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*The Urbs Aeterna in the Representation of Maxentius, Nepotian, and Priscus Attalus*

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## Three Usurpers in Rome

*The Urbs Aeterna in the Representation of Maxentius, Nepotian, and Priscus Attalus*

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**ABSTRACT** Although most emperors from Diocletian onwards no longer resided in Rome, the city continued to be held in high regard throughout the fourth and fifth centuries. During this period, three usurpers once again established the *Urbs Aeterna* as their capital: Maxentius (306–312 CE), Nepotian (350 CE), and Priscus Attalus (409–410 CE). This article examines how each of them sought to employ the unique prestige of Rome as an asset to strengthen their claims to the purple. It argues that Rome was a flexible ideological concept that could be employed in a variety of ways to suit the circumstances of different rulers and appeal to various audiences. While Maxentius made some efforts to present himself as a *civilis princeps*, he mostly favored an exalted style as *conservator Urbis suae*, associating himself closely with Rome's *aeternitas*. Nepotian and particularly Attalus were more inclined to present themselves as senatorial emperors. As all three cases show, ambitious men could exploit the discrepancy between Rome's high status and political marginalization, yet a Rome-based emperorship also confronted them with hazards and limitations, such as the expectations of a huge volatile crowd and a long-established, powerful aristocracy. **KEYWORDS:** Rome, usurpers, Maxentius, Nepotian, Priscus Attalus

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Even after it had ceased to be the permanent residence of emperors, Rome continued to be held in high regard by pagans and Christians alike. “First among cities, the home of gods, is golden Rome,” the fourth-century poet Ausonius exclaimed in his poem on Roman cities.<sup>1</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus agreed, calling the city “the home of Empire and of every virtue” and the Forum Romanum “the most renowned (. . .) of ancient dominion.”<sup>2</sup> When Constantius II paid

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1. Ausonius, *Ordo urbium nobilium* 1. Translation from Ausonius: *Volume I: Books 1–17*, trans. H.G. Evelyn-White, Loeb Classical Library 96 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 269.

2. Ammianus Marcellinus 16.10.13: *imperii virtutumque omnium lavem; perspectissimum priscoe potentiae forum*. Translation from Ammianus Marcellinus: *History, Volume I: Books 14–19*, trans. J.C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library 300 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 249.

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his famous visit to the old capital in 357 CE, he is said to have been “dazzled by the array of marvelous sights,” especially by the Forum of Trajan, while his travel companion, the Persian prince Ormisda, reportedly commented that he could only take comfort in the fact that, even here, men were mortal.<sup>3</sup>

As Hans Lejdegård has stressed, we would be wrong to regard such remarks as mere commonplaces, reflecting a glorious past that no longer bore any relevance to the present. On the contrary, the notion of Rome as the *caput mundi* was still very much alive, its history and traditions bestowing great prestige on the Roman Senate and the *populus Romanus*.<sup>4</sup> Besides Constantius II, the city was visited by Constantine, Theodosius, and Honorius in the fourth and early fifth centuries. Once they had crossed the *pomerium* these rulers put aside their posture of aloof, splendid monarchs and displayed their *civilitas*—an old-fashioned, but not forgotten imperial virtue—to establish good relations with the SPQR.<sup>5</sup> Honorius, for instance, relieved the senators from their obligation to walk in front of his chariot when he entered Rome in 403 CE and, as the citizens allegedly agreed among themselves, acted more like a fellow citizen than as their master. The court poet Claudian made the most of the occasion. Now at last, he exclaimed to the emperor in his panegyric, winged Victory had her wish granted and could promise “that for all time to come thou shalt be

3. Ammianus Marcellinus 16.10.13–17 (Rolfe, *History, Volume I*: 249–253). There are good reasons to assume that much of this passage was actually inspired by the visit of Theodosius in 389 CE: S. Schmidt-Hofner, “Trajan und die symbolische Kommunikation bei kaiserlichen Rombesuchen in der Spätantike,” in *Rom in der Spätantike. Historische Erinnerung im städtischen Raum*, ed. R. Behrwald and C. Witschel (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2012), 33–59 at 38 n. 29. A. Cameron, “Biondo’s Ammianus: Constantius and Hormisdas at Rome,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 92 (1989): 423–436 at 429–434 provides a lucid discussion of the exchange between Constantius and Ormisda.

4. H. Lejdegård, *Honorius and the City of Rome: Authority and Legitimacy in Late Antiquity* (PhD diss., University of Uppsala, 2002), 13–38 offers a detailed analysis of Rome’s prestige in pagan and Christian works from Late Antiquity and the city’s relationship with late antique emperors. For late antique Rome in general, see W.V. Harris, ed., *The Transformations of Vrbs Roma in Late Antiquity* (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1999), Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series 33; J.R. Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital: Rome in the Fourth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000); R.R. Chenault, *Rome without Emperors: The Revival of a Senatorial City in the Fourth Century CE* (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008); Behrwald and Witschel, *Rom in der Spätantike*; Th. Fuhrer, ed., *Rom und Mailand in der Spätantike. Repräsentationen städtischer Räume in Literatur, Architektur und Kunst* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2012); L. Grig and G. Kelly, ed., *Two Romes: Rome and Constantinople in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

5. R. Klein, “Der Rombesuch des Kaisers Konstantius im Jahre 357,” *Athenaeum* 57 (1979): 98–115; S.G. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 39–45 (both focusing on Constantius’ 357 CE *adventus*); Schmidt-Hofner, “Trajan und die symbolische Kommunikation” (on imperial displays of *civilitas* in Rome in Late Antiquity).

Rome's guardian and she thine."<sup>6</sup> With the significant exception of the tetrarchic period, *dea Roma* was regularly depicted on late antique Roman coinage, sometimes in the company of her younger sister, Constantinople. Legends such as VRBS ROMA and VRBS ROMA FELIX appeared on the coins of many emperors, especially in the western provinces.<sup>7</sup>

Like the city itself, the Roman Senate continued to hold great prestige. Although it did not have much formal power as an institution, members of the senatorial aristocracy still boasted of their noble lineage and *paideia*, wielding considerable wealth and influence through their enormous estates and throngs of clients. After a period of marginalization in the third century, these aristocrats once again played an important role in the imperial government in the fourth and fifth centuries. Despite competition from new elites risen through the civic administration and the army, they went on to cultivate ties to the imperial court and fulfilled high political offices, such as provincial governorships.<sup>8</sup>

In the worldview of these senators, the symbolic importance of Rome lay not just in its imperial past—that is, its past as a city of emperors—but also, and especially, in what Carlos Machado has called its “civic memory.” Throughout the fourth and fifth centuries, senators cherished and cultivated this memory above all else. Their care and restoration efforts were first and foremost focused on spaces associated with Rome's civic past and traditional institutions, such as

6. Claudian, *Panegyricus de sexto consulatu Honorii Augusti* 543–559; 597–602: *nunc tandem fruitur votis atque omne futurum te Romae seseque tibi promittit in aevum*. Translation from Claudian: *On Stilicho's Consulship* 2–3. *Panegyric on the Sixth Consulship of Honorius. The Gothic War. Shorter Poems. Rape of Proserpina*, trans. M. Platnauer, Loeb Classical Library 136 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922), 113–119.

7. Rome and Constantinople: *RIC* VIII, Antioch 81–91; *RIC* X, Honorius, 1331–1332. VRBS ROMA: *RIC* VIII, Rome 455–456, 473; *RIC* IX, Treveri 27a–f; 45a–46c; Lugdunum 43a–d; Roma 22a–c; 67a–68f; *RIC* X, Honorius 1243, 1345, 1351, 1353. Also noteworthy are the ROMAE AETERNAE types minted at Rome under Constantine (*RIC* VII, Rome 146–157), as well as Constantine's ROMAE RESTITVTAE types (*RIC* VI, Londinium 272–274), minted after the defeat of Maxentius. All *RIC* numbers in this article refer to: H. Mattingly et al., ed., *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, 10 volumes (London: Spink, 1923–1994).

8. J. Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court A.D. 364–425* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) remains a crucial work on the Western senatorial aristocracy. See also M.R. Salzman and C. Rapp, ed., *Elites in Late Antiquity* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); C. Badel, *La noblesse de l'Empire romain. Les masques et la vertu* (Seysse: Champ Vallon, 2005); R. Lizzi Testa, ed., *Le trasformazioni delle élites in età tardoantica. Atti del Convegno internazionale, Perugia, 15–16 marzo 2004* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2006); S. Rebenich, “Pars melior humani generis’ – Aristokratie(n) in der Spätantike,” in H. Beck, P. Scholz, and U. Walter, ed., *Die Macht der Wenigen. Aristokratische Herrschaftspraxis, Kommunikation und “edler” Lebensstil in Antike und früher Neuzeit* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008), 153–175.

pagan temples, *basilicae* and, of course, the Curia itself. In comparison, Rome's "imperial memory" received less emphasis. Senators, in short, increasingly appropriated the symbolic status of Rome for their own purposes. To them, the city was and remained a source of immense pride and glory, but those were increasingly defined in terms of civic and traditional, as opposed to imperial, values.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, the fact that most emperors from the time of Diocletian onwards chose to reside elsewhere inevitably compromised Rome's status as the center of the Empire. Ammianus Marcellinus, for all the praise he lavished on the old capital, felt that its population was no longer in its prime, but had entered old age, and that the venerable city, "like a thrifty parent, wise and wealthy, has entrusted the management of her inheritance to the Caesars, as to her children."<sup>10</sup> As far as we know, several of those Caesars, like Valentinian I and Gratian, never took the trouble to visit the city at all. Rome thus had a paradoxical status in Late Antiquity. On the one hand, she continued to be held in high regard because of her symbolic value as the cradle of Roman civilization, her glorious past, her architectural splendor, and the enduring power and prestige of the resident senatorial class. On the other hand, it was not until the return of Valentinian III to Rome in the fifth century that an uncontested emperor once again ruled the West from the old capital.<sup>11</sup> *Roma et Augustus* were clearly not as inseparable as they had been in the days of the Principate.

### USURPERS IN ROME

In this light, it is interesting that three usurpers made the former *caput mundi* the center of their empires in the fourth and early fifth centuries. The first and most famous of these was Maxentius, who ruled Italy, Africa, Sardinia and Corsica from 306 to 312 CE, when he lost his power and his life to Constantine at the Milvian Bridge. In 350 CE, Julius Nepotianus was acclaimed emperor at Rome, but did not gain support outside the city. He was killed by

9. C. Machado, "Building the Past: Monuments and Memory in the Forum Romanum," in W. Bowden, A. Gutteridge, and L.A. Lavan, ed., *Social and Political Life in Late Antiquity* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2006), 157–192.

10. Ammianus Marcellinus 14.6.3–6 (Rolfé, *History, Volume I*: 37). The sentiment was not wholly new: in the mid-second century CE, Florus in his *Epitome*, at 1 *prooemium* 8, already remarked that the Romans had entered old age since the emperors came to power, although he did not relate this aging to the city of Rome in particular.

11. A. Gillett, "Rome, Ravenna and the Last Western Emperors," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 69 (2001): 131–167.

the troops of the usurper Magnentius before his reign had lasted a month. Finally, Alaric raised the Roman senator Priscus Attalus as a puppet emperor in his conflict with Honorius in 409 CE. The man was only recognized in Rome and parts of Italy and was deposed as soon as he was no longer useful to the Gothic leader. In 414 CE, Alaric's brother Athaulf raised him to the purple again, only to abandon him a brief while later.

By calling these men usurpers, I do not presume to pass any verdict on their legitimacy as emperors. After all, as Egon Flaig has argued, imperial legitimacy was a tenuous concept, especially in Late Antiquity, and the most appropriate yardstick for measuring whether a candidate for the throne should be seen as *legitimus* is the amount of *Akzeptanz* that he managed to generate among his subjects.<sup>12</sup> There is no reason to consider Maxentius as any less “legitimate” than Constantine, Licinius, and the other emperors who ruled simultaneously.<sup>13</sup> Many factors contributed to the legitimacy of a Roman ruler, including a properly performed investiture ritual, with use of the proper attributes,<sup>14</sup> family relations to previous rulers, acknowledgment by a well-established senior emperor, a track record of military victories and the blessing of God or the gods. Therefore, I do not identify Maxentius, Nepotian and Priscus Attalus as “usurpers” because I reject their status as Roman emperors, but solely because they challenged the reign of other rulers who had already established themselves. Rather than rising to the purple in a power vacuum, or being elevated by a senior *Augustus*, these men sought to take the place of rivals who laid claim to the same authority and titles. In doing so, it was paramount for them to legitimize their position.

Rome-based emperorship was a potential source of prestige. Even some usurpers in other parts of the Empire, such as Carausius in Britain (286/7–293 CE) and Domitius Alexander in Africa (308–309 CE), took pains to stress their attachment to Rome, minting coins depicting the goddess Roma and the

12. E. Flaig, *Den Kaiser herausfordern. Die Usurpation im römischen Reich* (Frankfurt, New York: Campus-Verlag, 1992), 174–207; E. Flaig, “Für eine Konzeptionalisierung der Usurpation im spätrömischen Reich,” in F. Paschoud and J. Szidat, ed., *Usurpationen in der Spätantike* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1997), 15–34; J. Szidat, *Usurpator tanti nominis. Kaiser und Usurpator in der Spätantike (337–476 n. Chr.)* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2010), 32–39.

13. M. Cullhed, *Conservator urbis suae: Studies in the Politics and Propaganda of the Emperor Maxentius* (Stockholm: Åström, 1994), 89–93.

14. F. Kolb, *Herrscherideologie in der Spätantike* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2001), 91–102; Szidat, *Usurpator tanti nominis*, 71–75. See M. Icks, “Bad Emperors on the Rise: Negative Assessments of Imperial Investitures, AD 284–395,” *Klio. Beiträge zur alten Geschichte* 94 (2012): 462–481 for an analysis of how late antique authors used this criterion in their accounts to construct “legitimate” and “illegitimate” emperors.

she-wolf suckling the twins, which bore legends such as INVICTA ROMA and ROMAE AETERNAE.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, we should keep in mind that ruling from the *caput mundi* also posed challenges and restrictions. The senatorial aristocracy and the *populus Romanus* expected certain modes of behavior from their rulers, including displays of *civilitas* and benefaction in the form of games, public buildings and distributions of grain and money.<sup>16</sup> The Roman plebs had a long tradition of openly criticizing or mocking emperors in the amphitheater and the circus—as Diocletian found out to his detriment during his one and only imperial visit to the city in 303 CE to celebrate his *vicennalia*, when he met with such hostility that he beat a hasty retreat, “unable to endure the outspokenness of the people of Rome.”<sup>17</sup> Until the reign of Constantine, there were also the praetorians to contend with, who had never hesitated to act against emperors if they considered that to be in their interest.<sup>18</sup> Rome, in short, required resident emperors to play by a different set of rules than existed in provincial towns.

In this article, I will examine how Maxentius, Nepotian and Priscus Attalus sought to employ the *Urbs Aeterna* as an asset to strengthen their legitimacy as Roman emperors. To what extent were they able to exploit the city’s special status to distinguish themselves from other rulers who resided elsewhere? Which limitations were set on their representation and modes of behavior by the city’s particular circumstances, traditions and the expectations of its inhabitants? In short, how did these three usurpers deal with the benefits and restrictions that came with a Rome-based emperorship?

To answer these questions, I will pay special attention to numismatic, sculptural and architectural evidence. I will examine how these emperors’ titles, coins and (in case of Maxentius) busts and building projects evoke or enhance the city of Rome and how their appeals to Roman symbols and traditions relate to the

15. M. Cullhed, “Maxentius as *Princeps*,” *Opuscula Romana: Annual of the Swedish Institute in Rome* 17 (1989): 9–19 at 17. Carausius: *RIC* V, Carausius, 387–390, 534, 571–578, 612–615, 968, 973–975. Domitian Alexander: *RIC* VI, Carthago, 62–63, 68, 70–71, 75–76.

16. See A. Wallace-Hadrill, “*Civilis Princeps*: Between Citizen and King,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 72 (1982): 32–48 for *civilitas* as an imperial virtue in the time of the principate.

17. Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 17.2. Translation from Lactantius: *De mortibus persecutorum*, trans. J.L. Creed (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 25; Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital*, 45–46. Constantius II, on the other hand, “took delight in the sallies of the commons, who were neither presumptuous nor regardless of their old-time freedom” (Ammianus Marcellinus 16.10.13; Rolfe, *History, Volume I*: 2.49).

18. See S. Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard: A History of Rome’s Elite Special Forces* (London, New York: Tauris, 2013), 9–50 for an overview of the history of the Praetorian Guard, including its frequent involvement in the overthrowing of emperors.

city and its inhabitants, especially the senatorial aristocracy. I will interpret these strategies of representation in light of the changing political circumstances that Maxentius, Nepotian and Priscus Attalus had to deal with. These include their rivalries and alliances with other emperors and pretenders, but also their relation with powerful groups in the city, such as again the Senate. In my conclusion, I will compare and contrast the strategies of the three usurpers to reflect on Rome's significance to late antique emperors in the fourth and early fifth centuries.

### MAXENTIUS, CHALLENGER OF THE TETRARCHS (306–312 CE)

Maxentius' rise to power can be seen as a direct consequence of the increasing marginalization of Rome under the tetrarchs and the disgruntlement this caused among the city's residents. Galerius not only abolished Rome's age-old exemption from taxes, but together with Severus also made plans to do away with the Praetorian Guard, whose numbers had already been severely reduced by Diocletian. In response, as various authors inform us, the remaining soldiers revolted and, with the support of the Roman people, bestowed the imperial purple on Maxentius, who had been passed over in the tetrarchic succession and was residing in a nearby villa on the Via Appia.<sup>19</sup> In all likelihood, Maxentius' role was not as passive as these accounts suggest. According to Zosimus, he was prompted into action when the image of Constantine arrived at Rome, confirming that Constantius' son had gained the purple. Maxentius, exploiting the general discontent in the city, then staged a coup with the help of the tribunes Marcellianus and Marcellus, the *tribunus fori suarii* Lucianus, and (once again) the Praetorian Guard.<sup>20</sup> It is likely that the urban and praetorian prefects, both members of the Anullinus family, also played a key role in the usurpation.<sup>21</sup>

19. *Anonymus Valesianus* 3.6; Aurelius Victor 40.5; Eutropius 10.2; Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 26.2–3; Orosius, *Historiae adversus paganos* 7.28.5. The *Epitome de Caesaribus* 40.2 does not mention the praetorians, but merely states that Maxentius was made emperor (*imperator . . . fit*) in his villa. Among those who acclaimed Maxentius, the *equites singulares Augusti* appear to have played a leading role: M.P. Speidel, "Maxentius and His *Equites Singulares* in the Battle at the Milvian Bridge," *Classical Antiquity* 5 (1986): 253–262 at 254–257; see also O.J. Hekster, "The City of Rome in Late Imperial Ideology: The Tetrarchs, Maxentius and Constantine," *Mediterraneo antico* 2 (1999): 717–748 at 736–737; R. Donciu, *L'empereur Maxence* (Bari: Edipuglia, 2012), 64–65.

20. Zosimus 2.9.2–3. Only Zosimus gives us these names, which lends credence to his account. See also H. Leppin and H. Ziemssen, *Maxentius. Der letzte Kaiser in Rom* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2007), 20; Donciu, *L'empereur Maxence*, 65–66.

21. D.S. Potter, *Constantine the Emperor* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 109, 115.

Since Maxentius' claim to the purple relied on a local power base, it comes as no surprise that Rome played a key role in his representation, yet the question remains how the emperor defined his relation to the city, the Senate and the *populus Romanus*. Many scholars have envisioned the emperor's policy as an attempt to return to the traditions of the Principate, cloaking monarchical power in the guise of *civilitas*. According to Edmund Groag, Maxentius' conception of imperial rule was hopelessly romantic and anachronistic, betraying an unrealistic longing for an age long past. This seems overly harsh and gives the emperor very little credit. Mats Cullhed gives a more positive verdict, arguing that Maxentius' tradition-oriented policy from 308 CE onwards "appealed to senatorial conservatism and popular *libertas* alike," while teaching future rulers that the unity of emperor and Rome was of key importance to establish imperial legitimacy. Olivier Hekster also emphasizes Maxentius' traditionalism, noting that he chose to stress his role as *civilis princeps* instead of presenting himself as a predominantly military ruler.<sup>22</sup>

It is true that Maxentius did not immediately style himself as *Augustus*, but took the unusual title of *princeps* after he had first risen to power. Most scholars have interpreted this move as part of a strategy to be accepted as a member of the tetrarchy, or as an attempt to claim a special place within the tetrarchic system, as Humphrey Sutherland has suggested.<sup>23</sup> Cullhed offers an alternative view, suggesting that Maxentius never aspired to become a tetrarch at all. He argues that Maximian, who was invited to come out of retirement and resume the imperial purple, was supposed to bestow the *Augustus* title on his son, but proved reluctant to elevate Maxentius to his own rank. Since the latter would not accept the inferior title of *Caesar*, he was stuck with *princeps*, which did not define his relation to his father in

22. E. Groag, s.v. "Maxentius," in A.F. von Pauly et al., ed., *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* 14.2 (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Buchgesellschaft, 1930), 2417–2484 at 2459; Cullhed, *Conservator urbis suae*, 94; Hekster, "The City of Rome," 733–737. R. Van Dam, *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 243 likewise characterizes Maxentius' imperial representation as that of "a conventional Republican emperor associated with Rome and its traditions."

23. O. Seeck, *Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt*, Vol. 1 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition; Berlin: Siemenroth & Troschel, 1897), 81; Groag, "Maxentius"; T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 1981), 30; C.H.V. Sutherland, "Some Political Notions in Coin Types between 294 and 313," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 53 (1963): 14–20. The notion that Maxentius sought acceptance as a member of the tetrarchy has also been suggested by Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital*, 53; Leppin and Ziemssen, *Maxentius*, 20; and Donciu, *L'empereur Maxence*, 66–67.

hierarchical terms. Only in April or May 307, when Maximian had temporarily left the capital, did Maxentius finally claim the *Augustus* title.<sup>24</sup> Whether or not we accept this explanation, it seems likely that Maxentius never envisioned the use of *princeps* at the expense of other imperial titles as more than a stop-gap measure, until his position was strong enough to assert himself as a full-fledged *Augustus*.

Nevertheless, the emperor did indeed make some effort to present himself as a *princeps*. One or two of the remaining Maxentius busts indicate that some of his statues displayed him in toga, perhaps even *capite velato* to emphasize his traditional piety.<sup>25</sup> Several gold medallions and coins, bearing the legend FELIX PROCESS(VS) CONSVLAT(VS) AVG(VSTI) N(OSTRI), also depict the emperor dressed in toga, holding a globe and scepter, to commemorate his various consulates. However, we need to keep in mind that even the tetrarchs held consulates and displayed themselves in this manner on coins, although they did not erect togate statues of themselves.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, then, Maxentius was not unique in using the traditional image of the emperor as magistrate, but this style of representation had special resonance in Rome, since it emphasized the emperor's *civilitas*. The appeal this virtue still held for the Roman Senate and *populus* can be gleaned from the civic displays of late antique emperors during their rare visits to the old capital. As Sebastian Schmidt-Hofner has argued, these displays in Rome were not meant to evoke the long-gone days of the Republic, but allowed rulers to place themselves in the tradition of Trajan, the *optimus princeps*, who was still celebrated as an exemplary ruler in the fourth and fifth centuries. This admiration was not only due to his conquests, but also due to the fact that he was regarded as an emblem of *civilitas* and hence of cordial relations with the Senate and people of Rome. By imitating Trajan, late antique emperors could exchange the splendid, elevated posture they usually assumed elsewhere for one that better fitted the traditions of the capital.<sup>27</sup>

24. Cullhed, *Conservator urbis suae*, 32–44; see also Cullhed, “Maxentius as *Princeps*.” Coins with Maxentius as *princeps*: *RIC* VI, Roma, 135, 137–138, 140, 143–144. As *Augustus*: *RIC* VI, Roma, 162–163, 166–169. In Carthage, the emperor's status appears to have led to confusion, since he appears as *Caesar* on some coins (47–48a).

25. C. Evers, “Betrachtungen zur Ikonographie des Maxentius. Zu einer neuen Porträt-Replik im Kestner-Museum Hannover,” *Niederdeutsche Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte* 31 (1992): 9–22 at 20–21; also noted by Hekster, “The City of Rome,” 734.

26. Maxentius as consul: *RIC* VI, Roma 167–169, 179, 188. Tetrarchs as consuls: *RIC* VI, Antiochia 1, 5–6, 13 (Diocletian); 3–4, 11–12 (Maximian).

27. Schmidt-Hofner, “Trajan und die symbolische Kommunikation,” 43–56.

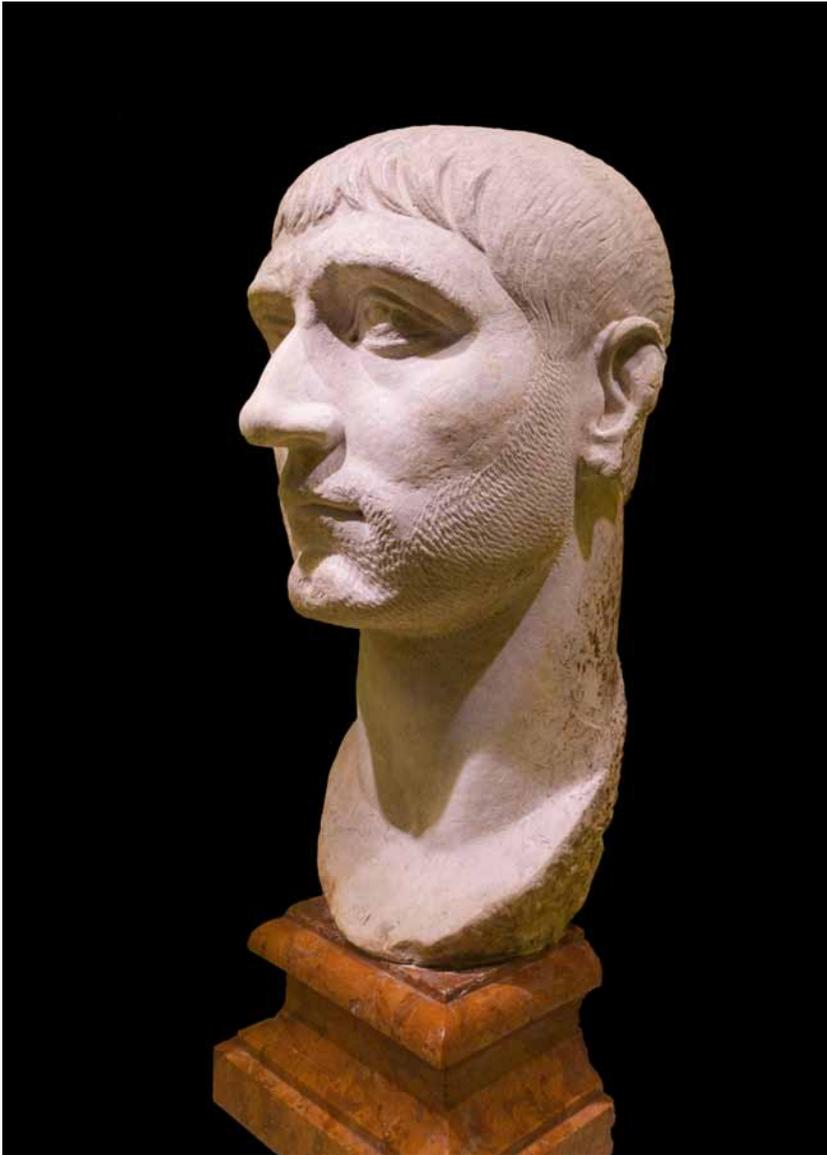
It is therefore significant that Maxentius associated himself with this great predecessor. His portraits are less standardized than the images of the tetrarchs, depicting him in a more naturalistic, classicist style that is reminiscent of the Principate. As Cécile Evers has pointed out, Maxentius' individually arranged locks closely resemble the locks of some Trajanic busts, deliberately evoking parallels with the *optimus princeps*.<sup>28</sup> In addition, Eric Varner has suggested that Maxentius associated himself with Hadrian, especially in the colossal statue of himself in the Basilica Nova, which was later reworked to represent Constantine. Originally, Varner argues, the statue represented Hadrian. When Maxentius had it reworked, he did not intend that as a *damnatio memoriae*, but as a tribute to the second-century emperor.<sup>29</sup> There is certainly something to be said for this interpretation. While Hadrian lacked Trajan's reputation as a paragon of *civilitas*, he was the first to promote the concept of *Roma Aeterna* and bestowed several monumental buildings on the city, which may well have made him an appealing role model to Maxentius.

Right from the start of his reign, the new emperor residing at Rome put great stress on his close bond with the *Urbs Aeterna*. Whereas the tetrarchs minted coins for the GENIO POPVLI ROMANI, focusing on the populace of the Empire as a whole, Maxentius presented himself as the CONSERVATOR VRBIS SVAE.<sup>30</sup> In the early years of his reign, some coins bestowed this title on Maximian or Constantine as well, using the plural CONSERVATORES to include them. However, these were exceptions, and the singular form CONSERVATOR was reserved for Maxentius alone. Hence the emperor clearly established himself as Rome's first and foremost protector. In Carthage, local variations of the title were introduced and bestowed on several emperors, so that we find Maximian, Maxentius and Constantine as CONSERVATOR or CONSERVATORES AFRICAE SVAE, while one type celebrates Constantine

28. Evers, "Betrachtungen zur Ikonographie." See also D.E.E. Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture* (New Haven, CT, London: Yale University Press, 1992), 407–408; N. Hannestad, *Tradition in Late Antique Sculpture: Conservation, Modernization, Production* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1994), 63. H.P. L'Orange, *Das spätantike Herrscherbild von Diokletian bis zu den Konstantin-Söhnen: 284–361 n. Chr.* (Berlin: Mann, 1984), 114–116 provides an overview of Maxentius busts.

29. E.R. Varner, "Maxentius, Constantine, and Hadrian: Images and the Expropriation of Imperial Identity," in *Using Images in Late Antiquity*, ed. S. Birk, T.M. Kristensen, and B. Poulsen (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014), 48–77 at 53–56, mainly deducing the statue's Hadrianic origins from its characteristic earlobes.

30. Tetrarchs: *RIC* VI, Treveri, 137a-227; Lugdunum, 1–199c; Heraclea, 12a-b, 17a-20b, 23a-26b, 30–31, 33–34. Maxentius: *RIC* VI, Roma, 135, 143–144, 187, 208–213; Ostia, 2; Ticinum, 100.



**Bust of Maxentius 1**

Marble bust of Maxentius (Skulpturensammlung Dresden)

Author: Jebulon (Wikimedia Commons)

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Head\\_of\\_Maxentius\\_from\\_Dresden\\_Colosseum\\_Rome\\_Italy.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Head_of_Maxentius_from_Dresden_Colosseum_Rome_Italy.jpg)



**Bust of Maxentius 2**

Plaster cast of a bust of Maxentius (Pushkin Museum)

Author: shakko (Wikimedia Commons)

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maxentiuso2\\_pushkin.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maxentiuso2_pushkin.jpg)



**Bust of Trajan**

Marble bust of Trajan (Louvre)

Author: Marie-Lan Nguyen (Wikimedia Commons)

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bust\\_Trajan\\_Louvre\\_Mai250.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bust_Trajan_Louvre_Mai250.jpg)

as CONSERVATOR KART(HAGINIS) SVAE.<sup>31</sup> It seems likely that these types should be seen as responses to the coin types from Rome, struck at the initiative of the Carthaginian mint, rather than on the express instruction of Maximian and Maxentius. After all, some Carthaginian coins also styled the latter as *Caesar*, even though it is clear that he himself never used this title.<sup>32</sup>

Maximian's failed attempt to depose his son in 308 CE proves that the military support that had earned the latter the imperial purple had by no means evaporated. However, the break between the two rulers meant that Maxentius could no longer boost his prestige through the dynastic link with the old *Augustus*. Until then, Hercules had made frequent appearances on his coinage, but now the focus shifted to Mars, a god who had not been "contaminated" by the representation of Maximian and the other Herculean tetrarchs. This emphasis on Mars can be glimpsed particularly well from Maxentius' gold medallions, upon which the divine father of Romulus and Remus features much more prominently



**Maxentius coin RIC VI Ticinum 100**

Bronze coin of Maxentius as CONSERVATOR VRBIS SVAE

RIC VI, Ticinum, 100 (bronze, obverse & reverse)

<http://numismatics.org/collection/1944.100.2771>

31. CONSERVATORES: *RIC VI*, Roma, 194–195, 198a–199 (Maxentius); 165, 202b (Maximian); 164, 196–197, 200–201, 202 (Constantine). CONSERVATOR AFRICAE SVAE: *RIC VI*, Carthago, 52–61. CONSERVATOR KART(HAGINIS) SVAE: *RIC VI*, Carthago, 49. Carthage also minted ROMA AETERNA types for Maxentius, Maximinus Daia, and Constantine: *RIC VI*, Carthago, 48a–c.

32. See note 24 for the Carthaginian *Caesar* coins.

than the monster-slaying son of Jupiter.<sup>33</sup> Yet Maxentius not only broke with Maximian, but with Constantine as well. From now on, he no longer recognized any colleagues who had their power base elsewhere than at Rome. Instead, he started to place his own progeny in the spotlight.

In 308 and 309 CE, the emperor shared the consulate with his son Romulus. Unfortunately, it is not known when the latter received that fortuitous name, but it forged another link between Maxentius' reign and the city's mythical past. Moreover, in 308 CE, the emperor erected a statue of Mars near the *lapis niger*, the place where the mythical Romulus' grave was supposedly situated, dedicating it on April 21<sup>st</sup>, the city's founding day. In all likelihood, the deity was accompanied by the she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus, since the twins are also mentioned in the inscription on the statue's base, which is all that has been preserved of the monument. A near-identical base, later used as a building block for the Basilica Julia, contains a fragmentary inscription praising Maxentius' *censura vetera* and *pietas singularis*. Presumably, the statue of the emperor stood next to the statue of the god, an unmistakable testimony to their close connection.<sup>34</sup>

Henning Wrede has interpreted these statues, with their emphasis on heredity and *Roma Aeterna*, as a deliberate antithesis to the nearby tetrarchic monument. The latter, erected at the Forum Romanum to commemorate Diocletian's and Maximian's *vicennalia*, displayed the four tetrarchs as equals, indicating that they all held equal claim to the old capital.<sup>35</sup> In fact, Elizabeth Marlowe has plausibly argued that the monument was erected on

33. Hercules: *RIC* VI, Roma 137–138, 147, 171, 181–184, 214; Cohen 1862, nos. 77–80. Mars: *RIC* VI, Roma, 140, 148, 172, 186, 189, 218–222; H. Cohen, *Description historique des monnaies frappées sous l'Empire romain, Tome sixième* (Paris: Rollin & Feuardent, 1862), nos. 82–95, 98. See Cullhed, *Conservator urbis suae*, 49; Hekster, "The City of Rome," 731–733. Mars is featured on medallions three times as often as Hercules.

34. *ILS* 8935 = *CIL* VI, 33856 (Mars and the twins); *CIL* VI, 31394a = 33857 (Maxentius). All *ILS* and *CIL* numbers in this article respectively refer to: H. Dessau, ed., *Inscriptiones Latinae selectae*, 3 volumes (Berlin: Berolini apud Weidmannos, 1892–1916); Th. Mommsen et al., ed., *Corpus inscriptionum Latinarum*, 17 volumes (Berlin: Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1863...). See F.A. Bauer, *Stadt, Platz und Denkmal in der Spätantike. Untersuchungen zur Ausstattung des öffentlichen Raums in den spätantiken Städten Rom, Konstantinopel und Ephesos* (Mainz: Von Zabern, 1996), 18–19; Cullhed, *Conservator urbis suae*, 61; Hekster, "The City of Rome," 727; Leppin and Ziemssen, *Maxentius*, 42–43.

35. H. Wrede, "Der *genius populi Romani* und das Fünfsäulendenkmal der Tetrarchen auf dem Forum romanum," *Bonner Jahrbücher des rheinischen Landesmuseums in Bonn und des Vereins von Altertumsfreunden im Rheinlande* 181 (1981): 121–142 at 140–142; A. Pulte, "Rostra: 'Fünfsäulendenkmal,'" in *Lexicon topographicum urbis Romae*, Vol. 4, ed. E.M. Steinby (Rome: Ed. Quasar, 1999), 218–219; Hekster, "The City of Rome," 723.

the initiative of the Senate and reflected senatorial priorities, such as the notion that Rome was still the heart of the Empire and the place where emperors truly belonged.<sup>36</sup> Maxentius certainly reinforced that thought by the erection of statues of Mars and himself on the Forum, but in the process he also claimed Rome as his own. Like the CONSERVATOR VRBIS SVAE coins, the statues were a clear signal that he was different from all the other rulers in the Empire. Even if he had not risen to power on a tide of discontent directed against Galerius and Severus, Maxentius' position as emperor residing at Rome inevitably posed a challenge to the continuity of the tetrarchy. His possession of the *Urbs Aeterna* gave him a trump card that none of his rivals could match. Despite Galerius' position as *maximus Augustus*, the tetrarchs stressed their shared authority in their representation, even to the extent that their portraits downplayed individual features in favor of a standardized image of imperial power. The emphasis was more on unity than on hierarchy between the rulers. It is hard to imagine how this unified front could have been maintained if one of the emperors had resided in the *caput mundi*—which must have been one of the reasons why Diocletian decided to abandon the city and institute four new capitals.<sup>37</sup>

Many of Maxentius' coin types, especially those from Rome and Ostia, stressed the emperor's close bond to his capital in a very distinct way. The goddess Roma, who hardly featured on tetrarchic coinage, made frequent appearances, sometimes seated on a shield, sometimes in a hexastyle temple, often holding a globe and scepter.<sup>38</sup> Especially noteworthy are coins which depict Roma handing a globe to Maxentius, a scene which sometimes occurs in a temple, as well. These pieces, which are unique among contemporary coinage, usually bear the legend CONSERVATOR VRBIS SVAE, although one gold multiple is dedicated to ROMAE AETERNAE AVCTRICI AVG(VSTI) N(OSTRI).<sup>39</sup>

36. E. Marlowe, "The Multivalence of Memory: The Tetrarchs, the Senate, and the Vicennalia Monument in the Roman Forum," in *Cultural Memories in the Roman Empire*, ed. K. Galinsky and K. Lapatin (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2015), 240–263.

37. Cullhed, *Conservator urbis suae*, 64–67; Hekster, "City of Rome," 718–722. Clearly, there were still indications of hierarchy within tetrarchic representation, such as the distinction between *Augusti* and *Caesares*, as well as between the Jovian and Herculean emperors. See also R. Rees, "Images and Image: A Re-Examination of Tetrarchic Iconography," *Greece & Rome* 40 (1993): 181–200 at 187–183.

38. Roma seated on shield: *RIC VI*, Roma, 135–136, 143–145, 177; Ostia 2. Roma seated in a temple: *RIC VI*, Roma, 162–163, 194a–195, 258–260, 278–280.

39. *RIC VI*, Ticinum, 110; Aquileia, 113–114; Roma, 166. The medallion hailing Roma as *auctrix Augusti* is listed as Roma, 173.

Maxentius also referenced other mythological figures that had a special bond with the *Urbs Aeterna*, such as the Dioscuri and the she-wolf nursing Romulus and Remus.<sup>40</sup>



**Maxentius coin RIC VI Aquileia 113**

Bronze coin of Maxentius as CONSERVATOR VRBIS SVAE

RIC VI, Aquileia, 113 (bronze, obverse & reverse)

<http://numismatics.org/collection/2004.14.206>



**Maxentius coin RIC VI Ostia 41**

Bronze coin depicting the she-wolf and twins

RIC VI, Ostia, 41 (bronze, obverse & reverse)

<http://numismatics.org/collection/1917.155.25>

40. Dioscuri: *RIC VI*, Ostia, 14–15, 35–38. Wolf and twins: *RIC VI*, Roma 190–191; Ostia, 5, 20, 39–42, 51–52. Combination of both themes: *RIC VI*, Ostia, 16–19.

More than anything else, Maxentius' extensive building program must have left the inhabitants of Rome little doubt that they were once again living in an imperial capital. The emperor may have finished repair work on several iconic structures in the city center, such as the Forum of Caesar, the Basilica Julia and the Curia.<sup>41</sup> The Palatine palace was expanded, so that its façade now towered directly over the Circus Maximus. The Venus and Roma temple, which had been severely damaged in a fire in 307 CE, was restored in splendid fashion, with new *cellae* and apses to house the cult statues of both deities. West of the temple rose the huge Basilica Nova, which Filippo Coarelli has identified as the *secretarium tellurense*, the official seat of the urban prefect.<sup>42</sup> This identification is questionable, as we will shortly see. Outside the city, Maxentius' villa was turned into a palace in the style of the tetrarchs, including a circus that could seat thousands. As Alfred Frazer has noted, the layout of this complex closely mirrored the layout of the Palatine palace and the Circus Maximus, with the adjacent mausoleum mirroring the site of the Ara Maxima, the great Hercules altar at the Forum Boarium. From this, he reasons that Maxentius wanted to stress his place in the Herculean dynasty.<sup>43</sup> Alternatively, the complex's apparent association with Hercules may have been aimed at underlining Maxentius' close bond with Maximian when the two emperors were still on reasonably good terms.

In 310/311 CE, Maxentius once again appears to have changed his attitude towards emperors residing outside of Rome. Whereas these had been completely ignored in his representation after the spring of 308, he now started minting

41. Varner, "Maxentius, Constantine and Hadrian," 49. The damage had mainly been caused by the great fire of 283 CE. Much of the repair work is often attributed to the tetrarchs; e.g. Machado, "Building the Past," 161–164.

42. Palace: Hekster, "The City of Rome," 728; Leppin and Ziemssen, *Maxentius*, 59–68. Venus and Roma temple: Cullhed, *Conservator urbis suae*, 52; Hekster, "The City of Rome," 724–725; Leppin and Ziemssen, *Maxentius*, 74–87. Basilica Nova: F. Coarelli, "L'urbs e il suburbio," in *Società romana e impero tardoantico*, Vol. 2: *Roma. Politica, economia, paesaggio urbano*, ed. A. Gardina (Rome: Laterza, 1986), 1–58 at 22–33; Cullhed, *Conservator urbis suae*, 50–52; Hekster, "The City of Rome," 725–726; Leppin and Ziemssen, *Maxentius*, 87–105.

43. A. Frazer, "The Iconography of the Emperor Maxentius' Buildings in Via Appia," *The Art Bulletin* 48 (1966): 385–392 at 391–392; see also Cullhed, *Conservator urbis suae*, 57–60; J.H. Humphrey, *Roman Circuses: Arenas for Chariot Racing* (London: Batsford, 1986), 582–602 (critical of the parallelism suggested by Frazer); C. Heucke, *Circus und Hippodrom als politischer Raum. Untersuchungen zum großen Hippodrom von Konstantinopel und zu entsprechenden Anlagen in spätantiken Kaiserresidenzen* (Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann, 1994), 391–394; Hekster, "The City of Rome," 729–731; Leppin and Ziemssen, *Maxentius*, 105–118 (arguing that the villa complex should not be seen as an alternative imperial residence because of the inclusion of a mausoleum). For a detailed analysis of all of Maxentius' building activities in and around Rome, see Leppin and Ziemssen, *Maxentius*, 52–119.

*divi* coins in honor of the deceased emperors Constantius Chlorus, Maximian and Galerius. According to Ramiro Donciu, the emperor never completely gave up hope to gain a legitimate place within the tetrarchy.<sup>44</sup> However, these types should not be seen as Maxentius' ultimate attempt to gain tetrarchic recognition, since the living (ex-)tetrarchs Diocletian, Maximinus, Constantine and Licinius were duly ignored. Rather, the minting of these coins represented an act of *pietas* with regard to deceased members of the *gens Valeria*, as is clearly indicated by the fact that Maxentius specified the family relations that each of the deified rulers had to him. In doing so, he not only positioned himself as their rightful heir, but also stressed his unique position as master of Rome, since the deification of emperors traditionally required the consent of the Senate.<sup>45</sup> A year earlier, Romulus had also been deified after his premature death, the first time in decades that such a ceremony had been performed in Rome. The building depicted on coins struck in his memory has been identified as either the mausoleum at the Via Appia or the so-called "temple of Romulus" which the emperor built in Rome, although it probably represents a generic funerary monument, rather than a specific building.<sup>46</sup>

### Status and support

Whereas tetrarchic representation placed emphasis on the Empire as a whole, Maxentius stressed the supremacy of Rome as the *caput mundi*. This renewed focus on the city as the center of the civilized world must undoubtedly have appealed to many of its inhabitants. The emperor's extensive building program advertised him as a worthy successor to such prestigious rulers as Augustus, Trajan and Hadrian. As we have seen, Maxentius' busts associated him with Trajan in particular, while the rebuilding of the Venus and Roma temple could be regarded as a tribute to Hadrian's memory.<sup>47</sup>

44. *RIC* VI, Roma, 243–248, 250–255; Ostia, 24–31; Donciu, *L'empereur Maxence*, 110–114.

45. Cullhed, *Conservator urbis suae*, 76–79; Hekster, "The City of Rome," 732; Leppin and Ziemssen, *Maxentius*, 26–27. Maxentius also stressed his position as Maximian's heir by declaring war on Constantine, whom he identified as his father's murderer (Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 43.4).

46. *RIC* VI, Roma, 239–240, 249, 256–257; Cullhed, *Conservator urbis suae*, 52–55; Leppin and Ziemssen, *Maxentius*, 54. E.A. Dumser, "The AETERNAE MEMORIAE Coinage of Maxentius: An Issue of Symbolic Intent," in *Imaging Ancient Rome: Documentation – Visualization – Imagination*, ed. L. Haselberger and J. Humphrey (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2006), *Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series* 33, 106–118 argues against the identification with a specific building.

47. See also note 29 for possible associations of Maxentius with Hadrian.

Several aspects of Maxentius' reign fit well into the traditional mold of the Rome-based emperors of the first and second centuries. These include the classicist style of his busts, the fact that some of his statues appear to have been togate, his extensive building program and the performance of traditional ceremonies, such as the deification of deceased emperors by the Senate. All of these set him apart from emperors residing elsewhere. Moreover, Maxentius was the only ruler who was in a position to celebrate a *triumphus* in its original urban setting, hence evoking the glorious triumphs of the Principate.<sup>48</sup> It has been suggested that the Arch of Constantine was originally erected in his honor.<sup>49</sup> If so, it linked Maxentius' victories to those of Titus and Septimius Severus and placed him in a long line of emperors who brought military glory to Rome.

Despite the more traditional aspects of his representation, we should not regard Maxentius as a late antique embodiment of the *civilis princeps*. The emperor was certainly not acting in accord with the *civilitas* ideal when he styled himself *conservator urbis suae*, a title that indicates how unabashedly he appropriated the city as his own. Hartmut Leppin has remarked that this superior attitude is typical for the new style of representation that had come into vogue under the tetrarchs. Rome was no longer considered to be a sovereign entity that the emperors were obliged to serve, but merely a rescued "damsel in distress" that could be claimed as an imperial prize. Coins and medallions confirm this perspective: although some types depict the goddess Roma as Maxentius' *auctrix imperii*, handing him a globe, the accompanying legend, CONSERVATOR VRBIS SVAE, makes it clear that the emperor receives imperial rule as a reward for having "saved" the city from its enemies.<sup>50</sup> In other words, Roma is honoring Maxentius, rather than the other way around. Moreover, as the emperor's *auctrix imperii*, the goddess fulfils the same role as Jupiter and Hercules did for the tetrarchs. Just as these deities bestowed divine qualities on the Jovian and Herculean emperors, Roma bestows her *aeternitas* on Maxentius. Symbols such as the she-wolf and twins, which often feature on Maxentius' coins, reference the city's eternity, while types bearing the legend

48. Maxentius celebrated a triumph over the African tribes which had supported Domitian Alexander (hence avoiding the stain of celebrating a civil war victory): Zosimus 2.14.4; Donciu, *L'empereur Maxence*, 76.

49. R.R. Holloway, "Maxentius and the Arch of Constantine," *Orizzonti. Rassegna di archeologia* 4 (2003): 61–65; Varner, "Maxentius, Constantine and Hadrian," 64–70.

50. Leppin and Ziemssen, *Maxentius*, 44–45. See note 39 for coins and medallions presenting Roma as *auctrix*.

AETERNITAS AVG(VSTI) N(OSTRI) indicate that this divine quality now also applies to the emperor himself.<sup>51</sup>

Since the temple of Venus and Roma was an important symbol for the *aeternitas* of Rome, and since some of the numismatic depictions of Roma handing the globe to Maxentius are situated in a temple, Hauke Ziemssen has wondered whether one of the temple's new apses contained a statue depicting this very scene. It is an attractive theory, although we lack the evidence to elevate it above the level of mere speculation.<sup>52</sup> Certainly, it is significant that Maxentius built a new and equally large structure right next to the temple, the so-called Basilica Nova. Ziemssen argues that it is implausible that Maxentius would have intended this huge edifice as an audience hall for the *praefectus urbi*, as Coarelli and others have suggested. After all, the urban prefect did not represent the absent emperor, as he did under the tetrarchs and Constantine.<sup>53</sup> It makes much more sense that Maxentius intended the Basilica as an *aula* for himself. Seated on a throne in the apse, perhaps in front of a giant statue of himself, he would have struck an awe-inspiring figure. Due to the building's size and location at the heart of the city, it symbolized the *Kaiserpräsenz* in a grand manner befitting the age of the tetrarchs, and did so much more powerfully than any reconstruction of the Palatine audience hall could have achieved. Its vicinity to the Venus and Roma temple expressed the close bond that had been forged between the emperor and the deity who personified the *Urbs Aeterna*.<sup>54</sup>

Maxentius, in short, was much more imposing autocrat than *princeps*, presenting himself as a superhuman figure who embodied the *aeternitas* of Rome. It was no coincidence that his new *aula* was built with its back turned towards the Curia and the Forum Romanum. As Roma's favored protector and heir to the Valerian dynasty, the emperor did not derive his legitimacy primarily from the consent of the SPQR. It is important to keep in mind that the usurper was not elevated by the Senate, but by Rome-based soldiers, most notably the *equites singulares Augusti* and the Praetorian Guard.<sup>55</sup> As far as we can tell, these units never wavered in their loyalty to the emperor. Fragmentarily preserved inscriptions on bases situated at the Forum of Trajan indicate that the praetorians received the honorific *cohors* (. . .) *Romana Palatina*, a reference to the tetrarchic

51. Leppin and Ziemssen, *Maxentius*, 48–49. Wolf and twins: *RIC* VI, Roma 190–191; Ostia, 5, 20, 39–42, 51–52. AETERNITAS AVG(VSTI) N(OSTRI): *RIC* VI, Ostia, 14–20, 35–44.

52. Leppin and Ziemssen, *Maxentius*, 82.

53. Leppin and Ziemssen, *Maxentius*, 102; see note 42 for the interpretation of Coarelli and others.

54. Leppin and Ziemssen, *Maxentius*, 104–105.

55. See note 19 for the involvement of the *equites singulares*.



### **Basilica Nova**

View of the Basilica Nova from the Palatine Hill

Author: unknown (Wikimedia Commons)

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:RomaBasilicaMassenzioDaPalatino.JPG>

elite troops of the *scholae Palatinae*.<sup>56</sup> Maxentius also strengthened the praetorian camp, another indication of the close bond between the emperor and his troops.<sup>57</sup> After Constantine's victory and capture of Rome in 312 CE, both the Praetorian Guard and the *equites singulares* were disbanded. Moreover, the new master of the *Urbs Aeterna* destroyed the new camp of the *equites* and built churches and mausoleums on the sites of the cemeteries of both army units.<sup>58</sup> Undoubtedly, he did so to destroy the core of his predecessor's power base in Rome once and for all.

56. Aurelius Victor 40.24; M.P. Speidel, "Les prétoriens de Maxence. Les cohortes palatines romaines," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome* 100 (1988): 183–186; J. Wienand, *Der Kaiser als Sieger. Metamorphosen triumphaler Herrschaft unter Constantin I.* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2012), 236.

57. E. Lissi Caronna, "Castrum praetoria," in *Lexicon topographicum urbis Romae*, Vol. 1, ed. E.M. Steinby (Rome: Ed. Quasar, 1993), 251–254; Hekster, "The City of Rome," 736.

58. Speidel, "Maxentius and His *Equites Singulares*," 255–256; Hekster, "The City of Rome," 736–737; Donciu, *L'empereur Maxence*, 190–191.



the land-owning elite; in all likelihood, he needed the money to maintain his sizable military force and pay for the construction of the Basilica Nova and other ambitious building projects.<sup>60</sup> Between this tax, the possible executions of senators, Maxentius' self-aggrandizing representation and his famously tolerant attitude towards Christians, the (pagan) senators of Rome may well have been less fond of their resident *Augustus* than Cullhed has suggested.<sup>61</sup>

The attitude of the *populus Romanus* is also hard to grasp, but the three sieges that the city endured during the period 306–312 CE and the temporary cutting-off of the grain supply during Domitius Alexander's revolt must have put the people under considerable strain. According to the *Chronography of 354*, a great famine occurred under Maxentius, leading to violence in which soldiers killed 6,000 citizens. Eusebius and Aurelius Victor likewise record the slaughter of citizens by the praetorians, allegedly on Maxentius' orders.<sup>62</sup> In addition, the *Chronography* claims that the emperor demanded gold from "all Romans," implying that not only the elite were taxed.<sup>63</sup> If true, this measure must have been particularly damaging to Maxentius' reputation, as resentment over the tetrarchic decision to have the inhabitants of Rome pay taxes was one of the main factors that had facilitated his usurpation in the first place. Presumably the city's Christian community felt grateful to the emperor for ending the persecutions and even overturning anti-Christian legislation, but they only constituted a small minority of the city's total population.<sup>64</sup> If Lactantius can be believed, Maxentius faced open defiance from the *populus Romanus* near the end of his reign, when the crowd in the circus exclaimed that he could never hope to beat Constantine.<sup>65</sup>

On the whole, then, the possession of Rome did not only provide Maxentius with opportunities to boost his status and claim unique prestige among the

60. Aurelius Victor 40.24.

61. Cullhed, *Conservator urbis suae*, 94. Several authors raise the possibility of tension between Maxentius and the Senate: Hekster, "The City of Rome," 736; Leppin and Ziemssen, Maxentius, 29–30; Donciu, *L'empereur Maxence*, 78–79; Wienand, *Der Kaiser als Sieger*, 237–238.

62. *Chronography of 354*, 16. Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 8.14.3; Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 1.35 (famine is mentioned in the next chapter); Aurelius Victor 40.24.

63. *Chronography of 354*, 16: *Romanis omnibus aurum indixit et dederunt*. Translation by the author.

64. See Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital*, 63–65 for Maxentius' treatment of Christians. Even the hostile Eusebius did not accuse him of being a persecutor, but rather of "feigning piety" to appear mild; *Historia ecclesiastica* 8.14.1. Translation from Eusebius: *Ecclesiastical History, Volume II: Books 6–10*, trans. J.E.L. Oulton, Loeb Classical Library 265 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 303.

65. Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 44.7.

rulers of his time, but also presented him with considerable challenges. Unlike emperors who spent all their time on military campaigns or resided in provincial towns, he not only had to secure the support of his troops, but also had to contend with the wishes and expectations of a centuries-old aristocracy and a million-head population. Maxentius' attempts to renew the glory of Rome as the *caput mundi* and *sedes imperii* were in the interest of the praetorians and the *equites singulares*, who derived their prestige and even their *raison d'être* from the presence of a resident emperor. Undoubtedly, his Rome-centered program also held some appeal to the Senate and people, but that does not appear to have been enough to compensate for the emperor's financial demands and the hardships that his various conflicts with other political players brought upon them. John Curran speculates that it was loss of support among Rome's non-military residents that drove Maxentius to leave the confines of the city to confront Constantine head-on.<sup>66</sup> In order to win back the *Urbs Aeterna*, he ultimately lost it.

#### NEPOTIAN, ROME'S NEW CONSTANTINE (350 CE)

The reign of Nepotian did not last nearly as long as that of Maxentius. The short-lived usurper, a nephew of the emperor Constantine, seized power at Rome on June 3, 350 CE, allegedly with the help of a band of gladiators or robbers. At the time, the western half of the Empire was ruled by Magnentius, who had usurped the throne of Constans and was at war with the eastern emperor, Constantius II. For several weeks, Nepotian held sway in the capital and sought the recognition of Constantius, but his efforts proved in vain. Magnentius' *magister officiorum* Marcellinus marched on Rome and defeated the usurper, whose head was put on a spear and paraded through the city.<sup>67</sup>

During his short time as emperor, Nepotian instigated an "intense numismatic activity."<sup>68</sup> After an initial phase in which the usurper combined Magnentius' GLORIA ROMANORVM reverses with obverse portraits of

66. Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital*, 67.

67. Jones, Martindale, and Morris, ed., *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, Vol. 1, 624; *Chronica minora* 1.237; Aurelius Victor 42.6–8; *Epitome de Caesaribus* 42.3; Eutropius 10.11.2; Orosius, *Historiae adversus paganos* 7.29.11; Hieronymus, *Chronicon* 2366; Zosimus 2.43.2–4. See also K. Ehling, "Die Erhebung des Nepotianus in Rom im Juni 350 n. Chr. und sein Programm der urbs Roma christiana," *Göttinger Forum für Altertumswissenschaft* 4 (2001): 141–158 at 147–148. As Szidat, *Usurpator tanti nominis*, 244 has pointed out, the references to robbers and gladiators in several sources may have been invented to discredit Nepotian's elevation as illegitimate.

68. C.H.V. Sutherland and R.A.G. Carson, ed., *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, Vol. 8: *The Family of Constantine I, A.D. 337–364* (London: Spink, 1981), 241.

himself and Constantius II, he introduced a new theme, VRBS ROMA. It would be the only legend he would henceforth use. On bronze pieces, it was combined with the image of a seated Roma with spear, helmet and shield, holding a globe with a small Victory in her right hand. The same figure appeared on *solidi*, with the significant difference that the Victory was replaced by a chi-rho symbol.<sup>69</sup> Since this celebration of Rome as *Urbs Christiana* was limited to gold coins, it must have been targeted at an elite audience. Kay Ehling has argued that we should see Nepotian's usurpation as a revolt against the city's pro-pagan policies, with Christian senators supporting a Christian emperor. The *Codex Theodosianus* does indeed indicate that Magnentius had permitted nightly sacrifices, which were once again abolished by Constantius II. Contrary to the assertion of hostile authors, however, Magnentius was in all likelihood a Christian himself, since he also minted coins with the chi-rho sign. Therefore, Ehling proposes the *praefectus urbi* Fabius Titianus, a known pagan, as the man permitting the night sacrifices.<sup>70</sup>

However, there is no reason to assume that the urban prefect would have gone against the intentions of his master. It may be that Magnentius himself adopted a tolerant attitude towards paganism to garner support for his reign. Whether such tolerance provided the spark for a Christian revolt in Rome is doubtful; after all, the city would remain a bulwark of paganism for decades to come. Ehling's argument for the Christian nature of Nepotian's usurpation ultimately rests on just one Christian symbol on one coin type—a symbol that featured much more prominently on the coins of Magnentius, whose revolt could certainly *not* be explained as a response to a rise in tolerance for paganism.<sup>71</sup>

There are clues that Nepotian enjoyed considerable support among the ruling class of Rome. According to Theophanes' chronicle, he was even invested

69. GLORIA ROMANORVM: *RIC* VIII, Nepotian, 198–200; VRBS ROMA: *RIC* VIII, Nepotian, 166–167 (gold); 201–203 (bronze). For the chronology of Nepotian's coinage, see Ehling, "Die Erhebung des Nepotianus," 149–151.

70. Ehling "Die Erhebung des Nepotianus," 153–157; *Codex Theodosianus* 16.10.5. For Magnentius' affiliation with Christianity, see J. Ziegler, *Zur religiösen Haltung der Gegenkaiser im 4. Jh. n. Chr.* (Kallmünz: Lassleben, 1970), 53–74; S. Elbern, *Usurpationen im spätromischen Reich* (Bonn: Habelt, 1984), 102–103; B. Bleckmann, "Die Schlacht von Mursa und die zeitgenössische Deutung eines spätantiken Bürgerkrieges," in H. Brandt, ed., *Gedeutete Realität. Krisen, Wirklichkeit, Interpretationen* (3.-6. Jh. n. Chr.) (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1999), 47–102 at 78 n. 123. Titianus' paganism is confirmed by his membership of the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis*: *L'Année épigraphique* 1893, no. 124 = *ILS* 8983.

71. Ziegler, *Zur religiösen Haltung*, 67–68. Chi-rho sign on Magnentius' coins: *RIC* VIII, Amiens, 34–45; Lyon, 153–176; Trier, 315–316, 318–327A.

with imperial authority by the Senate, although this is not confirmed by any other source. After Nepotian's defeat, Magnentius allegedly killed many senators, which also suggests that they had supported the revolt. Julian records that many senators fled Rome to find refuge in the East.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, André Chastagnol argued that the majority of the senators chose Nepotian's side against Magnentius, although that claim has not gone undisputed.<sup>73</sup>

Numismatic evidence provides some clues to the image Nepotian wanted to project as emperor. His coins display two portrait types, the first showing him as a bare-headed man with wavy locks and a short beard, the second showing him as a bearded, diademed man. Except for the beard, the features of the second type are clearly Constantinian.<sup>74</sup> Ehling has interpreted the first type (which appears exclusively in combination with Magnentius' GLORIA ROMANORVM reverse and must therefore precede the second) as standing in the tradition of the soldier-emperors and the tetrarchs, pointing at its supposedly blocky features and short-cropped hair. However, the portrait is not particularly blocky, nor its hair particularly short. Richard Delbrueck has identified Nepotian's haircut as Hadrianic, suggesting that it stands in a historicizing tradition.<sup>75</sup> This interpretation better fits the visual evidence and could well be correct. If so, Nepotian was projecting the image of a ruler who represented the glory days of the Principate and was well known for his *paideia*, but whose legacy was also controversial because of his execution of four ex-consuls.<sup>76</sup> Alternatively, it is possible that this portrait type is meant to evoke Antoninus Pius, who was uncontestedly a "good emperor" and spent much of his reign in the capital.

72. Theophanes, *Chronographia*, AM 5849, AD 356/7. Murder of senators: Eutropius 10.11.2; Hieronymus, *Chronicon* 2366; Socrates Scholasticus 2.32; Sozomen 4.7. Senators fleeing to Constantius: Julian, *Oratio* 1.48B; idem, *Oratio* 2.97B-C.

73. A. Chastagnol, *La préfecture urbaine à Rome sous le Bas-empire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960), 420–421. Disputed by B. Bleckmann, "Constantina, Vetrico und Gallus Caesar," *Chiron* 24 (1994): 29–68 at 56–57 n. 142, who argues that Magnentius still enjoyed some senatorial support after the death of Nepotian, and that it was only after Vetrico's abdication that many senators fled Rome to join Constantius II.

74. First type: *RIC* VIII, Rome, 200–202. Second type: *RIC* VIII, Rome, 167, 203. See L'Orange, *Das spätantike Herrscherbild*, 89–90 (not distinguishing between types, but identifying Nepotian's portraits as looking Constantinian in general); and Ehling, "Die Erhebung des Nepotianus," 149–150.

75. Ehling, "Die Erhebung des Nepotianus," 149–150; R. Delbrueck, *Spätantike Kaiserporträts von Constantinus Magnus bis zum Ende des Westreiches* (Berlin, Leipzig: De Gruyter, 1933), 42. Like L'Orange, *Das spätantike Herrscherbild*, Delbrueck does not distinguish between types, but speaks about all of Nepotian's portraits.

76. However, there is also evidence for a positive reception of Hadrian's legacy in late antique Rome, especially by Maxentius; see Varner, "Maxentius, Constantine and Hadrian," 54–56.



**Nepotian coin RIC VIII Nepotian 202**

Bronze coin with Nepotian's first portrait type  
 RIC VIII, Nepotian, 202 (bronze, obverse & reverse)  
<http://numismatics.org/collection/1944.100.20839>

Nepotian, then, was definitely a Christian emperor and, in all likelihood, a Senate-oriented emperor, but above all, he represented himself as a member of the Constantinian dynasty. This can be gleaned not only from the way his portrait evolved to stress his family resemblance to the first Christian emperor and his heirs, but also by the evolution of his titulature. On the early coins with the bare-headed portrait, Nepotian styled himself FL(AVIVS) POP(ILIVS) NEPOTIANVS P(IVS) F(ELIX) AVG(VSTVS), but this was soon replaced by D(OMINVS) N(OSTER) IVLIVS NEPOTIANVS P(IVS) F(ELIX) AVG(VSTVS) on gold coins and FL(AVIVS) NEP(OTIANVS) CONSTANTINVS P(IVS) F(ELIX) AVG(VSTVS) on bronze.<sup>77</sup> The emperor thus took over the *Dominus Noster* that had become part of standard imperial titulature at the time and was used by Constantius II as well. More striking is his abbreviation of the name *Nepotianus* on later bronze coinage in favor of *Constantinus*. The abbreviated form could even be read as NEP(OS) CONSTANTINVS, which may well have been a deliberate attempt to create the impression that he was a direct descendant of Constantine.<sup>78</sup> At any rate, these coins advertise the emperor's family connections at the expense of his own name.

77. RIC VIII, Rome, 200–202; 167; 203. See also Ehling, “Die Erhebung des Nepotianus,” 149–150.

78. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

The fact that numismatic portraits started to display Nepotian wearing a diadem also bears great significance. After all, this attribute had been introduced in imperial representation by Constantine as a token of legitimacy. The appearance of the diadem on the coins of Nepotian does *not* indicate that the usurper had now been recognized by Constantius. Firstly, the short time frame would have made this impossible; secondly, the eastern *Augustus* was hardly the man to take such decisions rashly; and thirdly, even Magnentius displayed himself wearing a diadem on some of his coins.<sup>79</sup>

All of this should not lead us to suppose that Nepotian's Constantinian representation was just a strategy to gain recognition from the eastern emperor. Since he held Rome, winning the support of the local residents must have been the usurper's primary concern. This is why he presented himself as "simultaneously a Constantinian and a senatorial emperor."<sup>80</sup> Constantine had certainly left his mark on the *Urbs Aeterna*. After the defeat of Maxentius, the first Christian emperor had not only appropriated the latter's impressive architectural feats, such as the Basilica Nova, but had also imprinted his own buildings and monuments on the urban landscape.<sup>81</sup> In doing so, he had presented his predecessor as a tyrant and had cast himself in the role of the city's savior.

According to Eusebius, Constantine ordered a statue of himself bearing a cross ("the Savior's sign") in his right hand to be set up in the most public place in Rome, presumably a reference to the colossal statue in the apse of the Basilica Nova. As the accompanying inscription recorded, "By this salutary sign, the true proof of bravery, I saved and delivered your city from the yoke of the tyrant; and moreover I freed and restored to their ancient fame and splendor both the Senate and the people of the Romans." Whether the statue indeed displayed a cross or some other sign has been disputed.<sup>82</sup> Likewise, Rufinus claims that Constantine had ordered statues to be erected at various locations which showed him triumphant, holding the *vexillum* of the holy cross in his right

79. Ehling, "Die Erhebung des Nepotianus," 151–152; *RIC* VIII, Arles 133–139; Lyon, 108–112.

80. Chenault, *Rome without Emperors*, 56.

81. Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital*, 70–115 provides an excellent discussion of Constantine's building activities in Rome. See also E. Marlowe, "Liberator urbis suae: Constantine and the Ghost of Maxentius," in *The Emperor and Rome: Space, Representation, and Ritual*, ed. B.C. Ewald and C.F. Noreña (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 199–219 for Constantine's appropriation of Maxentius' legacy.

82. Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 9.9.10–11 (Oulton, *Ecclesiastical History, Volume II*: 363–365). Van Dam, *Remembering Constantine*, 190–203 plausibly argues against the colossal statue of Constantine holding a cross. See also Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital*, 78–79; Wienand, *Der Kaiser als Sieger*, 256–258.

hand.<sup>83</sup> A similar, but more religiously ambiguous message was conveyed by the Arch of Constantine, which celebrated the emperor as “the liberator of the city” and “the establisher of peace,” who “by a just victory avenged the state both on the tyrant and on all his faction.”<sup>84</sup>

It is against this background that we should interpret the chi-rho sign on Nepotian’s gold coins. Clearly, it was no coincidence that Nepotian struck this type both for himself and for Constantius II, associating them both with the symbol. As Alan Dearn has argued, around the middle of the fourth century, the chi-rho sign not only signified Christianity, but was also strongly associated with the Constantinian dynasty.<sup>85</sup> The contemporary usurper Vetranio, who had aligned himself with Constantius II, was well aware of this association, striking issues with the chi-rho sign as well as with the legend HOC SIGNO VICTOR ERIS.<sup>86</sup> Likewise, the chi-rho on Nepotian’s coinage did not herald his intentions of founding an *urbs Roma Christiana*, but was meant to draw a comparison between his own usurpation and Constantine’s conquest of Rome in 312 CE. In some respects, this comparison was quite apt: both emperors called themselves Constantine and claimed victories over tyrants with remarkably similar names, Maxentius and Magnentius.<sup>87</sup>

Like his famous uncle, Nepotian could boast that he had saved the city from the clutches of a malicious tyrant. Comparing his conquest of Rome to that of the first Christian emperor, he could imply that history had repeated itself: once again a Constantine had proved victorious. It was a neat way to employ one of

83. Rufinus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 9.9.11.

84. *ILS* 694 = *CIL* VI, 1139. Translation of the inscription from: Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital*, 87. See Wienand, *Der Kaiser als Sieger*, 212–215. In Rome’s official calendar of 354 CE, Maxentius is also referenced as *tyrannus*: A. Degraffi, ed., *Inscriptiones Italiae*, Vol. 13.2: *Fasti anni Numani et Iuliani. Accedunt ferialia, menologia rustica, paraepemata* (Rome: Libreria dello Stato, 1963), 257.

85. A. Dearn, “The Coinage of Vetranio: Imperial Representation and the Memory of Constantine the Great,” *The Numismatic Chronicle* 163 (2003): 169–191 at 187–188.

86. *RIC* VIII, Siscia 272, 275, 278–279, 282–283, 286–288, 291–292. Vetranio minted these coins both for himself and for Constantius II. Magnentius apparently tried to detach the chi-rho sign from its Constantinian associations by the end of his reign, so that he could claim it for himself: Dearn, “The Coinage of Vetranio,” 189.

87. The parallel between the names Maxentius and Magnentius was not lost on contemporaries, as is clear from Themistius’ 357 CE speech in honor of Constantius II. Referring to Constantine’s victory at the Milvian Bridge, the orator remarked that “the father first freed this city from a tyranny that was similar and all but identical in name” (*Oratio* 3.44A). Translation from Themistius: *Politics, Philosophy, and Empire in the Fourth Century: Select Orations of Themistius*, trans. P. Heather and D. Moncur, *Translated Texts for Historians* 36 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 130.

the most significant and memorable events in the city's recent history for his own benefit.

**PRISCUS ATTALUS, CHAMPION OF THE SENATE (409-410 CE;  
414-415 CE)**

The rise of Priscus Attalus was a direct consequence of the failed negotiations between the emperor Honorius and the Gothic leader Alaric, who wanted to secure land for his people and, it seems, an influential military office for himself. In order to put pressure on the emperor, Alaric twice marched on Rome and laid siege to the city, forcing the inhabitants to open their gates to him at the end of 409 CE. Both parties felt let down by Honorius, who on the one hand had stubbornly refused to reach an agreement with the Goths, yet on the other hand had done next to nothing to protect Italy and Rome from the invaders. On Alaric's instigation, the urban prefect Priscus Attalus was appointed emperor by the Senate, serving as the figurehead of a Roman revolt against the Ravenna court.<sup>88</sup>

In his excellent analysis of Attalus' 409 CE usurpation, Lejdegård argues that the emperor had probably been chosen in accordance with the wishes of the Senate, even though the decision to appoint an emperor in the first place had been forced upon it by Alaric.<sup>89</sup> After all, Attalus had twice been chosen to lead an embassy to the imperial court at Ravenna and had occupied the important posts of *comes sacrarum largitionum* and *praefectus urbi*.<sup>90</sup> Ancient authors record how he was invested with a purple mantle and a diadem, the attributes that signaled imperial legitimacy in Late Antiquity. After his appointment, he proceeded to the palace to take up residence there, symbolically taking possession

88. J.R. Martindale, ed., *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, Vol. 2: *A.D. 395-527* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 180-181; Zosimus 6.6.1-7.3; Olympiodorus, fr. 10.3; Orosius, *Historiae adversus paganos* 2.3.3-4; 7.42.7-8; Philostorgius 12.3; Socrates Scholasticus 7.10; Sozomen 9.8; Procopius, *Bellum vandalicum* 1.2.28-29. See also Lejdegård, *Honorius and the City of Rome*, 103-112.

89. Lejdegård, *Honorius and the City of Rome*, 110. Olympiodorus, fr. 10.2 records that the Senate voted Attalus emperor. The fragment is based on Philostorgius 12.3, who records that Attalus was proclaimed by the Romans with common consent. In contrast, Sozomen 9.8 claims that Alaric forced the Romans to recognize Attalus as their sovereign. See also F. Paschoud, ed. and trans., *Zosime. Histoire nouvelle. Tome III. 2e partie. Livre VI et index* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1989), 43-44 n. 125; P.J. Heather, *Goths and Romans 332-489* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 216; Szidat, *Usurpator tanti nominis*, 252-253.

90. J.R. Martindale, ed., *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, Vol. 2: *A.D. 395-527* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 180-181; A. Chastagnol, *Les fastes de la Préfecture de Rome au Bas-empire* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1962), 266-268.

of the city and the Empire. These acts would have been performed by all contemporary emperors in their respective capitals.<sup>91</sup> However, Attalus convened the Senate again the next day and held a speech, promising to uphold and protect the rights of this venerable civic body.<sup>92</sup> In doing so, he confirmed the close bond between emperor and Curia that had been cherished by the *principes* of the first and second centuries. While other emperors would also address the Senate when (and if) they visited Rome, it must have been the first time in decades that an emperor addressed the Senate immediately after his accession. Well-educated senators will have been reminded of the distant days of the Julio-Claudians, who invariably addressed the Curia and sought their approval when they first ascended the throne.<sup>93</sup>

Of course, the context in which this performance took place was completely different from that of first-century Rome. All the participants must have been well aware that they were acting on the bidding of Alaric. However, the fact that the latter did not simply appoint an emperor himself, but deferred that decision to the Curia, shows that he realized that a certain amount of diplomacy was required. The residents of Rome needed an emperor they could accept on their own terms, not one who had been imposed on them by an *auctor imperii* whom they could never recognize as legitimate. Attalus may have been primarily dependent on Alaric's military support, but he attempted to be more than a Gothic puppet. Once he had risen to the purple, the new ruler bestowed civilian offices exclusively on Romans. If Zosimus can be believed, the men he picked enjoyed great popularity as magistrates. Alaric was appointed as *magister militum* and Athaulf as *comes domesticorum equitum*, yet Attalus was careful not to place all military commands into Gothic hands. He even defied Alaric's wishes in his attempted conquest of Africa, refusing to send barbarian troops—undoubtedly fearing that the Goths might gain too strong a foothold in this vital province.<sup>94</sup> This implies that he could muster some military forces of his own, an assumption that is confirmed by Olympiodorus' remark that Attalus

91. Zosimus 6.7.1–3; Olympiodorus, fr. 3.10; Socrates Scholasticus 7.10; Procopius, *Bellum vandalicum* 1.2.28. For a discussion of the acts that signaled the legitimacy of an imperial investiture, see Kolb, *Herrscherideologie*, 91–102 and Szidat, *Usurpator tanti nominis*, 71–75.

92. Zosimus 6.7.3; Olympiodorus, fr. 10.1; Sozomen 9.8.

93. See B. Parsi, *Désignation et investiture de l'empereur romain (I<sup>er</sup>-II<sup>e</sup> siècle apr. J.-C.)* (Paris: Sirey, 1963) for a detailed discussion of imperial accession rituals during the principate.

94. Lejdegård, *Honorius and the City of Rome*, 109–111. Appointments: Zosimus 5.4.20; 6.7.1–4; Olympiodorus, fr. 10.1; see also Paschoud, *Zosime*, 43–44 n. 125. Defiance of Alaric's wishes: Zosimus 6.7.5–6; Olympiodorus, fr. 10.1; Sozomen 9.8; Procopius, *Bellum vandalicum* 1.2.29–30.

and Alaric marched on Ravenna with an army “composed of Romans and barbarians.” However, there is no way to tell whether Attalus’ “Roman” troops consisted of newly recruited citizens, Italian army units that decided to join the rebellion, or forces from elsewhere, nor do we know how numerous they were.<sup>95</sup> Apparently, the emperor’s non-Gothic military support was strong enough to provide him some leeway to sail an independent course and pursue Roman, rather than Gothic interests.

In order to appeal to the Senate and people of Rome, Attalus had to create the image of a traditional, Rome-oriented emperor. His appointment by the Curia had been one important way to achieve this. Contrary to contemporary convention, he did not use the title *Dominus Noster* on his coinage. As Lejdegård suggests, we should probably read this as a concession to the traditional notion that the ruler of Rome was *primus inter pares* among the senators, rather than their master.<sup>96</sup> Several of Attalus’ coin reverses show a seated Roma, crowned by a small Victory and surrounded by the legend INVICTA ROMA AETERNA. Although the appearance of *dea Roma* on coins was not extraordinary, the legend is unique.<sup>97</sup> The emperor was emphasizing that Rome was once again the seat of imperial power. At a time when many of the city’s inhabitants felt severely let down by Honorius, who had left them at the mercy of the Goths, this must have been a heartening message. Equally interesting is the legend RESTITVTIO REI P(VBLICAE), hinting at the restoration of former greatness.<sup>98</sup> Although this theme was certainly not new on late antique coinage,<sup>99</sup> the fact that Attalus was a Rome-based emperor, chosen from the ranks of the Senate, must have given it a very distinct meaning, hinting at a return to the days of the Principate.

According to Philostorgius, Attalus was a pagan, which has led some scholars to interpret his reign as a pagan reaction against a century of rule by Christian emperors.<sup>100</sup> Alan Cameron has rejected this view, pointing out that whatever gods Attalus worshipped, the fact that he agreed to go through baptism by a

95. Olympiodorus, fr. 10.1. Translation from Olympiodorus: *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus*, Volume II: *Text, Translation and Historiographical Notes*, trans. R.C. Blockley (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1983), 165; Lejdegård, *Honorius and the City of Rome*, 111.

96. Lejdegård, *Honorius and the City of Rome*, 118.

97. *RIC* X, Priscus Attalus, 1403–1408, 1411–1412.

98. *RIC* X, Priscus Attalus, 1416–1417.

99. For instance, Valentinian I and Valens had often proclaimed themselves RESTITVTOR REIPVBLICAE on their coins: *RIC* IX, Antiochia 2a-c, 6–7c; Constantinopolis 3a-d.

100. Philostorgius 12.3; G. Manganaro, “La reazione pagana a Roma nel 408–409 d.C. e il poemetto anonimo ‘Contra paganos,’” *Giornale italiano di filologia* 13 (1960): 210–224; S.I. Oost, *Galla Placidia*



**Priscus Attalus coin RIC X Priscus Attalus 1411**

Silver coin with reverse legend INVICTA ROMA AETERNA

RIC X, Priscus Attalus, 1411 (silver, obverse & reverse)

<http://numismatics.org/collection/1944.100.54853>

Gothic (Arian) bishop immediately after his accession is a clear indication that “he was willing to put career before religion.”<sup>101</sup> However, the baptism would not necessarily have precluded the new emperor from appointing pagan senators as officials. It may well be, as Sozomen claims, that both pagans and Arians supported Attalus because they hoped he would side with their religions and restore them to their former position.<sup>102</sup> It is certainly noteworthy that any overtly Christian or pagan symbolism is absent from the emperor’s coinage. This suggests he attempted to appeal to various religious groups, including pagans and (at least Arian) Christians.

During the whole of his 409–410 CE reign, Attalus refused to recognize any other emperors. Since his rise to power was prompted by Honorius’ inadequate handling of the Gothic question, it is hardly surprising that he would refrain from striking coins for his imperial rival. Even when Alaric and Attalus marched

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*Augusta: A Biographical Essay* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 93 n. 18; P. Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 190.

101. A. Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 194. Sozomen 9.9 mentions the baptism.

102. Sozomen 9.9. According to Orosius, the consul Tertullus expressed the hope that he would be appointed *pontifex maximus* (*Historiae adversus paganos* 7.42.8). R. Lizzi Testa, “Il sacco di Roma e l’aristocrazia romana tra crisi politica e turbamento religioso,” in *Rome e il sacco di 410: Realtà, interpretazione, mito*, ed. A. Di Berardino (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2012), 81–112 at 102 suggests that we could interpret Attalus’ baptism in the context of an alliance between pagans and Arians.

on Ravenna and Honorius proved willing to negotiate, offering to recognize Attalus as co-emperor, the latter refused, replying that Honorius would have to abandon his throne and go into exile.<sup>103</sup> The newly appointed *Augustus* did not seek the support of Theodosius II either. In his accession speech to the Senate, he had even boasted that he would reconquer the Eastern Empire and once again bring it under the dominion of Rome. Although this may sound like a clear case of hubris, Attalus' ambition to become the ruler of both halves of the Empire was nothing new in Late Antiquity. It did not differ from the hopes that Honorius and Stilicho had recently cherished with regard to the East.<sup>104</sup> As Stewart Oost has pointed out, Galla Placidia, the half-sister of Honorius, was probably living at Rome when Attalus gained the purple, yet he appears to have made no attempt to marry her and thus to forge a link to the Theodosian dynasty.<sup>105</sup>

Posing as the Senate's emperor, Attalus acknowledged only the right of the Curia to appoint Roman emperors. His conception of imperial legitimacy as ultimately deriving from Rome and the Senate held obvious appeal for a civic body whose political role had been severely marginalized since the days of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius. Many senators may have relished the opportunity to once again support an emperor from their own midst, one who claimed that all those who had risen to power elsewhere than at the *Urbs Aeterna* were not *Augusti* at all, but mere pretenders. The arrangement suited Alaric as well—not because he cared about the prestige of Rome or the Senate, but because it allowed him to ally his cause to that of a legitimate Roman emperor, turning him from a barbarian aggressor into an acknowledged servant of the Empire. Using the prestige of the *Urbs Aeterna* to claim legitimacy, Attalus and Alaric hoped to win support not only in Rome, but throughout Italy.<sup>106</sup> However, the alliance collapsed after news arrived that Attalus' military expedition to Africa had failed. The consequences of the lack of African grain were beginning to make themselves felt in Rome and even most senators came round to Alaric's

103. Zosimus 6.8.1; Olympiodorus, fr. 10.1–2; 14; Philostorgius 12.3; Sozomen 9.8. Perhaps on the initiative of the messenger, the demand was added that Honorius should be mutilated before his exile. I cannot agree with the harsh verdict of Michael Kulikowski, who claims that Attalus “proved stupidly intransigent” by refusing Honorius' offer to become co-ruler: *Rome's Gothic Wars: From the Third Century to Alaric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 176. After all, his usurpation was based on the utter rejection of the incompetent emperor in Ravenna.

104. B. Bleckmann, “Honorius und das Ende der römischen Herrschaft in Westeuropa,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 265 (1997): 561–595 at 591–592. See note 92 for the sources mentioning Attalus' speech.

105. Oost, *Galla Placidia Augusta*, 93–94. For Galla Placidia, see also H. Sivan, *Galla Placidia: The Last Roman Empress* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

106. Lejdegård, *Honorius and the City of Rome*, 116–120.

proposal to send Gothic troops to the lost province, but Attalus still refused to comply. To the Gothic leader, it became clear that the puppet emperor had outlived his usefulness. He summoned Attalus, deposed him of his imperial rank and sent the regalia to Honorius as an indication that he no longer backed the usurper and was willing to reopen negotiations.<sup>107</sup>

Ironically, Attalus' second and even briefer reign in 414–415 CE did not involve Rome or the Senate at all. This time he was raised to the purple by Athaulf, who had succeeded his brother Alaric as leader of the Goths and was still in conflict with the regime in Ravenna. The elevation took place at Narbonne, where Athaulf's forces were suffering a naval blockade imposed by Honorius' general Constantius.<sup>108</sup> Hardly anything is known about this second "reign," except that Ausonius' grandson Paulinus was made *comes rei privatae*. As hollow as this appointment was, it was a gesture of goodwill towards the Gallo-Roman elite, whose support Athaulf and Attalus must have been hoping to gain.<sup>109</sup> However, the situation was nothing like it had been when Attalus was first elevated in 409 CE. Alaric's military position at the time had been much stronger than Athaulf's current position in Narbonne. Moreover, this time the usurper had no special status to boast of. Without the support of Rome or the Senate, nothing distinguished him from the other pretenders who had risen against Honorius in Gaul, Britain and Spain in recent years.

Possibly, Athaulf and Attalus were hoping that some positive aura still clung to Attalus because he had been emperor of Rome and had risen against Honorius before, making him a suitable rallying point for resistance against the regime. If so, they must have been sorely disappointed. The Gallo-Roman elite recognized a lost cause when they saw one. Athaulf and his forces had to flee Narbonne and settled in Spain, where Attalus was abandoned. He was seized by imperial forces while trying to flee to Africa.<sup>110</sup> Honorius led him through

107. Zosimus 6.9.1–3; 11.1–12.3; Olympiodorus, fr. 10.1–2; Sozomen 9.8; Procopius, *Bellum vandalicum* 1.2.36. See also Matthews, *Western Aristocracies*, 298–299; Lejdegård, *Honorius and the City of Rome*, 112.

108. Orosius, *Historiae adversus paganos* 7.43.1–2; Olympiodorus, fr. 14; Prosper, *anno* 414. See also Matthews, *Western Aristocracies*, 317–318. According to Orosius, one of Athaulf's friends claimed that he had first wanted to supplant the Roman Empire with a Gothic one, but had later changed his mind and strove to restore Rome's glory (7.43.4–6). It seems unlikely that Athaulf ever intended to overthrow Roman power outright.

109. Paulinus, *Eucharisticon* 290–301.

110. Orosius, *Historiae adversus paganos* 7.42.9; Prosper, *anno* 415.

Rome in triumph, ritually trampled him, mutilated his right hand and sent him into exile.<sup>111</sup> The twice-failed usurper would never see the capital again.

## SYNTHESIS

As the cradle and former heart of the Empire, Rome provided resident emperors with unique potential to cloak themselves in the splendors of its mythological past and the glory days of the Principate. The *Urbs Aeterna* was a flexible ideological concept that could be employed in a variety of ways to suit the circumstances of different rulers and appeal to various audiences. Foremost among these were the Roman Senate, the urban plebs and the troops stationed in the city, such as the Praetorians and the urban cohorts.

Although Maxentius has sometimes been perceived as promoting himself as *civilis princeps* in the tradition of Augustus and Trajan, stressing traditional virtues and displaying himself in toga, his representation owed much to the exalted position of the tetrarchs. However, he combined this exalted style with a firmly Rome-based emperorship. By styling himself *conservator urbis suae*, associating himself with Rome's *aeternitas* and building the huge Basilica Nova as his new audience hall, Maxentius claimed the *Urbs Aeterna* as his own. Insofar as can be judged from his short reign, Nepotian adopted a different stance, trying to appeal to his subjects by presenting himself as a traditional Roman senator and, above all, a Constantinian savior. In doing so, he made reference to the city's liberation from "tyranny" by Constantine that was etched in public memory. Priscus Attalus boasted only his senatorial appointment. He possessed no family relations to the ruling Theodosian house and did not try to forge any through Galla Placidia. During his 409–410 CE reign, he appears to have taken his role of *civilis princeps* further than any other emperor from Late Antiquity, not detained by the fact that his position was upheld by a Gothic warlord.

Clearly, these usurpers did not only exploit the prestige of the city and its foremost civic body, the Curia, to claim legitimacy for themselves, but also rendered prestige to Rome in return by once more making it the seat of imperial power. Maxentius' emphasis on the *Urbs Aeterna* as the center of the Roman Empire, underlined by the impressive building program he initiated, was a clear response to the decentralizing tendencies of tetrarchic rule. Likewise, Attalus' appointment by the Senate did not just serve Alaric's agenda, but also that of a frustrated population, resenting an absent emperor who had utterly failed to

111. Lejdegård, *Honorius and the City of Rome*, 121–160, suggesting that Honorius may have spared Attalus' life because he wanted to show himself as a *princeps* who respected the dignity of the Senate.

guarantee the safety of the *caput mundi* and its residents. In both cases, a crisis in the relationship between emperor(s) and *Urbs* prompted usurpers to appeal to historic self-regard and to push for an alternative model of government in which Rome was once again the most important, if not the exclusive, imperial residence.<sup>112</sup> Nepotian's case is somewhat different, as he was happy to recognize a *senior Augustus* in Constantinople and hence to acknowledge that city's supremacy over Rome. Nevertheless, his apparent appeal to the Curia must at least in part have been due to the fact that he provided the city once more with a Rome-based emperor who was eager to rule with senatorial consent.

In the right circumstances, then, the discrepancy between Rome's high status and political marginalization in Late Antiquity provided ambitious men with a window of opportunity. Yet there were also hazards and limitations connected with a Rome-based emperorship. For one thing, the city lacked the military forces to sustain a revolt after Constantine's abolition of the Praetorian Guard and the *equites singulares*. As Nepotian found out to his detriment, the glory of the *Urbs Aeterna* and ties to the Constantinian dynasty were not enough to rally sufficient troops to his standards.<sup>113</sup> Maxentius and Attalus, who had stronger military backing, did manage to secure their position in most of Italy. However, their acceptance in other parts of the Empire was by no means a foregone conclusion, as both men's loss of the province of Africa shows.<sup>114</sup> Apparently, the African governors set more store by the legitimacy of the established regime—the tetrarchy and Honorius, respectively—than by the Rome-centered claims of these usurpers. This is especially remarkable in the case of Honorius, since that emperor's military position was for a long time considerably weaker than that of Attalus. In other words, while a Rome-centered representation helped to cement support for these usurpers in Rome itself, and perhaps in Italy, there is little indication that the city's prestige gave them an edge as far as provincial audiences were concerned.

112. The fact that Maxentius started minting *divi* coins for deceased emperors who had ruled from other cities in 310/311 CE may indicate that he was once again willing to recognize emperors residing elsewhere, but he did not stretch this recognition to include any living colleagues.

113. If Constans' bad reputation in the sources is any indication, the Constantinian dynasty may have lost a lot of credit in the West; see Aurelius Victor 41.23; Eutropius 10.9.

114. The mint of Ticinum starting minting coins for Maxentius after his defeat of Severus, which indicates that he was now also recognized in the north of Italy; Donciu, *L'empereur Maxence*, 68. Attalus' support in Italy is hard to establish, but must have been sufficient for him to be able to send a Roman force to Africa, while simultaneously marching on Ravenna with both Gothic and Roman troops; see note 95.

There were other hazards and limitations to take into account as well. Nepotian's and Attalus' reliance on senatorial support meant that they constantly had to adhere to the role of *civilis princeps*, which other emperors only had to play on occasion. This restricted the ways they could act and represent themselves. Moreover, the discontent of the Senate and the *populus Romanus*—sparked by food shortage, high taxes or other factors—could have serious consequences for Rome-based emperors. To a degree, these concerns plagued any city-based ruler, but they were especially pressing in Rome, where emperors were frequently confronted with vocal crowds of hundreds of thousands in the Circus Maximus and the Colosseum, while they also had to find a *modus vivendi* with a senatorial aristocracy of unparalleled prestige and affluence. As we have seen, the loss of civic support may well have driven Maxentius to engage Constantine in open battle, rather than to risk the hardships of siege. When disagreement about a new African campaign set Attalus at odds with the Senate and people, he ceased to be useful to Alaric and was duly deposed.

The actions of the emperors who eventually (re)conquered Rome—Constantine, Constantius II and Honorius—provide unmistakable testimony of the city's enduring importance. After his defeat of Maxentius, Constantine presented himself as Rome's savior, celebrated a *triumphus* and appropriated its monumental center. Constantius II staged an *adventus* in Rome to commemorate his victory over Magnentius.<sup>115</sup> Honorius, finally, celebrated a *triumphus* over Priscus Attalus, mutilating and banishing his former rival to make it clear that his power had been broken.<sup>116</sup> Each of these emperors, in short, made a considerable effort to establish their status at the old capital and (re)forge strong ties with the Senate and *populus Romanus*. None of them, however, went on to make the city their long-term residence. Evidently, they thought that the prestige the *caput mundi* bestowed on a ruler did not outweigh the hazards and limitations of a Rome-based emperorship.

But times would change yet again. As their domain and power crumbled, the last emperors of the West would once again make Rome their main seat of government. Like Nepotian and Priscus Attalus before them, they used their residence in the *caput mundi* to forge close ties to the senatorial aristocracy. This return to Rome was the culmination of a long-term trend, originating in the

115. Constantine and Rome: Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital*, 70–115. Ammianus Marcellinus 16.10.1–17 for Constantius II's *adventus*. Themistius' *Oratio* 3 was held on this occasion, presenting Rome and Constantinople as the twin capitals of the Empire.

116. Lejdegård, *Honorius and the City of Rome*, 121–160.

fourth century, that saw senators steadily regaining political relevance and playing an ever-growing role in imperial politics. Two of their number, Petronius Maximus and Olybrius, even managed to gain the imperial purple.<sup>117</sup> In Late Antiquity, then, a model of emperorship which emphasized the central importance of Rome and the Senate was not necessarily an anachronistic attempt to revive a long-dead past. It remained a viable option right up to the end of the Western Empire. ■

117. Gillett, "Rome, Ravenna," 162–165.