

# THE ELITE STATUS OF BISHOPS IN LATE ANTIQUITY IN ECCLESIASTICAL, SPIRITUAL, AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

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The Christianization of the Roman empire was greatly accelerated by Constantine's support of the new religion. This resulted in an exponential growth of the Church in the course of the fourth and fifth centuries. As ever more people sought baptism, existing congregations grew in size, new communities were founded, and new churches were built, the need for clergymen to minister to their needs increased accordingly. The episcopate not only grew in numbers on an unprecedented scale, but bishops also acquired great public visibility as representatives of the Christian religion and as spokesmen for their communities. The bishops joined the old aristocrats, the civic officeholders, and the *nouveaux riches* in assuming a prominent position in society and a role of public leadership. Within the Church, they had occupied an exclusive leadership role for at least two centuries.

This article explores the elite status of bishops in the late Roman empire, with a special emphasis on the era after Constantine.<sup>1</sup> "Status," in general, indicates a relative position in a hierarchical system of whatever kind, and mention of the "elite" specifies a position at or near the top of the hierarchical system in question. Discussing the "elite status" of bishops thus requires a closer definition of the contexts in which they held an elevated position and the criteria by which they were perceived to do so. The elite

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1 The arguments presented here will be discussed in greater detail in Rapp forthcoming.

status of bishops is defined, first and foremost, by their position in the institutional hierarchy of the Church. I therefore begin by discussing the development of the bishops' leadership role within Christian communities. Next, I turn to the bishops' superior spiritual qualifications as justification for their ecclesiastical elite status. In this regard, I argue, bishops were in competition with holy men and monks for recognition as a spiritual elite. Finally, I examine the social dimension of the elite status of bishops and the degree to which it changed in the period after Constantine.

## THE ECCLESIASTICAL ELITE STATUS OF BISHOPS

The status of bishops in relation to their communities and in relation to the other ministers underwent profound changes in the course of the first Christian centuries.<sup>2</sup> In the apostolic age, the tasks of an *episkopos* were encompassed by the literal meaning of the Greek word, namely "overseer." His function was largely administrative—especially important were the monitoring of incoming funds and the allocation of expenditures to charitable causes—while the teaching and preaching were undertaken by those who had the "gifts of the Spirit," the prophets and the teachers. This early stage was also marked by the appointment of several *episkopoi* within each community. It is thus only with the development of the monepiscopate, when one bishop served one community, that bishops began to occupy an elite position within the Church.<sup>3</sup> Although the roots of the monepiscopate may reach further back, it is firmly attested for the first time in the early decades of the second century, in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch to the churches in the eastern cities of Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Philadelphia, and Smyrna. "See that you all follow the bishop, as Jesus Christ follows the Father, and the presbytery as if it were the Apostles . . . Let no one do any of the things appertaining to the Church without the bishop."<sup>4</sup> More than a mere administrator, the bishop was now the representative of Christ to his community. He also assumed responsibility for the instruction of the faithful, first alongside the prophets and teachers, and eventually in their place.<sup>5</sup>

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2 For general background, see Telfer 1962, Hanson 1978.

3 For a detailed study of the designations for the Christian ministry in the first centuries, see Ysebaert 1994.

4 Ignatius *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 8.1, trans. Lake 1949.1.261.

5 By the late fourth century, the role of prophets and teachers had left only faint echoes in the *Apostolic Constitutions*. See Metzger 1986.2.57–59.

As the teaching of Christian doctrine became the sole prerogative of the bishop (who could then delegate this task to others), this had the welcome effect of eliminating the potential for a multitude of dissenting voices, each claiming to be inspired by the Holy Ghost. The one bishop became the guarantor of the one faith.

The relation of the episcopate to the presbyterate and the diaconate was, in the first two centuries, one of equality. Already at that stage, however, the seeds of a hierarchical stratification were present in the internal judicial and disciplinary authority of the *episkopos* over the other members of the congregation, including the presbyters and deacons. The more extensive authority of the *episkopos* was also evident in the fact that the ordination of presbyters was his exclusive prerogative, while deacons could be ordained by priests and bishops alike. The bishops themselves were ordained by their peers in office and thus integrated into an existing network of ecclesiastical leaders. The Council of Nicaea ruled that all the bishops of a province, or at the very least three of them, should participate in the ordination of a new colleague, thus signaling their approval and indicating their willingness to engage in friendly collaboration.<sup>6</sup> By the time of the Council of Carthage (387 or 390), the hierarchical position of the episcopate in relation to other clergy was given quantifiable expression: in order to depose a deacon, three bishops are needed; in order to depose a priest, six bishops must give their consent; and in order to depose a bishop, twelve bishops are required.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these stratifications within the ecclesiastical hierarchy that identify bishops as the Church's elite, it must be noted that the terminology in the sources remains vague well into the fourth century and beyond. The Latin *sacerdos* and the Greek *hierous* can mean "priest" or "bishop," and the context does not always help to identify which meaning is intended. The same linguistic ambiguity is found in the laws of the *Theodosian Code*, published in 438. A century later, however, the legislation of Justinian clearly recognized the distinctions between the ranks within the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In contrast to the *Codex Theodosianus*, the *Codex Justinianus* mentions archbishops, metropolitans, and patriarchs. They held supervisory authority over the bishops in their region, thus forming the top layer of the administrative hierarchy of the Church. In essence, however, they were

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6 Nicaea (325), can. 4: Hefele and Leclercq 1907–52.1.1.539–40.

7 Carthage (387 or 390), can. 10: Hefele and Leclercq 1907–52.2.1.78.

nothing but bishops with an extended portfolio and will therefore not be treated separately here.

The bishop's leadership role was originally limited to the Christian community attached to his church. His duties were extensive. He preached to the congregation, instructed and baptized catechumens, imposed and then lifted penance on members of the congregation, upheld orthodoxy against heretical teachings, ordained priests, supervised the deacons who assisted him in his administrative and liturgical duties, and attended the church councils that the archbishop of the nearest metropolis convened at least once a year. In the fourth and fifth centuries, as the number of Christians in the Roman empire increased, so did the extent of the bishop's authority. Once the majority of inhabitants of a city had become Christian, the bishop's religious authority over his flock and his pastoral care for their well-being effectively translated into his participation in civic matters. Theodosius' legislation on the treatment of heretics and pagans as enemies of the state had equated adherence to Christian orthodoxy with citizenship in the empire. The bishop, as the leader of the Christians in each city, thus could be regarded as the representative of all its inhabitants. He administered justice, took care of finances, supervised church building, dealt with women in the congregation (especially the order of widows and the consecrated virgins), oversaw the dispensation of charity to the needy, looked after prisoners, ransomed captives, organized emergency relief in times of famine, negotiated with members of the city council, and, on occasion, even traveled to the imperial capital to present a petition on behalf of his city. All of these tasks had already been expected of bishops in the third century, motivated by the Christian impulse to look after their own and to bestow charity on those in need, regardless of their religion. The true change that was inaugurated with the reign of Constantine was that these social duties of the bishop were now, for the first time, endorsed in imperial law. What were originally activities of practical pastoral care internal to the Church thus acquired a new character as imperially sanctioned demands for a civic leadership role for bishops (Noethlichs 1973). The position of a typical bishop after the time of Constantine thus involved public as well as spiritual leadership and demanded that he combine administrative skill with religious abilities in the pastoral care of his flock. The compatibility of these two aspects of the episcopal office became a matter of discussion, as the bishop's administrative authority threatened to overshadow his spiritual excellence.

## THE SPIRITUAL ELITE STATUS OF BISHOPS

The “spiritual elite,” as it were, in late antiquity was made up of men and women who had acquired a reputation for personal holiness. They were recognized as “bearers of the Spirit” (*pneumatophoroi*) or as “having divine insight” (*gnostikoi*). Years of ascetic toil had subjugated the needs of the body and prepared their souls for divine gifts, most importantly that of intercessory prayer, that enabled them to work miracles. It was the hermits and monks of the Egyptian desert in the fourth century who were considered the spiritual beacons of their time, just as the martyrs had been in the centuries before them. The bishops, by contrast, were often met with scorn by these “athletes of Christ.” Not only were countless individual bishops exposed for their abuse of the privileges of their position, but the episcopal ministry itself was shunned by the holy men of the desert because it required involvement in mundane business instead of solitude, and worldly distractions instead of concentration on prayer and meditation. The story of Ammonius, a fourth-century hermit in Egypt, illustrates this attitude in the most graphic way: when a delegation came to his retreat to ask him to accept ordination, he was so horrified that he cut off his ear, and threatened to cut out his tongue as well, in order to prevent his election.<sup>8</sup> Beyond its overt message of the incompatibility of monastic retreat and clerical office, this story confirms that the holy men of the desert were sought-after candidates for episcopal office.

The spiritual qualifications that were expected from a candidate for the episcopate changed in the same measure as the definition of the episcopal office. In the first two centuries, the *episkopos* had to be an upright member of the community in order to perform his duties, which were still largely administrative in nature. The only passage in the New Testament that treats the episcopal ministry in any detail is found in Paul’s First Letter to Timothy (1 Tim 3:1–7), which is repeated summarily in the Letter to Titus (Titus 1:5–9). Although modern scholars have called Paul’s authorship of this letter into question, it is generally agreed to be a work of the late first or early second century.

To aspire to leadership (*episkopes*) is an honorable ambition. A bishop, therefore, must be above reproach, husband of one wife, sober, temperate, courteous, hospitable,

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8 Palladius *Historia Lausiaca* 11.1–3, ed. Bartelink 1974.50–52.

and a good teacher. He must not be given to drink or brawling, but be of a forbearing disposition, avoiding quarrels, and not avaricious. He must be one who manages his own household well and controls his children without losing his dignity, for if a man does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take charge of a congregation of God's people? He must moreover have a good reputation with the outside world, so that he may not be exposed to scandal and be caught in the devil's snare.

These requirements were, by and large, the same as those for presbyters and deacons. The Church Fathers of the period before Constantine who commented on this passage applied it even more widely. They interpreted it as establishing the code of conduct that was expected not just of the clergy, but of every Christian. Neither stringent standards of conduct nor particular spiritual gifts had been required of the *episkopoi* in the apostolic age. It was only when the *episkopoi* began to take over, and eventually monopolize, the teaching ministry that their spiritual qualifications came under scrutiny. The ability of a bishop to pass on the Spirit, whether in his sermons to the congregation, in the teaching of catechumens, or in personal encounters with sinners, became an essential component of his ministry.

This gave rise to the expectation that the elite status of episcopal officeholders within the institutional Church should be matched, reinforced, and justified by the bishops' outstanding spiritual abilities. The spiritual excellence of bishops was, of course, an ideal that was not always met in reality, and this discrepancy led to a perilous bifurcation in the thinking about the Christian ministry. It generated the potential for a disjunction between those who possessed superior spiritual abilities and those who held a superior office. The first theologian to give voice to this problem was Clement of Alexandria, who died around 215. He characterized the ideal Christian as the *gnostikos* who is, by his very nature, a teacher in word and deed.

For it is possible even now for those who practice the Lord's commandments, and who live according to the Gospel in perfection and in *gnosis*, to be registered in the list of the apostles. Such a man is, in reality, a priest of the Church and a true deacon [a pun on the literal meaning of *diakonos*—"minister"] of God's will, if he practices and teaches the things of the Lord; he is not ordained with the

imposition of human hands, neither is he believed to be just, because he is a priest, but rather, he is enlisted in the priesthood because he is just.<sup>9</sup>

Clement's distinction between true priests and priests by ordination allows for the possibility that true priests do not receive ordination, while ordained priests may fall short of the mark for true priests. Both scenarios bear great danger, the former because people with spiritual gifts may operate outside the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the latter because the ranks of the clergy may be filled with unworthy men. Clement's disciple Origen pursued the consequences of this thought with even greater boldness than his teacher. Not only did he proclaim that the *pneumatikos* (the person gifted with the Spirit) is superior to any clergyman (Völker 1931.181–82), he also declared that only the *pneumatikoi* deserve to be called priests, because they are regarded as such by God. Origen was widely read and much admired among the monastic communities, especially in northern Egypt. His line of thinking contributed greatly to the negative view of ecclesiastical office that is so prevalent in the monastic literature of late antiquity.

In an ideal situation, spiritual elite status would be the most important qualification for the episcopal office. This explains why monks were often the candidates of choice for the episcopate. The case is different with men who became bishops after pursuing a worldly occupation. They sought to conform to this ideal after their ordination by engaging in ascetic practices. Ambrose of Milan, for example, is said by his hagiographer to have given away his wealth and adopted a strict regimen of fasting and vigils after he exchanged his career as governor of Aemilia and Liguria for the episcopal see of Milan.<sup>10</sup> In practice, however, it was not so much the spiritual qualifications of a candidate as his social background that became the decisive factor in making episcopal appointments.

## BISHOPS AS MEMBERS OF THE SOCIAL ELITE

Within the highly stratified social structure of the later Roman empire, membership in the social elite was determined by five interconnected factors: noble birth, education, wealth, office, and closeness to the

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9 Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* 6.13, 106.1, ed. Stählin et al. 1985. My translation.

10 Paulinus *Life of Ambrose*, ch. 9.38, ed. Kaniecka 1928.80–83, trans. Deferrari 1952.56.

emperor. That bishops, as holders of the highest office within the Church, were part of the ecclesiastical elite has already been discussed. The sources provide us with biographical details for only a fraction of the two thousand or more men who, according to some estimates, held the episcopal office at the beginning of the fifth century.<sup>11</sup> Still, with the help of recent prosopographical studies, it is possible to produce a thumbnail sketch of the social stratification of bishops-elect that also takes into account certain regional variations.

Bishops came from a wide range of family backgrounds. Nobody was barred from the episcopate by his humble origins. This continued to be true even in the period after Constantine as the Church experienced unprecedented growth.<sup>12</sup> A law of Valentinian III makes provision for the case that former slaves or men of servile status had acceded to the episcopal dignity, and this is still mentioned as a possibility more than a century later, in a law of Justinian.<sup>13</sup> Other laws of the mid-fourth to mid-fifth century mention *coloni*, merchants, pig dealers, bread-makers, collectors of purple dye fish, and other members of corporations alongside members of the curial class who were seeking ordination and its attendant privileges.<sup>14</sup> The fact that these laws were issued, and issued repeatedly, shows that large numbers of wage-earning and self-employed men of the fourth and fifth centuries were attracted to the clergy. It must be noted, however, that these laws refer to the clergy in general, including deacons and priests. Since these men had none of the usual worldly qualifications—not noble ancestry, nor wealth, nor education—to recommend themselves, we must assume that they were chosen because of their outstanding spiritual reputation. This is what happened to the coal-burner Alexander. When he was first presented to the people of Comana as a candidate for their episcopal see, they were appalled

11 Eck 1978. 567. This article covers much of what follows.

12 See, in general, Noethlichs 1972.151–52. The social background of bishops has also been treated briefly by Jones 1964.920–29.

13 NVal 35.1.6 (452), Pharr 1952.546. *Iust Nov* 123.4 (564).

14 Merchants: *C. Th.* 13.1.16 (399), Pharr 1952.386–87; pig dealers: *C. Th.* 14.4.8 (408), Pharr 1952.411; bread-makers: *C. Th.* 14.3.11 (365), Pharr 1952.407; “any slave, maidservant, decurion, public debtor, *procurator*, collector of purple dye fish, or anyone, finally, who is involved in public or private accounts”: *C. Th.* 9.45.3 (398), Pharr 1952.265; guild members in Rome must be recalled from the clergy: NVal 20 (445), Pharr 1952.532; “No person of ignoble birth status, an *inquilinus*, a slave or a *colonus* . . . no guildsman of the City of Rome or of any other city whatsoever, no decurion, no ex-primate, no receiver of the gold tax, no citizen who is a *sevir* of a guild or a public slave”: NVal 35.1.3 (452), Pharr 1952.546; *coloni*: NVal 13.8 (445), Pharr 1952.527.



at his filthy and unkempt appearance, but eventually came to recognize and appreciate the strength of his faith.<sup>15</sup> Bishops of inconspicuous backgrounds were not infrequent in the third century, and the trend continued well into the fourth century. In addition to Alexander the coal-burner, there was Spyridon of Trimithous, a former shepherd; Zeno of Maiouma, who continued to support himself as a linen weaver even after his accession to the episcopate; and George, the Arian bishop of Alexandria, who was born in the shop of a fuller.<sup>16</sup> In the second half of the fourth century, Basil the Elder ordained a slave to the episcopate, which gave rise to complications that were later felt by Basil's sons, Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzen.<sup>17</sup>

The vast majority of bishops were of more elevated background. The administrative component that had defined episcopal office from the beginning encouraged the selection of episcopal candidates who were already distinguished by their family lineage and whose education had prepared them for a role of civic leadership. Particularly suited to fulfill the administrative aspect of the episcopate were the sons of the landowning provincial aristocracy, the *curiales*, whose place in the local power structure was well established and who had access to an expensive education. The curial background of most bishops in late antiquity placed them below the senatorial aristocracy, as far as social stratification by rank and office is concerned. Yet, in economic terms, it seems fair to consider the *curiales* as part of the elite, especially since the wealth of some provincial landowners sometimes rivaled that of senators who had fallen on hard times. K. Hopkins thus regards them as a "third privileged group" after the equestrians and the senators (Hopkins 1965.12).

It should come as no surprise that bishops were predominantly selected from the curial class (Hunt 1998.264, Jones 1964.923–24), considering that the *curiales* numerically represented an infinitely larger recruiting ground than the senators. In the late fourth century, there were two-hundred and fifty thousand *curiales* throughout the empire, compared to only two thousand senators (Jones 1970.93 and Jones 1964.527). In fact, *curiales* had been prominent among the clergy long before Constantine. A third-century inscription from Asia Minor records that Marcus Julius Eugenius, whose

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15 *Vita Gregorii Thaumaturgi*, PG 46.936B–C, trans. Slusser 1998.70.

16 Spyridon: Socrates *HE* 1.12.1, ed. Hansen 1995.43, 1.7–8; Zeno: Sozomen *HE* 7.28.7, ed. Bidez and Hansen 1960.345, 1.3–5; George: Amm. Marc. 22.11.4, ed. Seyfarth et al. 1978.276, 1.2.

17 Greg. Naz. *Ep.* 79, trans. Gallay 1964.1.99–102.

father was a *curialis*, had served on the staff of the governor of Pisidia before becoming bishop of Laodiceia (Batiffol 1911). The *curiales* were the most upwardly mobile stratum in the empire, and the first step in attaining one of the coveted positions in the imperial service consisted of obtaining a good education.<sup>18</sup> The mere fact that most bishops from the fourth century onward were reasonably well educated—some even had stellar academic records and excelled as authors—also points to their recruitment from the curial class.

The classroom of Libanius at Antioch included not a single member of the senatorial class, but forty-two of his students later succeeded in gaining higher positions. Of those, six became members of the senate in Constantinople and three became bishops (Petit 1956.118 and 166–67). Libanius' student Evagrius embodies the aspirations and ambitions of a typical member of the curial class. The son of a famous and prosperous family in Antioch, he managed to escape his curial obligations through appointment to a provincial governorship and subsequent promotion to a higher post and senatorial rank.<sup>19</sup> His career came to an abrupt end when he was accused of maladministration, flogged, and forced to spend his inheritance to pay the fine. Although he was rehabilitated in the following year, he switched careers and joined the clergy, first serving as a priest, and then, at the very end of his life, as bishop of Antioch. Evagrius pursued his ecclesiastical career with no less dedication than his previous secular ambitions. He was personally acquainted with Jerome and Basil of Caesarea and translated the *Life of Anthony* into Latin.

Like Evagrius, most men of curial background first embarked on a career in the civil service and became bishops later in life. Augustine, the son of a landowner in Thagaste in Numidia, had reached the pinnacle of his career, a professorship of rhetoric in the imperial capital of Milan, and was seeking an administrative appointment, when he converted and subsequently retreated to a life of solitude and study. Upon his return to North Africa, he was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Valerius, and eventually succeeded him as bishop of Hippo.<sup>20</sup> Alypius, Augustine's younger friend and soulmate, also came from the curial class in Thagaste. He had held on three occasions the salaried position of *assessor*, i.e., legal advisor to a magistrate

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18 On the importance of education in making a career, see MacMullen 1962.

19 Evagrius 6, in Jones et al. 1971.1.285–86.

20 Aurelius Augustinus 2, Jones et al. 1971.2.186–91.

with judicial powers, before following Augustine's example in receiving baptism and retiring from public life. He became bishop of his hometown in 394.<sup>21</sup> Synesius of Cyrene studied with the woman professor Hypatia in Alexandria and soon applied his rhetorical skills by petitioning the imperial court for a tax remission for the region of Cyrenaica and for an exemption from his own curial obligations. For the last two years of his life, he was bishop of Ptolemais in Egypt, a post he reluctantly accepted under the condition that he not have to renounce his marriage or his interest in Neoplatonic philosophy.<sup>22</sup> These are examples of *curiales* who had gained prominence in public life, mostly by holding civic or imperial office, before converting to Christianity and eventually acceding to the episcopate. Those who came from Christian families, by contrast, like Basil of Caesarea, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and his friend Gregory of Nazianzen, decided to forgo a secular career entirely once they had completed their studies. They chose the monastic life instead and eventually became bishops.

The tendency towards episcopal recruitment from curial and lesser backgrounds was especially pronounced in North Africa. This region had a higher number of episcopal sees than other parts of the empire because it was a densely urbanized region, and because the Donatist church maintained its own hierarchy. By the end of the fourth/beginning of the fifth century, the independent episcopal sees numbered at least five-hundred, and perhaps as many as a thousand (Lancel 1990, Eck 1983.284). While most of these bishops were of curial background, many also came from the lower class of the *coloni*, the tenant farmers. Since this region had few senators in general, it is not surprising that only two of the 275 bishops listed in Mandouze's prosopography of late Roman Africa were of senatorial rank: Petilianus, the Donatist bishop of Cirta (d. 419/422), was a *vir clarissimus* and an eloquent rhetorician, and Fulgentius (d. 533) came from a wealthy senatorial family in Carthage and had enjoyed an excellent education that had provided him with a solid knowledge of Greek. After a long period spent in the pursuit of monasticism, he was ordained bishop of Ruspe at the age of 40.<sup>23</sup> Fulgentius thus fits the pattern, which will be discussed below, of men of senatorial rank whose ordination to the episcopate was preceded by many years of monastic life.

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21 Alypius 8, Jones et al. 1971.1.47–48.

22 Synesius 1, Jones et al. 1971.2.1048–50.

23 Petilianus, in Mandouze 1982.855–68; and Fulgentius 1, Mandouze 1982.507–13.

The general predominance of the *curiales* among the episcopate is confirmed by the imperial legislation of the fourth and fifth centuries. These laws, it must be noted, aimed to regulate the conditions for membership in the clergy in general, without distinguishing between the offices of deacon, priest, and bishop. While not a single law in the *Theodosian Code* addresses the possibility of senators serving as clergymen, it contains close to thirty laws that deal with *curiales* who join the clergy. The emperors show a continued concern for what scholars have termed “the flight of the *curiales*,” referring to the fact that members of the curial class were eager to escape the tax burdens and expectations of public benefactions that were associated with their rank (Jones 1970). This could be accomplished by either an upward or a lateral move in society—either by acquiring senatorial rank through officeholding, imperial privilege, or marriage, or by joining the clergy or taking the monastic habit. Constantine had set this process in motion in 313 in a letter to Anulinus, the proconsul of Africa, when he exempted members of the clergy from public duties.<sup>24</sup> It did not take long before the *curiales* discovered this convenient loophole that allowed them to keep their family fortune intact for future generations instead of spending it on obligatory service to their cities. In an attempt to curb this trend and to secure the financial well-being of the cities, the emperors of the fourth and fifth centuries enacted frequent, and often contradictory, laws. They either demanded that, before becoming a monk or joining the clergy, a *curialis* had to bequeath all or part of his property to the city,<sup>25</sup> or that he had to pass a certain part of it on to his designated heirs, who would then be obligated to fulfill the curial duties.<sup>26</sup> More than a century after Constantine, Valentinian II noted that “. . . public losses must not be created by a general diminution of decurions [*curiales*], while the number of the clergy is being superabundantly augmented.”<sup>27</sup>

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24 Eusebius *HE* 10.7.1–2, ed. Schwartz 1908.394, 1.1–395, 1.20.

25 *C. Th.* 12.1.59 (364), Pharr 1952.351: decurions who join the clergy must designate a substitute or cede their property to the municipality; those who failed to do so when they became clerics must be recalled to the council; *C. Th.* 12.1.104 (383), Pharr 1952.357: decurions who join the clergy are free from obligations to the municipal council only if they surrender their patrimony; *C. Th.* 12.1.163 (399), Pharr 1952.366: decurions who joined higher clergy are to remain in that state, after making restitution to municipal council.

26 *C. Th.* 8.4.7 (361), Pharr 1952.190–91, repeated *C. J.* 1.3.4: two thirds of their property must be passed on to their children, while they retain one third; *C. Th.* 12.1.49.1 (361), Pharr 1952.367: men of decurion status who join the clergy must properly dispose of their property; their obligations are inherited by their sons; *C. Th.* 12.1.172.1 (410), Pharr 1952.367: handing over patrimony to the curia; *NMaj* 7.1.7 (458), Pharr 1952.557–58.

27 *NVal* 3.1 (439), Pharr 1952.518–19.

How did ordination affect the social and economic status of a man who had become bishop? It may suffice to mention a few points summarily. Beginning with the fifth century, bishops were expected to act jointly with town councilors in the municipality's self-governance, including the selection, appointment, and supervision of public officers.<sup>28</sup> Since most bishops came from curial families anyway, membership in the *curia* enhanced the status only of those of inferior background. It was the bishop's singular position as leader of the Christian community that ensured his greater public recognition even within the *curia*. There was only one bishop, while the number of city councilors could vary between fifty to over one thousand (Jones 1964.724–25). The accession of a *curialis* to the episcopate propelled him to greater public visibility among his peers as the representative of the church, but without actually raising his position within the existing framework of social stratification. This also applied to men who had held high office and senatorial rank before they became bishops. As E. Jerg has shown, the honorific epithets and markers of social distinction with which these high-ranking men were addressed during their secular careers disappeared entirely after their ordination; they were replaced by the religious titlature that had become common for all bishops: “your holiness,” “most pious,” “beloved by God.”<sup>29</sup> The interplay between secular and ecclesiastical elite status here becomes most evident. Once ordained, the social status of bishops within their cities is determined largely by their ecclesiastical office, while prior to ordination, it was their inherited social status that recommended them for this office.

The episcopate could be abused for personal economic advancement. Those bishops who came from modest backgrounds made especially easy targets for suspicions of financial fraud, the more so if they were placed in charge of a wealthy community. Such men were often accused of being rapacious and greedy, and this, it was insinuated, had been their primary motivation in seeking ordination. Those from wealthy families had other problems. In theory, the bishop-elect was required to relinquish all his rights to his family's property so that he entered the office unencumbered by personal financial interests. Yet, bishops often retained ownership of property. This is taken for granted in canon 12 of the Council of Sardica, which allowed bishops to be absent from their sees for a maximum of three weeks

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28 This is first evident in the bishop's participation in the election of the *defensor civitatis*, C. J. 1.55.8 (409).

29 Jerg 1970.267–77. This begins to change in the sixth century.

in order to collect income from property that still belonged to them and which could benefit the charity of the Church.<sup>30</sup> In practice, though, this demand for charity was often not observed. Many Church canons attest that the bishops' alienation of ecclesiastical property or funds for their own use or for the use of their family was a real and continuing concern.<sup>31</sup> The episcopal office could thus indeed become a means to increase one's economic status.

Constantine's legislation in favor of the clergy may lead to the facile assumption that the entire demographics of the episcopate changed as more members of the upper classes chose to pursue a career in the church. In fact, change was neither rapid nor dramatic. Bishops continued to be recruited from lowly origins or from curial backgrounds just as they had in the period before Constantine. The true novelty was the election of members of the senatorial class, a trend that did not begin until about two generations after the death of Constantine. The senatorial class in the fourth century eludes definition, however, as the old senatorial families in Italy were joined by those who acquired senatorial rank either by holding certain offices or by imperial dispensation and as the new capital in the east, Constantinople, acquired its own senate to rival that in Rome. Consequently, the number of men who held senatorial rank multiplied significantly, so that the increase in bishops of senatorial status should not only be seen as an indication of an upward trend in ecclesiastical demographics, but also as a function of the expansion of the senatorial order.

The old senatorial families prided themselves on their long tradition of civic leadership and public officeholding, including honorary priest-hoods, and were very slow to embrace Christianity (Salzman 1992). It was not until the last decades of the fourth century that the members of the old senatorial order converted to the new religion in any significant numbers. A

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30 Sardica (347?), can. 12, Hefele and Leclercq 1907–52.1.2.793–94.

31 Prohibitions of usury: Elvira (300?), can. 20, Hefele and Leclercq 1907–52.1.1.232–33; Nicaea (325), can. 17, Hefele and Leclercq 1907–52.1.1.604–10; Laodicea (343? 381?), can. 4, Hefele and Leclercq 1907–52.1.1.998. Strict separation between church property and private property of the bishop: Antioch (341), can. 17, Hefele and Leclercq 1907–52.1.2.721–22; prohibition of alienation of church property for non-ecclesiastical causes: Antioch (341), can. 25, Hefele and Leclercq 1907–52.1.2.722; Orléans (511), can. 5, Hefele and Leclercq 1907–52.2.2.1010; prohibition of accepting bribes: Tarragona (516), can. 10, Hefele and Leclercq 1907–52.2.2.1028; prohibition of charging fees for ordinations and consecrations: Tours (567), can. 27, Hefele and Leclercq 1907–52.3.1.192; Braga (572), can. 3, 5, 7, Hefele and Leclercq 1907–52.3.1.194–95.

few in this period even became bishops.<sup>32</sup> The first to do so was Ambrose, whose father had been praetorian prefect of Gaul. At the time when popular demand raised him to the episcopate of Milan, in 374, Ambrose was in the imperial service as governor of Emilia and Liguria and refused to be ordained until he had been officially discharged by the emperor (McLynn 1994.32ff.). About a decade later, Paulinus, who hailed from an equally wealthy and distinguished family in Aquitaine and had himself been governor of Campania, became bishop of Nola. While Ambrose was catapulted, against his intentions, from active duty in the imperial bureaucracy to the highest ecclesiastical office, Paulinus had first made a conscious choice to abandon his career and pursue the religious life as a monk. He was eventually persuaded to join the priesthood, and later became bishop of Nola in 409/10 (Trout 1999 *passim*). I know of two other Italian bishops who possibly came from senatorial families: the “*sacerdos*” Marcellus, who was in correspondence with Ambrose, was probably a bishop rather than a priest. His brother, Quintilius Laetus, was a *clarissimus et illustris* and city prefect of Rome in 398/99. It is likely that Marcellus shared his brother’s senatorial rank.<sup>33</sup> Petronius, who became bishop of Bologna in 432, came from a distinguished senatorial family (his father had been praetorian prefect of Gaul), and had received a Christian education since his youth.<sup>34</sup>

Outside of Italy, bishops from senatorial or otherwise distinguished families were a common feature in Gaul—a trend that began in the fourth century and was very pronounced by the fifth due to the political conditions there.<sup>35</sup> As this region suffered the upheavals of the Germanic invasions and the subsequent settlement of the invaders, the beleaguered senatorial families, especially in southern Gaul, found that the episcopate enabled them to reinforce their social status in accustomed ways. In the absence of an

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32 Eck 1978.572–75 gives further details, including individuals whose senatorial rank is uncertain.

33 See Marcellus 8, Jones et al. 1971.1.552 and Quintilius Laetus 2, Jones et al. 1971.1.492–93.

34 Petronius 3, Jones et al. 1971.2.863; for his father, see Petronius 1, Jones et al. 1971.2.862–63. He, or perhaps his father, is the author of a book on episcopal ordination mentioned in Gennadius’ *de Viris Illustribus* 42.

35 Rousselle 1977.333–70 claims that there were no less than eleven bishops of senatorial rank in Gaul in the years between 314 and 418; Gilliard 1984.153–75 arrives at a much more conservative estimate for the number of senatorial bishops, based on incisive source criticism.

emperor who could confer titles and privileges, the Gallic aristocrats seized the opportunity offered by the highest ministry in the Church to gain the recognition they craved and which allowed them to continue in the pursuits that had traditionally been associated with their station in society: patronage of building and other works that benefited the community, presiding over public festivals, as well as private study, and the composition of literary works.<sup>36</sup> To many of these men, their accession to the episcopate was the conclusion of a successful career in public office. Claudius Lupicinus had been a *vir consularis* in the 380s, and the dedicatee of several honorific inscriptions, before he became bishop of Vienne (Heinzelmann 1976.224–26). A prominent case is the rhetor and panegyricist Sidonius Apollinaris. His father and grandfather had been praetorian prefects of Gaul, and his wife was the daughter of the future emperor Avitus. When he reached the height of his career in the civil service as city prefect of Rome, Sidonius was already a Christian. He was ordained bishop of Clermont in 470 soon after his return to Gaul (Harries 1994). The continuation into the sixth century of this tradition of senatorial families who acquired further distinction through their involvement in the Church is exemplified by Gregory of Tours, whose family not only held senatorial rank, but whose ancestry boasted three bishops. This hundred-year period between Sidonius and Gregory marks a significant change as Christianity became progressively more entrenched in Gallic society. This, in turn, affected not so much the family traditions of officeholding *per se*, but its context, which shifted from imperial service to service in the Church. If this patchy documentation permits generalizations, it appears that the earliest senatorial bishops in Italy and Gaul had inherited their social rank through their family lineage and acceded to the episcopate only after they had also held an important office in the civil service. In other words, for senators in the late fourth and fifth centuries, the episcopate was not primarily a career choice, but a retirement option. By the sixth century, a new trend seems to emerge. Now we encounter greater numbers of men of senatorial lineage who devote themselves to Christianity in their youth, and who will hold no other office than the episcopate.

The pattern of imperial bureaucrats of senatorial rank taking up episcopal office at the end of their careers is echoed in the eastern provinces. Since the senate of Constantinople was a new creation, senatorial rank was

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36 Mathisen 1993.89–104. Heinzelmann 1976.200–08. For a more detailed study, see Wieruszowski 1922.44ff.



acquired in the east not only through family lineage, but often through officeholding or as a personal favor from the emperor. In 381, only three years after Ambrose had established the precedent in the west, the city of Constantinople obtained its first senatorial bishop with Nectarius, who had previously been *praetor urbanus*.<sup>37</sup> It would take over half a century for this to become a recognizable pattern. In 439, Thalassius, who had been praetorian prefect of Illyricum, became metropolitan of Caesarea.<sup>38</sup> Chrysanthus retired to the capital in the hopes of gaining the city prefecture after a long career as palatine official, consular governor in Italy, and vicar of Britain, but then was forcibly ordained bishop of the Novatians in Constantinople, thus following in his father's footsteps.<sup>39</sup> Cyrus had been praetorian prefect of the Orient and city prefect of Constantinople before he fell into disfavor in 443. His enforced retirement and exile consisted of being ordained to the episcopal see of Cotyaeum in Phrygia. Seven years later, he resigned from the clergy and resumed his private life in Constantinople.<sup>40</sup> Irenaeus had been *comes Orientis* from 431 to 435 and, ten years later, became bishop of Tyre.<sup>41</sup> Two sixth-century bishops had previously held high office and senatorial rank. Ephraem of Antioch, a native Syriac speaker from Amida, had been *comes Orientis* and held an honorary consulate before becoming patriarch of Antioch, a position that he occupied for almost twenty years (527–45).<sup>42</sup> And Isaiah, the bishop of Rhodes, had previously been *praefectus vigiliis*. He was one of the victims of Justinian's crack-down on homosexuals in 529.<sup>43</sup> Compared to the west, the east features a relatively small number of senators-turned-bishop. This is exacerbated by the fact that one of the seven cases that I have been able to identify, namely Cyrus, underwent ordination as a punitive measure in order to remove him from the political scene. One explanation for

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37 Nectarius 2, Jones et al. 1971.1.621. If Nectarius' senatorial rank was inherited, rather than acquired through his high office, then his brother Arsacius, who succeeded John Chrysostom as bishop of Constantinople in 404/5, should also be counted among our list of senatorial bishops.

38 Thalassius 1, Jones et al. 1971.2.1060.

39 Chrysanthus, Jones et al. 1971.1.203. Cf. Socrates *HE* 7.12.1–7, ed. Hansen 1995.356, 1.20–357, 1.10.

40 Cyrus 7, Jones et al. 1971.2.336–39.

41 Irenaeus 2, Jones et al. 1971.2.624–25. On the rank of *comes* and its senatorial privileges, see Seeck 1900.635–36 and 659–61.

42 Ephraem (Ephraemius), Jones et al. 1971.2.394–96.

43 Isaiah, Jones et al. 1971.2.627. According to Jones 1964.106, with note 64, the office of *praefectus vigiliis* was one of the originally equestrian positions that were increasingly held by senators.

the relative paucity of senatorial bishops in the east may be sought in the novelty of the senate as an institution in the eastern capital.

The fifth factor that determined elite status in late antiquity—in addition to family background, wealth, education, and office—was closeness to the emperor. This could be achieved through a position at court or in the imperial administration, through the receipt of an office or title from the emperor, or merely by having easy access to the person of the emperor. The importance of this last aspect for the eastern empire in late antiquity and beyond has been highlighted by H.-G. Beck, who has shown that offices and titles generated a web of social relations dominated by personal ties to the Byzantine emperor.<sup>44</sup> It was in this spirit that Constantine created the *comitiva*, which gave official recognition to his staff of personal “companions,” whether or not they were of senatorial rank (Jones 1964.104–06). According to this criterion, the episcopal office did indeed confer elevation to elite status that no officeholder, civic or ecclesiastical, can have previously claimed. True, every citizen had the right to approach the emperor directly with a petition, prominent citizens represented their cities on embassies to the imperial court, and provincial and imperial officials often sought the emperor’s ear, but it was the bishops who assumed this privilege as a matter of fact and on a regular basis. As representatives of the Church and spokesmen of Christ, the bishops enjoyed *parrhesia*, literally the ability to “say everything,” to speak openly with the emperor. The success of their efforts is seen in the number of imperial laws that were passed in response to episcopal petitions.<sup>45</sup> The bishops’ *parrhesia* with the emperor was, in my view, the most

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44 Beck 1965 and 1974. On the interconnection between education and access to power, see also the incisive remarks of Brown 1992.

45 *C. Th.* 9. 40. 24 (419), Pharr 1952.258: Asclepiades, bishop of Chersonesus, has successfully intervened for those who had betrayed shipbuilding technique to the barbarians; amnesty is granted for those condemned. *C. Th.* 11.1.37 (436), Pharr 1952.296: exemption from method of tax payment exceptionally granted to “Cyrus, the Most Reverend Bishop of the City of Aphrodisium, whose merits are so great that even contrary to the provisions of a general sanction of this kind, he shall not be prohibited from the full enjoyment of a special grant of imperial favor.” *C. Th.* 11.36.20 (369), Pharr 1952.337: Bishop Chronopius is punished by a hefty fine for making a wrongful appeal. *C. Th.* 16.5.53 (412, 398), Pharr 1952.459–60: successful episcopal mission to protect [Rome?] against heretics. *Const. Sirm.* 2 (405), Pharr 1952.477–78; cf. *C. Th.* 16.2.35 (400, 405), Pharr 1952.446: bishops who have been deposed by a council of other bishops are not allowed to petition the emperor. *Nov Just* 129.1 (551): improvement in the inheritance laws for Samaritans at the request of Sergius, metropolitan of Caesarea in Palestine. For the direct influence of bishops and powerful monastic leaders on Justinian’s legislation against pagans, Samaritans, and Jews, see Gray 1993.

important and enduring factor in enhancing the elite status of a new bishop and it continued to play an important role in the east. For this is a prerogative that is implicit in the episcopal office itself, even if a particular bishop chose not to exercise it. By contrast, an increase in economic status was attained through the initiative of the individual bishop and usually met with disapproval.

Bishops seem to have gravitated towards the imperial court of Constantinople in great numbers. A prominent example from hagiography is Porphyry of Gaza, who made the journey to the capital in order to seek imperial support for the suppression of paganism in his city. He was successful beyond expectation, and not only obtained from the Emperor Arcadius permission to raze the large temple of Zeus to the ground, but also received generous funds and building materials to erect an impressive Christian church in its stead, along with military support for crowd control and labor.<sup>46</sup> Bishops from the eastern provinces came in droves to the capital of Constantinople on official or concocted business. Their presence reached such numbers that they soon formed the *synodos endemousa*, which acted as an advisory body to the Patriarch in dogmatic, liturgical, and administrative matters. The *synodos endemousa* is firmly attested for the first time in 448, and its decision-making capacities were recognized at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, but its origins may well reach back to the fourth century (Papadakis 1991). Although episcopal journeys could serve a valid purpose, they were often undertaken without a real need, motivated merely by a desire for “worldly glories and business,”<sup>47</sup> and resulted in episcopal absenteeism—a common occurrence that the councils, east and west, tried to curb.<sup>48</sup> Attempts were also made to prevent bishops from exploiting their friendships at the court for their own gain,<sup>49</sup> from joining the imperial

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46 *Life of Porphyry of Gaza*, chs. 37–54, ed. Grégoire and Kugener 1930.31–45, trans. Rapp 2000.

47 Sardica (347?), can. 7, Hefele and Leclercq 1907–52.1.2.782–83.

48 Antioch (341), can. 11, Hefele and Leclercq 1907–52.1.2.717–18: bishops must obtain a letter of authorization for their journey to court from the other bishops in their province, and especially from their metropolitan; Sardica (347?), can. 21, Hefele and Leclercq 1907–52.1.2.802–03: bishops who provide hospitality to their traveling colleagues and find out that their motives are not legitimate must refuse to support them; Hippo (393), can. 31, Hefele and Leclercq 1907–52.2.1.88: the permission of the primate is required for episcopal travel.

49 Sardica (347?), can. 9, Hefele and Leclercq 1907–52.1.2.787–88: the bishops may exploit their contacts by sending a letter, but this must be carried by a deacon.

service, or from moving on to a secular honor.<sup>50</sup> The targets of such chastisement must have been men of a certain station in society who maintained their friendships and continued to harbor worldly ambitions even after their accession to the episcopate. The canons were obviously anxious to ensure that whatever “secular” status the bishops brought to their office was put to use exclusively for the benefit of the Church.

Some bishops were singled out by the emperor and entrusted with special missions. Some were asked to act as ambassadors on behalf of the empire, others were appointed to missionize in the border regions (Mathisen 1977). Famous instances are the embassy of Leo I, the bishop of Rome, along with a few senators, to persuade Attila the Hun to desist in his plan to attack the city, and the embassy of the Arian Bishop Theophilus to the Himyarites and the Aksumites on behalf of Constantius II (Matthews 1978.673–79). I have encountered only one bishop whose service to the emperor was not strictly diplomatic, and that is Conon the Isaurian. In 484, the same year in which he became bishop of Apamea, the Emperor Zeno, a fellow-Isaurian, called him to military service against the usurper Illus. He “had abandoned his [episcopal] throne and changed his status from priest to that of an armed soldier and general,” notes Theophanes.<sup>51</sup> Conon never looked back and died nine years later on the battlefield.<sup>52</sup>

The highest status, measured in terms of closeness to the emperor, was held by those bishops who enjoyed such favor with the emperor that they became part of the imperial court (Hunt 1989). These men had been ordained to the episcopal rank, but did not busy themselves with the administration of a diocese. In fact, they spent most of their time in the entourage of the emperor, providing spiritual guidance and offering advice on ecclesiastical matters. Hosius of Cordoba and later Eusebius of Nicomedia held such a position at the court of Constantine. Eusebius of Caesarea probably had harbored hopes for a similar position, but all he could do was make posterity believe that he held a relation of intimacy with the emperor, by writing himself into such a role in his *Life of Constantine* (Barnes 1981.265–67).

To conclude this broad overview, it is useful to recapitulate the

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50 Chalcedon (451), can. 7, Hefele and Leclercq 1907–52.2.2.788–89.

51 Theophanes *Chronographia*, AM 5985, ed. De Boor 1883.138, 1.5–6, trans. and comm. Mango and Scott 1997.211.

52 Conon 6, Jones et al. 1971.2.306–07.

extent to which the four determinant factors of social elite status besides office—family lineage, education, wealth, and access to the emperor—and their application to the episcopate may have changed as a result of Constantine's "turn" to Christianity. Most bishops continued to hail from the curial class. Beginning with the late fourth century—as a consequence of the "aristocratization" of the Christian ideal outlined by M. Salzman in this volume—they were joined by a slowly increasing number of men of senatorial rank. Concomitantly, there is little or no change in the education of candidates for the episcopate. Their education in grammar and rhetoric was commensurate with their original status in secular society and would have guaranteed the acceptance of their peers. It may be worth speculating that the educational standard of the episcopate declined when, beginning with the sixth century, the recruiting ground for bishops shifted from the forum to the *monasterium*, but this period lies beyond the scope of the present study. A significant change occurs with regard to access to wealth among the episcopate. Although individual bishops were not supposed to enrich themselves, the growth of the Church in membership and property, fuelled in large part by imperial patronage, meant that the members of the episcopate were in charge of financial operations on a much larger scale than ever before. It would not be wrong to assume that such financial clout also translated into greater respect for the bishops from their peers. Free and immediate access to the emperor, even more than their expanded economic competence, dramatically enhanced the bishops' status ever since Constantine included Eusebius of Nicomedia and Hosius of Cordoba in his entourage. It is one of the consequences of the reign of Constantine that the elite status of bishops in late antique society was now defined by a combination of inherited attributes and newly acquired distinctions.

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