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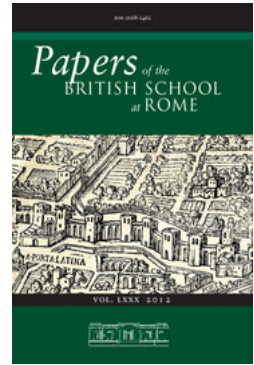
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## DECONSTRUCTING THE SYMBOLIC CITY: JEROME AS GUIDE TO LATE ANTIQUE ROME\*

by Lucy Grig

*This article considers the writings of Saint Jerome as a source for writing a cultural history of the city of Rome in late antiquity. Jerome is of course, in many respects, an unreliable witness but his lively and often conflicted accounts of the city do none the less provide significant insights into the city during an age of transition. He provides a few snippets for the scholar of topography, but these do not constitute the main attraction. Jerome's city of Rome appears above all as a textual palimpsest: variously painted in Vergilian colours as Troy and frequently compared with the biblical cities of Babylon, Bethlehem and Jerusalem. In the final analysis, it is argued, Jerome's Rome is surprisingly unstable, indeed a 'soft city'.*

*Questo articolo considera gli scritti di San Girolamo come fonte per scrivere una storia culturale della città di Roma nella tarda antichità. Girolamo è ovviamente, per molti aspetti, un testimone irrealista ma i suoi animati e spesso conflittuali resoconti della città senza dubbio forniscono significativi sguardi sulla città durante un periodo di transizione. Egli fornisce una manciata di spigolature per lo studioso di topografia, ma questo non costituisce la maggiore attrattiva. La Roma di Girolamo appare soprattutto come un palinsesto testuale: variamente dipinta nei colori virgiliani come Troia e frequentemente paragonata con le città bibliche di Babilonia, Betlemme e Gerusalemme. Nell'analisi finale si arguisce che la Roma di Girolamo è sorprendentemente instabile, certamente una 'soft city'.*

Interest in the transformation of the city of Rome in late antiquity is an academic boom industry that shows no sign, as yet, of abating. The physical fabric and material culture of the late antique city have received a wealth of attention, long overdue, in the last twenty years.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the testimony of the literary sources, for a long time treated in an overly literal fashion by patristic scholars, has also proved to be ripe for re-evaluation.<sup>2</sup> A *cultural* history of the late

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<sup>1</sup> See, out of many, W.V. Harris (ed.), *The Transformations of Vrbs Roma in Late Antiquity* (*Journal of Roman Archaeology, Supplementary Series* 33) (Portsmouth (RI), 1999); M.S. Arena, L. Paroli and L. Venditelli (eds), *Roma dall'antichità al medioevo: archeologia e storia nel Museo Nazionale Romano Crypta Balbi* (Milan, 2001); R. Meneghini and R. Santangeli Valenzani, *I Fori Imperiali: gli scavi del Comune di Roma (1991–2007)* (Rome, 2007); H. Dey, *The Aurelian Wall and the Refashioning of Imperial Rome AD 271–855* (Cambridge, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See, again out of many, focusing specifically on Rome: A.S. Jacobs, 'What has Rome to do with Bethlehem?' *Cultural capital(s) and religious imperialism in late ancient Christianity*, *Classical Receptions* 3 (2011), 29–45 (on Jerome); M. Roberts, 'Rome personified, Rome

antique city remains, as yet, to be written, an account that is alert to both the complex strategies of literary texts and the challenges presented by the material culture. In the meantime, this article focuses on one of the most lively and controversial figures of the period, Saint Jerome, an eloquent if highly partial witness to the transformations undergone by the city of Rome at the turn of the fifth century, a key period when both the image of the city and its pre-eminence were under threat, not just from the pretensions of the new Rome, Constantinople, but also from other competing ideological claims.<sup>3</sup> This study of a single author aims to unpick Jerome's strategies and to demonstrate what patristic sources can, and cannot, tell us about the late antique city of Rome, a city of ideas and symbols, a city of flesh and blood, as well as a city of brick and marble.<sup>4</sup>

To say that Jerome's relationship with the city of Rome was complex would be something of an understatement. The vicissitudes of his personal experiences there, as well as his conflicted engagement with classical and secular culture more broadly speaking, ensure an intriguingly coloured account. Previous scholarship has shown clearly that Jerome's picture of Roman society is not to be trusted as an 'objective' historical account<sup>5</sup> — for instance by showing how indebted his picture is to Roman satire,<sup>6</sup> or demonstrating how far he applied double standards when judging his friends as opposed to his enemies.<sup>7</sup> Other studies, meanwhile, have tried to get to grips with Jerome's views on the 'idea of Rome',<sup>8</sup> a trickily nebulous subject, as slippage between Rome as city and

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epitomized: representations of Rome in the poetry of the early fifth century', *American Journal of Philology* 122 (2001), 533–65. A. Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (New York, 2011), considers a wide range of sources and is likely to influence study of late antique Rome for the foreseeable future.

<sup>3</sup> See now L. Grig and G. Kelly (eds), *Two Romes: Rome and Constantinople in Late Antiquity* (New York, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> For the Latin texts: I. Hilberg (ed.), *Sancti Eusebi Hieronymi Epistulae (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 54–6, pars I–III)* (Vienna, 1996); F. Glorie (ed.), *Commentariorum in Hielem (Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 75)* (Turnhout, 1964). For English translations, see P. Schaff and H. Wace (eds), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* second series, vol. 6 (Oxford, 1893), now also available online at various locations.

<sup>5</sup> He was guilty of 'breathhtaking self-delusion' and wrote 'propaganda, not objective analysis': J. Matthews, 'Four funerals and a wedding: this world and the next in fourth-century Rome', in P. Rousseau and M. Papoutsakis (eds), *Transformations of Late Antiquity: Essays for Peter Brown* (Ashgate, 2009), 129–46, esp. pp. 140, 146.

<sup>6</sup> D.S. Wiesen, *St Jerome as a Satirist: a Study in Christian Latin Thought and Letters* (Ithaca, 1964).

<sup>7</sup> J. Curran, 'Jerome and the sham-Christians of Rome', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 48 (1997), 213–29; S. Rebenich, *Hieronymus und sein Kreis: Prosopographische und Sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Stuttgart, 1992), 179, commented that Jerome's writings give us 'zwar einen interessanten, aber keineswegs repräsentativen Einblick in die zeitgenössische römische Gesellschaft'.

<sup>8</sup> See here K. Sugano, *Das Rombild des Hieronymus* (Frankfurt/Bern/New York, 1983), and F. Paschoud, *Roma aeterna: études sur le patriotisme romain dans l'occident latin à l'époque des grands invasions* (Rome, 1967).

Rome as *imperium* is inevitable, as we shall see. These caveats notwithstanding, much can be gained, none the less, from examining Jerome's discussion and description of the city. This article will approach Rome as a *symbolic* city, as, we shall see, did Jerome himself. I shall argue that although Jerome tried to mobilize the symbols of his immaterial city, to make it truly Christian, Rome remains diffuse and multi-textured, a truly intertextual city that sometimes answers to the name of Troy, Babylon or Jerusalem, but can never be pinned down successfully.

Rome has a special claim to be considered as a symbolic city in that she always claimed to be more than just a city. Where 'Roma' is involved there is always a certain ambivalence: Rome is not just an *urbs*, even *the urbs* (as she was for so many of her inhabitants): there is always slippage between the city and the idea, *urbs* and *imperium*, *urbs* and *orbis*. The city of Rome was both symbol and society, material and immaterial, its topography both symbolically redolent and endlessly polyvalent. The polyvalency of Rome is such that any analysis of (late antique) descriptions of the city needs to focus not on trying to iron out the inconsistencies in its representations, but rather in accepting the discontinuities of city life.<sup>9</sup> Different city-dwellers inhabit different cities, a point for instance made by Boswell in his *Life of Johnson* (1791):

I have often amused myself with thinking how different a place London is to different people. They, whose narrow minds are contracted to the consideration of some one particular pursuit, view it only through that medium. A politician thinks of it merely as the seat of government in its different departments; a grazier as a vast market for cattle; a mercantile man, as a place where a prodigious deal of business is done upon 'Change; a dramatick enthusiast, as the grand scene of theatrical entertainments; a man of pleasure, as an assemblage of taverns, and the great emporium for ladies of easy virtue. But the intellectual man is struck with it, as comprehending the whole of human life in all its variety, the contemplation of which is inexhaustible.<sup>10</sup>

Boswell's claim for the 'intellectual man' — that he alone can comprehend the entire city — seems rather overoptimistic, however: such people can be especially susceptible to tunnel vision, especially intellectuals as single-minded as Saint Jerome. Jonathan Raban suggested that in writing about cities we are inevitably drawn to use simplifying strategies and to take short-cuts: resorting to the use of caricature, to the use of metonymy and synecdoche, and, ultimately, to metaphor.<sup>11</sup> The 'short-cuts', these methods of interpretation and description, as used in the construction of a description of the city that is essentially ideological, will form much of the focus of the following discussion.

Jerome's account of the city of Rome is not least important in biographical terms, constituting as it does the locus for key formative experiences and crucial

<sup>9</sup> I have been influenced here, and beyond, by J. Raban, *Soft City* (Glasgow, 1974).

<sup>10</sup> J. Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, cited in Raban, *Soft City* (above, n. 9), 92.

<sup>11</sup> Raban, *Soft City* (above, n. 9), 31.

social and intellectual connections.<sup>12</sup> Jerome's experience of and relationship with Rome are clearly crucial also in terms of understanding his complex relationship to Roman classical culture. Born in 347, Jerome first came to Rome as a schoolboy from the obscure city of Stridon in Dalmatia, and stayed there for his secondary and higher education, studying first with the renowned grammarian Aelius Donatus, and then at a school of rhetoric, in the late 350s and early 360s.<sup>13</sup> He was baptized in Rome, a fact of which he was very proud.<sup>14</sup> He left the city as a young adult, equipped for a career in the imperial service, which took him first to a very different sort of imperial capital: Trier. Jerome's life then took on a new turn, due to his 'conversion' to the ascetic life.<sup>15</sup> The chronology of the next few years is far from clear, but it is certain that Jerome's experimentation with the ascetic life took him, together with some friends, first to northern Italy, in or near Aquileia, before heading East in the early 370s. Although Jerusalem was the longed for destination, Jerome in fact stopped in Antioch, where he had the support of his rich friend and patron Evagrius. From Antioch, Jerome headed to the desert area of Chalcis, to study, write and practice 'desert asceticism'.<sup>16</sup> His interest in ecclesiastical politics and debate took him to Constantinople, around 380; he stayed there until the summer of 382,<sup>17</sup> when he returned to Rome, after an interval of maybe nearly twenty years.

The intervening years had obviously brought about great changes in and for the provincial *novus homo*, Jerome. He had worked hard to establish himself as an ascetic authority, biblical scholar and ecclesiastical adviser. He came to the city this time on ecclesiastical business from the East (to attend a synod, aimed at ending the Schism of Antioch), as part of the retinue of Paulinus of Antioch and Epiphanius of Salamis, probably serving as their adviser and interpreter. The intervening years had also brought change to the city of Rome. It is inarguable that the position of Christianity in aristocratic society was considerably more entrenched than it had been in the

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<sup>12</sup> Generally on Jerome, see J.N.D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (New York, 1975); S. Rebenich, *Jerome* (London, 2002); A. Cain and J. Lössl (eds), *Jerome of Stridon: His Life, Writing and Legacy* (Cardiff, 2009); and A. Cain, *The Letters of Jerome: Asceticism, Biblical Exegesis, and the Construction of Christian Authority in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> See here A.D. Booth, 'The date of Jerome's birth', *Phoenix* 33 (1979), 346–52, and A.D. Booth, 'The chronology of Jerome's early years', *Phoenix* 25 (1981), 237–59.

<sup>14</sup> See *Epistulae* 15.1, 16.1.

<sup>15</sup> The nature and dating of Jerome's 'conversion' is far from clear; Jerome gives his own dramatic account at *Epistulae* 22.30.

<sup>16</sup> Rebenich, *Hieronymus und sein Kreis* (above, n. 7), 85–98, cast a skeptical eye over Jerome's claims to have lived a life of extreme desert privations: it is most likely that he resided on an estate owned by his friend Evagrius, only 30 miles from Antioch; see also Rebenich, *Jerome* (above, n. 12), 16–20.

<sup>17</sup> Rebenich stressed Jerome's success in Constantinople, as an ecclesiastical mover, a Christian scholar and writer, and as a man who knew people: Rebenich, *Jerome* (above, n. 12), 21–30.



350s/360s, though the extent of the ‘Christianization’ of the city still remained at issue.<sup>18</sup>

Beginning his second sojourn in Rome, Jerome had certain credentials and cachet, but had to work hard to cement his reputation in the *urbs*: he was, of course, far from being the only would-be biblical expert (and spiritual adviser) in the city.<sup>19</sup> Of course he had a good deal of success at this point: as is well known, he swiftly made himself indispensable to the bishop of Rome, Damasus, who commissioned him to make a new translation of the Bible. Jerome would later claim that ‘Damasus meus sermo est’ (*Epistulae* 45.3), which generally has been interpreted to mean that the pope made Jerome his spokesperson.<sup>20</sup> It was during this period that Jerome became the friend and *cliens* of a coterie of aristocratic women with shared ascetic and scholarly tendencies, led by the redoubtable *matrona*, Paula.<sup>21</sup> None the less, his success at making friends in Rome was surpassed only by his talent for making enemies. His outspoken promotion of strict asceticism, especially when laid out in controversial writings (such as his infamous *Epistula* 22 on virginity to the young noble heiress Eustochium) caused scandal throughout the city and beyond.<sup>22</sup> The death of the young widow Blesilla (Paula’s daughter), widely believed to be due to excessive ascetic practices counselled by Jerome, in the autumn of 384 caused even more disquiet and disapprobation.<sup>23</sup> When Damasus died in December of that year Jerome lost his most important protector. In the summer of 385 matters came to a head. Charges were brought against him, seemingly relating to his friendship with his female patronesses (especially Paula), charges that he vociferously denied.<sup>24</sup> Jerome was brought before an episcopal court, and found

<sup>18</sup> Scholarship here is of course numerous, but see in particular P. Brown, ‘Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman aristocracy’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 51 (1961), 1–11; T.D. Barnes, ‘Statistics and the conversion of the Roman aristocracy’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 85 (1995), 135–47; M. Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy: Social and Religious Change in the Western Roman Empire* (London, 2002); and Cameron, *The Last Pagans* (above, n. 2).

<sup>19</sup> Cain, *The Letters of Jerome* (above n. 12), 33–4, stresses Jerome’s relative obscurity at this point, especially compared with the more prominent ‘Ambrosiaster’, and argues that he published his first letter collection, the *Epistularum ad Diversos Liber*, at this point, to serve as his literary calling card in a competitive market.

<sup>20</sup> It could, perhaps, be read differently: ‘Damasus had me always on his lips’. In any case, Jerome also claimed (though this is generally viewed with considerable scepticism) that he was considered as Damasus’s likely successor: ‘Omnium paene iudicio dignus summo sacerdotio decernebar’, *Epistulae* 45.3.

<sup>21</sup> See here in particular Rebenich, *Hieronymus und sein Kreis* (above, n. 7). Cameron, *Last Pagans* (above, n. 2), 3, memorably refers to Jerome’s ‘aristocratic groupies’.

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Rufinus, *Apologia contra Hieronymum* 2.5.5.

<sup>23</sup> See K. Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (London, 1996), 80–3; Cain, *The Letters of Jerome* (above, n. 12), 102–5.

<sup>24</sup> Jerome gives an angry but opaque account of the affair in his ‘farewell’ letter/*apologia* to his friend Asella: *Epistulae* 45. In it he tells us ‘Infamiam falsi criminis inportarunt’ (*Epistulae* 45.6); the probable relation to Paula: ‘Nihil mihi aliud obicitur nisi sexus meus, et hoc numquam obicitur, nisi cum Hierosolyma Paula proficiscitur’ (45.2). Cain, *The Letters of Jerome*

guilty (though he remains as circumspect regarding the sentence, which presumably required him to leave the city, as about the charges).<sup>25</sup> At the end of that summer Jerome set sail from Ostia, never to return.

Rome, for Jerome, was the site of success, failure and, ultimately, humiliation. In his writings on the city, whether extended or fleeting, it is as if we find him in the throes of a love affair gone wrong (a love affair not with any one person, but with a city, an idea, a dream); the atmosphere is thick with mutual recriminations and bitter asides.<sup>26</sup> Jerome spent the rest of his life in the Holy Land, until his death in 419/20, but kept in contact with his friends in Rome, as both his correspondence and the dedications of his other writings attest. The reading public in Rome continued to constitute the most significant audience for his writings.<sup>27</sup> The city itself, its society and its symbolism, as we shall see, seem never to have been far from his mind. Rome was not a place about which Jerome could be neutral. It is clear that throughout his life Jerome felt something of a bond to Rome and, moreover, that he was proud of having spent time at Rome, and, especially, of his Roman connections.<sup>28</sup> He referred to himself as a *homo Romanus*,<sup>29</sup> and liked to recall ‘when I was at Rome’.<sup>30</sup> As befitted a proper *homo Romanus* of his day, he was scornful of the upstart Constantinople, a city in which he had known seemingly untroubled success, and had even acted as a bridge between East and West.<sup>31</sup>

Jerome reacted like a true Roman patriot to the news of the sacking of Rome in 410;<sup>32</sup> his response, expressed across a number of texts from around that time, is full of emotion and vivid, violent imagery.<sup>33</sup> He described the sack as nothing less than a global decapitation: ‘Romani imperii truncatum caput: et, ut verius dicam, in una urbe totus orbis interiit’ (‘when the head of the Roman empire was severed,

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(above, n. 12), 99–128, gives an interesting account, suggesting that Paula’s family instigated the charges against Jerome, although ultimately this can only be speculation.

<sup>25</sup> The closest he comes to an admission that he was found guilty comes in his *Epistula adversus Rufinum* 22: ‘quid autem de me Romae iudicatum sit et quid postea scriptum, nolo taceas, praesertim cum habeas testimonium scripturarum’.

<sup>26</sup> See P. Laurence, ‘Rome et Jérôme: des amours contrariées’, *Revue Bénédictine* 107 (1997), 227–49.

<sup>27</sup> See Cain, *The Letters of Jerome* (above, n. 12), 171–8.

<sup>28</sup> He referred to his ‘fraternitas de Urbe’: *Epistulae* 85.3.

<sup>29</sup> *Epistulae* 15.3.

<sup>30</sup> For example, *Commentarii in Epistulam ad Galatas* pr. 331C; 1.19, 354D; *Commentarii in Ecclesiasten* pr. 249.

<sup>31</sup> His *Chronicle* records for the year AD 330: ‘Dedicatur Constantinopolis omnium paene urbium nuditate’. The *Chronicle* does, however, suggest an interest in goings on in the city, including not only events such as the deposition of relics but the bizarre hailstorm of 367 and work on the water supply: see here Kelly, *Jerome* (above, n. 12), 71–2.

<sup>32</sup> It is worth noting that this is in stark contrast to another one-time Rome dweller, Augustine; see, for example, *De Excidio Urbis Romae*.

<sup>33</sup> See J. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire: the Fall of Rome and the Triumph of the Church* (New York, 1987), 44–52.



or, to speak more truly, the entire world perished in a single city') (*Commentarii in Ezechielem* pr.). His language plays on the metonymic relationship between city and empire, and the verbal similarity between *urbs* and *orbs*:<sup>34</sup> 'capitur urbs quae totum cepit orbem' ('the city that had captured the whole world was itself taken captive') (*Epistulae* 127.12). The shocking reversal of this pivotal relationship dominates his descriptions of the sack, and he wonders: 'quis crederet ut totius orbis exstructa victoriis Roma corrueret, ut ipsa suis populis et mater fieret et sepulchrum' ('who would believe how Rome, built up by the conquest of the entire world, fell, that the mother of nations also became their tomb?') (*Commentarii in Ecclesiasten* III pr.).<sup>35</sup> Jerome's reflections on the sack of Rome are spread across several letters, written at various points of remove from 410.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the visceral nature of his response to the sack, generally Jerome's Rome remains a strikingly immaterial city. This is not to say that there is no material for the urban historian: Jerome's writings contain a number of snippets relating to the history and topography of late antique Rome, although they are not all of equal validity. His references to Roman churches are sparing: he refers to the basilica of San Clemente in his brief biography of Pope Clement.<sup>37</sup> He shows a perhaps surprising antiquarian interest in the origins of the Lateran church, commenting that the basilica was built on the site of the house of Plautius Lateranus, executed for treason under Nero.<sup>38</sup> He mentions that San Paolo fuori le mura served as both a place of sanctuary and a hospital during the sack of Rome.<sup>39</sup> Saint Peter's serves as the location for one of his most famous satirical vignettes: the story of 'the noblest woman in Rome' who practises ostentatious, but ultimately fake, charity in the basilica of Saint Peter's, distributing coins to a line of paupers but punching in the face an old woman who had the audacity

<sup>34</sup> See here E. Bréguet, 'Urbi et orbi, un cliché et un thème', in J. Bibauw (ed.), *Hommages à Marcel Renard* (Brussels, 1969), 140–52. Puns on the two words were common from Cicero onwards, mostly in prose texts. Cf. Jerome, *Epistulae* 127.4: '... in urbe, in qua orbis quondam populis fuit ...'.

<sup>35</sup> Bréguet, 'Urbi et orbi' (above, n. 34), noted a reminiscence of Cicero, *In Catilinam* 1.4.9, on the effects of the despoliation caused by Catiline: 'qui de huius urbis atque adeo de orbis terrarum exitio cogitent'. Cf. *Epistulae* 130.5: 'urbs tua, quondam orbis caput, Romani populi sepulchrum est'.

<sup>36</sup> See also *Epistulae* 123.17, written in 409, despairing over Stilicho's treaty with Alaric, and citing Lucan and Vergil; *Epistulae* 126.6, expressing shock at the news of the sack; *Epistulae* 130, written in 414, looking back to the time of the sack.

<sup>37</sup> Jerome, *De Viris Illustribus* 15: 'obiit tertio Trajano anno, et nominis ejus memoriam usque hodie Romae exstructa ecclesia custodit'.

<sup>38</sup> Jerome, *Epistulae* 77.4: 'basilica quondam Laterani, qui Cesariano truncatus est gladio'. This assertion was traditionally accepted by scholars of Roman topography, but has been shown to be false by the careful work of P. Liverani, 'Dalle Aedes Laterani al patriarchio lateranense', *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana* 75 (1999), 521–49.

<sup>39</sup> *Epistulae* 127.13: 'Cumque et illam et te [Principia] ad beati apostolic Pauli basilicam barbari deduxissent, ut vel salutem vobis ostenderent, vel sepulchrum ...'.

to attempt a second go! Interestingly, this account can be contextualized with other evidence for aristocratic charitable activity located at Saint Peter's, albeit less violent.<sup>40</sup>

This episode comes from the infamous *Epistula 22*, written in 384. As noted above, this letter would be crucial in sowing the seeds of the destruction of his position in the city. The letter extolled the virtues of the ascetic way of life and excoriated the lifestyle of the city's 'sham Christians'.<sup>41</sup> The picture given of the fashionable pseudo-Christian lifestyle is peppered with lively, indeed masterly, vignettes. Jerome famously defends himself, somewhat knowingly, against the charge of satire: 'ne saturam putes' ('lest you think this a satire') (*Epistulae* 22.32), but we always must be aware of the distorting contours of the satirical genre when reading Jerome, and remain alert to the presence of satirical tropes and themes.<sup>42</sup> None the less, Cameron argues persuasively that Jerome's exaggerated and hypocritical attacks on 'sham' Christians are still, in fact, evidence for the progress of Christianization of the élite at Rome. He rightly suggests that 'Jerome's vivid sketches are (of course) exaggerations, not to say caricatures, inspired as much by literature as real life. But they clearly imply an established, surely second-generation Christian elite, not a few recent converts'.<sup>43</sup>

Jerome's account of the Christianization of Rome generally does not take account of current events, let alone milestones considered significant by modern historians. He gives a spiteful account of the funeral of the eminent senator Praetextatus (*Epistulae* 23.3), but does not (at least in an extant text) even mention the 'debate' over the Altar of Victory in 384, something that generations of historians have seen as a watershed in the history of the Christianization of the Roman world. Generally Jerome's Rome is an image refracted through a number of prisms, textual (both biblical and classical) and temporal. Even his own experiences of Rome are constructed, or rather refracted, through such prisms. Two examples, relating, obliquely or not, to Jerome's first stay in Rome (that is, to his experiences of Rome as a youth), clearly demonstrate this process of refraction.

The first instance comes from the important *Epistula 22*, which includes certain biographical aspects, though these are problematic, as ever. In laying out his advice regarding the attainment of the true ascetic lifestyle, Jerome also

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<sup>40</sup> *Epistulae* 22.32. See the account of a banquet for the poor given at Saint Peter's by the Roman senator Pammachius, a correspondent of Jerome: Paulinus of Nola, *Epistulae* 13.11–16; L. Grig, 'Throwing parties for the poor: poverty and splendour in the late antique church', in M. Atkins and R. Osborne (eds), *Poverty in the Roman World* (Cambridge, 2006), 145–61.

<sup>41</sup> See here Curran, 'Jerome and the sham-Christians' (above, n. 7).

<sup>42</sup> Jerome was well aware of his satirical reputation (or, indeed, *persona*), and played upon it at times: see *Epistulae* 50.5, quoting Persius, Juvenal and Horace, and *Epistulae* 117.1, quoting Horace's description of Lucilius. In invoking Lucilius, Jerome is clearly laying out his satirical genealogy. See here, generally, Wiesen, *St Jerome as a Satirist* (above, n. 6).

<sup>43</sup> Cameron, *Last Pagans* (above, n. 2), 186.

looks back, as he was wont to do, on his heroic ascetic privations in the desert at Chalcis.<sup>44</sup> At this point, an interestingly split time-frame appears. While evoking the desert period of his life, Jerome at the same time conjures up an image of Rome, as it seemed to him *then* (and when? the time frame is perhaps deliberately obscure), as the supreme locus of pleasure and sin. While suffering in the *vasta solitudo* Jerome claims to have imagined himself surrounded by the allurements of Rome: ‘O quotiens in heremo constitutus et in illa vasta solitudine, quae exusta solis ardoribus horridum monachis praestat habitaculum, putavi me Romanis interesse deliciis’ (‘Oh how often when I was living in the desert, and in that vast solitude, scorched by the burning sun, which provides monks with a savage dwelling-place, did I imagine myself surrounded by the pleasures of Rome’) (*Epistulae* 22.7). And further, while recalling his endurance of all these manner of privations, weeping and groaning, he tells Eustochium that he often still imagines himself surrounded by ‘troupes of dancing girls’ (*choris . . . puellarum*), which, in context, seems clearly to link back directly to the ‘Roman pleasures’ evoked almost immediately beforehand. The image of Rome evoked here is that of a pleasure dome, a veritable pornotopia, juxtaposed for dramatic effect against the harsh backdrop of the desert. It is a complex series of memories we are dealing with here: the middle-aged Jerome, writing in Rome in the 380s, is recalling his earlier life in the desert (in the 370s), in which he represents himself as looking back on his earlier residence in Rome (in the 350s/360s).

This memory is to be related only implicitly to Jerome’s youth in Rome; explicit recollections of this period are rare. A striking, and famous, exception comes from his Commentary on Ezekiel, a text very obviously written in the aftermath of the sack of 410. Here Jerome recollects visiting the Roman catacombs on Sundays. Though this passage has been repeatedly cited, the significance of its profound intertextuality generally has been ignored.

*Dum essem Romae puer et liberalibus studiis erudirer, solebam cum ceteris eiusdem aetatis et propositi, diebus dominicis sepulcra apostolorum et martyrum circumire crebroque cryptas ingredi, quae in terrarum profunda defossae ex utraque parte ingredientium per parietes habent corpora sepulcorum, et quia obscura sunt omnia, ut propemodum illud propheticum compleatur: Descendant ad infernum viventes [Psalm 55.15], et raro desuper lumen admissum, horrorem temperet tenebrarum, ut non tam fenestram quam foramen dimissi luminis putes, rursumque pedetemptim inceditur et caeca nocte circumdatis illud Vergilianum proponitur: horror ubique animo, simul ipsa silentia terrent [Vergil, Aeneid 2.755]. (Jerome, *Commentarii in Ezechielem* 12.40.5–13)*

(When I was a boy, studying the liberal arts in Rome, I used to make tours of the tombs of the apostles and martyrs on Sundays, together with others of my age and convictions; we used to go down into those crypts, which are excavated deep underground, and contain, on either side as you enter, the bodies of the dead buried in the walls, and it is all so dark there that that line of the prophet seems to be fulfilled, ‘Let them go down

<sup>44</sup> As noted above (n. 16), recent scholarship has cast doubt upon these, further strengthening the picture of Jerome as an unreliable witness of his own biography.

living into hell.’ Only occasionally is light let in to mitigate the horror of the gloom, and then you would think that the light enters not so much through a window, as through a hole. We would walk back cautiously as, surrounded by the blindness of night, the words of Vergil would come to mind: ‘everywhere dread fills the heart; the very darkness too dismays.’)

So we see that, after quoting a passage from the Psalms, Jerome turns to Vergil, connecting the act of wandering through the catacombs with the image of Aeneas searching for his wife amidst the ruins of Troy.

This is a well-trodden passage, most frequently cited as ‘evidence’ for devotional visits to the catacombs in the mid-fourth century, and of course it does give a striking and vivid picture of that experience. The text has been noted also by scholars interested in tracing classical references in the works of the Church Fathers.<sup>45</sup> Jerome, despite his claim never to have picked up a classical author after his dramatic courtroom dream,<sup>46</sup> provides a particularly rich quarry for such a project: he continues throughout his life to quote and to paraphrase classical authors, especially Cicero, Horace and, of course, Vergil.<sup>47</sup>

Jerome’s use of quotations (and even extended quotations) of Vergil in fact stepped up considerably in his later years. The connection between the sack of Rome and Vergil’s account of the sack of Troy was first made in *Epistula* 127 (written in 412), where Jerome first paired Old Testament (in this case Isaiah) and Vergilian quotations in order to describe the sack.<sup>48</sup> The Vergilian passage is quoted by Jerome at some length, but slightly doctored, not least to avoid some unfortunate ‘pagan’ connotations:

*quis cladem illius noctis, quis funera fando  
explicet, aut possit lacrimis aequare dolorem?*<sup>49</sup>  
*urbs antiqua ruit, multos dominata per annos;  
plurima perque vias sparguntur*<sup>50</sup> *inertia passim*

<sup>45</sup> For example, H. Hagendahl, *Latin Fathers and the Classics: a Study on the Apologists, Jerome and Other Christian Writers* (Gothenburg, 1958).

<sup>46</sup> First made in *Epistulae* 22.30 (that is, in 384), later strengthened with the assertion that he had picked up neither Cicero nor Vergil for fifteen years, claiming that any seeming citations were merely ‘misty recollections’: *Commentarii in Epistulam Pauli Apostoli ad Galatas* pr. 3. We might note here again the play on time and memory in his autobiographical reflections.

<sup>47</sup> He was censured for this by the Roman orator Magnus (*Epistulae* 70) and, most seriously, by Rufinus: *Apologia contra Hieronymum* II.7. Jerome was, of course, not alone in his Vergilian enthusiasms; recent scholarship has picked up on renewed interest in Vergil during this period; see M. Geymonat, ‘The transmission of Virgil’s works in antiquity and the Middle Ages’, in N. Horsfall (ed.), *A Companion to the Study of Virgil* (Leiden, 1995), 292–312, esp. pp. 303–10; R. Rees, *Romane Memento: Vergil in the Fourth Century* (London, 2004); and J. Curran, ‘Virgilizing Christianity in late antique Rome’, in Grig and Kelly (eds), *Two Romes* (above, n. 3), 325–44.

<sup>48</sup> This pairing of Vergilian and biblical passages was a common practice for Jerome: see here Hagendahl, *Latin Fathers* (above, n. 45), 302–3.

<sup>49</sup> Replacing the original *labores*.

<sup>50</sup> Replacing *sternuntur*.

*corpora, perque domos, et plurima mortis imago*<sup>51</sup> [Vergil, *Aeneid* 2.361–5, 369].  
(*Epistulae* 127.12)

(Who could tell of that night of carnage and its orgy of death: whose tears can match such agonies? An ancient city was falling and the long years of her empire were at an end. Everywhere the dead were *scattered*, motionless about the streets, in the houses, *with death in a thousand forms*.)

The image of the sacked Troy, it need scarcely be said, is one of the most potent images in the whole of classical literature. Book 2 was clearly one of the most read and most cited books of the *Aeneid* in late antiquity, as today. Jerome's choice of this specific literary image in connection with the catacombs is clearly to be read in the light of his reaction to the sack of Rome, and its use in this context, therefore, is not surprising at all. None the less, it is obvious that we are again dealing with a multi-temporal frame through which Roman 'experiences' are recounted. Whatever the case in 412, the image of the sack of Troy would not be the most obvious association for a teenage visit down the catacombs in the 360s.<sup>52</sup>

It is as if, once Jerome had seen Rome falling in Vergilian colours, the image was indelible. (The same of course could be said to apply to Jerome's readers, both ancient and modern.) The textual Rome of Jerome's later years was a strikingly (however incongruously) Vergilian city. His Rome was a palimpsest, made up of literary, as well as experiential, reminiscences. Moreover, despite his allegedly hard-line stance on 'pagan' symbols and 'profane' literature, Jerome's city of Rome owed much to both: given his literary practice (both reading and writing) how, we might ask, could it have been otherwise?

So far, it has been argued that Jerome's city of Rome was largely a literary palimpsest, a construction that was deeply intertextual. As should be clear, this palimpsest owed far more to the symbolic and the literary than to the 'real' or the 'material'. This is especially clear when it comes to one notable case-study: Jerome's use of the striking symbol of the Capitolium as a metonym for various aspects of 'Rome', Rome here clearly standing for far more than the city of bricks, stone and marble. We shall see that although Jerome's view of the *caput mundi* was in many respects conflicted, his concern for the Christian conquest of the city remained uppermost in his mind.

In around 401 Jerome wrote, from Bethlehem, a letter to Rome, to his friend Laeta. *Epistula* 107 is, as so often, a letter of advice, in this case advice on bringing up a baby girl. Laeta, the daughter of a well-known 'pagan' as well as the daughter-in-law of a famously pious Christian (the redoubtable Paula), sought advice on the Christian education of her daughter, the younger Paula. The first part of Jerome's letter takes the conversion of Laeta's extended family

<sup>51</sup> This is a composite line, from 'corpora perque domos et religiosa deorum limina' (355–6) and '... et plurima mortis imago' (369). Clearly this change is made in order to avoid the 'pagan' connotations of the original line.

<sup>52</sup> Although of course Augustine famously recounted how, as a schoolboy, he wept for Dido: *Confessiones* 1.13.20.

(both actual and wished for) as emblematic of a broader development that Jerome claims is both inevitable and already well under way: the conversion of the city of Rome itself. Becoming Christian is a process, says Jerome, and one that the city of Rome is itself undergoing. He then adduces the case of the Capitolium to clinch his point: ‘Auratum sqaulet Capitolium, fuligine et araneorum telis omnia Romae templa cooperta sunt, movetur urbs sedibus suis et inundans populus ante delubra semiruta currit ad martyrum tumulos’ (‘The golden Capitol is dingy; all the temples in Rome are covered with soot and spiders’ webs. The city has shifted its foundations and a flood of people races past the half-ruined shrines on their way to the tombs of the martyrs’) (*Epistulae* 107.1).

When it comes to specifics, Jerome has little to go on. He refers to the earlier destruction of a mithraeum by Furius Maecius Gracchus, a relative of Laeta’s, when Urban Prefect, and newly baptized, in 376.<sup>53</sup> This need not have been a spectacular anti-pagan coup: in fact it most likely provided an easy means by which Gracchus could demonstrate his new fervour.<sup>54</sup> The Roman examples certainly pale by comparison with Jerome’s trump example of the triumph of Christianity: the destruction of the Serapeum at Alexandria (according to Ammianus, ‘after the Capitol . . . the most magnificent building in the world’),<sup>55</sup> which had taken place, accompanied by extreme violence, in 391.<sup>56</sup> He pairs this with the impending destruction of the Marneion at Gaza.<sup>57</sup> He goes on to comfort Laeta with examples of recent conversions in order to show that hopes for her own father should not be forlorn. These build up a triumphant description of worldwide conversion to the true faith: Jerome pushes the notion of Christianity as a world religion, his examples are deliberately exotic and colourful: crowds of monks in Ethiopia; Huns learning their psalms! The place of the conversion of the city of Rome in this discussion is instructive. It is Rome that is central, that is all-important, not least as the site of the aristocratic

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<sup>53</sup> Jerome, *Epistulae* 107.2: ‘ante paucos annos proinquus vester Gracchus, nobilitatem patriciam nomine sonans, cum praefecturam regeret urbanam, nonne specu Mithrae. et omnia portentuosia simulacra, quibus corax, nymphius, miles, leo, Perses, heliodromus, pater initiantur subvertit, fregit, exussit et his quasi obsidibus ante praemissis inpetravit baptismum Christi?’. Cf. Prudentius, *Contra Symmachem* 1.561–3.

<sup>54</sup> That the mithraeum was on private property is generally agreed; for example, J. Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court AD 364–425* (Oxford, 1975), 23. J. Bjørnebye ‘*Hic Locus Est Felix, Sanctus, Piusque Benignus*’: the Cult of Mithras in Fourth Century Rome (University of Bergen, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, 2007), 88, has pointed out that Jerome would have gloated, had the mithraeum belonged to a prominent aristocratic family. Cameron assumes that it would no longer have been active as by this time ‘Mithraism was in terminal decline’: *Last Pagans* (above n. 2), 144.

<sup>55</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus 22.16: ‘post Capitolium, quo se venerabilis Roma in aeternum attollit, nihil orbis terrarum ambitiosius cernat’.

<sup>56</sup> See here C. Kaas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict* (Baltimore, 1997), 159–68.

<sup>57</sup> An imperial edict demanding its closure had been served in 398, although it would take a second edict before the temple’s actual destruction in 402; see R. Van Dam, ‘From paganism to Christianity at late antique Gaza’, *Viator* 16 (1985), 1–20.



Laeta's family history, but above all as a paradigm for the rest of the world. The slippage between Rome as city, Rome as idea and Rome as empire is all too clear in Jerome's succinct expression of the decline of paganism in Rome.

It is no coincidence (and nor is it the first time, as we shall see) that Jerome focuses on the Capitolium as his key symbol for the transformation of the city of Rome.<sup>58</sup> Throughout Latin literature the Capitolium served as the paradigmatic Roman toponym, metonymically functioning as Rome, standing, again, for both city and empire, and their continued well-being.<sup>59</sup> The shining gilded roof, the *aurum* of the Capitolium, evoked a golden age for Rome, most famously in Augustan poetry.<sup>60</sup> In Book 8 of the *Aeneid* Evander takes Aeneas on a tour of the site of Rome, including an overgrown site that Vergil's reader knew (or knows) as the mighty Capitolium:

*hinc ad Tarpeiam sedem et Capitolia ducit,  
aurea nunc, olim silvestribus horrida dumis.*

(From there [Evander] leads him to the Tarpeian seat and the Capitol, golden now, but once wild and overgrown with woodland thickets.) (Vergil, *Aeneid* 8.347–8)

It is the temporal slide, forwards and back, from the pre-Roman rustic Rome to the golden Rome of the Augustan age (and beyond!) that makes this visit so redolent.

Jerome is all too aware of the power of this symbolism, and its temporal dimension, as evidenced by the passage in which he first made his metaphorically resonant claim regarding the 'dingy' Capitolium, writing *Against Jovinian* in 393: 'Cave Ioviniani nomen, quod de idolo derivatum est. Squalet Capitolium, templa Iovis et caeremoniae conciderunt. Cur vocabulum eius et vitia apud te vigeant? Adhuc sub regibus et sub Numa Pompilio facilius maiores tui Pythagorae continentiam quam sub consulibus Epicuri luxuriam susceperunt' ('Beware the name of Jovinian, which is derived from that of an idol. The Capitolium is dingy, the temples of Jupiter and their ceremonies have been overthrown. Why should his name and vices flourish now with you? Even in the time of Numa Pompilius, even under the kings, your ancestors embraced the self-restraint of Pythagoras more willingly than they did under the consuls the excesses of Epicurus') (*Adversus Jovinianum* 2.38). Jerome's claims that the contemporary Capitolium *squalet* hence points not only to Augustan poetry but also hints at a theme favoured by early Imperial moralists (as claimed by both Seneca and Silius Italicus):<sup>61</sup> that Rome was purer before the Capitol was

<sup>58</sup> See L. Grig, 'Imagining the Capitolium in Late Antiquity', in A. Cain and N. Lenski (eds), *The Power of Religion in Late Antiquity* (Ashgate, 2009), 279–91.

<sup>59</sup> See, for a particularly clear statement of the idea, Vergil, *Aeneid* 9.448–9, and, for modern discussion, C. Edwards, *Writing Rome: Textual Approaches to the City* (Cambridge, 1996), 69–95.

<sup>60</sup> For example, Ovid, *Fasti* 6.73–4.

<sup>61</sup> Seneca, *Controversiae* 1.64; Silius Italicus, *Punica* 3.622–4.

gilded. The image of golden Rome in late antiquity was still potent,<sup>62</sup> but even more pointedly double-edged.

The point is further highlighted when we compare a closely contemporary polemical claim about the Capitoline, this time made by the poet Prudentius (writing 402/3):

*iamque ruit, paucis Tarpeia in rupe relictis,  
ad sincera virum penetralia Nazareorum  
atque ad apostolicos Evandria curia fontes*

(Now, leaving only a few behind on the Tarpeian rock, the Senate House of Evander hurries to the holy shrines of the Nazarenes and the baptismal fonts of the apostles) (Prudentius, *Contra Symmachem* 1.547–9).

As with Jerome, here is a claim for the inversion of the city's traditional religious topography. Prudentius's reference is to the Tarpeian rock, a site that, by process of synecdoche, can of course also signify the Capitoline Hill as a whole. The Senate House is evoked for obvious reasons (Prudentius's claim is of course made as part of his (belated) poetic riposte to Symmachus's eloquent defence of the Altar of Victory in the Curia), but the link with Evander is also important. The mention of Evander is used to evoke the archaic, pre-Roman purity of Rome, which, none the less, is now surpassed in a topographical inversion, which works in the same way as Jerome's in his letter to Laeta.

What we can see in the writings of Jerome, Prudentius and others is a textual battle over the sacred topography of Rome. This battle was due in part to the threat to the status of the city as *caput mundi* at this time. The notion that Rome easily could assert her supremacy over the upstart Constantinople, through her superior cult status and her unique religious topography, was maintained by traditionalist Roman patriots. For Ammianus, for instance (citing Constantine), Rome was the *templum totius mundi* (temple of the whole world) (Ammianus Marcellinus 17.4.12–13): Nova Roma simply could not compete.<sup>63</sup> Devotees of traditional religion in late antiquity promoted a reading of Rome that involved an antiquarian (but far from irrelevant) interest in the most ancient cult sites and artefacts of the 'pagan' city. This is attested, not least, by the frequency and intensity of attacks on the Palladium, the Lares of Priam and the cult of Vesta and the Vestal Virgins in anti-pagan polemic.<sup>64</sup>

The dialectic between Christianity and 'paganism' was still very much a live issue at this time and the Capitolium was a key symbol in the debate.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>62</sup> For example, 'Prima urbes inter, divum domus, aurea Roma', Ausonius, *Ordo Urbium Nobilium* 1.

<sup>63</sup> See L. Grig, 'Competing capitals, competing representations: late antique cityscapes in words and pictures', in Grig and Kelly, *Two Romes* (above, n. 3), 31–52; and G. Kelly, 'The new Rome and the old: Ammianus' silences on Constantinople', *Classical Quarterly* 53 (2003), 588–607.

<sup>64</sup> See C. Ando, 'The Palladium and the Pentateuch: towards a sacred topography of the later Roman empire', *Phoenix* 55 (2001), 369–410.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Jerome, *Commentarii in Epistolam Pauli Apostoli ad Galatas* pr. 2, as well as a similarly polemic approach in Paulinus of Nola, *Carmina* 19.67–70, a passage interestingly dependent on

Jerome's view of the Capitolium was a highly partial one; his claim that the Capitolium *squalet* is not to be taken literally. While the temple's most famous role, as location of the climactic sacrifice of the triumphal procession, lay in abeyance and its position was undoubtedly anomalous, its continuing centrality in the civic life of the city seems likely.<sup>66</sup> The power of the Capitolium as both site and symbol, moreover, assured its mention in a number of late antique texts: from Ammianus through Ausonius to Cassiodorus.<sup>67</sup> The temple itself was not destroyed for many centuries to come — even its famous gilding lived to see off a few barbarians.<sup>68</sup>

The Capitolium was a highly potent metaphor, and its value as symbol far outweighed its materiality. In writing the city, as noted above, writers are bound to resort to metaphor or metonymy: Jerome's use of the Capitolium is emblematic of that trend. It is highly tempting as a symbol, but is ultimately perhaps self-defeating: its very multivalency resists closure, resists any insistence on one ideological meaning alone. The meaning of Rome's traditional symbolic topography was, in fact, up for grabs.

If the fate of the Capitolium was unclear, the spiritual barometer of the city as a whole was equally unsettled. The historian seeking evidence for the state of the Christianization of Rome in the early fifth century finds a conflicted picture in the literary sources of the period.<sup>69</sup> As we saw, on several occasions Jerome (and other Christian writers) argue that present-day Rome had undergone nothing less than a moral and religious renewal through the power of the Christian faith. But how far did Jerome actually think that such a renewal had taken place already? How 'Christian' was Jerome's city of Rome? Unsurprisingly, his account is somewhat contradictory. For one thing Jerome's picture of Rome varied from text to text, dependent upon his purpose, and

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*Aeneid* 2.338 and 2.629. Claudian, meanwhile, holds to a more traditional picture of the Capitoline: Claudian, *De VI Consulatu Honorii Augusti* 41–55. See further Roberts, 'Rome personified' (above, n. 2), 555–65.

<sup>66</sup> See S. De Angeli, 'Iuppiter Optimus Maximus Capitolinus, Aedes (fasi tardo repubblicane e di età imperiale)', in E.M. Steinby (ed.), *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae* III (H–O) (Rome, 1997), 152–3. There is archaeological and epigraphic evidence for the reconstruction and dedication of two traditional religious sites fronting the Clivus Capitolinus in the late fourth century: the Temple of Saturn and the Porticus of the Consenting Gods. Textual references include Jerome's own account of the full processional ascent of Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, to the Capitoline, presumably in order to sacrifice, in 384: Jerome, *Epistulae* 23.3. See further Cameron, *Last Pagans* (above, n. 2), 285–7, on Praetextatus's visit to the temples of Rome in that same year.

<sup>67</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus 16.10.14; Ausonius, *Ordo Urbium Nobilium* 19.15–18; Cassiodorus, *Variae* 7.6.1.

<sup>68</sup> Just as Nero's Colossus had its features repeatedly removed by successive emperors, the Capitoline's gilding was removed by both Stilicho (Zosimus 5.38.5) and Geiseric (Procopius, *Wars* 1.5.4).

<sup>69</sup> As Cameron notes of contradictory Christian accounts: 'Statements tend to fit either one or the other of two categories according to the point the writer is making: *either* paganism is now on the run, *or* the temptations of paganism are all around us. The same writer may even take both approaches in the same poem or sermon', *Last Pagans* (above, n. 2), 184.

indeed his addressee. When writing in flattery-mode to the eminent Christian aristocrat, Pammachius, presented by Jerome as leader of the lay ascetic community at Rome, the city is praised for having been transformed by the example and teaching of this community: ‘Nostris temporibus Roma possidet, quod mundus ante nescivit. Tunc rari sapientes, potentes, nobiles Christiani, nunc multi monachi sapientes, potentes, nobiles’ (‘In our time Rome possesses what the world in days gone by knew nothing about. Then few of the wise or mighty or noble were Christians; now many wise, powerful and noble men are monks’) (*Epistulae* 66.4).<sup>70</sup> But the picture remains complex, not least, as previous scholarship has shown, because Jerome’s fluctuating picture of the city is fundamentally indebted to classical literary models as well as to biblical comparanda.

The influence of classical satire is particularly important here: the city is the quintessential setting for satire, and the bigger the city, the richer the pickings.<sup>71</sup> Just as hackneyed as complaining about life in the city, was the age-old debate about whether it was better to live in the country, or a city, a basic topic for students of declamation, and a favoured old chestnut of letter writers.<sup>72</sup> When he wrote (not long before his forced departure) complaining of Rome as a noisy place, consumed by triviality and a love of the spectacles, Jerome was of course following in a long and familiar tradition:<sup>73</sup> ‘Habeat sibi Roma suos tumultos, harena saeviat, circus insaniat, theatria luxuriant, et quia de nostris dicendum est, matronarum cotidie vistetur senatus’ (‘Let Rome keep for herself her hustle and bustle, the raging of the arena, the madness of the circus, the luxury of the theatre and — for I must not say something of our Christian friends — the daily meetings of the matrons’ senate’) (*Epistulae* 43.3). In complete accord with convention, Jerome compares the hubbub of the city with the more wholesome pleasures offered by the countryside.<sup>74</sup> However, ultimately it is a different, and more complex, dichotomy offered by Jerome: while once he had sought (and failed) to replace the city with the desert, after 385 he both opposed and identified the earthly Rome with a shifting *ordo* of biblical cities.

Biblical texts provided various alternative identities for Rome. The city is referred to as biblical Babylon on several occasions, an epithet with dual associations, as Sugano noted.<sup>75</sup> At times Babylon-Rome is the city from which

<sup>70</sup> Wiesen, *St Jerome as a Satirist* (above, n. 6), 42–3, is particularly critical of this passage, referring to its ‘artificiality’ and ‘turgid rhetoric’.

<sup>71</sup> See S.H. Braund, ‘City and country in Roman satire’, in S.H. Braund (ed.), *Satire and Society in Ancient Rome* (Exeter, 1989), 23–47. Ammianus’s ‘Roman digressions’ provide a closely contemporary parallel: Ammianus Marcellinus 14.6, 28.4.

<sup>72</sup> For example, Pliny, *Epistulae* 1.9, 9.6.

<sup>73</sup> See Wiesen, *St Jerome as a Satirist* (above, n. 6), 21, on comparisons between this letter and Horace, *Satirae* 2.6.17–58 and Juvenal, *Satirae* 3 and 11.183–208.

<sup>74</sup> *deliciae rusticanae*; cf. *Epistulae* 43.3.

<sup>75</sup> Sugano, *Das Rombild* (above, n. 8), 33.

Jerome wished to escape to the biblical Jerusalem,<sup>76</sup> that is, the Old Testament, exilic-era Babylon, while at other times Babylon-Rome is clearly to be associated with the city of the Apocalypse.<sup>77</sup> Even whorish Babylon-Rome had a dual face, as we can see in Jerome's *Epistula* 46 (of 386), written again to Marcella. Here Jerome, not long arrived in Bethlehem, writes in the names of Paula and Eustochium, urging Marcella to leave Rome and come to the Holy Land to join them. The letter praises the holiness of Bethlehem,<sup>78</sup> a sacred site, before turning to Rome, first compared with the Babylon of the Apocalypse<sup>79</sup> and then with Babylon as decried by Jeremiah.<sup>80</sup> And yet, some hope for Babylon-Rome is allowed for immediately afterwards: 'Est quidem ibi sancta ecclesia, sunt tropea apostolorum et martyrum, est Christi vera confessio et ab apostolis praedicata fides et gentilitate calcata in sublime se cotidie erigens vocabulum Christianum' ('It is true that [Rome] has a holy church, there are the shrines of the apostles and the martyrs, there is a true confession of Christ. The faith has been preached there by an apostle, paganism has been trodden down while the name of 'Christian' is daily raised higher and higher') (*Epistulae* 46.12). Straight away, however, this positive description of a Christian city is undercut by what follows (*sed ...*), in a passage that sees Jerome firmly back in satirical form and that is, moreover, absolutely conventional in its attack on the daily routine of the city, though the alternative proposed is monastic *quies* rather than traditional villa-based *otium*: 'Sed ipsa ambitio, potentia, magnitudo urbis, videri et videre, salutari et salutare, laudare et detrahare, audire vel proloqui et tantam frequentiam hominum saltim invitum pati a proposito monachorum et quiete aliena sunt' ('But the pomp, power, and size of the city, the seeing and the being seen, the paying and the receiving of visits, the complimenting and disparaging, listening or speaking, as well as the need to put up with so very many people, even when one is least in the mood to do so: all these things are foreign to the principles and to the peace of the monastic life') (*Epistulae* 46.12). Jerome's *elogium* to Paula, his *Epistula* 108 to her daughter Eustochium, plays throughout on the antithesis between Rome and Bethlehem, playing on the contrast between the glories and history of the former and the apparent lowliness and obscurity of the latter. Jerome marvels first that a descendant of the Gracchi and the Scipiones would pick Bethlehem over Rome.<sup>81</sup> He enjoys the paradox that Paula found world renown not at Rome, but at Bethlehem, again playing on the *urbs/orbis*

<sup>76</sup> As at *Epistulae* 45.6. His opinion of the earthly Jerusalem was far more ambivalent — see, for instance, *Epistulae* 58.4.

<sup>77</sup> As at *Prologus in Didymi Libro de Spiritu Sancto* pr., p. 107 (Revelation 17.1–4).

<sup>78</sup> Laurence, 'Rome et Jérôme' (above, n. 26), 238, noted how in several letters Bethlehem is presented as an 'anti-Rome'.

<sup>79</sup> *Lege Apocalypsin Iohannis ... et Babylonis Cantetur Exitu* (Revelation 18.2); *Epistulae* 46.12

<sup>80</sup> *Ad Hieremiam quoque Regrediens Scriptum Pariter Adtende: Fugite de Medio Babylonis ...* (Jeremiah 51.6); *Epistulae* 46.12.

<sup>81</sup> *Epistulae* 108.1.

pun.<sup>82</sup> Finally, Jerome plays again on the paradox in each of the two metrical epitaphs that he wrote for Paula's tomb, and that are appended to the letter.<sup>83</sup>

Even more than Bethlehem or even Babylon, the ultimate biblical twin city for Rome is, of course, Jerusalem, but again this comparison bears different meanings according to context. In Jerome's *elogium* for Marcella (*Epistulae* 127), a letter that also expresses Jerome's grief at the sack of Rome, as we have already seen, the comparison is used in two ways. Firstly, as in the letter to Pammachius, the comparison is used as flattery. It was thanks to Marcella's holy ways, and the foundation of her monastery in particular, Jerome writes, that he had the joy of seeing 'Romam factam Hierosolymam' ('Rome become Jerusalem') (*Epistulae* 127.8).<sup>84</sup> However, for Jerome, Rome truly becomes a second Jerusalem only through a truly tragic event: its sack (*Epistulae* 127.12). This connection is made with the direct quotation of Psalm 79.1–3, a lament for the destruction of Jerusalem by the *gentes*.

This parallel, however, is not left to stand alone. The sack, as we saw, brought a whole host of comparanda to mind. As in the passage from the Commentary on Ezekiel, a quote from the Psalms is followed directly by a quotation from the *Aeneid*, comparing the fall of Rome with that of Troy. However, here the Psalms passage is directly preceded by another biblical quotation, but one that ascribes quite the opposite interpretation of the fall of Rome from that which is suggested by the allusion to Jerusalem: Isaiah 15.1. In this quotation Jerome evokes Isaiah's prophecy about the fall of Moab, an 'ungodly' nation, which even the moderately alert reader would then associate with the adjacent prophecies in Isaiah regarding the fall of Babylon (Isaiah 13) and other Gentile nations (Isaiah 17ff). Parallels and allusions seem to tumble, at this point, leading the reader to a very unclear picture of how we should read the fall of Rome.

Jerome's parallel use of biblical and classical literary allusions means that fallen Rome is both a biblical and a mythical city. Rome is the satirists' *urbs*, Vergil's Troy, not one but two biblical Babylons, and even Jerusalem. No wonder the picture is conflicted! The city of Rome then, in Jerome's writings, is a deeply unstable city: it is intertextually rich and multivalent, while its moral and religious temperature fluctuates wildly. From text to text, year to year, even within the *same* text, Jerome's Rome oscillates wildly.

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<sup>82</sup> 'Nam quae unius urbis contempsit gloriam, totius orbis opinione celebratur; quam Romae habitantem nullus extra Romam noverat, latentem in Bethlem et Barbara et Romana terra miratur': *Epistulae* 108.3.

<sup>83</sup> '... Romani prima Senatus / Pauperiem Christi, et Bethlemitica rura secuta est; Fratrem, cognatos, Romam patriamque relinquens, / Divitias, subolem, Betlemitico conditur antro': *Epistulae* 108.33.

<sup>84</sup> It is worth noting, however, that we are not talking of the *urbs* proper: in accordance with the practices of traditional aristocratic *otium*, Marcella founded her 'monastery' on her suburban farm, in order that its occupants could benefit from rural solitude: 'Suburbanus ager vobis pro monasterio fuit et rus electum propter solitudinem'.



Jerome is thus not much use as a practical guide to the late antique city of Rome. He tells the historian surprisingly little. His account of the physical status of the traditional religious sites of Rome is scarcely to be trusted. He is no chronicler of current events. Jerome's Rome, as this article has shown, is far more a city of books, a city of images, a city of symbols, than a material city, made of bricks and stones, and inhabited by historical humans. It remains something of an invisible city, to use the title of Italo Calvino's enigmatic novel:<sup>85</sup> a many-layered and richly intertextual literary artefact, inextricably steeped in classical as well as biblical literature. Jerome the hard-liner, the seemingly stable literary author and *persona*, turns out to be rather softer than we may have thought. Jerome's Rome, meanwhile, to return finally to Raban's words, is a soft city: 'the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare', which, if we agree with Raban, 'is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate on maps, in statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture'.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> I. Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (London, 1974); the original Italian title was *Le città invisibili*.

<sup>86</sup> Raban, *Soft City* (above, n. 9), 10.