

ROME IN HER OLD AGE: A TOPIC IN THE POLEMIC BETWEEN
PAGANS AND CHRISTIANS IN LATE ANTIQUITY*La vejez de Roma: un tema de la polémica
entre paganos y cristianos en la Antigüedad Tardía*Mar Marcos*
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ABSTRACT: This paper analyses the topic of Rome's old age and her capacity to regenerate as an Eternal City, which is recurrent in late antique literature, and which would become an important subject of controversy between pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity. I focus on the analysis of some early uses of this polemical theme, at a critical moment for the perception of Rome's eternity, in the years between the defeat at Adrianople (a. 378) and the sack of Rome by Alaric (a. 410). Rome's personification in Symmachus' *Relatio* 3, where she speaks in person about her old age, and Rome's prosopopoeia in Ambrose's *Epistula* 18 and Prudentius's *Contra Symmachum* 2, with the prospect of a renewal (*regeneratio*) through conversion, illustrate the versatility of the rhetorical techniques used in late antique religious debate, shared to a great extent by pagans and Christians alike.

Keywords: Eternal City, Rome's Prosopopoeia, Symmachus, Prudentius, Religious Controversy.

RESUMEN: Se estudia aquí el tema del envejecimiento de Roma y su capacidad para regenerarse como Ciudad Eterna, un tópico recurrente en la literatura tardoantigua, que constituyó un motivo de controversia entre paganos y cristianos al final de la Antigüedad. Se analizan algunos ejemplos del uso temprano de este tema polémico, en un momento crítico en la percepción de la eternidad de Roma, entre la derrota de Adrianópolis (a. 378) y el saqueo de Roma por Alarico (a. 410). La personificación de Roma en la *Relatio* 3 de Símaco, donde aquella habla en primera persona de su vejez, y su prosopopeya en la epístola 18 de Ambrosio de Milán y en el *Contra Symmachum* 2 de Prudencio, con la perspectiva de una regeneración (*regeneratio*) mediante la conversión, ponen de manifiesto la versatilidad de las técnicas retóricas usadas en la confrontación religiosa de la Antigüedad tardía, que eran compartidas en gran medida por paganos y cristianos.

Palabras clave: Roma Eterna, Prosopopeya de Roma, Símaco, Prudencio, polémica religiosa.

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I envy you for possessing Rome and Rome for possessing you. For you possess a thing to which there is nothing similar on the earth...

Libanius, *Ep.* 1063 to Marcellinus (trans. Barnes 1998: 25)

A Tribute to Francisco Marco Simón on his 70th Birthday

1. *Introduction: Rome's eternity, aging and regeneration*

The idea that Rome might grow old is as old, perhaps, as the history of Rome itself. According to Livy, Tullus Hostilius, the third king of Rome, a vigorous young man, thought that the city had been allowed to lapse into old age from inaction, which led him to seek excuses for renewed military adventure (Liv. 1.22.3). In Livy's age, in the reign of Augustus, the myth of eternal Rome was articulated in its classical form, closely connected with the history of the city's military successes and its ability to govern a vast territory in the spirit of concord. This myth, exalted by poets in Augustus' time and in the early Empire, and consecrated by the institutionalisation of the worship of *Roma Aeterna* during Hadrian's reign, endured until Late Antiquity (Moore 1894; Koch 1952; Pratt 1965; Paschoud 1967; Di Salvo 1970; Turcan 1983; Dopico Cañzos 1998; Giordano 2001; Pollmann 2011; 2013; Tommasi 2013; Andrés Perez 2014; Isaac 2017, with further references).

As Vergil proclaimed, Rome was destined to rule the world in an empire with neither spatial nor temporal bounds. His verses are famous, in which Jupiter makes the prediction: «To the Roman race I set limits neither in space nor time: Unending sway have I bestowed on them» (*Aen.* 1.278-279: *His ego nec metas rerum nec tempora pono; imperium sine fine dedi*). At the same time, complementary to this conviction, other pessimist tendencies limited or played down the eternity of Rome and its empire. In the second century BC, Scipio Aemilianus, while watching the destruction of Carthage during the Third Punic War, reflected on the fall of Troy and on that of the other emblematic empires, such as the Assyrians, Medes, Persians and Macedonians, and wondered if one day his native city would not suffer the same fate (Polyb. 38.21-22). Livy himself, in the preface of his *History*, speaks of growth and decadence; beginning with very modest origins, Rome has grown so great that it falls under the weight of its own grandeur (*praef.* 4, 8-9; Levene 1992: 56-57). Rome's old age was the natural conclusion of a process of degradation analogous with that of human life (childhood, adolescence, maturity and senility), a 'biological' evolution that must naturally end in decay and death (Häussler 1964; Ruch 1972), as expressed in Florus's preface 4-8 to his *Epitome of Roman History* (Facchini Tossi 1990; Hinojo Andrés and Moreno Ferrero 2000: 12-16):

Si quis ergo populum Romanum quasi unum hominem consideret totamque eius aetatem percenseat, ut coeperit utque adoleverit, ut quasi ad quandam iuventae frugem pervenerit, ut postea velut consenuerit, quattuor gradus processusque eius inveniet [...]. Deinceps ad Caesarem Augustum centum et quinquaginta anni, quibus totum orbem pacavit. Hic iam ipsa iuventus imperii et quasi robusta maturitas. A Caesare Augusto in saeculum nostrum haud multo minus anni ducenti, quibus inertia Caesarum quasi consenuit atque decoxit, nisi quod sub Traiano principe movit lacertos et praeter spem omnium senectus imperii quasi reddita iuventute reviruit.

If anyone were to contemplate the Roman people as he would a single individual and review its whole life, how it began, how it grew up, how it arrived at what may be called the maturity of its manhood, and how it subsequently as it were reached old age, he will find that it went through four stages of progress [...] From the time of Caesar Augustus down to our own age there has been a period of not much less than two hundred years, during which, owing to the inactivity of the emperors, the Roman people, as it were, grew old and lost its potency, save that under the rule of Trajan it again stirred its arms and, contrary to general expectation, again renewed its vigour with youth as it were restored (trans. Foster 1929).

The idea of a dramatic end of Rome, as a consequence of old age and the inexorable decline of the world, is often found in Christian Latin literature (Siniscalco 1977). Cyprian of Carthage, in the middle of the third century, is the great exponent of such pessimist vision, inherited from the classic and apocalyptic tradition (*Ad Demetrianum* 3 ff.): the same pessimism can be found in the poetry of his contemporary Commodianus, well acquainted with pagan literature, especially Virgil. In a poem exhorting the pagans and the Jews to accept Christ, Commodianus concludes with an apocalypse, advocating the end of Rome in his time (*Carmen de duobus populis*, 925: *stat tempus in finem fumante Roma maturum*). The preface of Juvenecus to his Commentary to the Gospels, c. 330 (*Evangeliorum Libri IIII*, praef. 1-5, ed. Marold 1886) collects this same apocalyptic legacy. *Aurea Roma* will die by the irrevocable pass of the time:

*Immortale nihil mundi compage tenetur,
Non orbis, non regna hominum, non aurea Roma,
Non mare, non tellus, non ignea sidera caeli.
Nam statuit genitor rerum inrevocabile tempus,
Quo cunctum torrens rapiat flamma ultima mundum.*

The Universe has nothing without end —
not earth, not realms of men, not golden Rome,
not seas, not land, not stars that burn above.
The Father of all things set a fixed time
when final scorching fire will seize the world

(trans. McGill 2016)

However, Roman historiography, at least the profane versions, did not imagine that final phase and expressed hope for a potential reversal (*renovatio*), accompanied by a moral regeneration, which allowed to integrate decline and death into a cyclical eternity (Gagé 1936; Sor-di 1972; Mazza 1983; Pollmann 2013: 25-28; Papaioannou 2018). It might be said that *Aeternitas* was a «conditioned privilege», a «precarious» eternity, subordinated to the observance of the contract that linked the Romans with their gods, this is the daily practice of civic and cult virtues. A privilege that, according to the traditional representation, would be lost, either by negligence or by a deliberate violation of the *mos maiorum*. The eternity of Rome is conditioned by the citizens's *concordia*, the action of their rulers and the gods that protect the city; Rome's «grandeur» was «precarious», in the etymological sense of the word («obtained by entreaty»), and might and should be renewed; the eternity of Rome is not linear, continuous and infinite, but, rather, of an eternal return, of a movement «en quelque sort hélicoidale» (Turcan 1983: 13-14, 18). The idea of renewal developed at an early time (Tullus Hostilius believed that new conquests would revitalise Rome), symbolised by the myth of the Phoenix, able to rise once and again from its ashes, that will end up symbolizing the inexhaustible vitality of the *res Romana* (Van den Broek 1971).

Although pessimism about the eternity of Rome is to be found in much imperial literature (Cogné 1976), the idea of decline and old age becomes stronger in late Antiquity, particularly in the last decades of the fourth century and the first decades of the fifth, closely linked with violent historical events, like the disaster of Adrianople in 378 and the sack of Rome by Alaric in 410, which caused a great psychological impression amongst people at the time, and that put to test the conception of Rome's perennial regeneration. In the same years, which were crucial for the Christianisation of Rome, the last ideological battle was waged in Rome between pagans and Christians. The myth of Rome, exalted now as never before in pagan circles—for example, in Ammianus Marcellinus, who uses *Urbs aeterna* as the normal expression to refer to Rome, in the *Historia Augusta*, in the poets Claudian and Rutilius Namatianus (Roberts 2001; Pollmann 2013: 25-28)—, became a part of the discourse of religious controversy, a rhetorical device favoured by the religious connotations of the notion of *aeternitas*. Among Christians, however, the optimistic view will much disappear after 410 (Di Salvo 1970).

The present paper studies the use of the motif of the old age and the power of Rome to renew itself in the controversy between pagans and Christians in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Three documents well-known to late-antique scholars will be used: the *Relatio* 3 by Symmachus in defence of traditional worship, where the city of Rome speaks in person about her old age; and the Christian replies by Ambrose in *ep.* 18 and by Prudentius in the two books of his *Contra Symmachum*,

in which the prospect of regeneration through conversion is envisaged. The common use of prosopopeia (impersonation) as a dialoguing device and a series of classical *topoi* about the idea of Rome illustrate the versatility of the rhetorical techniques used in religious debate in Late Antiquity, and the transformations that the new cultural and religious conditions of the time caused in the representation of the myth of the Eternal City.

2. *Symmachus' Relatio 3.9-10:*

The religious dimension of the aeternitas myth

Symmachus' *Relatio 3*, pronounced before the Emperor Valentinian II in 384 to demand that the Altar of Victory be restored to the Senate-house and pagan priests should regain the financial immunity they had traditionally enjoyed, contains a prosopopeia of Rome in which the city begs to hold on to its rites, appealing to its old age (*Rel. 3.9-10*, ed. Callu 2009; D'Auria 2011, with further references):

Romam nunc putemus adsistere atque his Vobiscum agere sermonibus: Optimi Principum, Patres Patriae, reveremini annos meos, in quos me pius ritus adduxit! Utar caerimoniis avitis, neque enim paenitet! Vivam meo more, quia libera sum! Hic cultus in leges meas orbem redegit, haec sacra Hannibalem a moenibus, a Capitolio Senonas repulerunt. Ad hoc ergo sevuata sum, ut longaeua reprehendar? Videro, quale sit, quod instituentum putatur; sera tamen et contumeliosa est emendation senectutis.

Let us imagine that Rome herself stands in your presence and pleads with you thus, «Best of emperors, fathers of your country, respect my length of years won for me by the dutiful observance of rite, let me continue to practise my ancient ceremonies, for I do not regret them. Let me live in my own way, for I am free. This worship of mine brought the whole world under the rule of my laws, these sacred rites drove back Hannibal from my walls and the Senones from the Capitol. Is it true that I have been kept alive solely for the purpose of being reprimanded at my age? 10. I will see what kind of changes I think should be set on foot, but reformation of old age comes rather late and is humiliating» (trans. Barrow 1973).

This prosopopeia of Rome forms part of a long rhetorical tradition that, since the impersonation of the laws in Plato, in dialogue with Socrates (*Crit. 50a-51c*), regarded the personification of characters as a literary device of the most elevated style (D'Angelo 2017). Rome personified appears for the first time (at least in the texts that have reached us) in Cicero to denounce Catilina and then in Lucan for stopping Caesar when he was about to cross the Rubicon (*Phars. 1.186-193*; Moretti 2007). The mighty image of Rome (*ingens imago*, 186) appears before Caesar with a threatening look, with white hair on a turreted head (*turrigero canos ef-*

fundens vertice crines, 188) and bare shoulders, imploring between tears (*gemitus permixta loqui*, 190). In Symmachus' time, the image of a *vetus Roma* who commands respect for her years still held all its literary force (Pollmann 2013: 25-28). A personified Rome speaks to the Emperor Theodosius, when after Magnus Maximus's defeat (a. 388), he entered the city of Rome to celebrate the triumph and showed hesitant to resume power (Pac., *Paneg. Lat.* 2.11.4-7). Rome's personification appears remarkably in the poetry of Claudianus (Cameron 1970: 349-371; Cameron 1975; Döpp 1980; Roberts 2001), who uses Rome's impersonation in his consular panegyrics (*Prob.* 75-173; *De cons. Stil.* 2.223-407; *De cons. Hon.* 6.356-493) and in other poems (*De bel. Gild.* 17-212; *In Eutrop.* 1.371-513). Rome's old age can be reversed and her youth recovered either thanks to Jupiter, who changes the colour of her hair (*De bel. Gild.* 208 ss: *dixit — scil. Iuppiter — et adflavit Romam meliore iuventa.*) *Continuo redit ille vigor seniique colorem [mutavere comae]* or to Stilicho himself, who, with his victories, gives back her vigour (*De bel. Get.* 436 ss.: *ut sese pariter diffudit in omnia regni/ membra vigor vivusque redit color urbibus aegris*).

The image of an aged Rome, on the other hand, goes back to the very origins of the myth of its eternity, and frequently reappears in times of crisis. Since the vigour of Rome is traditionally linked to its military successes, defeats in battle are a symptom and proof of its decadence. The Roman disaster at Adrianople in 378 was one of those critical times, favouring interpretations in terms of providence (Lenski 1997). For Nicene Christians, it was the deserved punishment for an emperor, the Arian Valens, who had persecuted them. According to Sozomenus (*HE* 6.40.1) and Theodoretus (*HE* 3.34.1-3), the Syrian monk Isaac, who in the summer of 378 was in Constantinople, insulted the emperor, warning him that he would be defeated by the Goths for being a heretic (Barnes 2010: 242). Shortly after the defeat, Gregory of Nazianzus (*Or.* 33.2) and Ambrose of Milan (*De fide* 2.139-143) made the same interpretation (Lensky 1997: 157-160). For the supporters of traditional religions, like Libanius, the defeat was the consequence of the displeasure of the gods (*Lib. Or.* 24, a. 379: the disaster was caused by Valen's failure to revenge Julian's murder, which had caused the wrath of the gods).

Aged Rome springs up again in the profane literature of the last decades of the fourth century. It is present in the *Historia Augusta* (*Vita Cari* 2-3) and is most clear in Ammianus Marcellinus's *Res Gestae*, whose description of the fourth age is very close to Symmachus' characterisation (14.6.3-7):

...iamque vergens in senium et nomine solo aliquotiens vincens ad tranquilliora vitae discessit. Ideo urbs venerabilis post superbas efferatarum gentium cervices oppressas latasque leges fundamenta libertatis et retinacula sempiterna velut frugi parens et prudens et dives Caesaribus tam-

quam liberis suis regenda patrimonii iura permisit. Et olim licet otiosae sint tribus pacataeque centuriae et nulla suffragiorum certamina set Pompiliani redierit securitas temporis, per omnes tamen quotquot sunt partesque terrarum, ut domina suscipitur et regina et ubique patrum reverenda cum auctoritate canities populique Romani nomen circumspicuum et verecundum.

...finally, when it was verging on old age and owed its occasional victories only to its reputation, it gave itself over a more peaceful way of life. The venerable city, having set its foot on the proud necks of savage peoples and given them laws to serve as the eternal foundation and guarantee of liberty, took the course which a thrifty, wise, and rich parent takes with his children, and handed over to the Caesars the administration of its heritage. Although the tribes and centuries of the voters have long been inactive, and electoral contests have been superseded by a calm which recalls the time of Numa, Rome is accepted in every region of the world as mistress and queen; everywhere the authority of its senators is paid the respect due to their grey hairs, and the name of the Roman people is an object of reverence and awe (trans. Hamilton 1986).

Rome retains all its prestige at the end of the fourth century and constitutes the symbol of the entire empire. Despite appearances, Ammianus is not speaking of a decline but of rejuvenation in the person and position of the emperors who, by undertaking wars in the name of Rome, guarantee its survival (Pack 1953; Paschoud 1967: 59-61; Matthews 1986).

For Ammianus, like any educated Roman, was well aware that a treaty (*foedus*), even an 'eternal' one, could be broken by the default of one of the parties. By positing a treaty without a specific time limit, Ammianus is suggesting that Rome can be eternal, but that this eternity is conditional upon human virtue. In this light he is calling for a return to traditional moral standards as a necessary condition for Rome's survival (Blockley 1999: 5).

Symmachus transferred that image, which was familiar in his cultural milieu (Salzman 1989), to the scenario of religious controversy, in an exquisitely traditional argument which develops the religious dimension of the *aeternitas* myth. The destiny of Rome is subordinate to the observance of the contract that binds Romans to their gods. Rome and its empire are eternal and infinite thanks to them, who have stood beside it in war, especially Victory, whose altar had now been removed from the Senate-house. This relationship of reciprocity, which has ensured Rome its universal empire, is a central argument in the *Relatio*, together with the insistence on the function of the vestal virgins as guarantors of the *imperii aeternitas*, which is renewed by attending to the *pietas* of the Romans and fulfilling the religious rites scrupulously. Furthermore, the choice of an elderly Rome who implores the upholding of tradition

and customs (*consuetudo*) strengthens the idea that age validates pagan rites: *iam si longa aetas auctoritatem religionibus faciat, servanda est tot saeculis fides et sequendi sunt nobis parentes, qui secuti sunt feliciter suos* (Rel. 3.8, «If long passage of time lends validity to religious observances, we ought to keep faith with so many centuries, we ought to follow our forefathers who followed their forefathers and were blessed in so doing»). Finally, Rome, in her old age, has the right to freedom (*vivam meo more, quia libera sum!* «Let me live in my own way, for I am free», 3.9). Symmachus plays here with the double meaning of *libertas*: the traditional one (*libertas* as a political concept) and the more recent one of freedom of choice of worship, connected with the idea of tolerance (Marcos 2012: 49-51). The fact that until recent times, the emperors had respected traditional worship (Symmachus speaks of *dis-simulatio*) was proof that tolerance itself was part of Roman *consuetudo* (Marcos 2016; Kahlos forthcoming).

3. An old lady in tears: Rome's personification in Ambrose, Ep. 18

The dramatic appeal and emotional effect of an aged Rome, forced to plead with the emperors, her sons, was captured by Ambrose, who argued against this image in *ep.* 18, with which he replied to *Relatio* 3 (Paschoud 1967: 76-77; Gualandri 1995; D'Auria 2011: 436-440). It is significant that the first thing Ambrose refutes is the prosopopoeia of Rome (18.4-7), with a good dose of sarcasm, as he reproaches Symmachus for having presented an old lady in tears, who begs for her ancient religious ceremonies in a tearful voice (18.4: *flebili Roma questu sermonis illacrimat*). Ambrose makes Rome speak to the followers of the traditional cults to explain that the victories in war were not due to the observance of traditional rites, but to the bravery of warlike men (*non in fibris pecudum, sed in viribus bellatorum tropaea victoriae sunt*, 18.7). Rome then declares her conversion:

Facessat igitur invidiosa illa populi Romani querela: non hanc Roma mandavit. Aliis illa eos interpellat vocibus: Quid me casso quotidie gregis innoxii sanguine cruentatis? Non in fibris pecudum, sed in viribus bellatorum tropaea victoriae sunt... Poenitet lapsus: vetusta canities pudendi sanguinis traxit ruborem. Non erubescio cum toto orbe longaeva converti. Verum certe est quia nulla aetas ad perdiscendum sera est. Erubescat senectus, quae emendare se non potest. Non annorum canities est laudata, sed morum. Nullus pudor est ad meliora transire. Hoc solum habebam commune cum barbaris, quia Deum antea nesciebam.

Let, then, that invidious complaint of the Roman people come to an end. Rome has given no such charge. She speaks with other words. Why do you daily stain me with the useless blood of the harmless herd? Trophies of victory depend not on the entrails of the flocks, but on the

strength of those who fight [...] I mourn over my downfall, my old age is tinged with that shameful bloodshed. I do not blush to be converted with the whole world in my old age. It is undoubtedly true that no age is too late to learn. Let that old age blush which cannot amend itself. Not the old age of years is worthy of praise but that of character. There is no shame in passing to better things. This alone was common to me with the barbarians, that of old I knew not God.... (trans. Schaff and Wace 1896).

In his re-writing of Rome's discourse, Ambrose makes her rejuvenated through conversion. The old lady blushes like a girl (*erubesco*) and professes to be in favour of progress. Her *vetusta canities* allows her to reflect on past faults and to proceed to conversion. Whereas Symmachus and the last pagans cling to the *mos maiorum*, Ambrose presents Christianity as an agent contributing to the progress of civilization. Pagan Rome is a preliminary stage on the road towards the Christian present.

4. *Rejuvenation by conversion: Prudentius'* *Contra Symmachum* 2.649-768

The idea of a Christian Rome taking over from pagan Rome, sketched out by Ambrose, is developed more fully by Prudentius in the two books *Contra Symmachum*, first published in 402-403, in reply to *Relatio* 3. It has been debated whether these are only a rhetorical exercise (Paschoud 1967: 78) or respond to a contemporary historical context, to be precise, to a recent petition by Symmachus to Honorius' court, to plead once more for the restoration of pagan worship after the Christian victory at Pollentia (Barnes 1976; Döpp 1986; Brown 2003). Book One is a long refutation of polytheism and also sings the praises of the Emperor Theodosius' Christian policies, which have achieved the conversion of the Roman *populus* and most of the large senatorial families. The second, extremely long (over eleven hundred lines), is the refutation of the *Relatio*, point by point.

The image of an elderly Rome, rejuvenated by conversion, is present in the first book, in a very similar way to the one given by Ambrose, which inspired it. After hearing Theodosius' speech inviting her to conversion, Rome, docile in her old age, sees the errors of her old ways; she clears the dark clouds from her aged looks and becomes Christian (*Tunc primum senior docilis sua saecula Roma/erubuit, pudet exacti iam temporis, odit/ praeteritos foedis cum religionibus annos, 1.514-523; fidem Christi pleno transfertur amore, 1.523*). Prudentius takes Vergil's verses *verbatim* and puts Jupiter's promise in Theodosius' mouth as he «teaches (Rome) to exercise an endless empire so that the bravery of Romulus never grows old, so that the glory achieved never knows old age» (*Denique nec metas statuit nec tempora ponit,/imperium sine fine docet, ne Romula virtus/ iam sit anus, noria nec gloria parta senectam, 1.541-543*).

The change of verb is significant: in Vergil it is *dedit*, in Prudentius *docet*. Theodosius *teaches* Rome how to ensure its eternity.

In the second book (2.649-768), Symmachus' prosopopoea of aged Rome is given new life.

*Si uocem simulare licet, nemque aptior ista
uox Romae est quam nunc eius sub nomine promam.
Quae, quia turpe putat templorum flere repulsam
aegidaeque in dubiis pro se pugnasse periclis
dicere seque grauem senio inclinante fateri,
ductores complexa suos sic laeta profatur:
“O clari saluete duces generosa propago
principis inuicti, sub quo senium omne renascens
deposui uidique meam faescere rursus
canitiem; nam, cum mortalia cuncta uetustas
inminuat, mihi longa dies aliud parit aeuum,
quae uiuendo diu didici contemnere finem.
Nunc, nunc iusta meis reuerentia competit annis,
nunc merito dicor uenerabilis et caput orbis,
cum galea sub fronde oleae cristasque rubentes
concutio uiridi uelans fera cingula serto
atque armata deum sine crimine caedis adoro.
Crimen enim (piget heu!) crimen persuaserat atrox
Iuppiter ut sacro iustorum sanguine tincta
adsuetum bellis scelerarem funere ferrum.*

If I am permitted to impersonate a voice, indeed this voice is more fitting to Rome, which I shall now produce in her name. She who because she thinks it disgraceful to weep for the overthrow of the temple and to say that the aegis fought for her in perilous circumstances, and to admit that she is weighed down with crippling old age having embraced her leaders thus joyfully speaks: ‘Greetings glorious leaders, honourable offspring of an unconquered emperor, under whom, being reborn, I laid aside all my old age and I saw my grey hair grow golden again: for while age diminishes all that is mortal, length of days produces another life-time for me who has learnt by living a long time to despise death. Now, now suitable reverence is due to my years, now deservedly am I called venerable and the capital city of the world, when I shake my helmet and its red crests under the branch of the olive hiding the fierce sword-belt with a green wreath and, armed, I worship God without the offence of slaughter. For it was to offences, terrible offences, (alas it revolts me) that Jupiter had persuaded me so that wet with the holy blood of the just I might desecrate the sword, which is accustomed to wars, with their death....

(trans. Brown 2003)

Rome protests that Symmachus has shown her as a stooping old lady (*seque grauem senior inclinante fateri*) and she addresses the Christian princes Honorius and Arcadius. It is now, she says, when her years are granted a fair reverence, now she is being rightly called venerable and the head of the world (*uenerabilis et caput orbis*). Prudentius gives a physical description of Rome (which does not appear in either Symmachus or Ambrose), who is dressed with a helmet and red crest, decorated with olive leaves, and armed. The description is a copy of the representations of the goddess Rome in art and is probably inspired by Claudian's poetry, above all by *De bello Gildonico*, which Prudentius was aware of. The goddess repudiates the persecutions and rejects the idea spread by those who say that Rome has lost wars through abandoning her traditional religions. Peace now reigns, the barbarians are not a threat and they do not even form part of the army — Prudentius' anti-barbarian feelings are very strong; he prefers a pagan to a barbarian. Rome refers to the victory at Pollentia in 402 AD (Döpp 1986), where Honorius' armies defeated Alaric, a victory that was due to the Christian piety of the prince and his father-in-law Stilicho, whom she asks to come and celebrate their victory in the city.

5. Epilogue

Prudentius relaunches the myth of Rome, never more pagan but Christian, who takes up her path without any spacial or temporary limit, as Virgil had advocated. Christianity guarantees the eternity of the Empire, and a rejuvenated Rome is exultant at the victory over Alaric, which took place on Easter Day 402, but was ephemeral. Stilicho's army had to face the enemy again the following year, and won at Verona. However, the danger did not go away, and Alaric sacked Rome in 410. Despite the fact the city was taken, which clearly shattered the hope expressed by Prudentius and questioned the myth of *Roma aeterna*, Christian authors like Augustine of Hippo believed that regeneration was possible through conversion. That is what he upholds in *De civitate Dei* 2.29.1, where he appeals to the *indoles Romana laudabilis* for Rome to convert to the true religion, and in 4.7, where he states that the Empire has been subjected to a hard test but it has not been replaced by another; Rome has experienced similar situations and has survived. Why despair now?

Quamquam Romanum imperium afflictum est potius quam mutatum, quod et aliis ante Christi nomen temporibus ei contigit et ab illa est afflictione recreatum, quod nec istis temporibus desperandum est. Quis enim de hac re novit voluntatem Dei?

The Roman Empire has been violently buffeted by storms, but not shattered. It experienced violent storms, too, before Christ's name was heard,

but it weathered them all. Hence, there is no reason to despair in our times. For, who can tell what is God's design in this matter? (Aug., *Civ.*, 2.29.1; trans. Zema and Walsh 1950).

Rome's *aeternitas* was saved from pessimism, or at least the traditional pessimism about its eternity did not increase with the catastrophe. Seven years later, Rutilius Namatianus opened his *De reditu suo* 1.1-4 with the *laudes Romae*, and praised her eternity (Portuese 2017, with further references), associating her rebirth with a renewed military supremacy (*De red.* 1. 115-124):

*Erige crinales lauros seniumque sacrati
verticis in virides, Roma, refinge comas.
aurea turrigero radiant diademata cono,
perpetuosque ignes aureus umbo vomat!
abscondat tristem deleta iniuria casum:
contemptus solidet vulnera clausa dolor.
adversis solenne tuis sperare secunda:
exemplo caeli ditia damna subis.
astrorum flammae renovant occasibus ortus;
lunam finire cernis, ut incipiat.*

Raise, O Rome, the triumphal laurels which wreath thy locks, and re-fashion the hoary eld of thy hallowed head to tresses fresh and fair. Golden let the diadem flash on thy tower-crowned helmet; let the golden buckler belch forth perpetual fires! Let forgetfulness of thy wrongs bury the sadness of misfortune; let pain disregarded close and heal thy wounds. Amidst failure it is thy way to hope for prosperity: after the pattern of the heavens losses undergone enrich thee. For flaming stars set only to renew their rising; thou sets the moon wane to wax afresh (trans. Duff and Duff 1935).

In the late fifth century, Sidonius Apollinaris wrote the most beautiful tributes to Rome in his imperial panegyrics (Brocca 2003-2004; Tommasi 2013). It could be said that, whether in the form of the classic myth or transformed into a Christian myth (as in Leo the Great, *Serm.* 82.3, 29 June 441: «The light of truth, which was revealed for the salvation of all nations, would then pour itself out more effectively from the head itself through the whole body of the world»; Wessel 2012: 368), the idea of the eternity of Rome survived in good health not only until the end of Antiquity, but beyond it.

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