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VETTIUS AGORIUS PRAETEXTATUS AND THE RIVALRY BETWEEN THE BISHOPS IN ROME IN 366–367

MAIJASTINA KAHLOS

In 366 the two contenders for the bishopric of Rome, Damasus and Ursinus, were elected and ordained simultaneously as bishops. This double election led to bloody fights in Rome between their adherents. The Roman city prefect Vettius Agorius Praetextatus (310/320–384) had to interfere in the disturbances and restore public order in the city. Praetextatus was a pagan Roman senator who was highly esteemed and admired by his contemporaries and even by succeeding generations. He promoted pagan cults, participating in some and acquiring many priesthoods and initiations, and he is also known to have devoted himself to the study of philosophy and literature.¹

In this article I intend to show what the role of the pagan Praetextatus in settling the Christians' internal differences was. In my opinion Praetextatus' paganism and impartiality in settling the conflict has been overemphasized in modern scholarly literature and therefore I argue that Praetextatus' action as city prefect cannot be explained simply by his religious adherence. The outcome of the conflict between the rival bishops should be seen in the broader context of Praetextatus' and Damasus' alliance.

The combat between Damasus and Ursinus

The split in the Roman church began in 355 when the bishop of Rome, Liberius (352–366), was banished by the Emperor Constantius and the

¹ PLRE I, "Praetextatus 1", 722–724. Praetextatus' character is praised by his contemporaries Symmachus, rel. 10–12, 21, 24; epist. 1,44–1,55 and by Ammianus 22,7,6; 27,9,8–10. He also appears as a leading authority on paganism in Macrobius' *Saturnalia* and is esteemed by Zosimus 4,3.

deacon Felix was chosen as bishop in Liberius' place. The situation became more complicated when Liberius was reinstated and returned to Rome, which meant that there were two bishops in Rome.² The double election of Liberius and Felix led later to a new pair of rivals who both contended for the position after Liberius' death in September 24, 366: one faction chose and ordained the deacon Ursinus, and the other elected and consecrated the presbyter Damasus.³

The information the contemporary sources, the *Collectio Avellana*, Jerome, Rufinus and Ammianus Marcellinus give us is contradictory. While the *Collectio Avellana* sympathizes with Ursinus,⁴ Jerome and Rufinus take Damasus' side,⁵ and Ammianus is neutral on the incident.⁶ The later church historians Socrates (c. 380–c. 450) and Sozomen (c. 400–c. 450) report the incident and condemn Ursinus, but their accounts are inaccurate.⁷

Damasus and Ursinus were probably elected almost simultaneously, though the *Collectio Avellana* insists that Ursinus was chosen and conse-

² Amm. 15,7,6–10. A. Lippold, "Ursinus und Damasus", *Historia* 14 (1965) 105; E.D. Hunt, "Christians and Christianity in Ammianus Marcellinus", *CQ* 35 (1985) 189–190. Liberius had set himself against Constantius' anti-Nicean church politics and had refused to condemn bishop Athanasius. According to Theodoret. *hist. eccl.* 2,17 Liberius' banishment was cancelled after wealthy Roman matrons had appealed to Constantius through their husbands. The restoration of Liberius: *Avell.* 2. *Avell.* 1,5 implies that Felix still had supporters in stating that Damasus was elected as bishop in his place. H.O. Maier, "The Topography of Heresy and Dissent in Late-Fourth-Century Rome", *Historia* 44 (1995) 233, 243–244.

³ "Damasus", *Lexikon des Mittelalters* 3, 469–470; A. Lippold, "Ursinus", *RE Suppl.* X, 1142–1148.

⁴ The *Collectio Avellana* (CSEL 35), a collection of documents, letters and edicts of Roman emperors, magistrates and bishops between 367 and 553, also presents the correspondence between the Roman civil authorities and the imperial court involving the dispute between Ursinus and Damasus. For the dating of the Ursinian documents in the *Collectio Avellana*, see Lippold, *Historia* 14 (1965) 106–107.

⁵ Jerome wrote about the dispute while Damasus was still alive, Rufinus around 403. Lippold, *Historia* 14 (1965) 109 regards Jerome's and Rufinus' accounts of the conflict as even more partial and unreliable than the Ursinian *Collectio Avellana*. Hunt 191 n. 30 believes that Jerome may have been an eye-witness of the dispute.

⁶ Amm. 27,3,11–13; 27,4,12. Lippold, *RE* 1142 regards Ammianus' account as anti-Christian, while Hunt 191, 199 shows that Ammianus criticizes pagans and Christians alike in his *Res gestae*: "Christianity per se was just not an issue for Ammianus".

⁷ *Socr. hist. eccl.* 4,29; *Sozom. hist. eccl.* 6,23. Sozomen has even changed Ursinus to Ursicius.

crated (September 24, 366) before Damasus in the Basilica Iulii trans Tiberim and that Damasus was elected in a titulus church *in Lucinis* (S. Lorenzo in Lucina today) after Ursinus. Between the ordinations Damasus' adherents attacked the Ursinians, who had convened in the Basilica Iulii, and fought them there for three days.⁸ Rufinus claims that it was Damasus who was chosen first; Ursinus, who could not stand Damasus being elected, in a fury had himself ordained as bishop.⁹ Jerome does not mention who was chosen first but states that Damasus was ordained first.¹⁰

After his consecration Damasus began to solicit the support of the authorities. The city prefect Viventius, following the orders of Emperor Valentinian I, tried to restore peace by exiling Ursinus. However, Viventius did not interfere in the disturbances by force and could not stop the riots; instead, he had to escape to the suburbs. The Ursinian *Collectio Avellana* claims that Ursinus was banished because Damasus had bribed both the *praefectus urbi* Viventius and the *praefectus annonae* Iulianus.¹¹

In spite of Ursinus' banishment, the adherents of Damasus and Ursinus continued bloody riots in the city. Ammianus reports a fight in the Basilica Sicinini with one hundred and thirtyseven dead, and the *Collectio Avellana* describes an attack by the Damasians on the Basilica Liberii (in

⁸ Avell. 1,5–6: *Tunc presbyteri et diacones Ursinus Amantius et Lupus cum plebe sancta ... coeperunt in basilica Iuli procedere et sibi Ursinum diaconum pontificem in loco Liberii ordinari deposcunt; periuri vero in Lucinis Damasum sibi episcopum in loco Felicis expostulant. Ursinum Paulus Tiburtinus episcopus benedicit. Quod ubi Damasus ... comperit, omnes quadrigarios et imperitam multitudinem pretio concitat et armatus fustibus ad basilicam Iuli perrumpit et magan fidelium caede per triduum debacchatus est.*

⁹ Rufin. hist. eccl. 2,10: *Damasus post Liberium per successionem sacerdotium in urbe Roma suscepit. Quem praelatum sibi non ferens Ursinus quidam eiusdem ecclesiae diaconus in tantum furoris erupit, ut persuaso quodam satis imperito et agresti episcopo, collecta turbulentorum et seditiosorum hominum manu, in basilica quae Sicinini appellatur, episcopum se fieri extorqueret legibus et ordine et traditione perversis.*

¹⁰ Hier. chron. a. 366: *Romanae ecclesiae tricesimus quintus ordinatur episcopus Damasus. Et post non multum temporis intervallum Ursinus a quibusdam episcopis constitutus ...*

¹¹ Amm. 27,3,11–12; Avell. 1,6. Viventius PVR 365–367, PPO Galliarum 368–371: PLRE I, "Viventius", 972. Iulianus, *praefectus annonae* 366: PLRE I, "Iulianus" 16, 472. Lippold, *Historia* 14 (1965) 120–121, 127–128; J. Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court A.D. 364–425*, Oxford 1975, 38; A. Alföldi, *A Conflict of Ideas in the Late Roman Empire. The Clash between the Senate and Valentinian I*, Oxford 1952, 80.

October 26, 366) where the Ursinians had convened; there were 160 dead and even more were wounded.¹² Could we identify the fight in the Basilica Sicinini mentioned by Ammianus with the attack of the Damasians on the Basilica Iulii described by Avell. 1,5, or is it identical with the fight in the Basilica Liberii described by Avell. 1,7? Both Ammianus and Jerome describe a fight in the Basilica Sicinini, Rufinus mentions *basilica quae Sicinini appellatur* as the meeting place of the Ursinians, and Socrates also calls the meeting place of the Ursinians Βασιλική Σικίνη.¹³ Lippold distinguishes three fights and puts the fight (II) in the Basilica Sicinini after Damasus' consecration and before Ursinus' exile. The fight (III) in the Basilica Liberii in October 26, 366 (Avell. 1,7) took place after Ursinus had been exiled. The fight (I) in the Basilica Iulii – put between the ordinations of the bishops by Avell. 1,5 – was before these two fights.¹⁴

I am inclined to think that there were two fights: the riot in the Basilica Sicinini mentioned by Ammianus, Jerome, Rufinus and Socrates is identical with the fight in the Basilica Liberii described by the Ursinian *Collectio Avellana*. For the Ursinians, the basilica was Liberius' church while the other sources called it Basilica Sicinini.¹⁵

¹² Amm. 27,3,12–13; Avell. 1,7. It is possible that Ammianus' information about the number of the dead is based on official reports.

¹³ Hier. chron. a. 366: ... *Ursinus a quibusdam episcopus constitutus Sicininum cum suis invadit: quo Damasianae partis populo confluyente, crudelissimae interfectiones diversi sexus perpetratae*. Rufin. hist. eccl. 2,10: ... *in basilica quae Sicinini appellatur, episcopum se fieri extorqueret legibus et ordine et traditione perversis. Quo ex facto tanta seditio, immo vero tanta bella coorta sunt, alterutrum defendentibus populis, ut replerentur humano sanguine orationum loca*. Socr. hist. eccl. 4,29: Καὶ χειροτονεῖται οὐκ ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ, ἀλλ' ἐν ἀποκρύφῳ τόπῳ τῆς βασιλικῆς, τῆς ἐπικαλουμένης Σικίνης.

¹⁴ Lippold, RE, 1144; Lippold, *Historia* 14 (1965) 122–123. Lippold believes that Ursinus' election and consecration took place in the same place, in the Basilica Iulii trans Tiberim, and that thereafter the Ursinians gathered in Sicininum as Hier. chron. a. 366 states.

¹⁵ G. De Spirito, "Basilica Sicinini", *Lexicon topographicum urbis Romae* I, ed. E.M. Steinby, Roma 1993, 188 and P. Künzle, "Zur Basilica Liberiana: Basilica Sicinini = Basilica Liberii", *RQA* 56 (1961) 1–61, 123–166 identify the Basilica Liberii with the Basilica Sicinini. De Spirito points out that all sources, except the Ursinian *Collectio Avellana*, use the (technical-administrative) name Basilica Sicinini rather than Basilica Liberii when reporting the conflict between Damasus and Ursinus. Lippold, RE 1144 and *Historia* 14 (1965) 124 n. 99, 126 suggests that the Basilica Sicinini is the Basilica Iulii; the church, however, cannot be located. Various identifications with modern churches have been proposed: Alföldi 80 identifies the Basilica Sicinini with the present S. Cecilia

Praetextatus settles the disturbances as city prefect

The city prefect Viventius was succeeded by Vettius Agorius Praetextatus in 367.¹⁶ Both Ammianus and the *Collectio Avellana* report Praetextatus' acts in the conflict between Damasus and Ursinus.

The Ursinians appealed to Valentinian I so that the exiled Ursinus and his deacons would be pardoned and permitted to return to Rome.¹⁷ Finally, on September 15, 367 Ursinus and his deacons Amantius and Lupus were allowed to return to Rome but the riots between the adherents of Damasus and Ursinus soon began again. The Ursinians still occupied the Basilica Sicinini.¹⁸

According to Ammianus, Praetextatus successfully settled the fights between the rival factions and his decisions were based on justice and truth. Praetextatus gave his support to Damasus and restored order by banishing Ursinus once again from Rome. Profound peace reigned thereafter.¹⁹ The *Collectio Avellana* reports that Ursinus' adherents and priests were allowed to reside wherever they wanted with the exception of Rome *intra muros*. Since their meetings were forbidden within the walls of Rome,²⁰ they

in Trastevere; A. Ferrua, "S. Maria Maggiore e la *Basilica Sicinini*", *Civiltà Cattolica* 89 (1938), 56–59 suggested the present S. Maria in Trastevere. L. Duchesne, *Liber Pontificalis I*, Paris 1955, 188 n. 11 places Sicininum on the Esquiline.

¹⁶ Praetextatus entered the city prefecture between May, 5 (Cod. Theod. 9,38,3, the last law addressed to Viventius) and Aug. 18, 367 (Cod. Theod. 8,14,1, the first law addressed to Praetextatus). His *praefectura urbis* ended between Sept. 20, 368 and Jan. 28, 369 (Cod. Theod. 14,8,2). O. Seeck, *Symmachus, opera omnia*, MGH, AA VI, Berlin 1883, lxxxvii–lxxxviii; Chastagnol, *Les Fastes de la préfecture de Rome au Bas-Empire*, Paris 1962, 171.

¹⁷ Avell. 1,9–10: *Voces ergo plebis ad Valentinianum principem sunt delatae, qui pietate commotus reditum concessit exulibus*.

¹⁸ Avell. 1,10–11; Avell. 5, *ubi Ursinus et qui cum sunt ab exilio relaxantur*, a letter addressed to Praetextatus (before Sept. 15, 367) by Valentinian, who announces that the exiled Ursinus and his adherents are to be allowed to return to Rome.

¹⁹ Amm. 27,9,9: *Cuius auctoritate iustisque veritatis suffragiis, tumultu lenito, quem Christianorum iurgia concitarunt, pulsoque Ursino, alta quies parta, proposito civium Romanorum aptissima...*

²⁰ Avell. 1,11. In Avell. 7, *de expellendis sociis Ursini extra Romam*, a letter addressed to Praetextatus (Jan. 12, 368), Valentinian confirms the banishment of the Ursinian priests suggested by Praetextatus but only from within the walls of Rome: *Ursini sociis ac ministris, quos praecelsa sublimitas tua propter quietem urbis aeternae de medio*

continued their meetings outside the walls (*ad sanctam Agnem*, in the present S. Agnese fuori le mura) but the Damasians attacked them again.²¹ Damasus continued as the bishop of Rome and Praetextatus handed the Basilica Sicinini, the main church of the Ursinians, over to him.²²

According to the *Collectio Avellana* other Italian bishops who arrived for the anniversary of Damasus' ordination condemned the violence of the Damasians against Ursinus' adherents.²³ In spite of the protests of other bishops, Damasus retained power until his death in 384. Ursinus who did not give up his fight for the bishopric of Rome is known to have made troubles in Milan and to have continued disputing with Damasus, and his adherents still caused disturbances in Rome in the 370s and 380s.²⁴

The role of the city prefect in keeping the *publica disciplina* in Rome

The *praefectus urbi* was one of the most powerful administrators of the Late Empire and the emperor's deputy in Rome. The city prefect had become the most important man in the city since the emperor no longer stayed in Rome. He was not only the supreme judge whose jurisdiction extended 100 miles from Rome but he was also responsible for keeping public order in the city and the urban cohorts and the cohorts of *vigiles* were subordinated to him.²⁵

putavit esse tollendos, Roma tantum, ... Praetextate parens karissime atque amantissime.

²¹ Avell. 1,12: *Sed populus timens Deum multisque persecutionibus fatigatus non imperatorem, non iudicem nec ipsum auctorem scelerum et homicidam Damasum timuit sed per coemeteria martyrum stationes sine clericis celebrabat. Unde cum ad sanctam Agnem multi fidelium convenissent, armatus cum satellitibus suis Damasus irruit et plurimos vastationis suae strage deiecit.* In the *Collectio Avellana* Praetextatus is usually mentioned by name, but here as *iudex*, i.e. as city prefect.

²² Avell. 6, *ubi redditur Basilica Sicinini*, a letter addressed to Praetextatus (between Nov. 16, 367 and Jan. 12, 368).

²³ Avell. 1,13. The first anniversary of Damasus' bishopric is dated by Künzle 17–23, to Oct. 1, 367, by Lippold, *Historia* 14 (1965) 107–108, to autumn 368.

²⁴ Avell. 11–12; Hier. epist. 15; Ambr. epist. 11. For Ursinus' later years see Lippold, RE 1146–1147; Künzle 166. It seems that the Ursinians were still active in 384 when Siricius was elected as Damasus' successor, since Ursinus was condemned in the election. Avell. 4.

²⁵ The city prefect of Rome ranks immediately after the praetorian prefect of Italy and

Disturbances in the fourth century were often related either to social or economic circumstances, food shortages, rivalries between the circus factions and various conflicts between the upper and lower classes, or to religious issues, which cannot be clearly separated from social and economic ones. Religious disturbances were quite common during the late empire and usually were far more violent than other riots.²⁶

In the late fourth century both the *praefectus urbi* and the *vicarius urbi* were constantly forced to interfere in religious disturbances in Rome.²⁷ These were sometimes fought because of dogmatic disagreements but they were often purely power struggles. The church historian Socrates points out that the battle between Damasus and Ursinus was fought not over dogma but for power.²⁸ The election of the bishop of Rome caused disturbances in Rome even after Damasus and Ursinus: Eulalius and Bonifatius struggled

the praetorian prefect of Gallia in *Notitia Dignitatum* 1,4. A. Chastagnol, *La préfecture urbaine à Rome sous le Bas-Empire*, Paris 1960, 66, 68, 84–85, 120, 181–182; R. von Haehling, *Die Religionsangehörigkeit der hohen Amtsträger des römischen Reiches seit Constantins I. Alleinherrschaft bis zum Ende der theodosianischen Dynastie (324–450 bzw. 455 n.C.)*, Bonn 1978, 15; W.G. Sinnigen, *The Officium of the Urban Prefecture during the Later Roman Empire*, Rome 1957, 6–7. For the history of the urban prefecture, see Chastagnol, *Préfecture* iii–ix.

²⁶ A. Knepe, *Untersuchungen zur städtischen Plebs des 4. Jahrhunderts n.Chr.*, Bonn 1979, 20–21, 60–63, 68, 90; T.E. Gregory, "Urban Violence in Late Antiquity", *Aspects of Graeco-Roman Urbanism. Essays on the classical city*, ed. R.T. Marchese, Oxford 1983, 141–142, 147, 154.

²⁷ E.g. in 368–369 the Luciferian bishop Aurelius was arrested and prosecuted by a city prefect (Avell. 2,77–81); in 382 the Luciferian bishop Ephesius was prosecuted by the prefect Auchenius Bassus but was liberated (Avell. 2,84–85); in 368 the prefect Olybrius and the vicar Aginatus reported religious disturbances to the Emperor and were ordered to restore peace (Avell. 8–10); in 370–372 the Ursinians caused problems for the prefect Ampelius and the vicar Maximinus (Avell. 11–12); in 378–379 the vicar Aquilinus was ordered to banish factionists beyond the hundredth milestone from Rome (Avell. 13). W.G. Sinnigen, "The Vicarius Urbis Romae and the Urban Prefecture", *Historia* 8 (1959) 107–108; D. Vera, "Lo scandalo edilizio di Cyriades e Auxentius e i titolari della 'praefectura urbis' dal 383 al 387. Opere pubbliche e corruzione in Roma alla fine del IV secolo d.C.", *SDHI* 44 (1978) 59–60.

²⁸ Socr. hist. eccl. 4,29: Ἐστασίαζον οὖν πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς, οὐ διὰ τινὰ πίστιν ἢ αἵρεσιν, ἀλλὰ περὶ τοῦ μόνου τίς ὀφείλει τοῦ ἐπισκοπικοῦ θρόνου ἐγκρατῆς γενέσθαι.

for the bishopric of Rome in 418²⁹ and Laurentius and Symmachus in 498–514.³⁰

The conflict between Damasus and Ursinus was uncomfortable for the civil authorities, both because the city prefect was responsible for public order in Rome and was expected to interfere in rioting³¹ and because the civil authorities did not want to settle the disturbances by force and criminal law, since Valentinian I wanted to avoid any interference in the internal affairs of the church.³² After his ordination Damasus appealed to the civil authorities, and the secular government did intervene to the internal affairs of the church. However, as Lippold points out, Viventius did not avoid interfering in the dispute because of Valentinian's neutrality in religious affairs: it seems rather that the Roman urban cohorts and *vigiles* were so weak in the fourth century that Viventius had to keep out of the way, as Ammianus states: *quae nec corrigere sufficiens Viventius nec mollire, co-actus vi magna, secessit in suburbanum*.³³

Praetextatus' success

It was the pagan city prefect Praetextatus who succeeded in settling the Christians' internal squabbles. He seems to have enjoyed Emperor Valentinian's confidence because he was appointed *praefectus urbi* in middle of the conflict. Alföldi and von Haehling believe that Praetextatus' appoint-

²⁹ Vera, SDHI 44 (1978) 60; A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284–602 II*, Oxford 1964, 693.

³⁰ E. Wirbelauer, *Zwei Päpste in Rom. Der Konflikt zwischen Laurentius und Symmachus (498–514)*, München 1993.

³¹ The importance of the public order, *publica disciplina*, *publica securitas* and peace, *pax*, *quies* in Rome is stressed in the correspondence between the city prefect and the emperor: Avell. 5–7.

³² Valentinian's decree of religious tolerance: Cod. Theod. 9,16,9 (May 29, 371): *Leges a me in exordio imperii datae, quibus unicuique, quo animo inbibisset, colendi libera facultas tributa est*. Pagans as well as Christians praised Valentinian for his impartiality and tolerance in religious matters. Amm. 30,9,5: *inter religionum diversitates medius stetit*; Zos. 4,3; Socr. hist. eccl. 4,1; Sozom. hist. eccl. 6,6.

³³ Amm. 27,3,12. Lippold, *Historia* 14 (1965) 120 and RE 1145. Jones 693 even claims that urban cohorts and cohorts of *vigiles* had been disbanded or had melted away by the early fourth century and that city prefects had no armed force at their disposal.

ment as city prefect in this difficult situation was a well-considered decision because as a pagan he was not restricted in his actions by the discipline of the Christian church.³⁴

Did Praetextatus really behave differently as city prefect because he was pagan? It seems to me that he did not differ from his predecessor Viventius³⁵ in solving the conflict between the two bishops of Rome. Viventius followed imperial orders and banished Ursinus, and so did Praetextatus. I assert that Praetextatus' action probably had nothing to do with his religious adherence and that he probably supported Damasus because his predecessor and the imperial court had already done so. Why had Viventius and the imperial court decided to support Damasus and to banish Ursinus? We do not know whether Damasus was more legitimate as the bishop of Rome or whether he had more supporters within the clergy. Both bishops seem to have been supported by clerics as well as by the Christian plebs but at least Damasus seems to have had more influential connections and to have acted more effectively than Ursinus. Ammianus states that Damasus was victorious because of the support of his adherents: *Et in concertatione superaverat Damasus, parte quae ei favebat instante*.³⁶

Some city prefects managed disturbances efficiently, while other city prefects did not succeed in quelling riots. Viventius, for example, was forced to escape the disturbances.³⁷ As we have seen, Ammianus claims that

³⁴ Alföldi 80–81; Haehling 37–38.

³⁵ We do not know whether Viventius was a Christian or a pagan. Amm. 27,3,11 mentions him only as *integer et prudens Pannonius*. According to PLRE I, s.v. "Viventius", 972 and Künzle 129 n. 98, 163 he was probably a Christian. However, Viventius might have been a pagan as well; Ursinus' banishment does not indicate his being Christian. Lippold, *Historia* 14 (1965) 127 n. 111; Haehling 37–38.

³⁶ Amm. 27,3,13. Künzle 38 and E. Caspar, *Geschichte des Papsttums von den Anfängen bis zu Höhe der Weltherrschaft I*, Tübingen 1930, 196 believe that Ursinus was elected by the minority of the Roman clergy and Damasus was supported by the majority of the clergy, while Lippold, *Historia* 14 (1965) 111 and RE 1142, 1144 remarks that according to Avell. 1,5–6 three of the seven deacons (Ursinus himself, Amantius and Lupus), seven presbyters and *plebs sancta* were against Damasus. Avell. 1,5 regards Ursinus as the legitimate successor of Liberius and Damasus as a candidate chosen in place of Felix.

³⁷ The discontent of the Roman people, e.g. during food shortages, was often targeted against the city prefect or other authorities, though violence directed against the city prefect was rare. Crowds usually directed their anger against things, burned the houses of aristocrats, overturned statues, etc. Amm. 14,6,1 (Orfitus); Amm. 15,7,2–3 (Leontius);

Praetextatus succeeded in restoring the public order in Rome. The historian also praises his other activities as city prefect and writes that Praetextatus acted with high distinction, showing integrity and uprightness and was both feared and loved by the Roman people.³⁸ Ammianus compares him with M. Iunius Brutus, the Roman symbol of *virtus*; though he did not do anything to gain favour, everything he did was regarded with favour.³⁹ Ammianus' account implies that Praetextatus was extraordinary among the city prefects and that his relationship with the Roman *plebs* was exceptional. Because of his authority and popularity in Rome he was able to end the riots and restore order. Also the great sorrow of the Roman *plebs* for Praetextatus' death in 384 reflects his charisma and excellence.⁴⁰

Modern scholars have emphasized the skilful manner in which Praetextatus handled the conflict and earned the respect of pagans as well as Christians,⁴¹ basing their views on Ammianus' account where even

Amm. 19,10,1–4 (Tertullus); 27,3,8–9 (the populace tried to burn Lampadius' house); Amm. 27,3,4; Symm. epist. 1,44 (Avianus Symmachus' house was burned by the people). Aristocrats were particularly afraid of riots because the rage of the crowds fell first on them: Symm. epist. 2,6; 4,54,3; 5,12; 6,18; 6,66,1; rel. 6; 9; 18; 35. Kneppel 25, 63, 94–95; Gregory 140–142.

³⁸ Amm. 27,9,8–9: *Haec inter Praetextatus praefecturam urbis sublimius curans, per integritatis multiplices actus et probitatis, quibus ab adulescentiae rudimentis inclaruit, adeptus est id quod raro contigit, ut cum timeretur, amorem non perderet civium, minus firmari solitum erga iudices formidatos. Cfr. Claud. 10,331–333 of Stilicho: diligimus pariter pariterque timemus. / Ipse metus te noster amat, iustissime legum / arbiter...*

³⁹ Amm. 27,9,10: *In examinandis vero litibus ante alios id impetravit quod laudando Brutum Tullius refert, ut cum nihil ad gratiam faceret, omnia tamen grata viderentur esse, quae factitabat.* Ammianus refers to M. Iunius Brutus (85–42 B.C.) mentioned in Cic. orat. 10,34: *Quid tam difficile quam plurimorum controversiis diiudicandis ab omnibus diligi? ... Itaque efficis ut, cum gratia causa nihil facias, omnia tamen sit grata quae facis.*

⁴⁰ According to Hier. epist. 23,2–3 the whole city of Rome mourned his death: *ad cuius interitum urbs universa commota est.* Praetextatus' friend and the city prefect of 384 Q. Aurelius Symmachus states in rel. 11 that Praetextatus' death caused such great sorrow that the people of Rome refrained from the usual pleasures of the theatre. The mourning of all the Roman people made Praetextatus' death famous, *mortem celebrem dolor omnium fecerit.* According to Symm. rel. 12 both the people and the senate were grieved because of his loss: *Nam praeter illum populi Romani inusitatum dolorem etiam senatus impatiens dispendii sui solacium petit...* For Praetextatus' death see my "Fabia Aconia Paulina and the Death of Praetextatus – Rhetoric and Ideals in Late Antiquity (CIL VI 1779)", *Arctos* 28 (1994) 13–25.

⁴¹ E.g. H. Bloch, "A New Document of the Last Pagan Revival in the West, 393–394

Viventius' flight to the suburbs underlines Praetextatus' excellence. It is remarkable that Ammianus also praises Praetextatus eloquently elsewhere though he criticizes other Roman aristocrats severely.⁴² The *Collectio Avelana* complements and corrects this entirely positive image of Praetextatus and his part in the crisis. There is no sign of impartiality in Praetextatus' actions but on the contrary he seems to have followed the orders of his emperor and supported Damasus from the beginning. One begins to wonder if this is the justice and truth that Ammianus writes about.

The relations between Praetextatus and Damasus

I suggest that Praetextatus' support of Damasus during the rivalry for the bishopric of Rome was a part of the alliance between them. We do not know whether they had been allies before 367 but in any case they acted as allies later and may even have made a kind of division of power in Rome. In 384 it was Damasus' turn to support Praetextatus when Praetextatus' friend Q. Aurelius Symmachus was accused of persecuting Christians. As praetorian prefect Praetextatus had obtained an imperial order from Emperor Valentinian II which authorized the city prefect Symmachus to investigate the plunder of pagan temples. Since Symmachus' adversaries at the court in Milan rumoured that he used the investigation to maltreat Christians, Valentinian reprimanded Symmachus for having imprisoned and tortured Christian priests. Symmachus defended himself by stating that he had not even started the investigation. Bishop Damasus witnessed that Christians had not been offended.⁴³ On other occasions Damasus stood firmly against the Roman pagan aristocrats, including Symmachus, in the famous dispute over the altar of Victory.⁴⁴

A.D.", HThR 38 (1945) 204 asserted that Praetextatus showed a high degree of political tact in this difficult conflict; J.M. Huskinson, *Concordia Apostolorum: Christian Propaganda at Rome in the fourth and fifth Century, A Study in Early Christian Iconography and Iconology*, Oxford 1982, 111.

⁴² Ammianus' positive attitude to Praetextatus appears in Amm. 27,3,12–13.

⁴³ Symm. rel. 21,3–5. Q. Aurelius Symmachus: PLRE I, "Symmachus 4", 865–871. For Praetextatus' protection of pagan temples see my "The Restoration Policy of Vettius Agorius Praetextatus", *Arctos* 29 (1995) 39–47.

⁴⁴ For the dispute about the altar of Victory, see e.g. F. Canfora, *Simmaco e Ambrogio o*

The late fourth century was a period of peaceful coexistence and tolerance for pagan and Christian cults. Some scholars speak of the symbiosis between pagans and Christians rather than of rivalry, especially in the 360s and 370s in Rome. L. Cracco Ruggini even suggests that the period of tolerance was precisely the years dominated by the great personality of Praetextatus.⁴⁵

In the late fourth-century Rome pagans and Christians acted on terms of friendship within the same circles of the Roman aristocracy. Symmachus for example associated with Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, in friendly terms as his correspondence with him shows, though their interests collided in the dispute over the altar of Victory. Praetextatus and Damasus also seem to have moved in the same circles as Jerome records, mentioning that Praetextatus used to joke with Damasus saying: *Facite me Romanae urbis episcopum, et ero protinus Christianus*.⁴⁶ I think Praetextatus' sceptical comment

di un'antica controversia sulla tolleranza e sull'intolleranza, Bari 1970; R. Klein, *Der Streit um den Victoriaaltar*, Darmstadt 1972; R. Klein, *Symmachus, Eine tragische Gestalt des ausgehenden Heidentums*, Darmstadt 1971; J. Wytzes, *Der Streit um den Altar der Victoria*, Amsterdam 1936.

⁴⁵ The term "la convivenza pacifica" is used by L. Cracco Ruggini, "Ambrogio e le opposizioni anticattoliche fra il 383 e il 390", *Augustinianum* 14 (1974) 430, 443; P. Barcelò, "Zur Begegnung, Konfrontation und Symbiose von religio Romana und Christentum", *Christen und Heiden in Staat und Gesellschaft des zweiten bis vierten Jahrhunderts*, hrsg. G. Gottlieb & P. Barcelò, München 1992, 178; G.W. Bowersock, "I percorsi della politica", *Storia di Roma* 3,1, Torino 1993, 546; P. Hadot, *Marius Victorinus, recherches sur sa vie et ses oeuvres*, Paris 1971, 42–46, 58 describes 318–356 as a period of tolerance, while from 356–358 onwards the rivalry between pagans and Christians becomes clearer. Alföldi 84 suggested that the Roman pagan aristocracy and the Roman Church were allied in opposition to Valentinian I's government, and that pagans and Christians depended on each other.

⁴⁶ Hier. c. Ioh. 8 (PL 23, col. 377–379): *Miserabilis Praetextatus, qui designatus consul est mortuus. Homo sacrilegus, et idolorum cultor, solebat ludens beato papae Damaso dicere: 'Facite me Romanae urbis episcopum, et ero protinus Christianus'*. The background of Jerome's *Contra Ioannem Hierosolymitanum* (397) is the Origenist controversy against John of Jerusalem whom he accuses of heresy. In the dispute over the doctrine of the Christian Trinity, John had finally accepted the orthodox doctrine and rejected the Origenist subordinate christology. John had previously rejected the doctrine of the homousia of the Holy Spirit, and belonged to a Macedonian sect. Jerome defames his adversary, showing him as a renegade and insinuates that John changed his religious views for opportunist reasons, in order to become the bishop of Jerusalem. Praetextatus' sceptical comment is an example of calculating opportunism. For the controversy, see G. Grützmacher, *Hieronymus III*, Leipzig–Berlin 1908, 1–21.

ridiculed the contrast between Christian ethics and the power of the church.⁴⁷

The power and prestige of the Christian church had increased considerably during the fourth century and it had multiplied its properties through lavish benefactions from the Christian emperors and the aristocratic families. Damasus' ecclesiastical policy contributed notably to the authority and prestige of the bishop of Rome.⁴⁸ However, the splendour and pomp of the church were also criticized, e.g. by two Ursinian priests Faustinus and Marcellinus who turned to Valentinian I and condemned Damasus for his wealth and luxury.⁴⁹ Ammianus also reports the riches of the Roman church⁵⁰ and Jerome attacks the luxury of the church.⁵¹ Emperor Valentinian I wanted to control the donations made to the church and addressed an edict to Damasus in which he forbade clergymen to visit the houses of widows or orphan minors or to receive any kind of material benefit from them; that is to say, Valentinian virtually accused the churchmen of legacy hunting.⁵² Damasus himself was famous for his visits to aristocratic women, for which his

⁴⁷ Similarly Ch. Pietri, "Evergétisme et richesses ecclésiastiques dans l'Italie du IV^e à la fin du Ve s.: l'exemple romain", *Ktèma* 3 (1978) 317 and J.N.D. Kelly, *Jerome* 1975, 82. Praetextatus' remark has been interpreted in various ways. Alföldi 84 regards it as Praetextatus' answer to Damasus who had tried to convert him to Christianity. According to P. Courcelle, *Les lettres grecques en Occident de Macrobe à Cassiodore*, Paris 1948², 35, Jerome regarded Praetextatus as an opportunist who saw in religion nothing but a political device. Klein, *Symmachus* 48 believes that Praetextatus despised the Christians for their compromised attitude and did not appreciate their doctrine. For F. Paschoud, *Roma Aeterna*, Rome 1967, 95 and "Reflexions sur l'idéal religieux de Symmaque", *Historia* 14 (1965) 232 n. 99 Praetextatus' words illustrate the avaricious spirit of the Roman pagan aristocracy.

⁴⁸ Pietri, *Ktèma* 3 (1978) 317–337, esp. 321, 328; Huskinson 90–91.

⁴⁹ Avell. 2, *Marcellinus et Faustinus presbyteri de confessione verae fidei*.

⁵⁰ Amm. 27,3,14: *ut ditentur oblationibus matronarum, procedantque vehiculis insidentes, circumspicte vestiti, epulas curantes profusas, adeo ut eorum convivia regales superent mensas.*

⁵¹ Hier. epist. 52,10: *Multi aedificant parietes et columnas ecclesiae subtrahunt: marmora nitent, auro splendent lacunaria, gemmis altare distinguitur et ministrorum Christi nulla electio est.*

⁵² Cod. Theod. 16,2,20 (July 30, 370). Pietri, *Ktèma* 3 (1978) 331; Alföldi 83. For the control of legacies see also Ambr. epist. 18,14; Cod. Theod. 5,1,4; 4,4,2 from 389; Cod. Theod. 16,2,27–28 from 390.

Ursinian adversaries defamed him, calling him 'the matrons' ear-tickler', *matronarum auriscalpius*.⁵³

In this article I have argued that Praetextatus' action as city prefect in solving the conflict between Damasus and Ursinus had nothing to do with his paganism and that in supporting Damasus he followed simply the instructions of the imperial court. I also suggest that Praetextatus and Damasus were allies and supported each other: Praetextatus gave his support to Damasus in 367 and Damasus to Praetextatus in 384.

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⁵³ Avell. 1,9.