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Becoming Christian, becoming Roman

Hervé Huntzinger

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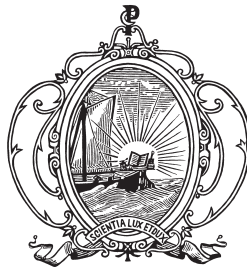
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Volume 3:
Becoming Christian in the Late Antique West
(3rd-6th Centuries)

Edited by
ARIANE BODIN, CAMILLE GERZAGUET and
MATTHIEU PIGNOT



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Table of Contents

Ariane BODIN, Camille GERZAGUET & Matthieu PIGNOT	
Introduction	1
Matthieu PIGNOT	
The Catechumenate in Anonymous Sermons from the Late Antique West	11
Camille GERZAGUET	
Preaching to the <i>ecclesia</i> in Northern Italy: The Eastertide Sermons of Zeno of Verona and Gaudentius of Brescia	33
Adrian BRÄNDLI	
Imagined Kinship: Perpetua and the Paternity of God.....	45
Jarred MERCER	
<i>Vox infantis, vox Dei</i> : The Spirituality of Children and Becoming Christian in Late Antiquity	59
Rafał TOCZKO	
The Shipwrecks and Philosophers: The Rhetoric of Aristocratic Conversion in the Late 4 th and Early 5 th Centuries	75
Ariane BODIN	
Identifying the Signs of Christianness in Late Antique Italy and Africa.....	91
Hervé HUNTZINGER	
Becoming Christian, Becoming Roman: Conversion to Christianity and Ethnic Identification Process in Late Antiquity	103

Becoming Christian, Becoming Roman: Conversion to Christianity and Ethnic Identification Process in Late Antiquity

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ABSTRACT

Though, at first, being Christian was not a matter of ethnic identity, the Christianisation of the Later Roman Empire, from Constantine to the Edict of Thessalonica (380), gradually connects submission to Roman authority and Christian religion. In this context, one can wonder if the barbarians' conversion to Christianity had either an ethnical or, at least, a political dimension. During the fourth century, the Empire was seen as a vehicle of Christianity (or sometimes Nicene orthodoxy), facing a barbarian pagan or Arian world. In a certain way, Christianity becomes the new expression of the Roman expansionism in a time when military expansion was over. Missions toward the *Barbaricum* embrace the language of the Roman domination. Nonetheless, this desire of ruling Christianity in the *Barbaricum* meets barbarian initiatives that recognize Roman authority over Christianity, even without any political agenda. Even when there is no episcopal hierarchy, the barbarian priests can refer to Roman authority. Two conversions, which are the best documented, show that in this context, conversion to Christianity is one of the crucial steps to become Roman. Both Fritigern around 376 and Fritigil, queen of the Marcoman in 397, while converting to Christianity, chose the faith of the current emperor. For both, also, conversion takes place in a general process of integration to the Roman world. During this process, the choice of Arian or Nicene faith does not match a 'strategy of distinction', but rather a strategy of conformity to the Roman authority. During the fourth century, being Arian is not yet a distinctive feature against Romanity. At the end of the century, Christianity turns into a new kind of *polis* religion, so that becoming Christian is now part of becoming Roman.

It is generally admitted that, even from the very beginning, belonging to the Christian church was not a matter of ethnic identity. Andrew Louth, when commenting the famous phrase of Tertullian: *Fiunt, non nascuntur Christiani*,¹ wrote that embracing the Christian faith leads to leave the world of the Roman

¹ Tert., *Apol.* 18. 4. Andrew Louth, 'Fiunt, non nascuntur christiani conversion, community, and christian identity', in Carol Harrison, Caroline Humfress and Isabella Sandwell (eds), *Being Christian in Late Antiquity: A Festschrift for Gillian Clark* (Oxford, 2014), 109-19, 109: 'For Tertullian, Christians are those who have left the world of the Roman Empire, to which they once belonged, and embraced the faith and practice of the church'.

Empire. This idea is based on the conviction that Christianity is radically different from paganism. Indeed, as paganism has a strong connection to civic institutions, at least in the ‘polis religion’ model,² Christianity would not match those civic and ethnic frameworks, and Christians would not think of themselves as a ‘people’.³ However, the process of Christianisation of the political structure of the Roman Empire during the fourth century, from Constantine to the Edict of Thessalonica (380 AD) creates a new religious framework that gradually connects submission to Roman authority and Christian religion.⁴ The idea that the spread of Christianity coincides with the territory of the Empire is increasingly attested.⁵ Therefore, with such a strong connection between political power and religion, it seems self-evident that conversion to Christianity should carry a stronger social and political connotation in Late Antiquity. Indeed, Ralph Mathisen pointed out how the mutual evolutions of Christianity and Roman citizenship meant that the possession of a full citizenship was bound to one’s Christian confessional status.⁶ Somehow, while the Empire became a *civitas* through the Antonine Constitution, the Edict of Thessalonica established Christianity as a new ‘polis religion’.

² At least in the ‘Polis Religion’ view, as developed by John Scheid or Mary Beard. See John Scheid, ‘La Religion romaine à la fin de la République et au début de l’Empire. Un problème généralement mal posé’, in Hinnerk Bruhns, Jean-Michel David and Wilfried Nippel (eds), *Die späte römische Republik. La fin de la République romaine. Un débat franco-allemand d’histoire et d’historiographie* (Rome, 1997), 127-39. The idea of ‘polis religion’ was first formulated concerning Greek cities by Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, ‘What is Polis Religion?’, in Oswin Murray and Simon Price (eds), *The Greek City from Homer to Alexander* (Oxford, 1990), 295-322.

³ For instance, the second-century *Epistle to Diognetos* states that the Christian community does not look like the other nations of the Pagan world or the nation of the Jews (*Ep. Diognetos* 5, 1). Paul Foster, ‘The Epistle to Diognetus’, *The Expository Times* 118 (2007), 162-8. Moreover, political and religious boundaries do not always match. The mithraic cult, said to be originated in Persia, is nevertheless celebrated even by Roman soldiers in Dura Europos in the late 190s, just in front of the Persian enemy. Pierre Leriche, ‘Observations sur le *mithraeum* de Doura-Europos à la lumière des découvertes récentes’, *Topoi: Orient-Occident* 11 (2001), 195-203.

⁴ *CTh.* XVI 1, 2: *Cunctos populos, quos clementiae nostrae regit temperamentum, in tali volumus religione versari, quam divinum Petrum apostolum tradidisse Romanis religio.*

⁵ In Byzantine East, Michael Maas showed how Christian historiography led classical ethnography to a new stage, at which the definition of Romanity matched the definition of Christianity, particularly with the appearance of the word *Romania* in Christian hagiography. See Michael Maas, ‘Delivered from Their Ancient Customs: Christianity and the Question of Cultural Change in Early Byzantine Ethnography’, in Anthony Grafton and Kenneth Mills (eds), *Seeing and Believing, Conversion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (New York, 2003), 152-88. Michel Meslin, ‘Nationalisme, État et religions à la fin du IV^e siècle’, *Archives de sociologie des religions* 9 (1964), 3-20, 4. In his study on the conversion of Isaurians by Conon, Philipp Wood stressed the fact that, in the Life of Conon, conversion implied a civilized way of life including specifically sedentary agriculture. Philip Wood, ‘The invention of history in the later Roman world. The conversion of Isauria in “The Life of Conon”’, *Anatolian Studies* 59 (2009), 129-38.

⁶ Ralph Mathisen, ‘*Peregrini, Barbari, and Cives Romani*: Concepts of Citizenship and the Legal Identity of Barbarians in the Later Roman Empire’, *AHR* 111 (2006), 1011-40, 1017.

Consequently, this new context in the fourth century invites us to consider the process of conversion in connection to another social process: barbarians becoming Romans. While considering the conversion of foreigners to Christianity, we should take into account the links between this process and the ethnical identification to Romanity.⁷ Hence the main question of this article: does becoming Christian mean becoming Roman? In other words, does conversion from paganism to Christianity, in the case of barbarians, mean a shift of political allegiance or a shift of ethnic identity? When Theodosius I, in 389 AD, orders the defeated Goths to ‘become Romans’,⁸ does it mean that they should both become citizens and accept the Edict of Thessalonica?

Most of the last decades of sociological research discussed and criticised the Lofland-Starck causal model, which considers several causes leading together to conversion.⁹ If that sort of model can help us analyse complex narratives of conversion, such as Augustine’s, the scarcity of the late Roman sources only enables us to use this theoretical foundation cautiously. Thus only external causes and social aspects will here be taken into account. More precisely, our main indicator of conversion will be membership status, or, in other words, nominal adhesion to Christianity.¹⁰ Nevertheless, we can grasp some hints from the general attitude toward conversion and from individuals of particular importance. Having said that, we will first consider the connection between the Empire, as a political structure providing ethnical identification, and Christianity. Then, we will take a look at the institutional dimension of Christianity in the *Barbaricum*. Finally, we will try to see how efficient the Roman model may have been in promoting conversion in order to obtain integration.

⁷ As we do not possess any mention of citizenship granted to *peregrini* after 212 AD, one can discuss if *externi* settling in the Empire became citizens. Ralph Mathisen argues that the many barbarians acting as citizens during the 4th and 5th centuries must have been real citizens, even without proof of formal granting. R. Mathisen, ‘*Peregrini*’ (2006), 10-37: at least *de facto*.

⁸ Themist., *Or.*, 167, 211-2; *Pan. Lat.* 2/12.36.4: *iussisti esse Romanam*.

⁹ John Lofland and Rodney Stark, ‘Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective’, *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965), 862-75.

¹⁰ We should bear in mind that, in the cases that we consider, baptism and conversion are still separated processes, especially since we only know very little about baptism. Laurent Guichard has shown that the baptisms of the imperial family members during fourth and fifth centuries are still largely unknown. See Laurent Guichard, *Le baptême et la pourpre: initiation chrétienne et fonction impériale de Constantin à Théodose II* (to be published). The conclusions were presented in a conference entitled ‘Le baptême et la pourpre. Initiation chrétienne et fonction impériale de Constantin à Théodose II’ and held at the *Séminaire International d’Histoire Ancienne* in Nancy (November 10th 2014).

Empire, *Barbaricum* and Christianity

As a first step, we have to consider the connection between the Empire and Christianity. In fact, it is a kind of *cliché* to depict the late Roman world as Nicene and opposing the barbarian world, which is pagan and Arian. Ancient Christian writers, especially Catholic ones, already depict the world in those terms. In one of his letter to Victricius of Rouen, dated to 397 AD, Paulinus of Nola presents the Christians/heathens boundaries as matching the Romans/barbarians boundaries.¹¹ The bishop describes exactly the opposition between non-civilisation (barbarians, brigands and desert places, to be understood as places that are not under political control) and civilisation (*urbes, oppida, insulae, silua*), this latter list of features supplemented with churches and monasteries, considering that they are now part of a Roman civilised world.¹² On the opposite side, a phenomenon like the fear of conversion is often mentioned concerning Christian children fallen into captivity in the hand of heathen people.¹³

This vision seems reciprocal. Inside the *Barbaricum*, Christianity can be rejected as Roman, or at least, under Roman imperial power. There are some traces of Christian converts in the Gothic *Barbaricum* before the middle of the fourth century. But these are either fictitious or so unclear that we cannot use them. However, from the time of the conversion of Ulfila (probably between 336 AD and 341 AD), it is quite clear that there were Christians among Goths. Eike Faber lists three Christian communities: Audian's heretical Christians, Ulfila's Arian community and Nicene Goths, as the community around Saint Saba.¹⁴ In this context two episodes of persecution occurred in Gothia in

¹¹ *Epist.* 18, 4: *Vbi quondam deserta siluarum ac littorum pariter intuta aduenae barbari aut latrones incolae frequentabant, nunc uenerabiles et angelici sanctorum chori urbes, oppida, insulas, siluas, ecclesiis et monasteriis plebe numerosis, pace consonis celebrant.* Precisely, one can read, as Paulinus congratulates Victricius for his missionary work: 'Where once barbarian strangers or native brigands dwelt in deserted, equally hazardous areas of forest and shore, now cities, towns, islands, and woods with churches and monasteries crowded with people and harmonious in peace, are thronged by revered, angelic choruses of saintly men'. *Letters of Saint Paulinus of Nola*, ed. Johannes Quasten (New York, 1966), 170 and 248 n. 1.

¹² Around forty years later, Salvian of Marseilles, in a page where he compares the sins of the Romans and those of the barbarians, writes 'we, who are said Christians and Catholics'. By these words he rejects Paganism and Arianism into the *Barbaricum*. *Salv., Gub.* 4, 58: *nos, qui Christiani et catholici esse dicimur.*

¹³ Ambrose, for instance, to defend the selling of liturgical dishes to ransom captives, argues that children risk filthiness by contact with idols among heathen barbarians. *Ambr., Offic.* 2, 28, 136: *Quis autem est tam durus, immittis, ferreus, cui displiceat quod ... adulescentulae uel pueruli uel infantes ab idolorum contagiis quibus mortis metu inquinabantur?* This fear is expressed much clearly but at a later period by Gregory the Great, who described how Lombards in the second half of the 6th century, forced their captives to participate to their heathen rites. *Greg., Dialog.* 3, 27-8.

¹⁴ Faber Eike, *Von Ulfila bis Rekkared: Die Goten und ihr Christentum* (Stuttgart, 2014), 104-8.

348 AD¹⁵ and between 369 AD and 372 AD.¹⁶ In the first episode Christians were expelled to the Empire and welcomed by Constantine II. The persecution between 369 AD and 372 AD also shows that for Athanaric the conversion of Goths was clearly connected to the Roman Empire, so that the Gothic persecutors thought that converting to Christianity was a way of getting compromised with the Roman Empire.

Furthermore, this pattern, according to which political and religious boundaries seem to match, has an underlying statement. The strict opposition between the boundaries of a Roman Catholic world and those of a barbarian Pagan and/or Arian world follows the assumption that the Roman Empire is a vehicle of Christianity or Nicene orthodoxy.¹⁷ Eusebius suggested that Constantine transferred Goths from savage life to rational life under Roman law.¹⁸ While speaking to Nicetas the Dacian, bishop of Remesiana and converting the barbarians dwelling along the Danube, Paulinus of Nola wrote: 'Through you they learn to resound the name of Christ with Roman heart, and to live chastely in tranquil peace'.¹⁹ This single sentence states both the equivalence between Christianity and Romanity, in terms of ethnic identity ('with a Roman heart'), and, also, with a rather political concern for border peace, the control brought by the Christianisation of the *Barbaricum*.²⁰ Such a motif, according to which the Roman Empire is the structure through which Christianity is brought to external *gentes*, is also used by Prosper Tiro about Patrick²¹ and by Augustine.²²

¹⁵ Aux., *Ep.* 58-60.

¹⁶ Jer., *Chron. a.* 369.

¹⁷ David Lambert, 'The barbarians in Salvian's *De gubernatione Dei*', in Stephen Mitchell and Geoffrey Greatrex (eds), *Ethnicity and Culture in Late Antiquity* (London, 2000), 105. David Lambert shows how Salvian uses Pauline criticism of the Jewish sense of superiority built upon the Law and his vision that the Law now had passed to the Christians. In Salvian's view the Roman sense of superiority is as fragile as the Jewish one criticized by Paul.

¹⁸ Euseb., *Triakont.* 7, 13 and *V. Const.* 4, 5. Alain Chauvot, 'Les migrations des barbares et leur connaissance du christianisme', in Jean-Marie Mayeur, Charles Pietri, Luce Pietri, André Vauchez and Marc Venard (eds), *Histoire du christianisme des origines à nos jours*, t. 2, *Naissance d'une Chrétienté*, 250-430 (Paris, 1995), 861-82, 863.

¹⁹ Paul. Nol., *Carm.* 17, 261-4: *Orbis in muta regione per te / Barbari discut resonare Christum / Corde Romano, placidamque casti / Vivere pacem.*

²⁰ James W. Binns, *Latin Literature of the Fourth Century* (London, 2014), 117. As underlined by J.W. Binns, Paulinus of Nola shows a great interest in missionary matters and seems to bind closely mission to the heathens and pacification.

²¹ While writing that 'God's Providence has willed the expansion of the Roman empire as a preparation for His design of the nations', he doubtlessly links the Christianisation of Ireland by Patrick with the expansion of the Roman world. Prosp. Tiro, *Voc. Omn. Gent.* 2, 38. Raymond M. Keogh, 'Patrick and the Prosper Connection', *Studia Hibernica* 32 (2002), 7-34, 15.

²² Augustine talks about 'the numerous barbarian people among us, that is in Africa, to whom the Gospel has not yet been announced'. Aug., *Ep.* 199, 12, 15-9: *Sunt enim apud nos, hoc est in Africa, barbarae innumerabiles gentes, in quibus nondum esse praedicatum evangelium ex his, qui ducuntur inde captivi et Romanorum servitiis iam miscentur, cotidie nobis addiscere in promptu est.* What is interesting in Augustine's sentence is that those barbarians are said to be

Thus, it appears that Roman ecclesiastical writers conceive the relationship to the *Barbaricum* within the framework of the Christian/heathen or Catholic/Arian dichotomy. But the boundary is not meant to be fixed and starting from the middle of the fourth century a sort of mixed political and religious expansionism develops in Christian literature.

Roman authority, mission outside the Empire and barbarian initiative

That is why we now have to consider the institutional dimension of Christianity in the *Barbaricum*. Indeed, would Christianity outside the Empire have had a Roman structure, namely a Roman episcopal hierarchy depending on imperial authority, then it would have been obvious that conversion to Christianity would have meant, in some way, a kind of integration into the imperial structure of power. In fact, there is a clear imperial claim to rule Christians outside the Empire as early as Constantine's reign. Ralph Mathisen observed that Eusebius depicts Constantine as the 'bishop of those outside', talking about himself in those terms: 'You are bishops of those within the Church (τῶν εἴσω τῆς ἐκκλησίας), but I am perhaps a bishop appointed by God over those outside (τῶν ἐκτοῦς)'.²³ Despite this claim, there seems to be an asymmetry between the East and the West. In the East, most of the foreign Christians have bishops appointed by the See of Alexandria.²⁴ But there is only one similar example in the West, namely Palladius, sent to the Scots by pope Celestine in 431 AD and, under less clear conditions, Patrick some time later.²⁵ Moreover, these narratives of Roman bishops bringing the faith to barbarians derive from a Roman Christian ideology of expansion, as told in the first section of this article.

As already demonstrated concerning the expansion of the imperial cult during the Principate by Simon Price,²⁶ the real question here is about initiative.

apud nos and at the same time are clearly outsiders, since they are known only by Roman captives. We must admit that the boundary is only clear for apologetical purposes.

²³ Euseb., *V. Const.* 4, 24: ἄλλ' ὑμεῖς μὲν τῶν εἴσω τῆς ἐκκλησίας, ἐγὼ δὲ τῶν ἐκτὸς ὑπὸ θεοῦ καθεσταμένως, ἐπίσκοπος ἂν εἴην. Translation by *Life of Constantine*, ed. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford, 1999), 161. Quoted by Ralph W. Mathisen, 'Barbarian Bishops and the Churches in *Barbaricis Gentibus* during Late Antiquity', *Speculum* 72 (1997), 664-97, 665 n. 6. Paul already used the expression οἱ ἕξωθεν to refer to Pagans (1Tim. 3:7). Anyway, it seems difficult to admit that, in this sentence, Constantine was considering himself as an *episcopus* of the Barbarians. Maybe we have here a clue for understanding the remaining Pagan dimension of his authority, or, at least, its justification.

²⁴ R.W. Mathisen, 'Barbarian Bishops' (1997), 666-7.

²⁵ Prosp. Tiro, *Chron.* s.a. 431 [1307]: *Ad Scottos in Christum credentes ordinatus a papa Caelestino Palladius primus episcopus mittitur.*

²⁶ This issue has already been considered for earlier periods. Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome* (Cambridge, 1998), 356 and Simon Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge, 1984), 65-75, about the introduction of imperial

Who wants conversion? Either barbarians from the periphery or Romans from the centre? And if barbarians ask for this conversion, what is its purpose? These questions bring us to the issue of the reasons for conversion, especially external reasons, among which political or ethnical conversion to a new identity.

If we consider the case of the Goths, Ralph Mathisen proved that there was no episcopal authority in Gothia in the years 369/375, since our sources only mention priests, namely a council of priests (*presbyterion*), who asked the *dux Scythiae*, Iunius Soranus, to send the body of Saint Saba to Cappadocia. Therefore, one cannot speak of Roman control. The council of priests seems rather to act on its own, even while looking towards the Empire. There is not, in this case, a Roman bishop appointed to convert barbarian people, but barbarian Christians, whose conversion occurred independently from external pressures.²⁷

This initiative does not mean however that they had no link to the Empire. There were in fact cases of barbarian conversion where the would-be Christians requested help from Roman bishops, thus recognizing the Roman tropism of Christianity and the Roman ecclesiastical hierarchy. Christians outside the Empire, on their own initiative, which however meets Roman expectations, ask for a hierarchical structure given by Roman church authority. Orosius, for instance, writes that Goths requested bishops from the emperor Valens before 378 AD.²⁸ Theodoret tells about John Chrysostom who was asked by nomadic Scythians people along the Danube to send priests.²⁹ The interesting point here

cult in Asia Minor. For a more detailed case see also François Kirbihler and Lilli Zabrana, 'Archäologische, epigraphische und numismatische Zeugnisse für den Kaiserkult im Artemision von Ephesos', *Jahreshefte des österreichischen archäologischen Institutes in Wien* 83 (2014), 101-31.

²⁷ The *Vita Sabae*, at the saint's death in 372 AD, only mentions a *presbyterion*, probably a council of priests, who asked the *dux Scythiae* Iunius Soranus (*PLRE* I 848, 'Iunius Soranus 2'), to send the remains to Cappadocia (*V. Sabae* 8: διὰ θελήματος τοῦ πρεσβυτέρου). R.W. Mathisen, 'Barbarian Bishops' (1997), 673 convincingly rebuts Peter J. Heather and John Matthews, *The Goths in the Fourth Century* (Liverpool, 1991), 109 n. 39, who consider that those priests depend on the bishop Betranio from Tomi. But they could not have taken such a decision without an episcopal agreement. Besides this mention, one can look at two Arian calendars which list several martyrs, all priests, monks or ministers. See also Knut Schäferdiek, 'Das gotische, liturgische Kalenderfragment – Bruchstück eines Konstantinopeler Martyrologs', *ZNW* 79 (1988), 116-37.

²⁸ Oros. 7, 33: *Gothis antea per legatos supplices poposcerent, ut illis episcopi, a quibus regulam Christianae fidei discerent, mitterentur. Valens imperator exitiabili pravitate doctores Ariani dogmatis misit. Gothi primae fidei rudimentum quod accepere, tenuerunt.* He adds that Valens *exitiabili pravitate* sent Arian doctors to teach them the basics of the Christian faith, but in the Arian version.

²⁹ Theod., *HE* V 31: 'On learning that some of the Nomads encamped along the Danube were thirsty for salvation, but had none to bring them the stream, John sought out men who were filled with a love of labour like that which had distinguished the apostles, and gave them charge of the work. I have myself seen a letter written by him to Leontius, bishop of Ancyra, in which he described the conversion of the Scythians, and begged that fit men for their instruction might be sent.' John Chrysostom is all the more concerned by this issue, that he really took care to carry Arian Goths back to the Nicene creed (Theod., *HE* V 30). During his episcopate (398 AD-404 AD) John Chrysostom sent a bishop to Nicene Goths in Crimea, John Chrysostom, *Epistula* 14; see

is that the request came from those nomadic Scythians, whatever this unclear ethnical name would cover in this case (probably Goths?). And it is clearly about conversion, not only about appointing a bishop. In both cases, bishops sent by Valens or priests sent by John Chrysostom, Goths follow the faith of the prevailing Roman authority, either Arian or Nicene.³⁰

It must be added that this link to the Empire does not always follow official authority, either political or ecclesiastical. Indeed a certain Audian, a heretical Syrian condemned by the council of Nicaea, went to the lower Danube, established several monasteries and ordained heretical bishops.³¹ Therefore, the main point is that Christianity is labelled as Roman, but not necessarily subject to Roman power. This implies that, rather than mere allegiance, conversion to Christianity includes intrinsic admiration for the Roman model.

Christianity and the Roman model

To support this view, we can reconsider two cases of conversion, both involving one leader and his group, thus both individual and collective conversion: Fritigern, leader of the Tervingi around 376 AD and Fritigil, queen of the Marcomans in 392 AD.

The conversion of Fritigern at the time when he asked for the right to pass the Danube has been much discussed. As scholars do not agree about the date of his conversion, we will mostly try to reconsider the reasons for his conversion. Three options are generally admitted. The first thesis claims that most of the Tervingi converted before the crossing. On the one hand, they could have converted during Valens' first Gothic War between 369 AD and 372 AD.³² The bishop Eudoxius probably pushed Valens to obtain the conversion of the Tervingi, either Catholic or Pagan, to Arianism.³³ Such a conversion would

R.W. Mathisen, 'Barbarian Bishops' (1997), 671. Later in 548 AD, the same Crimean Christians beg Justinian 'to give them a bishop' (Procop., *Bellum Gothicum* 4. 4. 11).

³⁰ This alone is sufficient to undermine any ethnical connotation of Arianism before the end of the fifth century.

³¹ Theod., *HE* 4, 9 and Epiph. Salam., *Haereseos* 70, 14. Theodoret described the heretical points, especially concerning the Easter date, but Epiphanius of Salamis pretended to have met some of them later in the East. His account is maybe fictitious, given that he said that they went further east, Clemens Leonhard, *The Jewish Pesach and the Origins of the Christian Easter: Open Questions in Current Research* (Berlin, 2006), 224.

³² This theory is mainly based on the testimony of Socrates (Socr., *HE* 4, 33). Evangelios K. Chrysos, *To Βυζάντιον και οι Γότθοι: συμβολή εις την εξωτερικὴν πολιτικὴν του Βυζαντίου κατά τον Δ' αιώνα* (Thessaloniki, 1972), 109-24.

³³ Theod., *HE* IV 38, 1-5. For a dating of this event in 369 AD/370 AD see Alain Chauvot, 'L'arianisme de Fritigern, religion de l'empereur ou religion des Tervinges ?', in Georgy Sakharov (ed.), *Communio et traditio: Καθολικεςκο εδινство Церкви в раннехристианский период* (Moscou, 2014), 46-65.

have had two levels: a diplomatic dimension, and an act of allegiance to the Empire. On the other hand, they could have converted after the Gothic civil war, which would have lasted until 372 AD in a kind of internal process.³⁴ The disorders of civil war lead the Tervingi to seek a new identity, in a way reminding Arthur Greil's 'spoiled identity' theory.³⁵ This sociological theory states that conversion can occur when people are seeking a new identity in a time of violent social changes. Conversion to Christianity makes then sense in the new sociological framework resulting from civil war and the breakdown of Gothic society.

The second thesis postulates a more or less cynical conversion as Goths crossed the Danube in 376 AD³⁶ or just before in order to tighten the links to the Empire,³⁷ or, at least, a conversion as an act of gratitude toward the emperor.³⁸ In this case, the conversion would have been of mutual profit for both Valentinian, who could claim to have converted Goths to the Arian faith, and for Fritigern whose power was challenged by Alaviv. Alain Chauvot has shown that conversion to Christianity was a means to legitimate his power much further than only the *kuni* of which he was *reiks*, namely over all the Tervingi Goths south of the Danube.³⁹

Eike Faber suggested a third explanation, following the thesis of E. A. Thompson.⁴⁰ The mass conversion would only have occurred after the treaty with Theodosius in 382 AD, when Gothic aristocrats began to live, like the Roman elites, the life of property owners, and then saw in Christianity an alternative to the old heathen cult, dislocated by several years of serious crisis.⁴¹ In this case, Goths would have become Christians *because* they lived like Romans.

Actually, the dissenting ancient sources do not allow us to make any compelling decision. However, it is remarkable that in each theory Christianity is linked to Roman political allegiance, Roman *habitus* or the Roman way of life. Even though we should admit that conversion was a long term process, which Gothic leaders did not completely control until the widespread conversion of Goths inside the Empire around 400 AD, this religious conversion cannot be

³⁴ Knut Schäferdiek, 'Zeit und Umstände des westgotischen Übergangs zum Christentum', *Historia* 28 (1979), 90-7. Andreas Schwarcz, 'Cult and Religion among the Tervingi and the Visigoths and their Conversion to Christianity', in Peter Heather (ed.), *The Visigoths from the Migration Period to the Seventh Century. An ethnographic Perspective* (San Marin, 1999), 447-72.

³⁵ Arthur L. Greil, 'Previous Dispositions and Conversion to Perspectives of Social and Religious Movements', *Sociological Analysis* 38 (1977), 115-25.

³⁶ Herwig Wolfram, *Histoire des Goths* (Paris, 1990), 94-5.

³⁷ Peter Heather, 'The Crossing of the Danube and the Gothic Conversion', *GRBS* 27 (1986), 289-318.

³⁸ Soz., *HE* VI 37, 7 and Isid. *Hisp.*, *Hist. Goth.* 7.

³⁹ A. Chauvot, 'L'arianisme de Fritigern' (2014).

⁴⁰ Eike Faber, *Von Ulfila bis Rekkared. Die Goten und ihr Christentum* (Stuttgart, 2014), 172-5. Following Edward A. Thompson, 'The Date of the Conversion of the Visigoths', *JEH* 7 (1956), 1-11.

⁴¹ C. Leonhard, *Jewish Pesach* (2006), 129-57.

understood without relating it closely to the process of integration inside the Empire. At the beginning of the fifth century, Prosper of Aquitaine speaks about barbarian soldiers who converted to Christianity while serving in the Roman army and keeping their new faith when going home.⁴² Prosper also adds that they could not learn this religion in their homeland, showing again the Roman tropism of Christianity.

Let's turn to another case, for which reasons are better known: Fritigil, queen of the Marcomans. After receiving the visit of a Roman traveller, around 397 AD, the queen heard about Ambrose and converted to Christianity. Then she convinced her husband to surrender to the Romans.⁴³ This last fact is sufficient to disqualify this example as a model for conversion of individuals without any political dimension. But, her story bears enough details to let us grasp the phenomenon of conversion in its complexity, including at an individual level.

This story reveals four points of interest. First, it is remarkable that the queen converted on her own initiative. She heard about Ambrose by 'some Christian, who came to her from Italy'.⁴⁴ Paulinus clearly states that he did not purposely come to convert her. He was not part of a missionary project and was probably a merchant. Paulinus, although one can doubt his accuracy regarding facts, makes of the queen the subject of all sentences, so that she decided alone to 'believe in Christ, whose servant she recognized in him'.⁴⁵ Though we cannot deny a political dimension (see *infra*), Fritigil's travel to Milan points out the equally undeniable individual dimension, which matches Nock's classical definition of conversion emphasizing a radical change within the individual.⁴⁶

⁴² Prosp. Tiro, *Voc. Omn. Gent.* 2, 33: *At alii barbari dum Romanis auxiliantur, quod in suis locis nosse non poterant, in nostris didicere regionibus, et ad sedes suas cum Christianae religionis institutione remearunt.*

⁴³ Paulin., *V. Ambros.* 36: 1. *Per idem tempus Fritigil quaedam regina Marcomannorum, cum a quodam christiano viro, qui ad illam forte de Italiae partibus advenerat, referente sibi audiret famam viri, Christo credidit, cuius illum servulum recognoverat; missisque muneribus ad ecclesiam per legatos postulavit, ut scriptis, qualiter credere deberet, informaretur. 2. Ad quam ille epistulam fecit praeclaram in modum catechismi, in qua etiam admonuit ut suaderet viro Romanis pacem servare; qua adcepta epistula mulier suasit viro, ut cum populo suo se Romanis traderet. Quae cum advenisset Mediolanum, plurimum doluit quod sanctum sacerdotem, ad quem festinaverat, minime reperisset; iam enim de hac vita migraverat.* The date of 397 AD is almost certain, because Paulinus was writing after Suetonius' model and, thus, following a chronological order. See Timothy D. Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History* (Tübingen, 2010), 196-7.

⁴⁴ Paulin., *V. Ambros.* 36, 1: *a quodam viro, qui ad illam de Italiae partibus advenerat.*

⁴⁵ Paulin., *V. Ambros.* 36, 1: *Christo credidit, cuius illum servulum recognoverat.*

⁴⁶ Arthur D. Nock, *Conversion, the Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford, 1933), 7: 'By conversion we mean the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right'. See also David A. Snow and Richard Machalek, 'The Sociology of Conversion', *Annual Review of Sociology* 10 (1984), 167-90, 169. This radical change is shown by

Secondly, the conversion happened fast. In Paulinus' words, it was not even a process: she heard, she believed: *referente sibi audiret famam uiri. Christo credidit*.⁴⁷ The way Paulinus formulates the conversion is remarkable: *Christo credidit*. By this elliptic wording, Paulinus reminds us that conversion was at this time disconnected from baptism and, if not a question of profound inner faith, at least a question of public profession of faith and not a process. Recent sociology introduced several levels of conversion, especially by distinguishing conversion and mere adhesion.⁴⁸ The same effort to conceptualize conversion also led to establish empirical indicators of conversion, as membership status, demonstration events and rhetorical indicators.⁴⁹ The profession of faith of the queen is doubtlessly such an empirical indicator.

As a third aspect, the appeal of the Roman Empire becomes clear when she convinces her husband to surrender to the Empire. Again, the question of initiative is crucial, but ambiguous. Paulinus tells us that Ambrose himself asked her, after her conversion, to convince her husband to surrender to Roman authority. What did the king do with 3 000 soldiers, after a *fœdus* with Honorius?⁵⁰ Did these soldiers convert? Was this hypothetical conversion part of the treaty? As Theodoret told about Fritigern, we can suspect a strong incitation to conversion through diplomatic means. Anyway, attraction for Roman life and allegiance to Roman power are here closely linked to conversion in a mutual process. Even if the queen converted because of personal convictions, it seems unlikely that religion did not imply political issues. If we admit that Christianity shared some features with a kind of polis religion, it follows that conversion means also a desire to integrate socially and politically the Roman *civitas*, or, in other words, the Empire.

Finally, the exact role of Roman authority, both political and religious, appears with the queen's request to be taught 'how she should believe'.⁵¹ Ambrose answered to this request in a letter by which he explained in simple words, 'as for a catechumen', how to believe. This means that, beyond the mere faith in Christ, with the simple words of Paulinus, he converted her to Nicene Christianity. One can ask if she converted to Nicene Christianity because of Ambrose or, for more political reasons, because of Honorius' own faith. If conversion simply happened on religious grounds, why didn't she convert to Arianism,

biblical Hebrew word *shub* and Greek *epistrephein*. See Virgil B. Gillespie, *Religious Conversion and Personal Identity: How and Why People Change* (Birmingham, 1979), 12-7.

⁴⁷ Paulin., *V. Ambros.* 36, 1.

⁴⁸ D. Snow and R. Machalek, 'Sociology' (1984), 169.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 171-2.

⁵⁰ Friedrich Lotter estimated that 3 000 Marcoman warriors must have migrated with Fritigil and his husband into the Roman Empire and noted that two Marcoman units appeared in the western *Notitia Dignitatum*, Friedrich Lotter, *Völkerverschiebungen im Ostalpen-Mitteldonau-Raum zwischen Antike und Mittelalter: 375-600* (Berlin, 2003), 46-7 and 100-1.

⁵¹ Paulin., *V. Ambros.* 36, 2: *qualiter credere debet*.

as it was the case in the Gothic world, much nearer than Italy? Federated Goths inside the Empire kept their Arian creed.

The question about the reason for conversion to Arianism rather than to Nicene Christianity is traditionally solved through the hypothesis of the ‘strategies of distinction’. As the conversion of the group under Fritigern’s leadership took place around 376 AD towards an evidently subordinationist form of Christianity, when the theodosian anti-subordinationist legislation eventually converted the Empire to the Nicene creed in 380 AD, the Goths kept their Arian creed, against the laws, as a way of marking their difference from the Romans, in a kind of ethnical identification process by differentiation.⁵² However, it has been shown by Viola Gheller that this framework is irrelevant for several reasons. First of all, Arianism was still very strong among Romans and Arians ready to rebel as soon as Theodosius’ position toward Magnus Maximus seemed to weaken and even until Honorius’ and Arcadius’ reigns.⁵³ The Edict of Thessalonica was not enforced systematically and Arianism was still very common among Greco-Roman populations of the Danubian area. Therefore, the Goths cannot have considered Arianism as a means of distancing themselves from Romanity once inside the Empire. Moreover, mixed Roman and Gothic Arian communities seem to have existed in Balkans, for instance near Nicopolis ad Istrum.⁵⁴ Consequently, Goths chose Arianism on the basis of the local Greco-Roman communities that they met rather than for political reasons and therefore not in order to distinguish themselves from Roman populations.⁵⁵ One can even state the opposite: at the very moment of conversion, they systematically chose the faith of the Roman authority with which they were negotiating.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, religious conversion is, at least partly, an individual choice and, therefore, has a subjective dimension out of our grasp. That being said, it seems hard to deny that, from the point of view of the *Barbaricum*, Christianity, which refers to both Arian and Nicene faiths depending on the context, has a strong Roman connotation, which often implies allegiance to the

⁵² Hagith Sivan, ‘The appropriation of Roman law in barbarian hands. Roman-barbarian marriage in Visigothic Gaul and Spain’, in Waler Pohl and Helmut Reimitz (eds), *Strategies of Distinction. The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300-800* (Leiden, 1998), 189-203, 190.

⁵³ Viola Gheller, ‘La conversione gotica: una questione identitaria?’, in Livio Zerbini (ed.), *Culti et religiosità nelle province danubiane. Atti del II Convegno Internazionale, Ferrara, 20-22 novembre 2013* (Bologna, 2015), 619-36, 625.

⁵⁴ V. Gheller, ‘La conversione gotica’ (2015), 629.

⁵⁵ At least until the settlement in Aquitania in 418 AD. V. Gheller, ‘La conversione gotica’ (2015), 634-5.

Roman imperial power, at least adhesion to the Roman way of life. The real framework for conversion is attraction for Romanness, especially at the end of the fourth century. People from the outside use Christianity as a means to become part of the Empire. Christians outside the Empire always keep bonds with other Christians inside the Empire, even if those bonds are not institutional. In return Roman bishops are concerned with the faith of Christians outside the Empire and imagine, like Paulinus did, that the whole *Barbaricum* will one day become Roman. However, this last phenomenon, underlying missions outside the Empire, is not sufficient to explain the attraction to Christianity in the *Barbaricum*.

Although the framework of religious and civic life underwent transformations in Late Antiquity, the idea that religion and politics are closely linked is still efficient. Faith is not a mere matter of inner consciousness, but conversion on a religious level also means a radical change in the other dimensions of life, including political, if not ethnical, adhesion. Barbarians, while becoming Christian, also think of themselves as becoming Roman. In this sense, the conversion of barbarians to Christianity is not above all a religious matter, but a social and political transformation. By parodying Tertullian's word, one could say, about barbarian converts: *fiunt, non nascuntur Romani*.

Volume 1
STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXV

STUDIA PATRISTICA

Markus VINZENT	
Editing <i>Studia Patristica</i>	3
Frances YOUNG	
<i>Studia Patristica</i>	11
Mark EDWARDS	
The Use and Abuse of Patristics	15

PLATONISM AND THE FATHERS

Christian H. BULL	
An Origenistic Reading of Plato in Nag Hammadi Codex VI.....	31
Mark HUGGINS	
Comparing the Ethical Concerns of Plato and John Chrysostom	41
Alexey FOKIN	
Act of Vision as an Analogy of the Proceeding of the Intellect from the One in Plotinus and of the Son and the Holy Spirit from the Father in Marius Victorinus and St. Augustine	55
Laela ZWOLLO	
Aflame in Love: St. Augustine's Doctrine of <i>amor</i> and Plotinus' Notion of <i>eros</i>	69
Lenka KARFÍKOVÁ	
Augustine on Recollection between Plato and Plotinus	81
Matthias SMALBRUGGE	
Augustine and Deification. A Neoplatonic Way of Thinking.....	103
Douglas A. SHEPARDSON	
The Analogical Methodology of Plato's <i>Republic</i> and Augustine's <i>De trinitate</i>	109

MAXIMUS CONFESSOR

Paul A. BRAZINSKI	
Maximus the Confessor and Constans II: A Punishment Fit for an Unruly Monk	119
Ian M. GERDON	
The Evagrian Roots of Maximus the Confessor's <i>Liber asceticus</i>	129
Jonathan GREIG	
Proclus' Doctrine of Participation in Maximus the Confessor's <i>Centuries of Theology</i> 1.48-50	137
Emma BROWN DEWHURST	
The 'Divisions of Nature' in Maximus' <i>Ambiguum</i> 41?	149
Michael BAKKER	
Gethsemane Revisited: Maximus' <i>Aporia</i> of Christ's γνώμη and a 'Monarchic Psychology' of Deciding.....	155
Christopher A. BEELEY	
Natural and Gnostic Willing in Maximus Confessor's <i>Disputation with Pyrrhus</i>	167
Jonathan TAYLOR	
A Three-Nativities Christology? Maximus on the <i>Logos</i>	181
Eric LOPEZ	
Plagued by a Thousand Passions – Maximus the Confessor's Vision of Love in Light of Nationalism, Ethnocentrism, and Religious Persecution.....	189
Manuel MIRA	
The Priesthood in Maximus the Confessor.....	201
Adam G. COOPER	
When Action Gives Way to Passion: The Paradoxical Structure of the Human Person according to Maximus the Confessor	213
Jonathan BIELER	
Body and Soul Immovably Related: Considering an Aspect of Maximus the Confessor's Concept of Analogy	223

Luke STEVEN	
Deification and the Workings of the Body: The Logic of ‘Proportion’ in Maximus the Confessor	237
Paul M. BLOWERS	
Recontextualizations of Maximus the Confessor in Modern Christian Theology.....	251

Volume 2

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXVI

EL PLATONISMO EN LOS PADRES DE LA IGLESIA

(ed. Rubén Pereto Rivas)

Rubén PERETÓ RIVAS	
Introducción.....	1
Viviana Laura FÉLIX	
Platonismo y reflexión trinitaria en Justino.....	3
Juan Carlos ALBY	
El trasfondo platónico del concepto de <i>Lex divina</i> en Ireneo de Lyon.....	23
Patricia CINER	
La Herencia Espiritual: la doctrina de la preexistencia en Platón y Orígenes.....	37
Pedro Daniel FERNÁNDEZ	
Raíces platónicas del modelo pedagógico de Orígenes.....	49
Rubén PERETÓ RIVAS	
La <i>eutonía</i> en la dinámica psicológica de Evagrio Póntico	59
Santiago Hernán VAZQUEZ	
El ensalmo curativo de Platón y la potencialidad terapéutica de la palabra en Evagrio Póntico	67
Oscar VELÁSQUEZ	
Las <i>Confesiones</i> en la perspectiva de la Caverna de Platón	79

Gerald CRESTA	
Acerca de la belleza metafísica en Pseudo-Dionisio y Buenaventura.....	91
Graciela L. RITACCO	
La perennidad del legado patrístico: Tiempo y eternidad.....	103

Volume 3

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXVII

BECOMING CHRISTIAN IN THE LATE ANTIQUE WEST (3rd-6th CENTURIES)

(ed. Ariane Bodin, Camille Gerzaguët and Matthieu Pignot)

Ariane BODIN, Camille GERZAGUËT & Matthieu PIGNOT	
Introduction	1
Matthieu PIGNOT	
The Catechumenate in Anonymous Sermons from the Late Antique West.....	11
Camille GERZAGUËT	
Preaching to the <i>ecclesia</i> in Northern Italy: The Eastertide Sermons of Zeno of Verona and Gaudentius of Brescia.....	33
Adrian BRÄNDLI	
Imagined Kinship: Perpetua and the Paternity of God	45
Jarred MERCER	
<i>Vox infantis, vox Dei</i> : The Spirituality of Children and Becoming Christian in Late Antiquity	59
Rafał TOCZKO	
The Shipwrecks and Philosophers: The Rhetoric of Aristocratic Conversion in the Late 4 th and Early 5 th Centuries	75
Ariane BODIN	
Identifying the Signs of Christianness in Late Antique Italy and Africa.....	91

Hervé HUNTZINGER

- Becoming Christian, Becoming Roman: Conversion to Christianity
and Ethnic Identification Process in Late Antiquity 103

Volume 4**STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXVIII**

LITERATURE, RHETORIC, AND EXEGESE IN SYRIAC VERSE

(ed. Jeffrey Wickes and Kristian S. Heal)

Jeffrey WICKES

- Introduction 1

Sidney H. GRIFFITH

- The Poetics of Scriptural Reasoning: Syriac *Mêmrê* at Work..... 5

Kristian S. HEAL

- Construal and Construction of *Genesis* in Early Syriac Sermons..... 25

Carl GRIFFIN

- Vessel of Wrath: Judas Iscariot in Cyrillona and Early Syriac Tradition 33

Susan ASHBROOK HARVEY

- The Poet's Prayer: Invocational Prayers in the *Mêmrê* of Jacob of Sarug 51

Andrew J. HAYES

- The Manuscripts and Themes of Jacob of Serugh's *Mêmrâ* 'On the Adultery of the Congregation' 61

Robert A. KITCHEN

- Three Young Men Redux: The Fiery Furnace in Jacob of Sarug and Narsai 73

Erin Galgay WALSH

- Holy Boldness: Narsai and Jacob of Serugh Preaching the Canaanite Woman 85

Scott Fitzgerald JOHNSON

- Biblical Historiography in Verse Exegesis: Jacob of Sarug on Elijah and Elisha 99

Volume 5

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXIX

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

(ed. Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski)

Piotr ASHWIN-SIEJKOWSKI	
Introduction	1
Judith L. KOVACS	
‘In order that we might follow him in all things’: Interpretation of Gospel Texts in <i>Excerpts from Theodotus</i> 66-86	7
Veronika ČERNUŠKOVÁ	
The <i>Eclogae Propheticae</i> on the Value of Suffering: A Copyist’s Excerpts or Clement’s Preparatory Notes?	29
Piotr ASHWIN-SIEJKOWSKI	
<i>Excerpta ex Theodoto</i> – A Search for the Theological Matrix. An Examination of the Document in the Light of Some Coptic Treatises from the Nag Hammadi Library	55
Jana PLÁTOVÁ	
How Many Fragments of the <i>Hypotyposes</i> by Clement of Alexandria Do We Actually Have?	71
Davide DAINESI	
Cassiodorus’ <i>Adumbrationes</i> : Do They Belong to Clement’s <i>Hypotyposes</i> ?	87
Joshua A. NOBLE	
Almsgiving or Training? Clement of Alexandria’s Answer to <i>Quis dives salvetur</i> ?	101
Peter WIDDICOMBE	
Slave, Son, Friend, and Father in the Writings of Clement of Alexandria	109
H. CLIFTON WARD	
We Hold These ἀρχαί To Be Self-Evident: Clement, ἐνάργεια, and the Search for Truth	123
Annette BOURLAND HUIZENGA	
Clement’s Use of Female Role Models as a Pedagogical Strategy ...	133

Brice ROGERS ‘Trampling on the Garment of Shame’: Clement of Alexandria’s Use of the <i>Gospel of the Egyptians</i> in Anti-Gnostic Polemic.....	145
Manabu AKIYAMA L’Unigenito Dio come «esegeta» (<i>Gv.</i> 1:18) secondo Clemente Alessandrino	153
Lisa RADA KOVICH HOLSBERG Of Gods and Men (and Music) in Clement of Alexandria’s <i>Protrep- ticus</i>	161
Joona SALMINEN Clement of Alexandria on Laughter	171
Antoine PARIS La composition des <i>Stromates</i> comme subversion de la logique aris- totélicienne.....	181

Volume 6

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXX

THE CLASSICAL OR CHRISTIAN LACTANTIUS

(ed. Oliver Nicholson)

Oliver NICHOLSON Introduction	1
John MCGUCKIN The Problem of Lactantius the Theologian	17
Mattias GASSMAN <i>Et Deus et Homo</i> : The Soteriology of Lactantius.....	35
Gábor KENDEFFY More than a <i>Cicero Christianus</i> . Remarks on Lactantius’ Dualistic System	43
Stefan FREUND When Romans Become Christians... The ‘Romanisation’ of Christian Doctrine in Lactantius’ <i>Divine Institutes</i>	63

Blandine COLOT	
Lactantius and the Philosophy of Cicero: ‘Romideologie’ and Legit- imization of Christianity	79
Jackson BRYCE	
Lactantius’ Poetry and Poetics	97
Oliver NICHOLSON	
The Christian Sallust: Lactantius on God, Man and History	119
Elizabeth DEPALMA DIGESER	
Persecution and the Art of Reading: Lactantius, Porphyry and the Rules for Reading Sacred Texts	139
David RUTHERFORD	
The Manuscripts of Lactantius and His Early Renaissance Readers ..	155
Carmen M. PALOMO PINEL	
The Survival of the Classical Idea of Justice in Lactantius’ Work ...	173
Ralph KEEN	
Gilbert Burnet and Lactantius’ <i>De mortibus persecutorum</i>	183

Volume 7

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXI

HEALTH, MEDICINE, AND CHRISTIANITY IN LATE ANTIQUITY

(ed. Jared Secord, Heidi Marx-Wolf and Christoph Markschies)

Jared SECORD	
Introduction: Medicine beyond Galen in the Roman Empire and Late Antiquity	1

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Christoph MARKSCHIES	
Demons and Disease	11
Ellen MUEHLBERGER	
Theological Anthropology and Medicine: Questions and Directions for Research	37

CHRISTIANS, DOCTORS, AND MEDICAL KNOWLEDGE

Jared SECORD	
Galen and the Theodotians: Embryology and Adoptionism in the Christian Schools of Rome	51
Róbert SOMOS	
Origen on the Kidneys	65
Heidi MARX-WOLF	
The Good Physician: Imperial Doctors and Medical Professionalization in Late Antiquity	79
Stefan HODGES-KLUCK	
Religious Education and the Health of the Soul according to Basil of Caesarea and the Emperor Julian	91
Jessica WRIGHT	
John Chrysostom and the Rhetoric of Cerebral Vulnerability	109

CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES ON DEATH,
DISABILITY, AND ILLNESS

Helen RHEE	
Portrayal of Patients in Early Christian Writings	127
Meghan HENNING	
Metaphorical, Punitive, and Pedagogical Blindness in Hell	139
Maria E. DOERFLER	
The Sense of an Ending: Childhood Death and Parental Benefit in Late Ancient Rhetoric	153
Brenda Llewellyn IHSEN	
‘Waiting to see and know’: Disgust, Fear and Indifference in <i>The Miracles of St. Artemios</i>	161

CONCEPTIONS OF VIRGINITY

Michael ROSENBERG	
Physical Virginity in the <i>Protevangelium of James</i> , the Mishnah, and Late Antique Syriac Poetry	177

Julia Kelto LILLIS Who Opens the Womb? Fertility and Virginitly in Patristic Texts	187
Caroline MUSGROVE Debating Virginitly in the Late Alexandrian School of Medicine	203

Volume 8

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXII

DEMONS

(ed. Sophie Lunn-Rockliffe)

Sophie LUNN-ROCKLIFFE Introduction	1
Gregory SMITH Augustine on Demons' Bodies	7
Sophie LUNN-ROCKLIFFE Chaotic Mob or Disciplined Army? Collective Bodies of Demons in Ascetic Literature	33
Travis W. PROCTOR Dining with 'Inhuman' Demons: Greco-Roman Sacrifice, Demonic Ritual, and the Christian Body in Clement of Alexandria	51
Gregory WIEBE Augustine on Diabolical Sacraments and the Devil's Body	73
Katie HAGER CONROY 'A Kind of Lofty Tribunal': The Gathering of Demons for Judgment in Cassian's <i>Conference Eight</i>	91

Volume 9

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXIII

EMOTIONS

(ed. Yannis Papadogiannakis)

Yannis PAPADOGIANNAKIS Introduction	1
--	---

J. David WOODINGTON
 Fear and Love: The Emotions of the Household in Chrysostom 19

Jonathan P. WILCOXSON
 The Machinery of Consolation in John Chrysostom’s Letters to Olympias..... 37

Mark THERRIEN
 Just an Old-Fashioned Love Song: John Chrysostom’s Exegesis of *Ps.* 41:1-2 73

Christos SIMELIDIS
 Emotions in the Poetry of Gregory of Nazianzus 91

Yuliia ROZUMNA
 ‘Be Angry and Do Not Sin’. Human Anger in Evagrius of Pontus and Gregory of Nyssa 103

Mark ROOSIEN
 ‘Emulate Their Mystical Order’: Awe and Liturgy in John Chrysostom’s Angelic πολιτεία 115

Peter MOORE
 Deploying Emotional Intelligence: John Chrysostom’s Relational Emotional Vocabulary in his Beatitude Homilies 131

Clair E. MESICK
 The Perils and Virtues of Laughter in the Works of John Chrysostom 139

Andrew MELLAS
 Tears of Compunction in John Chrysostom’s *On Eutropius* 159

Maria VERHOEFF
 Seeking Friendship with Saul: John Chrysostom’s Portrayal of David 173

Blake LEYERLE
 Animal Passions. Chrysostom’s Use of Animal Imagery 185

Justus T. GHORMLEY
 Gratitude: A Panacea for the Passions in John Chrysostom’s Commentary on the *Psalms* 203

Brian DUNKLE	
John Chrysostom's Community of Anger Management	217
Andrew CRISLIP	
<i>The Shepherd of Hermas</i> and Early Christian Emotional Formation	231
Niki Kasumi CLEMENTS	
Emotions and Ascetic Formation in John Cassian's <i>Collationes</i>	241
Margaret BLUME FREDDOSO	
The Value of Job's Grief in John Chrysostom's <i>Commentary on Job</i> : How John Blesses with Job's Tears	271
Jesse SIRAGAN ARLEN	
'Let Us Mourn Continuously': John Chrysostom and the Early Christian Transformation of Mourning.....	289
Martin HINTERBERGER	
Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus Speaking about Anger and Envy: Some Remarks on the Fathers' Methodology of Treating Emotions and Modern Emotion Studies	313

Volume 10

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXIV

EVAGRIUS BETWEEN ORIGEN, THE CAPPADOCIANS, AND NEOPLATONISM

(ed. Ilaria Ramelli, with the collaboration of Kevin Corrigan,
Giulio Maspero and Monica Tobon)

Ilaria RAMELLI	
Introduction	1
Samuel FERNÁNDEZ	
The Pedagogical Structure of Origen's <i>De principiis</i> and its Christology	15
Martin C. WENZEL	
The Omnipotence of God as a Challenge for Theology in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa	23

Miguel BRUGAROLAS
 Theological Remarks on Gregory of Nyssa’s Christological Language
 of ‘Mixture’ 39

Ilaria VIGORELLI
 Soul’s Dance in Clement, Plotinus and Gregory of Nyssa 59

Giulio MASPERO
Isoangelia in Gregory of Nyssa and Origen on the Background of
 Plotinus 77

Ilaria RAMELLI
 Response to the Workshop, “Theology and Philosophy between
 Origen and Gregory of Nyssa” 101

Mark J. EDWARDS
 Dunamis and the Christian Trinity in the Fourth Century 105

Kevin CORRIGAN
 Trauma before Trauma: Recognizing, Healing and Transforming the
 Wounds of Soul-Mind in the Works of Evagrius of Pontus 123

Monica TOBON
 The Place of God: Stability and Apophasis in Evagrius 137

Theo KOBUSCH
 Practical Knowledge in ‘Christian Philosophy’: A New Way to
 God 157

Ilaria RAMELLI
 Gregory Nyssen’s and Evagrius’ Biographical and Theological Rela-
 tions: Origen’s Heritage and Neoplatonism 165

Volume 11

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXV

AMBROSE OF MILAN

Isabella D’AURIA
 Polemiche antipagane: Ambrogio (*epist.* 10, 73, 8) e Prudenzio
 (*c. Symm.* 2, 773-909) contro Simmaco (*rel.* 3, 10) 1

Victoria ZIMMERL-PANAGL <i>Videtur nobis in sermone revivescere... Preparing a New Critical Edition of Ambrose's Orationes funebres</i>	15
Andrew M. SELBY Ambrose's 'Inspired' Moderation of Tertullian's Christian Discipline	23
Sarah EMANUEL Virgin Heroes and Cross-Dressing Kings: Reading Ambrose's <i>On Virgins 2.4</i> as Carnavalesque.....	41
Francesco LUBIAN Ambrose's <i>Disticha</i> and John 'Reclining on Christ's Breast' (Ambr., <i>Tituli</i> II [21], 1).....	51
D.H. WILLIAMS Ambrose as an Apologist.....	65
Brendan A. HARRIS 'Where the Sanctification is One, the Nature is One': Pro-Nicene Pneumatology in Ambrose of Milan's Baptismal Theology.....	77
David VOPŘADA <i>Bonum mihi quod humiliasti me</i> . Ambrose's Theology of Humility and Humiliation.....	87
Paola Francesca MORETTI 'Competing' <i>exempla</i> in Ambrose's <i>De officiis</i>	95
Metha HOKKE Scent as Metaphor for the Bonding of Christ and the Virgin in Ambrose's <i>De virginitate</i> 11.60-12.68.....	107
J. WARREN SMITH Transcending Resentment: Ambrose, David, and <i>Magnanimitas</i>	121
Andrew M. HARMON Aspects of Moral Perfection in Ambrose's <i>De officiis</i>	133
Han-luen KANTZER KOMLINE From Building Blocks to Blueprints: Augustine's Reception of Ambrose's <i>Commentary on Luke</i>	153

Hedwig SCHMALZGRUBER
 Biblical Epic as Scriptural Exegesis – Reception of Ambrose in the
 So-called *Heptateuch* Poet 167

Carmen Angela CVETKOVIĆ
 Episcopal Literary Networks in the Late Antique West: Niceta of
 Remesiana and Ambrose of Milan..... 177

Stephen COOPER
 Ambrose in Reformation Zürich: Heinrich Bullinger’s Use of
 Ambrosiaster’s Commentaries on Paul..... 185

Volume 12

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXVI

AUGUSTINE ON *CONSCIENTIA*

(ed. Diana Stanciu)

Diana STANCIU
 Introduction 1

Allan FITZGERALD
 Augustine, Conscience and the Inner Teacher 3

Enrique A. EGUIARTE
Conscientia (...) *itineribus* (...) in *sapientiam* 13

Matthew W. KNOTTS
 With Apologies to Jiminy Cricket. The Early Augustine’s ‘Sapiential’
 Account of *conscientia*..... 21

Anne-Isabelle BOUTON-TOUBOLIC
Conscientiae requies (*Conf. X*, 30, 41): Sleep, Consciousness and
 Conscience in Augustine..... 37

Andrea BIZZOZERO
Beati mundi cordes (*Mt* 5:8). *Coscienza*, *Conoscenza* e *Uisio Dei* in
 Agostino prima del 411..... 55

Josef LÖSSL
 How ‘Bad’ is Augustine’s ‘Bad Conscience’ (*mala conscientia*)? ... 89

Marianne DJUTH	
The Polemics of Moral Conscience in Augustine	97
Diana STANCIU	
<i>Conscientia, capax Dei</i> and Salvation in Augustine: What Would Augustine Say on the ‘Explanatory Gap’?	111
Jeremy W. BERGSTROM	
Augustine on the Judgment of Conscience and the Glory of Man....	119
Mark CLAVIER	
A Persuasive God: Conscience and the Rhetoric of Delight in Augustine’s Interpretation of <i>Romans</i> 7	135
John COMSTOCK	
The Augustinian <i>Conscientia</i> : A New Approach.....	141
Jérôme LAGOUANÈRE	
Augustin, lecteur de Sénèque: le cas de la <i>bona uoluntas</i>	153
Gábor KENDEFFY	
Will and Moral Responsibility in Augustine’s Works on Lying	163

Volume 13

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXVII

AUGUSTINE IN LATE MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

(ed. John T. Slotemaker and Jeffrey C. Witt)

David C. FINK & John T. SLOTEMAKER	
<i>In Memoriam</i> David C. Steinmetz	1
John T. SLOTEMAKER & Jeffrey C. WITT	
Introduction	3
John T. SLOTEMAKER	
The Reception of Augustine’s Thought in the Later Middle Ages: A Historiographical Introduction	5
Peter EARDLEY	
Augustinian Science or Aristotelian Rhetoric? The Nature of Theol- ogy According to Giles of Rome	23

Bernd GOEHRING	
Giles of Rome on Human Cognition: Aristotelian and Augustinian Principles	35
Christopher M. WOJTULEWICZ	
The Reception of Augustine in the Theology of Alexander de Sancto Elpidio	47
Graham MCALEER	
1277 and the Sensations of the Damned: Peter John Olivi and the Augustinian Origins of Early Modern Angelism	59
Florian WÖLLER	
The Bible as Argument: Augustine in the Literal Exegesis of Peter Auriol (c. 1280-1322) and Nicholas of Lyra (c. 1270-1349).....	67
Severin V. KITANOV	
Richard FitzRalph on Whether Cognition and Volition are Really the Same: Solving an Augustinian Puzzle.....	81
Simon NOLAN	
Augustine in Richard FitzRalph (c. 1300-1360)	95
Jack HARDING BELL	
Loving Justice: Cicero, Augustine, and the Nature of Politics in Robert Holcot's <i>Wisdom of Solomon</i> Commentary.....	109
John T. SLOTEMAKER	
Peter Lombard's Inheritance: The Use of Augustine's <i>De Trinitate</i> in Gregory of Rimini's Discussion of the Divine Processions	123
John W. PECK	
Gregory of Rimini's Augustinian Defense of a World <i>ab aeterno</i>	135
Jeffrey C. WITT	
Tradition, Authority, and the Grounds for Belief in Late Fourteenth-Century Theology	147
Pekka KÄRKKÄINEN	
Augustinian, Humanist or What? Martin Luther's Marginal Notes on Augustine.....	161
David C. FINK	
Bullshitting Augustine: Patristic Rhetoric and Theological Dialectic in Philipp Melanchthon's <i>Apologia</i> for the Augsburg Confession	167

Ueli ZAHND	
The Early John Calvin and Augustine: Some Reconsiderations	181

Volume 14

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXVIII

LATREIA AND IDOLATRY: AUGUSTINE AND THE QUEST FOR RIGHT RELATIONSHIP

(ed. Paul Camacho and Veronica Roberts)

Veronica ROBERTS & Paul CAMACHO	
Introduction	1
Michael T. CAMACHO	
‘Having nothing yet possessing all things’: Worship as the Sacrifice of Being not our Own	3
Erik J. VAN VERSEDAAL	
The Symbolism of Love: Use as Praise in St. Augustine’s Doctrine of Creation	21
Paul CAMACHO	
Ours and Not Ours: Private and Common Goods in Augustine’s Anthropology of Desire.....	35
Christopher M. SEILER	
<i>Non sibi arroget minister plus quam quod ut minister</i> (S. 266.3): St. Augustine’s Imperative for Ministerial Humility.....	49
Robert McFADDEN	
Becoming Friends with Oneself: Cicero in the Cassiciacum Dia- logues.....	57
Veronica ROBERTS	
Idolatry as the Source of Injustice in Augustine’s <i>De ciuitate Dei</i> ...	69
Peter BUSCH	
Augustine’s Limited Dialogue with the Philosophers in <i>De ciuitate Dei</i> 19	79
Joshua NUNZIATO	
Negotiating a Good Return? St. Augustine on the Economics of Secular Sacrifice.....	87

Volume 15

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXIX

THE FOUNTAIN AND THE FLOOD:
MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR AND PHILOSOPHICAL ENQUIRY

(ed. Sotiris Mitralaxis)

Sotiris MITRALEXIS	
Introduction	1
Dionysios SKLIRIS	
The Ontological Implications of Maximus the Confessor's Eschatology	3
Nicholas LOUDOVIKOS	
Consubstantiality beyond Perichoresis: Personal Threeness, Intra-divine Relations, and Personal Consubstantiality in Augustine's, Thomas Aquinas' and Maximus the Confessor's Trinitarian Theologies.....	33
Torstein Theodor TOLLEFSEN	
Whole and Part in the Philosophy of St Maximus the Confessor	47
Sebastian MATEIESCU	
Counting Natures and Hypostases: St Maximus the Confessor on the Role of Number in Christology	63
David BRADSHAW	
St. Maximus on Time, Eternity, and Divine Knowledge	79
Sotiris MITRALEXIS	
A Coherent Maximian Spatiotemporality: Attempting a Close Reading of Sections Thirty-six to Thirty-nine from the Tenth <i>Ambiguum</i>	95
Vladimir CVETKOVIĆ	
The Concept of Delimitation of Creatures in Maximus the Confessor	117
Demetrios HARPER	
The Ontological Ethics of St. Maximus the Confessor and the Concept of Shame.....	129
Smilen MARKOV	
Maximus' Concept of Human Will through the Interpretation of Johannes Damascenus and Photius of Constantinople	143

John PANTELEIMON MANOUSSAKIS St. Augustine and St. Maximus the Confessor between the Beginning and the End.....	155
---	-----

Volume 16

STUDIA PATRISTICA XC

CHRIST AS ONTOLOGICAL PARADIGM IN EARLY BYZANTINE THOUGHT

(ed. Marcin Podbielski)

Anna ZHYRKOVA Introduction	1
Sergey TROSTYANSKIY The Compresence of Opposites in Christ in St. Cyril of Alexandria's <i>Oikonomia</i>	3
Anna ZHYRKOVA From Christ to Human Individual: Christ as Ontological Paradigm in Early Byzantine Thought	25
Grzegorz KOTŁOWSKI A Philological Contribution to the Question of Dating Leontius of Jerusalem	49
Marcin PODBIELSKI A Picture in Need of a Theory: Hypostasis in Maximus the Confes- sor's <i>Ambigua ad Thomam</i>	57

Volume 17

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCI

BIBLICA

Camille LEPEIGNEUX L'éphod de David dansant devant l'arche (2S. 6:14): problèmes tex- tuels et exégèse patristique.....	3
Stephen WAERS <i>Isaiah</i> 44-5 and Competing Conceptions of Monotheism in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries	11

Simon C. MIMOUNI
 Jésus de Nazareth et sa famille ont-ils appartenus à la tribu des prêtres ?
 Quelques remarques et réflexions pour une recherche nouvelle..... 19

Joseph VERHEYDEN
 The So-Called *Catena in Marcum* of Victor of Antioch: Throwing
 Light on *Mark* with a Not-So-Little Help from *Matthew* and *Luke* .. 47

Miriam DECOCK
 The Good Shepherd of *John* 10: A Case Study of New Testament
 Exegesis in the Schools of Alexandria and Antioch 63

H.A.G. HOUGHTON
 The Layout of Early Latin Commentaries on the Pauline Epistles and
 their Oldest Manuscripts 71

David M. REIS
 Mapping Exilic Imaginaries: Greco-Roman Discourses of Displace-
 ment and the Book of *Revelation* 113

Stephan WITETSCHEK
 Polycrates of Ephesus and the ‘Canonical John’ 127

Gregory Allen ROBBINS
 ‘Many a Gaud and a Glittering Toy’ (Sayers): Fourth-Century Gospel
 Books 135

PHILOSOPHICA, THEOLOGICA, ETHICA

Frances YOUNG
 Riddles and Puzzles: God’s Indirect Word in Patristic Hermeneutics. 149

Methody ZINKOVSKIY
 Hypostatic Characteristics of Notions of Thought, Knowledge and
 Cognition in the Greek Patristic Thought..... 157

Elena Ene D-VASILESCU
 Early Christianity about the Notions of Time and the Redemption of
 the Soul..... 167

Jack BATES
 Theosis *Kata To Ephikton*: The History of a Pious Hedge-Phrase ... 183

James K. LEE	
The Church and the Holy Spirit: Ecclesiology and Pneumatology in Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine.....	189
Maria LISSEK	
In Search of the Roots. Reference to Patristic Christology in Gilbert Crispin's Disputation with a Jew	207
Pak-Wah LAI	
Comparing Patristic and Chinese Medical Anthropologies: Insights for Chinese Contextual Theology	213

HAGIOGRAPHICA

Katherine MILCO	
<i>Ad Proendam Virtutis Memoriam</i> : Encomiastic Prefaces in Tacitus' <i>Agricola</i> and Latin Christian Hagiography.....	227
Megan DEVORE	
<i>Catechumeni</i> , Not 'New Converts': Revisiting the <i>Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis</i>	237
Christoph BIRKNER	
Hagiography and Autobiography in Cyril of Scythopolis.....	249
Flavia RUANI	
Preliminary Notes on Edifying Stories in Syriac Hagiographical Collections.....	257
Nathan D. HOWARD	
Sacred Spectacle in the Biographies of Gorgonia and Macrina.....	267
Marta SZADA	
The Life of Balthild and the Rise of Aristocratic Sanctity	275
Robert WIŚNIEWSKI	
Eastern, Western and Local Habits in the Early Cult of Relics.....	283

ASCETICA

Maria Giulia GENGHINI	
'Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything' (<i>AP</i> Moses 6): How the Physical Environment Shaped the Spirituality of Early Egyptian Monasticism	299

Rodrigo ÁLVAREZ GUTIÉRREZ
 El concepto de *xénitéia* en la hagiografía Monástica primitiva..... 313

Sean MOBERG
 Examination of Conscience in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* 325

Daniel LEMENI
 The Fascination of the Desert: Aspects of Spiritual Guidance in the
Apophthegmata Patrum..... 333

Janet TIMBIE
 ‘Pay for Our Sins’: A Shared Theme in the Pachomian Koinonia and
 the White Monastery Federation..... 347

Paula TUTTY
 The Political and Philanthropic Role of Monastic Figures and Mon-
 asteries as Revealed in Fourth-Century Coptic and Greek Corres-
 pondence..... 353

Marianne SÁGHY
 Monica, the Ascetic..... 363

Gáspár PARLAGI
 The Letter *Ad filios Dei* of Saint Macarius the Egyptian – Questions
 and Hypotheses..... 377

Becky LITTLECHILDS
 Notes on Ascetic ‘Regression’ in Asterius’ *Liber ad Renatum Mona-*
chum..... 385

Laura SOURELI
 The ‘Prayer of the Heart’ in the *Philokalia*: Questions and Caveats 391

Brouria BITTON-ASHKELONY
 Monastic Hybridity and Anti-Exegetical Discourse: From Philoxenus
 of Mabbug to Dadišo Qatraya 417

Volume 18

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCII

LITURGICA AND TRACTATUS SYMBOLI

Liuwe H. WESTRA
 Creating a Theological Difference: The Myth of Two Grammatical
 Constructions with Latin *Credo*..... 3

Tarmo TOOM	
<i>Tractatus symboli: A Brief Pre-Baptismal Explanation of the Creed..</i>	15
Joseph G. MUELLER	
The Trinitarian Doctrine of the <i>Apostolic Constitutions</i>	25
Gregory TUCKER	
‘O Day of Resurrection!’: The Paschal Mystery in Hymns.....	41
Maria MUNKHOLT CHRISTENSEN	
Witnessed by Angels: The Role of Angels in Relation to Prayer in Four Ante-Nicene Euchological Treatises	49
Barry M. CRAIG	
He Lifted to You? Lost and Gained in Translation	57
Anna Adams PETRIN	
Reconsidering the ‘Egyptian Connection’ in the Anaphora of Fourth- Century Jerusalem	65
Anthony GELSTON	
The Post-Sanctus in the East Syrian Anaphoras	77
Graham FIELD	
Breaking Boundaries: The Cosmic Dimension of Worship	83
George A. BEVAN	
The Sequence of the First Four Sessions of the Council of Chalcedon	91

ORIENTALIA

Todd E. FRENCH	
Just Deserts: Origen’s Lingering Influence on Divine Justice in the Hagiographies of John of Ephesus.....	105
Benedict M. GUEVIN	
Dialogue between Death and the Devil in Saint Ephrem the Syrian and Saint Romanos the Melodist	113
Paul M. PASQUESI	
<i>Qnoma</i> in Narsai: Anticipating <i>Energeia</i>	119

David G.K. TAYLOR Rufinus the Silver Merchant's Miaphysite Refutation of Leontius of Byzantium's <i>Epaporemata</i> (CPG 6814): A Rediscovered Syriac Text.....	127
Valentina DUCA Pride in the Thought of Isaac of Nineveh	137
Valentin VESA The Divine Vision in Isaac of Niniveh and the East Syriac Christology	149
Theresia HAINTHALER <i>Colossians</i> 1:15 in the Christological Reflection of East Syrian Authors	165
Michael PENN, Nicholas R. HOWE & Kaylynn CRAWFORD Automated Syriac Script Charts.....	175
Stephen J. DAVIS Cataloguing the Coptic and Arabic Manuscripts in the Monastery of the Syrians: A Preliminary Report	179
Damien LABADIE A Newly Attributed Coptic <i>Encomium</i> on Saint Stephen (BHO 1093)	187
Anahit AVAGYAN Die armenische Übersetzung der pseudo-athanasianischen Homilie <i>De passione et cruce domini</i> (CPG 2247).....	195

CRITICA ET PHILOLOGICA

B.N. WOLFE The Gothic Palimpsest of Bologna	205
Meredith DANEZAN Proverbe (<i>paroimia</i>) et <i>cursus</i> spirituel : l'apport de l'Épitomé de la Chaîne de Procope.....	209
Aaron PELTTARI <i>Lector inueniet</i> : A Commonplace of Late Antiquity	215
Peter VAN NUFFELEN The Poetics of Christian History in Late Antiquity	227

Yuliya MINETS	
Languages of Christianity in Late Antiquity: Between Universalism and Cultural Superiority	247
Peter F. SCHADLER	
Reading the Self by Reading the Other: A Hermeneutical Key to the Reading of Sacred Texts in Late Antiquity and Byzantium	261

HISTORICA

Peter GEMEINHARDT	
Teaching Religion in Late Antiquity: Divine and Human Agency ...	271
David WOODS	
Constantine, Aurelian, and Aphaca.....	279
Luise Marion FRENKEL	
Procedural Similarities between Fourth- and Fifth-Century Christian Synods and the Roman Senates: Myth, Politics or Cultural Identity?	293
Maria KONSTANTINIDOU	
Travelling and Trading in the Greek Fathers: Faraway Lands, Peoples and Products	303
Theodore DE BRUYN	
Historians, Bishops, Amulets, Scribes, and Rites: Interpreting a Chris- tian Practice	317
Catherine C. TAYLOR	
Educated Susanna: Female <i>Orans</i> , Sarcophagi, and the Typology of Woman Wisdom in Late Antique Art and Iconography	339
David L. RIGGS	
Contesting the Legacy and Patronage of Saint Cyprian in Vandal Carthage.....	357
Jordina SALES-CARBONELL	
The Fathers of the Church and their Role in Promoting Christian Constructions in <i>Hispania</i>	371
Bethany V. WILLIAMS	
The Significance of the Senses: An Exploration into the Multi- Sensory Experience of Faith for the Lay Population of Christianity during the Fourth and Fifth Centuries C.E.....	381

Jacob A. LATHAM
Adventus, Occursus, and the Christianization of Rome 397

Teodor TĀBUŞ
 The Orthodoxy of Emperor Justinian’s Christian Faith as a Matter
 of Roman Law (*CJ I,1,5-8*)..... 411

Nicholas MATAYA
 Charity Before Division: The Strange Case of Severinus of Noricum
 and the Pseudo-Evangelisation of the Rugians..... 423

Christian HORNING
 Die Konstruktion christlicher Identität. Funktion und Bedeutung der
 Apostasie im antiken Christentum (4.-6. Jahrhundert n. Chr.) 431

Ronald A.N. KYDD
 Growing Evidence of Christianity’s Establishment in China in the
 Late-Patristic Era..... 441

Luis SALÉS
 ‘Aristotelian’ as a *Lingua Franca*: Rationality in Christian Self-
 Representation under the ‘Abbasids’ 453

Volume 19

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCIII

THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES

Joshua KINLAW
 Exegesis and *Homonoia* in *First Clement* 3

Janelle PETERS
 The Phoenix in *1Clement*..... 17

Jonathan E. SOYARS
 Clement of Rome’s Reconstruction of Job’s Character for Corinth:
 A Contextual Reading of the Composite Quotation of LXX *Job* 1-2
 in *1Clem.* 17.3 27

Ingo SCHAAF
 The Earliest Sibylline Attestations in the Patristic Reception: Eru-
 dition and Religion in the 2nd Century AD 35

J. Christopher EDWARDS	
Identifying the Lord in the <i>Epistle of Barnabas</i>	51
Donna RIZK	
The Apology of Aristides: the Armenian Version.....	61
Paul R. GILLIAM III	
Ignatius of Antioch: The Road to Chalcedon?	69
Alexander B. MILLER	
Polemic and Credal Refinement in Ignatius of Antioch	81
Shaily SHASHIKANT PATEL	
The ‘Starhymn’ of Ignatius’ <i>Epistle to the Ephesians</i> : Re-Appropriation as Polemic	93
Paul HARTOG	
The Good News in Old Texts? The ‘Gospel’ and the ‘Archives’ in <i>Ign.Phld.</i> 8.2	105
Stuart R. THOMSON	
The Philosopher’s Journey: Philosophical and Christian Conversions in the Second Century	123
Andrew HAYES	
The Significance of Samaritanism for Justin Martyr	141
Micah M. MILLER	
What’s in a Name?: Titles of Christ in Justin Martyr.....	155
M ADRYAEL TONG	
Reading Gender in Justin Martyr: New Insights from Old Apologies	165
Pavel DUDZIK	
Tatian the Assyrian and Greek Rhetoric: Homer’s Heroes Agamemnon, Nestor and Thersites in Tatian’s <i>Oratio ad Graecos</i>	179
Stuart E. PARSONS	
Trading Places: Faithful Job and Doubtful Autolycus in Theophilus’ Apology	191
László PERENDY	
Theophilus’ Silence about Aristotle. A Clandestine Approval of his View on the Mortality of the Soul?.....	199

Roland M. SOKOLOWSKI 'Zealous for the Covenant of Christ': An Inquiry into the Lost Career of Irenaeus of Lyons	213
Eric COVINGTON Irenaeus, <i>Ephesians</i> , and Union with the Spirit: Examining the Scriptural Basis of Unity with the Spirit in <i>AH</i> V 20.2	219
Sverre Elgvin LIED Irenaeus of Lyons and the Eucharistic Altar in Heaven.....	229
John KAUFMAN The Kingdom of the Son in the Theology of Irenaeus	237
Thomas D. MCGLOTHLIN Why Are All These Damned People Rising? Paul and the Generality of the Resurrection in Irenaeus and Tertullian	243
Scott D. MORINGIELLO Allegory and Typology in Irenaeus of Lyon.....	255
Francesca MINONNE Aulus Gellius and Irenaeus of Lyons in the Cultural Context of the Second Century AD	265
Eugen MAFTEI Irénée de Lyon et Athanase d'Alexandrie: ressemblances et diffé- rences entre leurs sotériologies	275
István M. BUGÁR Melito and the Body.....	303

APOCRYPHA AND GNOSTICA

Pamela MULLINS REAVES <i>Gnosis</i> in Alexandria: A Study in Ancient Christian Interpretation and Intra-Group Dynamics.....	315
Csaba ÖTVÖS Creation and Epiphany? Theological Symbolism in the Creation Narrative of <i>On the Origin of the World</i> (NHC II 5).....	325

Hugo LUNDHAUG	
The <i>Dialogue of the Savior</i> (NHC III,5) as a Monastic Text	335
Kristine Toft ROSLAND	
Fatherhood and the Lack thereof in the <i>Apocryphon of John</i>	347
Jeremy W. BARRIER	
Abraham's Seed: Tracing <i>Pneuma</i> as a Material Substance from Paul's Writings to the <i>Apocryphon of John</i>	357

Volume 20

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCIV

FROM TERTULLIAN TO TYCONIUS

Anni Maria LAATO	
Tertullian, <i>Adversus Iudaeos</i> Literature, and the 'Killing of the Prophets'-Argument	1
Ian L.S. BALFOUR	
Tertullian and Roman Law – What Do We (Not) Know?	11
Benjamin D. HAUPT	
Tertullian's Text of <i>Galatians</i>	23
Stéphanie E. BINDER	
Tertullien face à la romanisation de l'Afrique du Nord : une discus- sion de quelques aspects	29
Christopher T. BOUNDS	
The Doctrine of Christian Perfection in Tertullian	45
Kathryn THOSTENSON	
Serving Two Masters: Tertullian on Marital and Christian Duties ...	55
Edwina MURPHY	
Widows, Welfare and the Wayward: 1 <i>Timothy</i> 5 in Cyprian's <i>Ad Quirinum</i>	67
Charles BOBERTZ	
Almsgiving as Patronage: The Role of the Patroness in Third Cen- tury North African Christianity.....	75

Daniel BECERRA	
Origen, the Stoics, and the Rhetoric of Recitation: Spiritual Exercise and the <i>Exhortation to Martyrdom</i>	85
Antti LAATO	
A Cold Case Reopened: A Jewish Source on Christianity Used by Celsus and the <i>Toledot Yeshu</i> Literature – From Counter-Exegetical Arguments to Full-Blown Counter-Story	99
Eric SCHERBENSKE	
Origen, Manuscript Variation, and a Lacking Gospel Harmony	111
Jennifer OTTO	
Origen’s Criticism of Philo of Alexandria	121
Riemer ROUKEMA	
The Retrieval of Origen’s <i>Commentary on Micah</i>	131
Giovanni HERMANIN DE REICHENFELD	
Resurrection and Prophecy: The Spirit in Origen’s Exegesis of Lazarus and Caiaphas in <i>John 11</i>	143
Elizabeth Ann DIVELY LAURO	
The Meaning and Significance of Scripture’s Sacramental Nature within Origen’s Thought	153
David Neal GREENWOOD	
Celsus, Origen, and the Eucharist	187
Vito LIMONE	
Origen on the <i>Song of Songs</i> . A Reassessment and Proposal of Dating of his Writings on the <i>Song</i>	195
Allan E. JOHNSON	
The Causes of Things: Origen’s Treatises <i>On Prayer</i> and <i>On First Principles</i> and His Exegetical Method	205
Brian BARRETT	
‘Of His Fullness We Have All Received’: Origen on Scripture’s Unity	211
Mark Randall JAMES	
Anatomist of the Prophetic Words: Origen on Scientific and Herme- neutic Method	219

Joseph LENOW	
Patience and Judgment in the Christology of Cyprian of Carthage...	233
Mattias GASSMAN	
The Conversion of Cyprian's Rhetoric? Towards a New Reading of <i>Ad Donatum</i>	247
Laetitia CICCOLINI	
Le texte de 1 <i>Cor.</i> 7:34 chez Cyprien de Carthage.....	259
Dawn LAVALLE	
Feasting at the End: The Eschatological <i>Symposia</i> of Methodius of Olympus and Julian the Apostate	269
Marie-Noëlle VIGNAL	
Méthode d'Olympe, lecteur et exégète de Saint Paul	285
Johannes BREUER	
The Rhetoric of Persuasion as Hermeneutical Key to Arnobius' <i>Adversus nationes</i>	295

Volume 21

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCV

THE FOURTH CENTURY

Elizabeth DEPALMA DIGESER	
Pseudo-Justin's <i>Cohortatio ad Graecos</i> and the Great Persecution ..	3
Atsuko GOTOH	
The 'Conversion' of Constantine the Great: His Religious Legislation in the Theodosian Code.....	13
Vladimir LATINOVIC	
Arius Conservativus? The Question of Arius' Theological Belonging	27
Sébastien MORLET	
Eusèbe le grammairien. Note sur les <i>Questions évangéliques</i> (À Mari- nos, 2) et une scholie sur Pindare	43
Thomas O'LOUGHLIN	
Some Hermeneutical Assumptions Latent within the Gospel Appa- ratus of Eusebius of Caesarea	51

Michael Bland SIMMONS	
Exegesis and Hermeneutics in Eusebius of Caesarea's <i>Theophany</i> (Book IV): The Contemporary Fulfillment of Jesus' Prophecies.....	65
Sophie CARTWRIGHT	
Should we Grieve and Be Afraid? Christ's Passions versus the Pas- sions of the Soul in Athanasius of Alexandria	77
William G. RUSCH	
Athanasius of Alexandria and ' <i>Sola Scriptura</i> '	87
Lois M. FARAG	
<i>Organon</i> in Athanasius' <i>De incarnatione</i> : A Case of Textual Inter- polation	93
Donna R. HAWK-REINHARD	
The Role of the Holy Spirit in Cyril of Jerusalem's Sacramental Theology.....	107
Olga LORGEUX	
Choice and Will in the Catecheses of Cyril of Jerusalem.....	119
Florian ZACHER	
Marius Victorinus, <i>Opus ad Candidum</i> . An Analysis of its Rhetorical Structure.....	127

CAPPADOCIAN WRITERS

Claudio MORESCHINI	
Is it Possible to Speak of 'Cappadocian Theology' as a System?.....	139
Nienke M. VOS	
'Teach us to pray': Self-Understanding in Macrina's Final Prayer...	165
Adam RASMUSSEN	
Defending Moses. Understanding Basil's Apparent Rejection of Allegory in the <i>Hexaemeron</i>	175
Marco QUIRCIO	
A Philological Note to Basil of Caesarea's Second Homily on the <i>Hexaemeron</i>	183

Mattia C. CHIRIATTI ἀγών/θέα-θέαμα and στάδιον/θέατρον: A Reviewed ἔκφρασις of the Spectacle in Basil's <i>In Gordium martyrem</i>	189
Arnaud PERROT Une source littéraire de l'Ep. 46 de Basile de Césarée : le traité <i>De la véritable intégrité dans la virginité</i>	201
Aude BUSINE Basil of Caesarea and the <i>Praise of the City</i>	209
Benoît GAIN Le voyage de Basile de Césarée en Orient : hypothèses sur le silence des sources externes	217
Seumas MACDONALD Contested Ground: Basil's Use of Scripture in <i>Against Eunomius 2</i>	225
Nikolai LIPATOV-CHICHERIN An Unpublished Funerary Speech (CPG 2936) and the Question of Succession to St. Basil the Great	237
Kimberly F. BAKER Basil and Augustine: Preaching on Care for the Poor	251
Oliver LANGWORTHY Sojourning and the Sojourner in Gregory of Nazianzus	261
Alexander D. PERKINS The Grave Politics of Gregory Nazianzen's Eulogy for Gorgonia....	269
Gabrielle THOMAS Divine, Yet Vulnerable: The Paradoxical Existence of Gregory Nazianzen's <i>Imago Dei</i>	281
Bradley K. STORIN Reconsidering Gregory of Nazianzus' Letter Collection	291
Andrew RADDE-GALLWITZ Gregory on Gregory: <i>Catechetical Oration 38</i>	303
Andrew J. SUMMERSON Gregory Nazianzus' Mixture Language in Maximus the Confessor's <i>Ambigua</i> : What the Confessor Learned from the Theologian	315

Ryan CLEVENGER	
Ἐκφρασις and Epistemology in Gregory of Nazianzus.....	321
Karen CARDUCCI	
Implicit Stipulations in the <i>Testamentum</i> of Gregory of Nazianzos <i>vis-à-vis</i> the <i>Testamenta</i> of Remigius of Rheims, Caesarius of Arles, and Aurelianus of Ravenna.....	331
Michael J. PETRIN	
Eunomius and Gregory of Nyssa on τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον..	343
Andra JUGĂNARU	
The Function of Miracles in Gregory of Nyssa's Hagiographical Works.....	355
Makrina FINLAY	
Gregory of Nyssa's Framework for the Resurrected Life in <i>The Life of St. Macrina</i>	367
Marta PRZYSZYCHOWSKA	
Three States after Death according to Gregory of Nyssa.....	377
Ann CONWAY-JONES	
An Ambiguous Type: The Figure of Aaron Interpreted by Gregory of Nyssa and Ephrem the Syrian	389
Robin ORTON	
The Place of the Eucharist in Gregory of Nyssa's Soteriology	399
Anne KARAHAN	
Cyclic Shapes and Divine Activity. A Cappadocian Inquiry into Byzantine Aesthetics	405
Hilary Anne-Marie MOONEY	
Eschatological Themes in the Writings of Gregory of Nyssa and John Scottus Eriugena	421
Benjamin EKMAN	
'Natural Contemplation' in Evagrius Ponticus' <i>Scholia on Proverbs</i>	431
Margaret GUISE	
The Golden and Saving Chain and its (De)construction: Soterio- logical Conversations between Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion and the Cappadocian Fathers	441

Volume 22

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCVI

THE SECOND HALF OF THE FOURTH CENTURY

Kelley SPOERL Epiphanius on Jesus' Digestion	3
Young Richard KIM Nicaea is Not Enough: The Second Creed of Epiphanius' <i>Ancoratus</i>	11
John VOELKER Marius Victorinus' Use of a Gnostic Commentary	21
Tomasz STEPIEŃ Action of Will and Generation of the Son in Extant Works of Euno- mius	29
Alberto J. QUIROGA PUERTAS 'In the Gardens of Adonis'. Religious Disputations in Julian's <i>Caesars</i>	37
Ariane MAGNY Porphyry and Julian on Christians	47
Jeannette KREIJKES The Impact of Theological Concepts on Calvin's Reception of Chrysostom's Exegesis of <i>Galatians</i> 4:21-6	57
Hellen DAYTON John Chrysostom on <i>katanuxis</i> as the Source of Spiritual Healing ...	65
Michaela DURST The <i>Epistle to the Hebrews</i> in the 7 th <i>Oration</i> of John Chrysostom's <i>Orationes Adversus Judaeos</i>	71
Paschalis GKORTSILAS The Lives of Others: Pagan and Christian Role Models in John Chry- sostom's Thought	83
Malouine DE DIEULEVEULT L'exégèse de la faute de David (<i>2Règnes</i> 11-12) : Jean Chrysostome et Théodoret de Cyr.....	95

Matteo CARUSO	
Hagiographic Style of the <i>Vita Spyridonis</i> between Rhetoric and Exegetical Tradition: Analogies between John Chrysostom's Homilies and the Work of Theodore of Paphos.....	103
Paul C. BOLES	
Method and Meaning in Chrysostom's <i>Homily 7</i> and Origen's <i>Homily 1 on Genesis</i>	111
Susan B. GRIFFITH	
Apostolic Authority and the 'Incident at Antioch': Chrysostom on <i>Gal. 2:11-4</i>	117
James D. COOK	
Therapeutic Preaching: The Use of Medical Imagery in the Sermons of John Chrysostom.....	127
Demetrios BATHRELLOS	
<i>Sola gratia? Sola fide?</i> Law, Grace, Faith, and Works in John Chrysostom's <i>Commentary on Romans</i>	133
Marie-Eve GEIGER	
Les homélies de Jean Chrysostome <i>In principium Actorum</i> : le titre pris comme principe exégétique	147
Pierre AUGUSTIN	
Quelques sources Parisiennes du <i>Chrysostome</i> de Sir Henry Savile ..	157
Thomas BRAUCH	
The Emperor Theodosius I and the Nicene Faith: A Brief History ..	175
Sergey KIM	
Severian of Gabala as a Witness to Life at the Imperial Court in Fifth-Century Constantinople.....	189

FROM THE FIFTH CENTURY ONWARDS
(GREEK WRITERS)

Austin Dominic LITKE	
The ' <i>Organon</i> Concept' in the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria ..	207
Barbara VILLANI	
Some Remarks on the Textual Tradition and the Literary Genre of Cyril of Alexandria's <i>De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate</i> ...	215

Sandra LEUENBERGER-WENGER	
All Cyrillians? Cyril of Alexandria as Norm of Orthodoxy at the Council of Chalcedon.....	225
Hans VAN LOON	
Virtue in Cyril of Alexandria's <i>Festal Letters</i>	237
George KALANTZIS	
Passibility, Tentability, and the Divine Οὐσία in the Debate between Cyril and Nestorius	249
James E. GOEHRING	
'Talking Back' in Pachomian Hagiography: Theodore's Catechesis and the <i>Letter of Ammon</i>	257
James F. WELLINGTON	
Let God Arise: The Divine Warrior <i>Motif</i> in Theodoret of Cyrrhus' Commentary on <i>Psalm 67</i>	265
Agnès LORRAIN	
Exégèse et argumentation scripturaire chez Théodoret de Cyr: l' <i>In Romanos</i> , écho des controverses trinitaires et christologiques des IV ^e et V ^e siècles.....	273
Kathryn KLEINKOPF	
A Landscape of Bodies: Exploring the Role of Ascetics in Theodoret's <i>Historia Religiosa</i>	283
Maya GOLDBERG	
New Syriac Edition and Translation of Theodore of Mopsuestia's Reconstructed <i>Commentary on Paul's Minor Epistles</i> : Fragments Collected from MS (<i>olim</i>) <i>Diyarbakir 22</i>	293
Georgiana HUIAN	
The Spiritual Experience in Diadochus of Photike	301
Eirini A. ARTEMI	
The Comparison of the Triadological Teaching of Isidore of Pelusium with Cyril of Alexandria's Teaching	309
Madalina TOCA	
Isidore of Pelusium's Letters to Didymus the Blind.....	325

Michael MUTHREICH Ein äthiopisches Fragment der dem Dionysius Areopagita zuge- schriebenen <i>Narratio de vita sua</i>	333
István PERCZEL Theodoret of Cyrrhus: The Main Source of Pseudo-Dionysius’ Christology?	351
Panagiotis G. PAVLOS Aptitude (Ἐπιτηδειότης) and the Foundations of Participation in the Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite	377
Joost VAN ROSSUM The Relationship between Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor: Revisiting the Problem.....	397
Dimitrios A. VASILAKIS Dionysius <i>versus</i> Proclus on Undeified Providence and its Byzantine Echoes in Nicholas of Methone	407
José María NIEVA The Mystical Sense of the Aesthetic Experience in Dionysius the Areopagite	419
Ernesto Sergio MAINOLDI Why Dionysius the Areopagite? The Invention of the First Father ..	425
Alexandru PRELIPCEAN The Influence of Romanos the Melodist on the <i>Great Canon</i> of Saint Andrew of Crete: Some Remarks about Christological Typologies..	441
Alexis TORRANCE ‘Assuming our nature corrupted by sin’: Revisiting Theodore the Studite on the Humanity of Christ.....	451
Scott ABLES The Rhetoric of Persuasion in the Polemic of John of Damascus.....	457
James A. FRANCIS Ancient Seeing/Christian Seeing: The Old and the New in John of Damascus.....	469
Zachary KEITH The Problem of ἐνυπόστατον in John Damascene: Why Is Jesus Not a Human Person?	477

Nicholas BAMFORD	
Being, Christian Gnosis, and Deified Becoming in the ‘Theoretikon’ .	485
Alexandros CHOULIARAS	
The <i>Imago Trinitatis</i> in St Symeon the New Theologian and Niketas Stethatos: Is this the Basic Source of St Gregory Palamas’ own Approach?	493
GREGORY PALAMAS’ <i>EPISTULA</i> III	
(ed. Katharina Heyden)	
Katharina HEYDEN	
Introduction: The Two Versions of Palamas’ <i>Epistula</i> III to Akindynos	507
Katharina HEYDEN	
The Two <i>Epistulae</i> III of Palamas to Akindynos: The Small but Important Difference between Authenticity and Originality.....	511
Theodoros ALEXOPOULOS	
The Problem of the Distinction between Essence and Energies in the Hesychast Controversy. Saint Gregory Palamas’ <i>Epistula</i> III: The Version Published by P. Chrestou in Light of Palamas’ Other Works on the Divine Energies.....	521
Renate BURRI	
The Textual Transmission of Palamas’ <i>Epistula</i> III to Akindynos: The Case of Monac. gr. 223	535
Dimitrios MOSCHOS	
Reasons of Being versus Uncreated Energies – Neoplatonism and Mathematics as Means of Participating in God according to Nicephorus Gregoras	547

Volume 23

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCVII

FROM THE FOURTH CENTURY ONWARDS (LATIN WRITERS)

Anthony P. COLEMAN	
Comparing Institutes: Lactantius’ <i>Divinae Institutiones</i> in Calvin’s <i>Institutio christianae religionis</i> 1.1-5.....	3

Jessica VAN 'T WESTEINDE	
Jerome and the <i>Christianus Perfectus</i> , a Transformed Roman Noble Man?	17
Silvia GEORGIEVA	
Domina, Filia, Conserva, Germana: The Identity of the Correspondent in Saint Jerome's Letters.....	37
Roberta FRANCHI	
<i>Muliercularum socii</i> (Hier., <i>Ep.</i> 133,4): donne ed eresia nell' <i>Epistolario</i> di Gerolamo	51
Richard SEAGRAVES	
Prudentius: <i>Contra orationem Symmachi</i> , Bk. I	63
Klazina STAAT	
'Let him thus be a Hippolytus' (<i>Perist.</i> 11.87): Horror and Rhetoric in Prudentius' <i>Peristephanon</i> 11.....	79
Diane Shane FRUCHTMAN	
Witness and Imitation in the Writings of Paulinus of Nola.....	87
Lorenzo SCIAJNO	
Salvation behind the Web (Paul. Nol., <i>Carm.</i> XVI 93-148): Connections and Echoes of a Fairy-tale Theme in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages between West and East	97
Ewa DUSIK-KRUPA	
Politician, Theologian, Tutor. Luciferi Calaritanis' Use of Holy Scripture.....	103
Vincenzo MESSANA	
Massimino ariano e la Sicilia: il dibattito storiografico negli ultimi decenni su una <i>vexata quaestio</i>	115
Salvatore COSTANZA	
Il variegato panorama di accezioni dei termini <i>Romanus</i> e <i>barbarus</i> , <i>Christianus</i> e <i>paganus</i> negli scritti di Salviano.....	129
Matthew J. PEREIRA	
The Intertextual Tradition of Prosper's <i>De vocatione omnium gentium</i>	143

Raúl VILLEGAS MARÍN	
Abjuring Manichaeism in Ostrogothic Rome and Provence: The <i>Commonitorium quomodo sit agendum cum Manichaeis</i> and the <i>Prosperi anathematismi</i>	159
Mantè LENKAITYTĖ OSTERMANN	
John Cassian Read by Eucherius of Lyon: Affinities and Diver- gences	169
Daniel G. OPPERWALL	
Obedience and Communal Authority in John Cassian.....	183
Gerben F. WARTENA	
Epic Emotions: Narratorial Involvement in Sedulius' <i>Carmen</i> <i>Paschale</i>	193
Tim DENECKER	
Evaluations of Multilingual Competence in Cassiodorus' <i>Variae</i> and <i>Institutiones</i>	203
Hector SCERRI	
On Menstruation, Marital Intercourse and 'Wet Dreams' in a Letter by Gregory the Great.....	211
Jerzy SZAFRANOWSKI	
To See with Body and to See with Mind: Corporeal and Spiritual Cognition in the 'Dialogues' of Gregory the Great.....	219
Pere MAYMÓ I CAPDEVILA	
Chants, Icons, and Relics in the Evangelization Doctrine of Gregory the Great: The Case of Kent.....	225
Stephen BLACKWOOD	
Scriptural Allusions and the Wholeness of Wisdom in Boethius' <i>Consolation of Philosophy</i>	237
Juan Antonio JIMÉNEZ SÁNCHEZ	
A Brief Catalogue of Superstitions in Chapter 16 of Martin of Bra- ga's <i>De correctione rusticorum</i>	245
Alberto FERREIRO	
' <i>Sufficit septem diebus</i> ': Seven Days Mourning the Dead in the <i>Let-</i> <i>ters</i> of St. Braulio of Zaragoza	255

Susan CREMIN	
Bede's Interpretative Practice in his Homilies on the Gospels.....	265

NACHLEBEN

Bronwen NEIL	
Reception of Late-Antique Popes in the Medieval Byzantine Tradition.....	283
Ken PARRY	
Providence, Resurrection, and Restoration in Byzantine Thought, Eighth to Ninth Centuries	295
Eiji HISAMATSU	
Spätbyzantinische Übernahme der Vorstellung von der Lichtvision des Euagrius Pontikos, erörtert am Beispiel des Gregorios Sinaites .	305
Catherine KAVANAGH	
Eriugena's Trinity: A Framework for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue.....	311
Tobias GEORGES	
The <i>Apophthegmata Patrum</i> in the Context of the Occidental Reformation of Monastic Life during the 11 th and 12 th Centuries. The Case of Peter Abelard	323
Christopher M. WOJTULEWICZ	
Augustine and the Dissolution of Polarity. Some Thoughts on Augustine Reception in the Late 13 th and Early 14 th Centuries According to Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart	329
Marie-Anne VANNIER	
Origen, a Source of Meister Eckhart's Thinking	345
Lavinia CERIONI	
The Patristic Sources of Eriugena's Exegesis of the Parable of the Bridesmaids	355
Thomas F. HEYNE	
A Polemicist rather than a Patrologist: Calvin's Attitude to and Use of the Early Church Fathers	367

Volume 24

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCVIII

ST AUGUSTINE AND HIS OPPONENTS

Susanna ELM	
Sold to Sin Through <i>Origo</i> : Augustine of Hippo and the Late Roman Slave Trade.....	1
Michael J. THATE	
Augustine and the Economics of Libido	23
Willemien OTTEN	
The Fate of Augustine's <i>Genesis</i> Exegesis in Medieval Hexaemeral Commentaries: The Cases of John Scottus Eriugena and Robert Grosseteste.....	51
Midori E. HARTMAN	
Beginning Again, Becoming Animal: Augustine's Theology, Animality, and Physical Pain in <i>Genesis</i>	71
Sarah STEWART-KROEKER	
Groaning with the Psalms: The Cultivation of World-Weariness in Augustine's <i>Enarrationes in Psalmos</i>	81
Marie PAULIAT	
<i>Non inueni tantam fidem in Israel</i> : la péricope de l'acte de foi du centurion (<i>Matt. 8:5-13</i>) interprétée dans les <i>Sermones in Matthaëum</i> d'Augustin d'Hippone	91
Joseph L. GRABAU	
Christology and Exegesis in Augustine of Hippo's XV th Tractate <i>In Iohannis Euangelium</i>	103
Teppeï KATO	
Greek or Hebrew? Augustine and Jerome on Biblical Translation...	109
Rebekka SCHIRNER	
Augustine's Theory of Signs – A Hermeneutical Key to his Practice of Dealing with Different Biblical Versions?	121
Erika KIDD	
The Drama of <i>De magistro</i>	133

Douglas FINN	
The Holy Spirit and the Church in the Earliest Augustine: An Analysis of the Character of Monnica in the Cassiciacum Dialogues.....	141
John Peter KENNEY	
<i>Nondum me esse</i> : Augustine's Early Ontology.....	167
Maureen A. TILLEY	
Pseudo-Cyprian and the Rebaptism Controversy in Africa	173
Heather BARKMAN	
'Stubborn and Insolent' or 'Enfeebled by Riches'? The Construction of Crispina's Identity.....	181
David E. WILHITE	
Were the 'Donatists' a National or Social Movement in Disguise? Reframing the Question	191
Naoki KAMIMURA	
The Relation of the Identity of North African Christians to the Spir- itual Training in the Letters of Augustine	221
Edward Arthur NAUMANN	
The Damnation of Baptized Infants according to Augustine.....	239
Jane MERDINGER	
Defying Donatism Subtly: Augustine's and Aurelius' Liturgical Canons at the Council of Hippo	273
Marius Anton VAN WILLIGEN	
Did Augustine Change or Broaden his Perspective on Baptism?	287
Jesse A. HOOVER	
'They Agreed with the Followers of Arius': The 'Arianization' of the Donatist Church in Late Antique Heresiology	295
Joshua M. BRUCE	
The Necessities of Judgment: Augustine's Juridical Response to the Donatists	307
Carles BUENACASA PÉREZ	
Why Suicides Instead of Martyrs? Augustine and the Persecution of Donatists	315

Colten Cheuk-Yin YAM	
Augustine's Intention in Proceeding from ' <i>mens, notitia, amor</i> ' to ' <i>memoria, intelligentia, voluntas</i> '	327
Robert PARKS	
Augustine and Proba on the Renewed Union of Man and Woman in Christ's Humanity and the Church	341
Victor YUDIN	
Augustine on Omnipotence versus Porphyry Based on Appropriation of Plato's <i>Timaeus</i> 41ab	353
Johanna RÁKOS-ZICHY	
The Resurrection Body in Augustine	373
Pierre DESCOTES	
Une demande d'intercession bien maladroite : la correspondance entre Augustin d'Hippone et Nectarius	385
Giulio MALAVASI	
John of Jerusalem's Profession of Faith (CPG 3621) and the Pelagian Controversy	399
Katherine CHAMBERS	
The Meaning of 'Good Works' in Augustine's Anti-Pelagian Writings	409
Kenneth M. WILSON	
Re-dating Augustine's <i>Ad Simplicianum</i> 1.2 to the Pelagian Contro- versy	431
Nozomu YAMADA	
Pelagius' Narrative Techniques, their Rhetorical Influences and Neg- ative Responses from Opponents Concerning the Acts of the Synod of Diospolis	451
Piotr M. PACIOREK	
The Controversy between Augustine and Julian of Eclanum: On Law and Grace	463
Timo NISULA	
'This Three-Headed Hellhound' – Evil Desire as the Root (<i>radix</i>) of All Sins in Augustine's Sermons	483

Jonathan Martin CIRAULO Sacramental Hermeneutics: Augustine's <i>De doctrina Christiana</i> in the Berengarian Controversy.....	495
Elizabeth KLEIN The Silent Word: Speech in the <i>Confessions</i>	509
Christian COPPA The Creatureliness of Time and the Goodness of Narrative in Augus- tine's <i>Confessions</i>	517
D.L. DUSENBURY New Light on Time in Augustine's <i>Confessions</i>	529
Math OSSEFORTH Augustine's <i>Confessions</i> : A Discourse Analysis	545
Sean HANNAN Demonic Historiography and the Historical Sublime in Augustine's <i>City of God</i>	553
Jimmy CHAN The Restoration Word Group in <i>De civitate Dei</i> , Books XI-XXII: A Study of an Important Backbone of Augustine's Theology of His- tory.....	561
Michael L. CARREKER <i>Sapientia</i> as Dialectic in Book XV of Augustine's <i>De Trinitate</i>	569
Augustine M. REISENAUER Wonder and Significance in Augustine's Theology of Miracles.....	577
Makiko SATO Confession of a Human Being as Darkness in Augustine	589
Rowena PAILING Does Death Sting? Some Thoughts from the Mature Augustine	599
Kitty BOUWMAN Wisdom Christology in the Works of St. Augustine.....	607
Mark G. VAILLANCOURT The Predestinarian Gottschalk of Orbais: Faithful Augustinian or Heretic?: The Ninth Century Carolingian Debate Revisited.....	621

Matthew DREVER	
Speaking from the Depths: Augustine and Luther’s Christological Reading of <i>Substantia</i> in <i>Psalm 69</i>	629
Cassandra M.M. CASIAS	
The Vulnerable Slave-Owner in Augustine’s Sermons.....	641
Kyle HURLEY	
Kenoticism in <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> and <i>Confessions</i> : Descending to Ascend.....	653
Elizabeth A. CLARK	
Augustine and American Professors in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries: From Adulation to Critique.....	667
Shane M. OWENS	
Christoecclesial Participation: Augustine, Zizioulas, and Contemporary Ecumenism	675
Dongsun CHO	
The Eternal Relational Submission of the Son to the Father: A Critical Reading of a Contemporary Evangelical Trinitarian Controversy on Augustine.....	683