

Mark Krause

Ripon College

CAAS 2018 Fall Meeting Paper

Prudentius and his Synthesis of Pagan and Christian Literature

Prudentius, according to the Oxford Classical Dictionary, is the greatest of the Christian Latin poets, on the other hand Malamud in 1989 calls him the last classical poet along with his contemporary Claudian. Born around 350 and living past 405, Prudentius, in summary seeks to synthesize themes and content from both pagan and Christian literature during a time of great change and transition in an attempt to legitimize the authority of the officially Christianized government and promote Christian morality.

Before I discuss the main topic of this paper, I would like to explain my general philosophy and methodology. I was motivated to work on Prudentius after reading historian Peter Brown's 1971 *The World of Late Antiquity*. In this book, Brown discusses periodization, the concept in history of denoting time periods as separate sections of some greater timeline of history. He prefers to define a period of transition and evolution from 250-800 (Marcus Aurelius to Charlemagne). He deemphasizes the end of a good and civilized Roman Empire in 476. After this end, he revises the notion that horrible turmoil prevailed before civilization returned in 1000-1100, which medieval historians liked to call the High Middle Ages. Gibbon's 18th century *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is the source of this narrative of decline. The idea that there are, for instance, a distinct Classical Era and Middle Ages remains pervasive in much of intellectual culture, high school and college history courses, and our culture

at large. When I presented Prudentius at MAAR (Midwest Academy of Religion) conference last winter, I was surprised that church historians were not familiar with Brown's periodization.

Brown coined the term "Late Antiquity" for these 550 years: not quite medieval, but not exactly classical antiquity. Recently, this designation has come to be popular among many disciplines in the humanities; for instance, the *Journal of Late Antiquity*, started in 2008, to accommodate scholars who wish to work in this time period. There is a huge amount of previously unstudied Late Antique primary source material, and this combined Brown's rediscovery of the period in the English speaker's mind, if for no other reason than it being a useful designation, has pushed it to the front. Prudentius, in particular, has remained unseen by English speakers, leading me to the project today. I will proceed to argue that Prudentius, a poet on the end of Classical work and facing changing cultural and religious winds of Christianity, attempts to impose Christian morality onto pagan or traditional literary themes and topics.

Born in Northern Spain, Aurelius Prudentius Clemens lived from 348-c. 405. After receiving an education in law, he served as provincial governor twice and later advised Theodosius I. After his public service, he began to write poetry on Christian themes and topics. The reign Theodosius I is an important moment in the history of ecclesiastical Christianity: in 391, he gave the edict of Thessalonica, which officially mandated the closure of pagan temples. 80 years earlier, Constantine had privileged Christianity by offering Christians governmental positions. He did not however interfere with established pagan worship, but under Theodosius, the Church had now outlawed the old ways. It is reasonable, therefore, that an advisor of Theodosius would seek to produce literature that would aid in the governmental process of

change. Prudentius' writings are reflect the popular pro-Christian agenda of the church and imperial elite.

The perfect exemplar for approaching Prudentius' work is the *Passio Agnetis*, the Passion of St. Agnes, Book XIV of the *Peristephanon* (Crowns of Martyrdom), a collection of Saint's lives and the stories of their martyrdom. First, a synopsis of the book: Agnes, a young girl of marriageable age (*primis in annis*) is sentenced by a judge in Rome to be tied to a stake and left naked in a public square because she is a Christian and refused to worship at the temple of Minerva. However, God pitied the girl, and rather than be shamed by the passersby, they avert their gazes and allow her to keep her modesty, a vital virtue for young Christian women. One man, however, jeered and lusted at her, and was immediately struck down by a thunderbolt. In the end, Agnes meets her death by the sword, ecstatic to finally be able to become a bride of Christ and go to heaven.

Prudentius carefully wraps his poetry in layers of complexity and reference, but following his role as a figure during a time of transition, writes Christian morality within Roman poetry and myth. This story was actually well established as a "folk legend", but Prudentius is the first to associate it with Agnes. (Malamud, 166-7) Before the story even begins, Prudentius has made a pun, a typical feature of poetry of this time: the name Agnes sounds like the greek word ἁγνός, meaning holy, but also sounds like the latin word *agnus*, the lamb. Immediately Prudentius juxtaposes the Greek word, evoking more ancient images of religion, with the *Agnus Dei*, a part the new Christian faith.

Next, the first lines situate the christian martyr with the most ancient and august figures of Roman history:

“Agnes sepulcrum est Romulea in domo,
 fortis puellae, martyris inclytæ.
 conspectu in ipso condita turrium
 servat salutem virgo Quiritium,
 5 nec non et ipsos protegit advenas
 puro ac fideli pectore supplices.
 duplex corona est praestita martyri :
 intactum ab omni crimine virginal,
 mortis deinde gloria liberae.”

--Translation by MGK

In the house of Romulus lies the tomb of Agnes, a brave girl, and a famous martyr. Buried in the foundations within sight of the towers, the virgin preserves the health of all the people of Quirinus. And she protects strangers too and suppliants who come with pure and faithful hearts. A double crown is given to the martyr: one because her virginity was kept from any crime, then the other because of the glory of her liberating death.

This prelude describes the virtue of Agnes before the story, a feature of each of the fourteen books of the *Peristephanon*. Prudentius has chosen classic words to describe the mythological beginnings of Rome. “Romulea” and “Quiritium” evoke the deified Romulus, and suggest that she was likely buried at the Palatine hill, the heart of the city. Then there is “condita”, from the phrase *ab urbe condita* (from the city’s founding), the historian’s way of dating events in Roman history. Agnes does not discriminate whose “*salutatem*” she watches over, helping all who come to her. Prudentius’ distinction between two groups also mirrors the differences between Christians and pagans at this time: remember that the imperial government would like to have the citizens acquiesce to the church. If the more recent church can claim as ancient of a place in Rome as the traditional religion, than that will smooth the transition. Finally, Prudentius finishes this section with the Christian virtues of purity, virginity, and

martyrdom. He does not want to sacrifice the new Christian morality for expedience, but rather enforce it.

In the *St. Agnes*, Prudentius synthesizes Christian and pagan literature by juxtaposing the two as well as by suggesting that the church has ancient ties with Roman history. Marc Mastrangelo, in his book *The Roman Self in Late Antiquity*, makes a point tertiary to his argument but cogent to mine: essentially, Prudentius is working on historiography. Mastrangelo cites that Prudentius imagines himself to be a “*historicus*” like Moses, chronicling the history of God’s people on Earth. (42) By compiling pagan history alongside Christian history, Prudentius accomplishes something we might call historical imperialism, i.e., he incorporates or synthesizes pagan history and mythology into the Christian understanding of the timeline. This has two results: first, Prudentius unites pagans and Christians in the same grand narrative of history, and second, he legitimizes the current imperial government as a normal continuation of Roman government, on from Romulus, effectively covering the transition up while simultaneously progressing it.

Therefore, considering Prudentius’ goals of legitimizing the church and government as well as reconciling his Christian faith to his extensive classical education, his placing of Christian and pagan ideals together is not so shocking. Take, for instance, his comparison of civil war to Judas Iscariot’s betrayal of Christ in his *Psychomachia*:

477 “cognatam Civilis agit Discordia praedam...
 529 ...nonne triumphum
 530 egimus e Scarioth, magnus qui discipulorum
 et conviva Dei, dum fallit foedere mensae
 haudquaquam ignarum dextramque parabside
 iungit,
 incidit in nostrum flammante cupidine telum,

infamem mercatus agrum de sanguine amici
numinis, obliso luiturus iugera collo”

--Translation by Thomson

Civil war makes plunder of kin,...Did we not triumph over Iscariot, a great one among the disciples of God, and one that sat at meat with Him? Being false to Him (though He knew all) as he sat at his table and put his hand into the dish with Him, he fell upon our weapon in the heat of his desire, for he bought a piece of land of ill fame with the price of the blood of God, who was his friend, and was doomed to atone for his acres with a strangled neck.

This section is from the *Psychomachia*. Written in hexameters, the *Psychomachia* is an epic poem, but unlike much of Prudentius' other poetry, does not imitate classical writings. Instead of basing his work on Virgil's Aeneid, the obvious Latin epic, Prudentius writes a very straightforward and formulaic piece: He opposes some personified Christian virtues against vices, and after describing the depth of their qualities at length, the virtues emerge in the end victorious. Prudentius cites the vice of “*Discordia Civilis*”, Civil Strife, which causes the civil wars the Romans knew very well. Judas may have been “*magnus qui discipulorum*”, great like the Patricians of yesteryear, yet even he fell into the weakness of “*flammante cupidine*”. Prudentius then proceeds to explain that Judas traded his “*amici*” for land, the ultimate economic resource in Italy. This message also resounds with the government's agenda: civil strife over differences in religion is dangerous, as opposed to the virtue Prudentius praises, “*Harmonia*”, harmony among countrymen.

While this last section, like the St. Agnes, suggests the histories of the Romans and Christians have much in common, this next section demonstrates a radical theological stance in a major debate at the heart of the early church. From *Peristephanon II*,

" O Christe, nomen ^ unicum,
 o splendor, o virtus Patris,
 415 o factor orbis et poli,
 atque auctor horum moenium,
 qui scepra Romae in vertice
 rerum locasti, sanciens
 mundum Quirinali togae
 420 servire et armis cedere,
 ut discrepantum gentium
 mores et observantiam
 linguasque et ingenia et sacra
 unis domares legibus,
 425 en omne sub regnum Remi
 mortale concessit genus,
 idem loquuntur dissoni
 ritus, id ipsum sentiunt.
 hoc destinatum quo magis
 430 ius Christiani nominis,
 quodcumque terrarum iacet,
 uno inligaret vinculo.
 da, Christe, Romanis tuis
 sit Christiana ut civitas,
 435 per quam dedisti ut ceteris
 mens una sacrorum foret.
 confoederantur omnia
 hinc inde membra in symbolum.
 mansuescit orbis subditus,
 440 mansuescat et summum caput.
 advertat abiunctas plagas
 coire in unam gratiam ;
 fiat fidelis Romulus,
 et ipse iam credat Numa."

^Note: Alternative *numen*.

--Translation by Thomson

O Christ, the one name (the one divine will), the glory and strength of the Father, creator of earth and sky and founder of this city, who hast set the sceptre of the world on Rome's high citadel, ordaining that the world obey the toga of Quirinus and yield to his arms, that thou might'st bring under one system of laws the customs and observance, the speech and character and worship of nations which differed among themselves; lo, the whole race of men has passed under the sovereignty of Remus, and usages formerly discordant are now alike in speech and

thought. This was appointed that the authority of the Christian name might bind with one tie all lands everywhere. Grant, O Christ, to thy Romans that the city by which Thou hast granted to all others to be of one mind in worship, may itself be Christian. All its members everywhere are now allied in one confession of faith. The world it has subdued grows peaceable; may the supreme head too grow peaceable. May she see that countries far apart are uniting in one state of grace, and may Romulus become one of the faithful, and Numa himself be now a believer.

This prayer follows what has previously been discussed. The martyr of this book, Lawrence, stands before a judge. Like many early Christians, he has been accused of sedition for not burning incense to the genius of the emperor, but Lawrence proves that he has lived in accordance with the laws of the Empire and actually praises the Romans. Prudentius, through the mouth of Lawrence, gives a prayer legitimizing and lauding the imperial government before God. Interestingly, Prudentius was a contemporary of St. Augustine (354-430), the most important formative thinker and theologian of the church. The first part of the prayer lines up with Augustine nicely: the Roman Empire, although obviously not Christian, was still a uniting force in the world that brought about a net peace, making it an overall good, and that the Romans were part of the “*numen unicum*” as well. (Wogaman, 55) However, it is the final part of the prayer that reveals Prudentius’ thoughts on a major debate in the early church: the matter of Christians before Christ.

Because many of the early writers and thinkers of the Christian church had been educated in classical philosophy, they interpreted Christianity in that framework. Although obviously influenced by Cicero and Neoplatonism, St. Augustine became the cornerstone of Christian doctrine because he wrote extensively on doctrine at the time of Theodosius I. Although Augustine does not altogether condemn the institution of the Roman Empire, he does condemn

all individual non-Christians to hell with two of his fundamental doctrines: First, original sin; the idea that all humans are born with unconquerable sinfulness, and second, the idea that there is no salvation outside of Christ. (Nystrom & Nystrom, 102) Therefore, the most virtuous men of the past still must be in hell. However, Prudentius' prayer "*fiat fidelis Romulus, / et ipse iam credat Numa*" hopes for the opposite, that Romulus and Numa be counted among Christians in heaven because of the results of their actions. Additionally, the martyr Lawrence's name has another classical reference: Acca Larentia is a name for the prostitute who reared Romulus and Remus. This echoes the philosophy of Justin Martyr (c.100 - c.165 A.D.), who converted to Christianity as an adult. He simply could not accept that Socrates would be in hell, and therefore argued those who sought truth through the logos unknowingly sought Christ, who is called logos in John 1. (Nystrom & Nystrom, 68)

One vital consideration is that during the lifetime of these two men, the Roman Empire is dealing with barbarian attacks in the heart of the old empire. The Sack of Rome in 410 is quite near in the future. Augustine boldly and vehemently condemns all pagans in favor of the Christians, and while Prudentius did write apologies against Symmachus, he is less keen to discredit the great men of the past. Augustine justifies the pagan Romans on account of their actions, yet refuses to accept their spiritual equality to Christians. But Prudentius treats Romulus, a political leader, and Numa, a formative figure in a non-Christian religion, so highly that they have earned salvation alongside the Christians.

In fact, Prudentius does the same thing in an opposite way with St. Agnes: He treats Agnes so highly in Roman history that she is buried in the Palatine hill along with the city's founder, Romulus. Prudentius, in his historiographical work, fully fuses the two bodies of history

together into the same timeline in order to legitimize the dominance of the church, even to the point of accepting Numa as a Christian.

It should be noted, however, that this section is not a pure defense of the Romans. Lawrence continues his prayer to ask God that the Senate cease to worship “*Ianum bifrontem et Sterculum*”, two-headed Janus and Sterculus, the god of the manure pile, as well as the rest of the many gods they worship. Again, like in St. Agnes and *Psychomachia*, although Prudentius wants to synthesize pagan and Christian history, the overall goal is to impose the new Christian morality.

Prudentius, by positioning St. Agnes alongside the very founder of Rome, by placing Judas in the same timeline as Roman civil wars, and by praying that Romulus and Numa be in heaven, synthesizes Christian and Pagan history, accomplishing what he set out to do. The Christian morality rings loudly and the parts about government make sense in his political career.

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