

ELITE REALITIES AND *MENTALITÉS*: THE MAKING OF A WESTERN CHRISTIAN ARISTOCRACY

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Since the 1975 publication of John Matthews' *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court, A.D. 364–425*, the tendency in scholarship on the Roman aristocracy has been to look at differences within that class rather than at the characteristics that provide unity and coherence.¹ A generation of scholars has tried to analyze the western aristocracies by region, career, social position, resources, ideology, and other characteristics.² Archaeologists have provided a wealth of information about the material culture of the elite, enriching studies of aristocrats in Spain, Gaul, Italy, and Roman Africa with details of their everyday lives.³ Scholars, influenced perhaps by the contemporary emphasis on a pluralistic society, have tended to describe the late Roman aristocracy as something like the faculty of a modern university in which there are many professors sharing office space who yet possess distinct "casts of mind" depending on field and specialty. Few scholars have been willing to consider the aristocracy as a cohesive unified class with a shared worldview and perspective.⁴

1 Matthews 1975. The 1990 reprint, pages 389–405, cites relevant reviews and updates bibliography. In his paper below on "The Roman Empire and the Proliferation of Elites," Matthews' view of elites is consistent, by and large, with his earlier published work on western aristocracies.

2 Because the bibliography would be vast, I cite here only some representative scholars: Arnheim 1972, Demandt 1980, Heather 1998, Mathisen 1993, de Palol 1983, Van Dam 1985.

3 Mattingly and Hitchner 1995 is illustrative of the detailed archaeological work available; Lizzi 1990 shows how a religious historian can utilize archaeological evidence.

4 There are a few scholars who are beginning to reverse this trend, notably Näf 1995. This paper is a contribution toward this shift.

In my view, scholars have pushed the notion of difference too far as it applies to the Roman aristocracy in the west in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Sufficient evidence exists to indicate that a *mentalité*—a set of collective ideas or beliefs, similarly structured and part of the aristocrats' everyday life—existed in the west among the aristocracy of this period, however difficult it may be to discern in certain cases.⁵ This *mentalité* is based on a shared status culture, a culture marked by a concern with personal honor according to the Weberian notion that “every typical component of life is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of *honor*.”⁶ To come from the right family, to live in an appropriately distinguished fashion, to acquire public office and honors, to exercise influence on behalf of friends, family, and clients, these were some of the trappings that showed that one was truly honored, truly an aristocrat. Moreover, because the culture of the aristocracy was rooted in a common interest in status, social relationships and institutions played a key role in supporting it and the aristocrats' *mentalité*.

If a shared status culture lies behind the dominant aristocratic *mentalité*, we can still speak of the late Roman aristocracy as one entity, as A. H. M. Jones did (1964.547ff. and passim). We can then also extend the implications of this notion to the conversion of the aristocracy. As I will argue in this paper, Christianizing emperors and bishops appealed to this elite *mentalité*, infused with its concern for status, in order to help Christianity spread more widely through the aristocracy. This appeal to an elite *mentalité* helps to explain much of the shared rhetorical discourse, in content and form, that several late fourth- and early fifth-century bishops—like Ambrose, Augustine, and Paulinus of Nola—constructed to spread the message of Christianity.

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- 5 For the purposes of this paper, an aristocrat is defined as anyone who was a member of the senatorial aristocracy by virtue of having attained the lowest senatorial rank, the clarissimate, either by holding an office that conferred senatorial rank or by being born into the senatorial order. The rank of clarissimate was hereditary for sons, grandsons, and daughters. It brought certain legal privileges as well; see, for example, *C. Th.* 9.2.1, 11.20.6, Heather 1998, Schlinkert 1996.55–61. I use the term “aristocracy” to define the clarissimate, for it describes the sense of solidarity better than alternatives like “upper class”; here I agree with J. E. Lendon 1997.37–39.
 - 6 Weber 1946.187. Roman aristocrats were actively engaged in asserting and maintaining their honor in this status culture; it permeated the *mentalité* of the late Roman aristocrat and functioned in significant ways to distinguish this class from those below them in society.

Yet, in arguing here for extending the notion of a dominant, aristocratic *mentalité* to the process of Christianization, we must also confront the question of difference. As I have shown elsewhere, different groups within the aristocracy—imperial elites, Gallic provincials, Rome-based nobles—convert to Christianity at different times and show marked differences in their openness to the emperor's religion (Salzman 1989, 1992). Why were there differing rates of conversion if there was a shared elite *mentalité*? The answer to that question is complex, but, as I will argue in the conclusion to this paper, the notion of a dominant *mentalité* is not at odds with the possibility of different conversion rates if we take into account the fact that different groups were attracted to Christianity for social as well as ideological reasons.

This paper falls into three parts. First, I shall suggest a working definition of *mentalité* and analyze briefly its key components as we see them among western aristocrats of the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Second, I shall show how the rhetoric constructed by Christian bishops of the fourth and fifth centuries appealed to the aristocratic *mentalité*, embedded as it was in the elite status culture. And, in the end, I shall argue that differing rates of conversion do not refute the existence of a dominant, homogenizing elite *mentalité* and status culture.

A WORKING DEFINITION OF *MENTALITÉ*

For the purposes of this paper, I would like to propose a working definition of *mentalité* that follows that outlined by Peter Burke in an important survey article. Burke discerned three common features of the use of this term among historians: 1) a concern with collective ideas and attitudes rather than individual ones; 2) a concern with the "structure of beliefs as well as their content," with "categories . . . metaphors and symbols"; and 3) a concern with "unconscious assumptions," with perception, and the "workings of everyday thought."⁷ The incomplete evidence from late antiquity does not allow us to investigate all these features of aristocratic *mentalité* as fully as we might like. What we can investigate, however, are the words of a few men who were among the most literate or

7 Burke 1986. I do not want to take a position about the general utility of the concept of *mentalité*, for it has been the subject of much discussion. Rather, I want here to use it in a specifically defined way.

articulate of the group. Often these words are written by members of the core aristocratic families from Rome: Symmachus, Praetextatus, Sextus Petronius Probus, to name only the most frequently cited sources.

There are problems in making inferences about belief from the statements of individuals, especially those statements shaped to meet rhetorical ends in literary texts. To support their discussions of and generalizations about a worldview from such texts, historians have sought statements of ideas or beliefs that recur frequently and appear as distinctive characteristics of that group. Frequency and pervasiveness also help the historian to avoid defining the peculiar as emblematic of the collective group. I, too, shall turn to these criteria in discussing the *mentalité* of the late Roman aristocracy. Following Burke, I shall attempt to outline the ideology or worldview of this class, a “cast of mind” that influenced and permeated the mental activity of those who shared it.

ONE *MENTALITÉ*

From the moment he awoke in the morning, the aristocrat was concerned with status and its manifestations. He took care that his slaves dress him in appropriate clothing; the purple border of his toga was one indicator of rank, as were the codicils of appointment that he, as the holder of a high office, would have prominently displayed in his house. When the aristocrat dined with friends or family, he was concerned that he be seen with the “right set” and that he follow a code of behavior that demonstrated that he belonged and was accepted by his peers, whoever they may have been.⁸

Symmachus and his father, involved with a centrally situated group of pagan aristocrats of the Roman senate, shaped their rhetoric to reinforce their position, but many of the sentiments they expressed were shared by western aristocrats at large and not just an elite core at Rome. A series of short epigrams written by the father, Avianius, preserved in Symmachus’ letters, provide a concise outline of the conventional aristocratic *mentalité*. The lines describing Amnius Anicius Iulianus, urban prefect in 326–29 and consul in 322, begin as follows: “a man so illustrious that none would fail to

8 Amm. Marc. is the *locus classicus* for this discussion. He is dealing with stereotypes, but ones that still held for the fourth century. On this, see T. D. Barnes 1998.55–99, who makes much of Ammianus’ non-noble background, and Alan Cameron 1964.

yield to him on the grounds of wealth (*opes*), nobility (*nobilitas*) or power (*potestas*).⁹ These virtues led him to surpass his peers, acquiring riches (*dives*) and honors (*celsus honoribus*). The pride in winning the competition for honors is clear, and it served to reinforce aristocratic willingness to live up to these goals. Yet it was through the exercise of influence, often manifested through patronage, that status was made visible. So, Iulianus' virtues made him "dear to all, prepared to contribute and to help all. His accomplishments conferred upon him the greatest prestige: but he was greater (*grandior*) than these (i.e., wealth and honors), filling Rome with his eternal name."¹⁰ The last line of the epigram claims public recognition as the culminating goal of an aristocrat's life; above all, he seeks recognition, especially from peers and family who would read about him in verse and in laudatory inscriptions.

Another of Avianius' epigrams eulogized the aristocrat Valerius Proculus as worthy of his family line; in this regard, too, Avianius was articulating a widespread aristocratic belief in the value of family, especially an old, reputable family, filled with illustrious ancestors.¹¹ Family was also valued for the advantages it brought in achieving prestige; noble birth (*nobilitas*) endowed one with a name, clients, connections, and clarissimate standing.

The aristocratic concern for family explains the actions taken by men from all areas of the elite to advance their family and to secure their family lines; so, the newly arrived Ausonius worked hard to promote his family to positions of authority within the imperial court and state bureaucracy (Sivan 1993.58–55). Similarly, generals and military officers consistently tried to advance their sons into high military positions, as did Cretio, Count of Africa, who placed his son, Masaucio, in military service and helped him to become *protector domesticus* under Valentinian.¹² The

9 Symm. Ep. 1.2.5.1–2: *Cuius opes aut nobilitas aut tanta potestas, / Cedenti cui non praeluxerit Amnius unus?* All translations in this paper are my own unless noted otherwise.

10 Symm. Ep. 1.2.5.3–6: . . . *cunctisque adcommodus idem / Hic et carus erat, conferre iuvare paratus: Nam dives, tum celsus honoribus, et tamen illis / Grandior, aeterno complebat nomine Romam.*

11 Symm. Ep. 1.2.4.1–3: *Cum primis, quos non oneravit gloria patrum, / Ponemus Proculum, vitae morumque decore / Haud unquam indignum magnorum Publicolarum.*

12 Cretio, Comes of Africa, Jones et al. 1971.1.231 and his son, Masaucio, *protector domesticus* in the west 365, Jones et al. 1971.1.566; cf. St. Martin's father, who placed him in a military guard according to Sulp. Sev. *Vita Mart.* 2, whose account must be handled with care.

Praetorian Prefect Maximinus, also strove to advance his son, the future general Marcellianus, in military service even as he, like any good, aristocratic father, arranged an advantageous match for his son. So, Maximinus had his son wed to the daughter of Anepsia, a wealthy aristocratic widow.¹³ Similarly, the Frankish general Flavius Bauto sent his daughter to Constantinople where, adapting to Roman society, she was subsequently betrothed to the emperor Arcadius.¹⁴

Wealth was necessary to maintain social status; it enabled the elite to reward and patronize their dependents and to live in accord with peer expectations. Although the pagan Zosimus singles out some military men, like Bauto, for allegedly valuing loyalty over desire for gold, most were as eager as other members of the aristocracy for the wealth that would allow them to sustain their honor and position (Zos. 4.33.2). This was certainly true of the generals in the age of Theodosius and Honorius, namely Gildo, Stilicho, and Heraclianus.¹⁵ Indeed, Gildo's estates were so large that, when they were confiscated, a new official was created to manage them.¹⁶ The Praetorian Prefect Maximinus' zeal for money was so excessive that he provoked the criticism of Ammianus Marcellinus (28.1.35 and note 13 above). Precisely because Ammianus recognizes that all aristocrats share this concern for wealth, he lists the zeal for wealth of the general Flavius Arbitio alongside that displayed by the Roman noble Anicii in a passage noting the influence of the emperor.¹⁷

Peer acceptance was the final touchstone of status. Imperial grants of office and the clarissimate could confer aristocratic standing, and they could be seen as points of pride, but they did not bring the confirmation of social prestige that peer acceptance did (Mathisen 1993.12–13). So the Gallic aristocrat Sidonius well described one of his aristocratic friends: "He seeks the favor not of all men but of good men, and is not degraded by

13 Maximinus 7, praetorian prefect of Gaul 371–376, Jones et al. 1971.1.577–78, father of Marcellianus 2, *dux per Valerian* c. 373, Jones et al. 1971.1.543, who wed Anepsia's daughter, Jones et al. 1971.1.66.

14 For the career of Flavius Bauto, see Jones et al. 1971.1.159–60; for his daughter Eudoxia, see Philost. *HE* 11.6.

15 For Gildo, see Jones et al. 1971.1.395–96. For Stilicho, see Jones et al. 1971.1.853–58. For Heraclianus, see Jones et al. 1971.2.539–40. For the importance of wealth for the military, see Demandt 1980.

16 *Comes Gildoniaci patrimonii*, *Not. Dig. Occ.* 12.5.

17 Amm. Marc. 16.8.13, Flavius Arbitio 2, *magister equitum* 351?–361, Jones et al. 1971.1.94–95.

indiscriminate familiarity.”¹⁸ Therefore, much of what an aristocrat did was designed to impress his peers. Conversely, peer acceptance could make up for a lot, even low birth; Sidonius notes how Gaudentius’ humble origins are overlooked by his peers (*Ep.* 1.3.2), and Symmachus urges his fellow senators to accept Synesius among them despite his father’s humble origins (*Or.* 7.1–3). The expression of elite sentiments created a shared sense of belonging. Since aristocrats relied primarily on one another for acceptance and recognition, the circle within which the aristocrat moved was of key importance in granting that acceptance and, hence, in shaping identity.

The elite status culture was supported by a shared educational background based on the study of rhetoric and classical texts. The training of the elite so spread this aristocratic literary culture that men involved in civic affairs from all parts of the western empire can be said to have been similarly shaped by this experience. Thus, along with high public office, cultural attainments—or at least a professed appreciation of them—won prestige for the aristocrat. So when his Istrian tenants commenced their address to the eminent Sextus Petronius Probus, they began with praise of his cultural attainments: “chief of the nobility, light of letters and eloquence, model of authority, master of foresight and management, fountain of philanthropy, advocate of moderation.”¹⁹ The association of these areas of cultural life is fulsome and formulaic, but, for these very reasons, such cultural attainments can be seen as typical of the *mentalité* of the aristocrat. Failure to live up to this widely accepted norm brings blame, which explains why Ammianus Marcellinus can mock a man like Memmius Vitrasius Orfitus, who had high office and the outward trappings of status, yet did not measure up to the level of cultural attainment befitting a man of noble rank.²⁰

The military elite is the one group within the aristocracy often denigrated as lacking in literary training and an appreciation of culture. The generals and commanders in the Roman military could attain senatorial rank

18 Sid. Ap. *Ep.* 7.9.22: *gratiam non captat omnium sed bonorum, non indiscreta familiaritate vilescens*; cf. 3.2.4 and Lendon 1997.2–106, especially 39–52 on the “opinion-community of the aristocracy” granting honor to men.

19 CIL 6.1751=D 1265: *nobilitatis culmini, / litterarum et eloquentiae lumini / auctoritatis exemplo, / provisionum ac dispositionum magistro / humanitatis auctori, / moderationis patrono*. (Translation Croke and Harries 1982.115–16.) For more on the man, see Probus 5, Jones et al. 1971.1.736–40.

20 Amm. Marc. 14.6.1: *splendore liberalium doctrinarum minus quam nobilem decuerat institutus*.

and were often of “barbarian” (i.e., non-Roman) origins. But even if the generals themselves could be accused of being deficient in this area, they saw the value of such training for their upwardly mobile offspring; so, for example, the general Gratian ensured that his son, the future emperor Valentinian, was well educated in Latin, and Valentinian, in turn, took care that his son, the future emperor Gratian, had the best training available by arranging for Ausonius to tutor him.²¹ And the production of compendia, encyclopedias, and *breviaria* in the fourth century suggests the desire on the part of the new elites to acquire this cultural background quickly (Salzman 1990.55–60).

To summarize, a pervasive and recurring concern for personal status was the key component of the aristocratic *mentalité*. Aristocrats believed that they acquired and reinforced their status by living in accord with the norms of elite conduct in public and private affairs. Wealth was essential in the pursuit of that aristocratic lifestyle, but it was not all that mattered. *Nobilitas* (i.e., a distinguished line of descent), family ties, friendship, influence exercised through patronage, and service to the state shown by the holding of a high public office were also desired as manifestations of personal prestige. In the competition for status, imperial favor gave an aristocrat a distinct advantage, but peer approval was key. I have here only outlined the status culture that shaped the aristocratic *mentalité*, but there is ample evidence for how pervasive it was.

MENTALITÉ AND CHRISTIANIZATION

The aristocrat’s concern for personal status extended to the desire to belong to the right religious group. Aristocrats traditionally sought pagan priesthoods for a wide range of reasons, but one key motivation was that such offices offered another arena in which to demonstrate and augment personal honor. Pagan ceremonies, rituals, festivals, and holidays had for centuries allowed the late Roman aristocrat the opportunity to assert pre-eminence in a public sphere. At home, private, family religious rituals

21 Sivan 1993.90–91, 101. On Valentinian’s education, see Amm. Marc. 30.9.4, *Epit. de Caes.* 45.5–6. He was educated in Latin literature and knew Greek, despite the hostile tradition (e.g., Amm. Marc. 29.3.5, Zosimus 3.36.2) that sees him as a rustic Pannonian. On this phenomenon more generally, see Elton 1996.136–54.

reinforced the patriarchal social order as they conferred prestige on male aristocrats.²² To the aristocrat in the early fourth century, then, adopting Christianity presented a special sort of problem, having to do in no small part with his personal concern about status.

Only after emperors and bishops could assuage concerns over personal status could pagan aristocrats in large numbers readily identify themselves with Christianity. Christian bishops and leaders of the late fourth century—Ambrose, Chromatius, Augustine, Paulinus of Nola, and Jerome among the most prominent—were particularly important in this regard on two levels. First, they took pains to shape the rhetoric of Christianity so as to appeal to aristocratic sensibilities, as has often been demonstrated (esp. Averil Cameron 1991.1–15, 189–221). And second, of great importance, but not noted as a response to elite culture, are the attempts that many bishops in the late fourth century made to shape the message of Christianity, in public and private, in ways that would be attractive to aristocrats concerned with personal status. In key respects, Christian bishops and leaders of this time sought to create a “fit” between Christian and aristocratic attitudes, values, beliefs, worldview—in short, *mentalité*.

Consequently, we find many Christian bishops addressing the key components of aristocratic status: wealth, *nobilitas*, family ties, friends, influence through patronage, service to the state, honor. In this paper, I will focus on two of these elements: wealth and the concept of *nobilitas*. Because both were of fundamental concern to aristocrats, bishops engaged in vehement discussion of both wealth and *nobilitas*. The discourse that bishops in the western empire constructed concerning these topics is illustrative of the strategies adopted to appeal to the elite’s *mentalité* in the late fourth and early fifth centuries.

Wealth

Traditionally, aristocrats used their wealth to gain personal prestige. But how to be both wealthy and a good Christian was an issue that had troubled Christians even in the first century.²³ Following Clement, a number of Christian bishops in the fourth and early fifth centuries discussed this topic in ways that fit with traditional aristocratic notions of wealth in the

22 Scheid 1992.377–408; cf. Prud. *Contra Symm.* 1.205–08.

23 Kee 1994.29–42 discusses the New Testament evidence in full.

service of status.²⁴ Ambrose, for one, writes that there is no crime in being rich, only in not employing one's wealth in proper fashion.²⁵ He, like many other bishops, proposed almsgiving as the single most important justification for riches.²⁶ Augustine similarly justified wealth in the service of charity in a sermon: "Wealth is good, gold is good, silver is good, servants are good, possessions are good, all these things are good, but so that you might do good with them, not so that they might make you good."²⁷ Yet the responsibility of almsgiving did not require a man to divest himself of all wealth. In a striking image, Augustine talks of the servants of rich men acting as porters (*laturarii*) bearing wealth into the next world.²⁸ Indeed, many church leaders urged moderation in charity instead of completely divesting oneself of one's wealth.²⁹ As Ambrose stated in *de Officiis Ministrorum*, a treatise explicitly intended for priests: "The Lord does not want us to give away all our goods at once, but to impart them little by little."³⁰ Instead, many bishops, like Ambrose, encouraged aristocrats to give alms with the proper humble attitude, a far more easily attainable goal.³¹

In discussing the recipients of aid, Christian bishops reflect an awareness of their aristocratic audience. In emphasizing the need for discernment in almsgiving, Ambrose notes that a person's first obligation is to his family, a sentiment expressed in the *de Officiis* and by other bishops that was in accord with the basic views of most aristocrats, as well as the

24 Clement of Alexandria *Who Is The Rich Man That Shall Be Saved* 11.14. See, too, Countryman 1980.

25 Ambr. *Exp. evang. sec. Luc.* 8.85 (CSEL 14.330). The parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19–31 was used by contemporary Christian bishops frequently as a lesson that the rich must learn the benefits of charity, not as a condemnation of riches *per se*. See Petrus Chrysologus *Serm.* 124 (PL 52.532, 541), Zeno *Tract.* 1.2.9 (CC 22.17), Ambr. *de Off.* 1.9.29 (PL 16.32).

26 Ambr. *Exp. in Ps.* 119 (118).8.41 (CSEL 62.176) and the excellent discussion by Ramsey 1982.

27 Aug. *de Divitiis* 19.4 (PL Suppl. 1.1414). Translated by Ramsey 1982.240.

28 Aug. *Serm.* 38.9 (CCSL 41.484–85), *Serm.* 18.4 (CCSL 41.249), *Serm.* 25A (CCSL 41.345), *Serm.* 60 (PL 38.405).

29 Ambr. *de Off.* 2.21.111 (PL 16.133), Jerome in *Isaiam* 58.6–7 (CCSL 73A.666), Pelagius *Serm.* 61.11.12 (PL 38.414), and Ramsey 1982.233–35.

30 Ambr. *de Off.* 1.30.149 (PL 16.66): *Ceterum Dominus non vult simul effundi opes, sed dispensari*. Translated by H. M. de Romestin 1979 (reprint).

31 Ambr. *de Off.* 1.30.143ff. (PL 16.66 ff.). Cf. Aug. *Ep.* 157.35–41 (CSEL 44.482–88), Aug. in *Ep. Ioann.* 8.9 (PL 35.2040). It became a commonplace.

population at large.³² Significantly, Ambrose indicates that the most deserving of alms are those who were once rich and noble, but suffered calamity.³³

As Christian leaders justified wealth as the basis for charity, they encouraged traditional evergistic patterns of behavior among aristocrats. Simultaneously, they tried to redefine the benefits of evergetism in spiritual, not secular terms. They reiterated the Christian notion that charity was the way to atone for sin, in particular, the sin of avarice.³⁴ Thus Christian bishops were advocating a change in attitude concerning charity. It is one thing to give beneficently to friends, relations, clients, and fellow citizens, quite another to donate to the poor. Yet the blueprint for this action and a traditional motivation for it already existed. Rewards in the form of social recognition and honor were what aristocrats traditionally understood as motivating charity, for, in the classical world, “charity had been a way of being rich—of exercising the privilege of one’s status and wealth—and a way of carrying out the responsibilities of social relationships.”³⁵

The impetus for charity remained fundamentally donor-centered. Injunctions to give to the poor and to practice charity with humility were frequently repeated, and some Christian fathers criticized donors who practiced charity out of a desire for popular acclaim. But the texts from this period do not, by and large, demonstrate real social concern, as B. Ramsey (1982) concluded after a study of almsgiving in the fourth- and fifth-century Latin church.³⁶ Rather, they frequently state that the poor exist for the sake of the rich, to offer them opportunities for beneficence or to test them.³⁷ This

32 Ambr. *de Off.* 1.30.150 (*PL* 16.67), cf. Jerome *Ep.* 120.1 (*CSEL* 55.477), Augustine *Ep.* 243.12 (*CSEL* 57.578–79), Ambrosiaster *in 1 Ep. ad Tim.* 5.16 (*CSEL* 81.3.283–84). See further Ramsey 1982.233–39.

33 Ambrose *Exp. in Ps.* 119 (118).17.4 (*CSEL* 62.379).

34 Ambrose’s *de Nabuthae*, *de Helia et Ieiunio*, and *de Tobia* are treatises based on sermons against avarice. The bishop Zeno wrote treatises on this topic too; see his *de Avaritia* 1.5, 14, 21 (*CCSL* 22.38–42, 57–59, 68). For a wider discussion, see Padovese 1983.77–92 for Zeno, 114–18 for Gaudentius of Brescia, 69–74 for Chromatius.

35 Harvey 1994.44 succinctly summarizes the differences between pagan and Christian views of charity, but ignores the aristocratic interests studied here.

36 For an interesting instance of the need for humility, see Aug. *Ep.* 157.35–41 (*CSEL* 44.482–88), a letter to the Sicilian layman Hilarius; for criticism of a donor as eager for popularity, see Jerome *in Esaiam* 58.6–7 (*CCSL* 73 A.666).

37 Gaudentius *Praef. ad Benivolum* 21–22 (*CSEL* 68.7ff.): *non malitiose, sed providenter te fecit Deus divitem, ut per opera misericordiae invenires peccatorum tuorum vulneribus medicinam.* Paul. of Nola *Ep.* 34.6 (*CSEL* 29.307–08): (God) *fecit miserum, ut agnosceret misericordem. fecit inopem, ut exerceret opulentum.*

view justified economic and social inequities in the world, including aristocratic pre-eminence. Moreover, the wealthy aristocrat could thus continue to win prestige by donating monies to the poor or to building projects. The construction of large public basilicas by Ambrose and his contemporary bishops in northern Italy indicated episcopal willingness to incorporate traditional patterns of evergistic behavior and the elite *mentalité* of aristocratic landowners within their vision of a Christian society (Lizzi 1990.156–73).

Nobilitas

Christian discussions of the notion of *nobilitas* show this same attempt to appeal to the status concerns of aristocrats. In a wide range of texts from the Latin Christian fathers of the late fourth and early fifth centuries, the traditional criteria for *nobilitas*—a distinguished family filled with high officeholders (traditionally consuls)—were noted as being of lesser worth in determining this virtue than a strong Christian faith.³⁸ But, ironically, the Latin fathers used as examples of this new Christian nobility those who were already ennobled according to the conventional standards of the aristocracy. Melania the Elder, Pammachius, and Paula are illustrative of this tendency.³⁹ Indeed, it became a virtual commonplace in Gaul in the fifth century to claim that an aristocrat was “noble because of his birth, but nobler because of his religion.”⁴⁰ Thus, the Latin fathers were incorporating aristocratic *nobilitas* and its traditional bases into their Christian version of this virtue. This rhetoric claimed a cultural continuity between Christianity and elite culture by focusing on a virtue familiar to aristocratic audiences, even as the Church fathers proposed a new hierarchy of *nobilitas* in which Christian attributes weighed more heavily than traditional ones.

38 Schlinkert 1996.16–33, 155–73, Salzman 2001; Barnish 1988 notes that the rank of consul is no longer the only office used as the basis of *nobilitas* in the fourth century.

39 For Paula, see Jerome *Ep.* 107.13 (CSEL 55.303–05), 108.1 (CSEL 55.306–07); on Melania the Elder, see Paul. of Nola *Ep.* 29.6 (CSEL 29.2.51–52). For Pammachius, see Jerome *Ep.* 57.12 (CSEL 54.524): *vir omnium nobilium Christianissime, et Christianorum nobilissime*; cf. Jerome *Ep.* 66.4 (CSEL 54.651–52), Paul. of Nola *Ep.* 13.15 (CSEL 29.96–97). On Paulinus of Nola, Ambr. *Ep.* 6.27 (58).3 (CSEL 82.1.181).

40 Constantius of Lyons *Vita Germani* 22 (SC 112): *natalibus nobilis, religione nobilior*. See Mathisen 1993.90.

It may appear, however, that some Christian writers were proposing a more radical notion of Christian *nobilitas* based solely on personal Christian virtue when they argued that those nobles who rejected the traditional bases for their nobility and adopted asceticism were “the most noble” of all Christians. Jerome, for example, appears almost obsessed with noting origins and consistently reserves this virtue for virgins and ascetics, male and female.⁴¹ But he, like Ambrose, Paulinus of Nola, and many other proponents of asceticism in the late fourth century, consider as eligible to attain the highest form of Christian “nobility” only those who were actually of noble birth and who could thus make a show of renouncing their *nobilitas* (in traditional terms).⁴² Thus, ironically, what at first may appear as a radical break with elite conceptualizations of *nobilitas*, is similarly tied to aristocratic ideals.

The pervasive force of the aristocratic status culture and its *mentalité* is suggested, first, by the widespread attempt on the part of Christian leaders to appropriate this term into their discourse as a Christian virtue and, second, by the inability of virtually all Christian leaders to think of this term outside of its conventional bases (i.e., family and office). In a survey of Latin authors from the fourth and fifth century, only a handful even raise the possibility of totally redefining *nobilitas* and using it of a personal quality that could be applied to all good Christians, regardless of social rank.⁴³ That so few Christian authors make this claim, and thus make a real break with the aristocratic *mentalité*, underscores the vitality and widespread assumptions of the elite status culture.

By associating Christianity with aristocratic virtues like *nobilitas*, by essentially shaping their message in elite terms, many Christian bishops and thinkers assured aristocrats that Christianity entailed no loss of personal status. Quite the reverse was claimed; “Noble because of his birth, nobler because of his religion” became, in essence, part of the rhetorical argument that claimed for Christianity the kind of prestige traditionally desired by aristocrats. Similarly, emperors reassured aristocrats of this new reality;

41 So, for example, Jerome uses the term *nobilis* in his letter to Eustochium, *Ep.* 22 (CSEL 54.143–211), no less than six times, four times for women at 22.11, 15, 27, 32 and twice for the houses of noble families at 16 and 28. Clark 1994.101–07, Laurence 1997.309–48.

42 See note 39 above and cf. Trout 1999.133–59.

43 Salzman 2001, based on an overview of the CETEDOC database and the *Patrologia Latina Database*. Among the very few authors who apply *nobilitas* to all men are Prudentius *Peristephanon* 3.1–2 and Hilarius *Sermo de Vita Sancti Honorati* 4.1 (SC 235).

imperial appointments of Christians to high office indicated that being Christian might actually help in the pursuit of personal status. Imperial gifts of land, buildings, and monies to the church also worked to make Christianity appear as a high-status option to the late Roman aristocrat. Thus, Christian bishops and emperors appealed to the *mentalité* of the aristocracy in ways that eased their status concerns and facilitated the spread of Christianity.

MENTALITÉS WITHIN THE ARISTOCRATIC MENTALITÉ

In arguing for a dominant *mentalité* to which Christian leaders appealed, I would not want to overlook the important social differences that existed within the aristocracy. Peter Heather has suggested that some three thousand new senatorial positions (bestowing the rank of *clarissimus*) were created in the west in this period (1998.188–97). The growth in importance of offices and the increase in the number of civic and military posts leading to senatorial (*clarissimate*) status made for a far more diverse class than in the early empire. There emerged strongly defined groupings of elites within the western aristocracy. Some were composed primarily of men from the provinces who were not tied to or integrated into the core aristocratic families of Italy. Along with provincial elites, we find career bureaucrats whose service and loyalty enabled them to gain offices high enough to confer *clarissimate* status. And we find the growth of a military aristocracy who pursued a distinctly different career path and focus (Demandt 1980 and Chastagnol 1992.15–49).

As I have shown in my prosopographic studies, different groups within the aristocracy approached Christianity differently (Salzman 1989, 1992). For example, aristocrats from Rome and Italy were the last of all aristocrats to convert. In contrast, Gallic and Spanish provincials converted sooner than the Roman and Italian elites. From this can we infer that Gallic and Spanish provincial aristocrats were more open to Christianity because of a difference in *mentalité*? Were they, for instance, more text-oriented, more uncertain about the reality of the pagan deities than their African or Pannonian peers, and could that “cast of mind” help explain their earlier conversion to the religion of the book? Or was it some aspect of the theology preached in Rome and Italy that slowed the conversion of aristocrats there? Wouldn’t changes in *mentalité* be among the principle factors explaining conversion?

I don’t think so, for several reasons. Christian bishops, as I have argued here, constructed their rhetoric to appeal to an elite *mentalité* and to

aristocrats' concern with status. Of course, the rhetorical strategies they adopted varied. Christian bishops did not simply accept the bases and attitudes of the aristocratic status culture. They sought, rather, to shape its components into a totalizing Christian discourse, as was the case for "Christian *nobilitas*." Some Christian leaders denied the importance of aristocratic status concerns and sought a more radical shift in perspective from the convert. But even these, including such important figures as Jerome, a radical proponent of asceticism, attest to the widespread appeal of the aristocratic worldview that they strove to address and undermine (Curran 1997). Most Christian bishops did not, by and large, require such a radical shift of perspective from their aristocratic audiences. Rather, they sought a fit between the elite *mentalité* and Christianity.

As the aristocracy grew over the course of the fourth century and became increasingly differentiated, as Heather (1998) observed, social bonds, careers, and experiences did make for differences in the ways certain aristocrats viewed and valued Christianity. Because of their relationships and roles at a Christian imperial court, for instance, some aristocrats may have been more open to Christianity; some at court may have seen Christianity as more advantageous, more true, or more prestigious than paganism. Hence, for a variety of social reasons, aristocrats involved in the court or in the imperial bureaucracy converted to Christianity earlier than their peers in the pagan-dominated senate (Salzman 1992). But neither the influence of social bonds nor the differences in careers and circumstances of fourth-century aristocrats required a complete transformation in the code by which the aristocrat lived. Nor, for that matter, did conversion to Christianity. Rather, as the evidence indicates, most aristocrats still adhered to the dominant status culture, even if they converted to Christianity at different rates.

Moreover, as different aristocratic groups converted, one would expect some change in aspects of the elite *mentalité* and status culture. So, for example, the idea of giving charity to the poor did, by the late fourth century, become an acceptable notion among the elite. But such a change was still tied to aristocratic attitudes. The noble woman who bestowed coins on the poor in St. Peter's is exemplary of a changed attitude, but her desire to perform this charitable act in public so as to win prestige (and the savage criticism of Jerome) shows that this change in perspective is still very much tied to the elite status culture.⁴⁴ The letters of Ausonius, too, show the way an

44 Jerome *Ep.* 23.32 (CSEL 54.193–94).

aristocrat who was an upwardly mobile Christian was able to live within the norms of the elite status culture (Sivan 1993.6–21, 74–96). Christianity did, in time, bring certain changes to aspects of the aristocratic *mentalité*, but these changes were still tied to the dominant elite status culture.

Hence, in my view, converting to Christianity did not require a radical break with the dominant status culture for most aristocrats. Admittedly, this was not true for all. For some theologically or ideologically oriented aristocrats, the more serious contradictions raised by the status culture and their conversion required a greater change in attitude and behavior. The dramatic conversion and reorientation of lifestyle of a Paulinus of Nola may exemplify such a change. Over time, these changes would eventually mount and bring fundamental shifts in the culture of the aristocracy. The men who required such radical change were, however, relatively few in number in the late fourth century, when most of the aristocracy converted in the west.

To conclude, I have proposed here that the vitality of the aristocratic *mentalité* and its status culture persisted in the face of a growing and increasingly differentiated class in the west. Even the reforming attempts of the emperor Valentinian, who strove to insert the idea of qualifications into his notion of public office, failed because he could not break the elites from this dominant aristocratic status culture and *mentalité* (Löhken 1982.154ff.). The dominance of this culture explains, too, why so many bishops appealed so often to elite status concerns in their efforts to make the western aristocracy Christian. Differences in the rates of conversion do not undermine the importance of the dominant status culture in late Roman life. Social relationships and circumstances would have affected how particular aristocrats valued Christianity and influenced conversion rates, but they did not require most aristocrats to reject the way of life, attitudes, and perspectives sanctioned by the dominant aristocratic *mentalité*. Thus, in my view, conversion for most of the elite in the late fourth-century western empire was possible even as the aristocratic status culture persisted, much as it had for hundreds of years.

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