

The Roman Senate and the Politics of Religion in the *Collectio Avellana* (IV-VI Century AD)¹

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The purpose of this article is to analyze the evidence contained in the *Collectio Avellana* on the Roman senate, both on the institution and on individual senators. Its scope is thus limited, but it may nonetheless shed new light on a number of episodes which saw the senate play a role in the complex situation in which the other main actors were the church, the emperors of East and West, and in the end the Gothic kings of Italy. More than that, it enables us to define the changing role of the body in relation to religious matters: in the fourth century the senate had no direct involvement in doctrinal matters, although it included in its members both pagans and Christians; the dispute about the new religion did not affect the working of the assembly, or did it only marginally; from the first decades of the fifth, in a short time, the senate became deeply involved in disputes about church affairs, and more or less directly in matters of doctrine. The Christianization of the empire and the rise of the bishopric of Rome meant a dramatic change in the attitude of the senatorial assembly and its members toward religion and religious politics. The new attitude diverged markedly from the traditional view of the Roman aristocracy that was based on the assumption that the Capitoline religion was embedded into the life of the empire without having any influence on the beliefs of individuals.

The *Collectio Avellana*

The CA is of great interest, as it contains 244 documents, of which 200 are not known from any other source. Its origin and purpose are not entirely clear, but the nature of the documents, mostly letters from the bishop of Rome and, more rarely, other bishops and church officials, emperors and Roman magistrates, on ecclesiastical matters, provides a privileged perspective on the role of the Roman senate and of some of its most prestigious members in this very sensitive area.

Recent work on the CA and other collections of similar kind has contributed significantly to the understanding of the origin and purpose of these documents.² Not

¹ This article originated in a paper read at the Conference on *Emperors, Bishops, Senators. The Significance of the Collectio Avellana 367-553 AD* (Rome, 1-2 April 2011). It has been substantially enlarged and modified.

² Besides the Conferences quoted in nn. 1 and 3 a third one took place in 2013: *East and West, Constantinople and Rome: Empire and Church in the Collectio Avellana 367-553 AD*, Rome 5-6 April 2013); hopefully, the proceedings of the three Conferences will be available soon. A most useful general survey of the main problems discussed in the Conferences and in the recent literature in R. Lizzi Testa, *La Collectio Avellana e le collezioni canoniche romane e italiche del V-VI secolo*:

everything is clear, and there are doubts on various items; on some points there seems to be an agreement among scholars: the *CA*, according to its first modern editor, O. Günther, was put together around the middle of the sixth century AD with a number of dossiers.³ These are, at least, the following: *CA* 1-40, which deal with the contested papal election of 366-367 and its aftermath (Damasus and Ursinus) and 418-419 (Bonifatius and Eulalius); *CA* 41-50, which probably originated in the archives of the bishopric of Carthage, dealing mostly with the bishop of Rome Zosimus and the Pelagian controversy; *CA* 51-56, known only from this collection, dealing with the problems of the church in Alexandria in 460, all dated on the 17th and 18th of June; *CA* 56-104, the most problematic and apparently incoherent, but still forming somehow a unit in itself between the Alexandrian dossier and the following dossier on the bishopric of Hormisdas: it contains information on the beginning of the Acacian schism from 476 to 482, with letters between the bishop of Rome Simplicius, the emperor Zeno and Acacius (56-69); it goes on till the bishoprics of Gelasius, Anastasius and Symmachus (79-81, 94-104), with documents from 490 to 513; in the middle of this group the *CA* lists the Latin translation of the false correspondence of Petrus Fullo, with the Greek version, except in one case (71-78), and a group of documents without any chronological order: *CA* 83 is the most recent one, a letter written in 553 by the bishop of Rome Vigilius to Justinian; *CA* 82 is a letter from pope Agapitus to Justinian dated to 536, while *CA* 84-93 date from 534 to 540, and consist, with one exception, of letters exchanged between Justinian and Agapitus and then Vigilius; then we find the largest dossier, *CA* 105-243, concerning the bishopric of Hormisdas and the end of the Acacian schism, with a most interesting correspondence between the bishop, the senate of Rome and the emperor Anastasius, among other documents.

The nature of the collection formed by these different dossiers is a matter of discussion in the most recent scholarship. The problem of *cui bono*, however, is still quite open; there are many things we do not know enough about: when the archives of the bishopric of Rome started to function for the first time, the role and culture of the officials in charge, the relation of the *CA* with other known collections, when and by whom it was put together in its extant structure, and for what purpose.

This is not the place to discuss in any detail these questions. Since, however, they are important for understanding the reasons for the selection of the documents, the absence of some very significant ones and the inclusion of others, I will sum up some of the most relevant hypotheses. Some scholars emphasize the presence of the dossiers on the controversial papal elections, and think that the *CA* reflects the difficulties of the Laurentian schism and the discussion about the legitimacy of the two candidates to the papacy; the author of the collection might have been the prefect of Rome in 502-503,

un progetto di ricerca, in «CrSt», 35, 1, 2014, pp. 77-102, and the *Introduction* to the Conference of 2016.

³ *CSEL*, 35, 1-2, ed. O. Günther, Wien, 1885; id., *Avellana-Studien*, Vienne, 1896 (Sitzungsberichte der philosophisch-historischen Classe der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 134), pp. 2-3 for the proposal in the text, followed among others most recently by Ph. Blaudeau, *Le siège de Rome et l'Orient (448-536): étude géo-ecclésiologique* (CÉFR 460), Rome, 2012; id., *Collections du schisme acacien*, in *La Collectio Avellana e le altre Collezioni canoniche di ambiente italico: formazione, contenuti e contesti* (Perugia-Gubbio, 21-24 September 2016).

Faustus Albus, and the aim may have been to give support to Laurentius;⁴ Dionysius Exiguus may have been behind the compilation. The supremacy of the Roman see, on the other hand, may have been the main concern of the compiler(s), and this would account for the huge dossier of Hormisdas and the relevance of the documents related e.g. to Gelasius.⁵ The role of the emperor, problematic though it was, was essential in solving the struggles in papal elections: it so happened in the fight between Damasus and Ursinus and in the one between Eulalius and Bonifatius; this is seen by some scholars as the reason for the compilation, which may have been promoted by Cassiodorus, looking for precedents for the actions of Theoderic.⁶ Internal problems, like the struggle for the bishopric of Rome, or doctrinal matters like the Acacian schism, which may have been related anyway, are not mutually exclusive, nor are the problems created by the role of the emperor and the king of Italy, which could interfere one with the other. At the same time, none of these theories admittedly is capable of solving all the problems. There are incongruities that do not fit into any definitive solution, the gaps are not always justifiable unless we knew more about the actual working of the archives, and some of the information is not coherent with any given theory; for instance, the strong anti-damasian content of some documents, otherwise unknown, like the rescript of Theodosius on the Luciferians (not in the *Codex Theodosianus*) is not easily accounted for if we argue for the supremacy of the bishop of Rome as the fundamental aim of the collection.⁷ Also rather surprising is the absence of any document on the Laurentian schism; most of these doubts may be solved, or may become irrelevant, when research on the precedents, on the other collections which may have been at the basis of the core of the CA, will have made further progress.

For our purpose it may suffice to point out that the CA was put together, by one or more probably by a number of compilers, as a useful instrument in the definition of ecclesiastical affairs; these dealt mostly with doctrinal problems, but had to do with the relationship of the church with the other institutions: the emperor, the senate, individual magistrates, and less often with members of the imperial household and the king of Italy. The CA thus provides valuable information on the activity and the role of these institutions and individuals, but it does so only occasionally, when they come into the picture. We must therefore be careful in drawing general conclusions from what we have; nonetheless, with this caution in mind, we can use the information on the senate and the senators to fill gaps in our evidence, and to account for the view that emerges of their role in the new world of ecclesiastical matters. These involved many actors, and the

⁴ E. Wirbelauer, *Zwei Päpste in Rom: der Konflikt zwischen Laurentius und Symmachus (498-514): Studien und Texte* (Quellen und Forschungen der Antike Welt 16), München 1993; but see for a different reconstruction of the schism T. Sardella, *Società Chiesa e Stato nell'età di Teoderico. Papa Simmaco e lo scisma laurenziano*, Soveria Mannelli 1996.

⁵ Blaudeau, *Le Siège de Rome*, p. 429 and *Collections*, p. 12, traces the origin of the CA to the debate raised by the Acacian schism, following E. Schwartz (ed.), *Publizistische Sammlungen zum acacianischen Streit* (Abhandlungen der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 10, München 1934); he also attributes a role to Dionysius Exiguus, who was close to Hormisdas.

⁶ Lizzi Testa, *The Collectio Avellana and the Bishop of Rome*, paper read at the Conference of 2013, see n. 2.

⁷ CA 2a.

way the Roman senate and its members behaved is not without interest to reconstruct their history along almost two centuries.

During this long period the Roman senate underwent deep and far-reaching changes. Its political role changed sharply due to the prolonged absence of the emperor from Rome; the senatorial aristocracy in the city had to deal with the progressive christianization of its members, and with the growing power of the palatine officers; the role of the church increased steadily, and the senatorial magistrates, and the senate as a body, had to cope with new problems, like riots for papal elections, heresies, and competition between the ecclesiastical and secular forums. With the vacancy of the imperial throne in the West, the senate and the few great senatorial families left became central again in the policies of the bishop of Rome and the dealings with the Byzantine emperor; they assumed an international role, at the same time involving themselves more and more in doctrinal matters, as these were politically relevant.⁸ On these developments the *Collectio* contains precious evidence, which must be put into perspective to shed new light on crucial turning points in the history of the institution and on some episodes that involved its members.

The Damasus Dossier (366-383/4)

One very interesting item comes from the first set of documents, dealing with the dispute between Damasus and Ursinus (1-13). It has been recognized long ago that the *Collectio* lists some documents which are strongly biased against Damasus; the significance of this choice is not clear: it is highly probable that the whole dossier was put together in the archive of the *praefectus urbi*, but it contains pieces coming from different sources: the *Gesta inter Liberium et Felicem episcopos* open the sequence, followed, and artificially linked by the compiler of the *Collectio*, to the *Libellus precum* presented as a *supplicatio* to the emperor Theodosius in Constantinople by the followers of Lucifer, Marcellinus and Faustinus, around 383/4. The emperor, in the end, ruled in favor of the petitioners, and addressed a rescript to Maternus Cynegius, praetorian prefect in the East, to this effect. These two documents, strongly anti-damasian, are at odds with the ones that follow, which are official imperial letters to Roman magistrates

⁸ The senate in Late Antiquity: P. De Francisci, *Per la storia del senato romano e della Curia nei secoli V e VI*, «Pontificia Accademia di Archeologia», Rendic. 22, 1946-1947, pp. 275-317; A. Chastagnol, *Le Sénat romain à l'époque impériale: Recherches sur la composition de l'assemblée et le statut de ses membres*, Paris, 1992; L. Cracco Ruggini, *Il Senato tra due crisi (III-VI secolo)*, in E. Gabba (ed.), *Il Senato nella storia*, I, *Il Senato in età romana*, Roma 1998, pp. 223-375; P. Heather, *Senators and Senate*, in A. Cameron — P. Garnsey (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History*, XIII, *The Late Empire, A.D. 337-425*, Cambridge 1998, pp. 184-210; F. Burgarella, *Il Senato*, in *Roma nell'alto medioevo*, «Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo», XLVIII, 1, Spoleto 2001, pp. 130-147; G. Clemente, *Il senato e il governo dell'impero tra IV e VI secolo: la religione e la politica*, in: G. Bonamente-N. Lenski-R. Lizzi Testa (eds.), *Costantino prima e dopo Costantino*, Bari 2012, 321-331; A. La Rocca-F. Oppedisano, *Il senato romano nell'Italia ostrogota*, Roma 2016, for a discussion on the recruitment procedures; Ch. Radki, *The Senate at Rome in Ostrogothic Italy*, in J.J. Arnold-M. Shane Bjornlie-K. Sessa (eds.), *A Companion to Ostrogothic Italy*, Leiden-Boston 2016, pp. 121-146.

dealing with the affair, apart from two letters, on the building of the basilica of Saint Paul (3) and for the election of pope Siricius (4); these are out of chronological order and only indirectly the one on Siricius deals with Ursinus, in that it contains an allusion to one last attempt on his part to gain the episcopate of Rome, blamed by the emperor. All these documents do not conceal the responsibilities of Ursinus, whose actions are described with some strong language.⁹

Of course, we know that Damasus, in the end, was the winner, both against Ursinus and against his many enemies in Rome, including some very powerful Christian aristocrats; so, it has been noted, the *Collectio* is representing here a selection of the evidence which, should we have it alone, would make it impossible to understand what really happened in a rather confused and at times apparently inextricable sequence of events. A number of magistrates are involved: in the *Gesta* the Ursinians accused Damasus of corrupt practices, having bribed Viventius, the *praefectus urbi*, and Iulianus, the *praefectus annonae*, in order to obtain Ursinus' exile. When the decision was reversed, due to pressure on the court by the *plebs sancta*, but obviously also by influential aristocrats, Damasus again bought the whole *palatium*. This second accusation concerned a very popular and respected magistrate, the then *praefectus urbi* Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, who was not mentioned, unlike the other officials. This story is told in the *Gesta* in a rather concise account. In the *Libellus* the accusations are heavier and described in more detail. One episode is particularly interesting for our purpose: the Luciferians, persecuted by Damasus, who had received *regalis auctoritas* from Gratian, tell the story of one *iudex* Bassus, *olim catholicam fidem venerans*, who refused to condemn the Luciferians as heretics, although the accusation had been brought before the judge by the same Damasus and his *defensores*, who were laymen.¹⁰ What emerges from the narrative of these two documents, originally independent, but linked by the compiler of the *Collectio* probably because of the anti-damasian content, is that the Roman aristocrats and the imperial officials were deeply involved in the fight for the papal elections by the middle of the fourth Century. In fact, it is commonly accepted that the bishopric of Damasus represented a turning point in this as in other matters concerning church affairs. It is interesting to note that Viventius was a respected imperial official, of whom Ammianus, for one, gave a favorable portrait. He had been involved in the trial of Auxentius, in Milan, in 364/365, had acquitted the bishop from the accusation of blasphemy and unorthodox views, and had opposed in so doing the intransigent followers of Nicaea. As *quaestor*, he had also saved the followers of the emperor Julian from persecution.¹¹

Ten years later, Sextus Petronius Probus as praetorian prefect condemned to death the son of Viventius' sister and some relatives of his colleague, Julian. It is extremely

⁹ For a recent discussion on Damasus, with useful considerations on the dossier of the CA, R. Lizzi, *Senatori, popolo, papi: il governo di Roma al tempo dei Valentiniani*, Bari 2004, pp. 129-203.

¹⁰ CA 2, 84-86; G. Clemente, *Il rossore del vescovo*, in S. Cagnazzi et al. (eds.), *Scritti di Storia per Mario Pani*, Bari 2011, pp. 111-122.

¹¹ T. D. Barnes, *Valentinian, Auxentius and Ambrose*, «Historia», LI, 2002, pp. 227-237; C. Pietri, *Aristocratie milanaise. Pàiens et chrétiens au IVe siècle*, in *Roma Christiana*, II, Roma 1976, pp. 981-1006.

difficult to detect a pattern in the action of the aristocratic groups in Rome at the time. It is highly probable that some orthodox aristocrats resented the acquittal of Auxentius, but it is very difficult to find a connection between what we know of the career of Viventius and his support of Damasus, outside of the fact that he was doing his job. Probus was close to Ambrose, who supported Damasus, but he was against Viventius, who had, it is true, supported Auxentius, but also Damasus, to the point of calling upon himself the accusation of having been bribed. So little did this accusation count, or the enmity of Probus, that Viventius went on to a splendid career, being appointed praetorian prefect in Gaul at the time when Valentinian moved his court there, quite an acknowledgment on the part of the emperor.¹²

The *Libellus* has another piece of information on the behavior of a member of the old aristocracy, which we have already mentioned: the refusal of Bassus to condemn the Luciferians, in open opposition to a request by Damasus. Bassus, it is commonly accepted, must be identified with Anicius Auchenius Bassus, who had been *proconsul Campaniae vice sacra iudicans* and then *praefectus urbi* in 382/3. With him we are on firmer grounds. The *Anicii* had converted very early to the Christian faith. As governor of Campania, Bassus had probably been involved in the religious disputes between the followers of Ursinus and Damasus. The most striking feature of the news in the *Collectio* is that he judged in matters of doctrine, deciding about the accusation of heresy brought by the bishop of Rome against the Luciferian bishop Ephesius. A number of things call for closer scrutiny in the narrative. From the text of the *Libellus*, it seems clear that the prefect entered into a close examination of the doctrinal aspects of the matter. The Luciferians were an organized sect, and they had bishops. They had not been included in any list produced in the legislation against heresies in the years before 382/3. Later, there was some doubt about their orthodoxy. In any case, they were, so to speak, borderline, the distinction between an organized sect and a heretical group being very thin, and subject to interpretation. The Luciferians praised Bassus for having decided on the firm conviction that they were not heretical, and on the basis of a correct application of the existing laws. In the following passages of the supplication, they launched themselves into a lengthy defence of their orthodoxy. This may well be normal procedure, but it still leaves room for doubt. We know that in the rescript of Theodosius in 380 on the Nicaean creed the emperor adopted an empirical solution to the question of orthodoxy: those who accepted to be in communion with Damasus and Petrus of Alexandria were considered orthodox. No imperial magistrate had decided about doctrinal matters up to then. The case of Viventius with regard to Auxentius was different, since the *quaestor* had taken his decision in a hearing in the presence of a number of bishops; their role and attitude is discussed, but their presence is what matters. In the text of the *Libellus* there is no trace of the presence of bishops, but the decision is said to have been taken by Bassus, who had a profound knowledge of the Christian doctrine, having been himself a Christian for a long time, and belonging to a family that had been Christian for generations now. Besides, he ruled against the opinion of Damasus, who was, after all, the same bishop who had successfully punished a number of Italian bishops; he, in the end, won the battle against the Luciferians, who

¹² Lizzi, *Senatori, popolo*, pp. 150-170.

were exiled despite Bassus' decision.¹³ The rescript of 380 may have had a limited scope, and may have not been applied in the West; but it was there to be used if anyone was willing to do so, and the insistence of the *Libellus* on the correct application of the imperial decisions on the part of Bassus show that this could not be taken for granted. In the end, it was a magistrate opposing the bishop of Rome in matters of faith. The same *Libellus* is very sensitive about procedures; it tells the story of a *vicarius Hispaniae*, Clementinus, who refused to pass a judgment on a bishop without a previous decision of the clergy on the bishopric of the accused; he was respectful of procedures although he was not a Christian, the *Libellus* notes with a clear intent to mark a difference from the behavior of others who were Christian, or even bishops, like Damasus.¹⁴ Although the situation is different from the one that Bassus faced, this and other episodes show that the imperial magistrates were trying to find a way to deal with the novelty of jurisdiction over the clergy in matters of doctrine and law.

The Damasus affair, it appears from the way it is presented in the *Collectio*, emphasizes not so much the enmity of senatorial groups and the struggle of the aristocratic families for the control of the election of the bishop of Rome. These, of course, were real, and the behavior of Bassus is a clear example of it; so are the stories about the corruption of magistrates and of the whole *palatium*. The involvement of senators, as officials, is beyond dispute, although it is very difficult to determine a pattern in the dissensions; we do not know enough about too many things, like the management of the *tituli*, the control of funds, the social composition of the different groups; we have difficulties in identifying the aristocratic families that had become Christian at the time, and what that meant in terms of politics in church matters. We can point out a few changes which seem to be relevant in the aftermath of the government of Constantius and in the reign of the Valentinians, as it is described in the *Collectio*; despite the deformation due to the polemical nature of the documents we are discussing, they are consistent with the more general picture. The aristocracy was not so overwhelmingly Christian as to put church matters at the center of the political life in Rome and make them a cause for internal divisions. Nor were these divisions so clear-cut from the point of view of the social structure. The Roman senators as magistrates considered the disorders around the papal elections or about any other religious dissension as matters of public order. It was the duty of a Viventius or of a Praetextatus, as magistrates, to restore and keep order in the city, with the usual means, were they Christians or pagans. What made the difference in our sources is the fact that they were strongly biased, and reflected the interests of groups inside the church that fought their own battles. In this political juncture the Christian aristocratic families played a role, but

¹³ A commentary on these passages in A. Canellis, *Faustin (et Marcellin), supplique aux empereurs* (Libellus precum et Lex Augusta), *SC*, 504, 2006, pp. 29-40; M. V. Escribano Paño, *Teodosio I y los Heréticos: La aplicación de las leyes en el Libellus Precum* (384), in «Antiquité Tardive», 16, 2008, pp. 125-140; G. Clemente, *La religione e la politica. Il governo dell'Impero tra pagani e cristiani fra III e VI secolo*, in *Costantino I. Enciclopedia Costantiniana sulla figura e l'immagine dell'Imperatore del cosiddetto Editto di Milano 313-2013*, I, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, Roma 2013, pp. 699-714, where, at p. 713, n. 38, bibliography on the problem of the jurisdiction over the definition and persecution of the heresies.

¹⁴ *CA* 2, 21-27.

they were still not so powerful and embedded into public life and institutions to make a difference in the management of public affairs. The main difference may have come in the style of office holding. For the first time, Roman officials were called upon to govern in religious matters; it was still a problem of jurisdiction, but it was a slippery new area: a Christian with strong religious convictions, and maybe some earthly political interests, like Bassus, may have stepped beyond his sphere of intervention by deciding about who was heretical and who was not. This could happen only with a Christian magistrate. The *Libellus* makes it clear that a good old fashioned pagan official could be more trustworthy than a Christian with personal inclinations. It is a time of transition, and many are trying new ways to deal with a new situation, beginning with the emperor. These developments were momentous, and deployed their impact decades later, in the course of the fifth Century. For the moment we can only point them out.

The Dispute between Bonifatius and Eulalius (418-419 AD)

This development becomes clear if we turn to another group of documents, following immediately the dossier on the Damasus affair: the dossier on the dispute between Bonifatius and Eulalius in 418-419 (nn.14-37 in the *Collectio*). In the generations that separate the election of Damasus and that of Bonifatius the senatorial aristocracy had become Christian; the few pagans left were not an active opposition, nor wanted, probably, to interfere in the dissensions internal to a world that was by then at the center of political affairs and of the social life of the city; it was, anyway, a world foreign to their attitude toward religion.

The *Collectio* is virtually the only account we have on this episode; it consists of the official correspondence exchanged between the *praefectus urbi* Aurelius Anicius Symmachus, the emperor Honorius, the *magister militum* Constantius and his wife Galla Placidia; then between Honorius and the senate and the people of Rome, and the bishop of Spolegium Achilleus, called upon to go to Rome and celebrate Easter while the dispute was settled; there are also letters addressed to the bishops of Africa, asked to take part in the *concilium* that the emperor had decided to convene to solve the problem. Here, we are in a rather different world in comparison with the atmosphere of Rome at the time of Damasus. In the second half of the fourth century the senate was still dominated by a numerous pagan aristocracy; it is not relevant to establish if it formed a majority; the main point, for our purpose, is that the senate did not act as a body in religious matters; its major preoccupation was still the keeping of rituals embedded into the life of the city of Rome. A few years later it appears to be divided, however not dramatically, as the debate around the Altar of Victory shows, on the impact of the new faith on the observance of traditional practices. The sources speak of individual magistrates, acting in their own official capacity, and interpreting, in so doing, the role that was expected of them. There may have been differences in their behavior: the attitude of Auchenius Bassus was far from the attitude of Praetextatus, who took responsibility for the expulsion of the Ursinians, having the approval afterwards of the emperor, and acting like any serious *praefectus urbi* to curb disorders; but he would never have decided on matters of doctrine, unless he were applying an imperial rescript. Still, there was no action on the part of the senate as an institution.

In the dispute between Bonifatius and Eulalius the *praefectus urbi* acted calling on the *proceres* to share his responsibility in the most delicate turns of events; on the same occasion the senate as a body received a letter from Honorius emphasizing the need to keep the peace and not to stir the sentiments of the people. The people of Rome received an imperial letter to the same effect, of course in a firmer and very stern language. It appears that, in a Christian city, the problem of the government was now to act to avoid riots among Christian factions, and that the emperor could expect, or at least demand, that the public institutions take responsibility. This does not mean that the aristocracy was not divided and did not take sides; but the senate as such, being now formed by an overwhelmingly Christian aristocracy, was important in governing a Christian city.¹⁵ The significance of this change cannot be underestimated, in a world where tradition was essential, and the ideology behind the senate as a body was not a formality; it was part of the functioning of politics and of the effort to exercise social control on other groups, be they religious or lay. So the senate resumed a role that was based on the force of its traditional institutional function, applied to a completely new situation.

The Roman aristocracy, at the time, was recovering from the sack of Alaricus. This famous event had not damaged irreparably the wealth and status of the senators. We have a number of sources pointing toward this conclusion, despite the enormous impact that the fall of the eternal city, understandably, had made on contemporaries, and the following debate among pagan and Christian historians and polemicists on responsibilities. Rutilius Namatianus mentions many aristocratic families in his eulogy of the senate, leaving the impression of a very healthy group.¹⁶ As is well known, a fragment of Olympiodorus on the wealth and expenditures of the senators confirms that the senators were still very powerful and well-to-do.¹⁷ A few years after the election of Bonifatius, some well-known inscriptions attest the ability of the senate to obtain a significant reconnaissance from the emperor: one is a pompous dedication to a senator, otherwise unknown, but clearly important as former *praefectus urbi*, Flavius Olbuis

¹⁵ The *proceres* in CA 29 and 32; *ordo amplissimus* CA 34; here the senate is described as acting as an institution, supporting the *praefectus* in public demonstrations.

¹⁶ S. Roda, *L'aristocrazia senatoria occidentale al tempo di Attila; l'ideologia oltre la crisi dell'impero*, in S. Roda (ed.), *La parte migliore del genere umano*, Torino 1994, pp. 271-291; D. Vera, *Strutture agrarie e strutture patrimoniali nella tarda antichità: l'aristocrazia romana tra agricoltura e commercio*, in Roda (ed.), *La parte migliore*, pp. 165-224. On the sack of Rome J. Lipps-C. Machado-P. Rummel von (eds.), *The sack of Rome in 410 AD: the event, its context and its impact (Proceedings of the Conference in Rome, 4-6 November 2010)*, Wiesbaden 2013. In general, for an up-to-date discussion of different viewpoints on the relevant problems see G. A. Cecconi-C. Gabrielli (eds.), *Politiche religiose nel mondo antico e tardoantico*, Bari, 2011, pp. 235-384; P. Brown-R. Lizzi Testa (eds.), *Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire: The Breaking of a Dialogue (IVth-VIth Century AD) (Proceedings of the International Conference at the Monastery of Bose, October 2008)*, Münster 2011; P. Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle. Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD*, Princeton 2012; A. Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome*, Oxford 2011, with the discussion in R. Lizzi Testa (ed.), *The Strange Death of Pagan Rome. Reflections on a Historiographical Controversy*, «Giornale Italiano di Filologia». Bibliotheca, 16, Brepols 2013.

¹⁷ Olymp. Frg. 44 (FHG IV, 67-68).

Auxentius Draucus, between 425 and 450; the dedication is the result of a request of the senate to the emperors, who gave their approval through a flattering letter; another is a dedication of a statue offered by the emperors to the outstanding senator Petronius Maximus, *praefectus urbi* for the first time in 421; then the inscription that reproduces the text of the rehabilitation of Nicomachus Flavianus Sr., in 431, again with a letter of the emperor.¹⁸ These are the most striking examples of a revival of the importance of the senate, mirrored in the representation its members were able to propose, but based on real power and prestige as a body. The cumulative evidence seems irrefutable, and it explains, among other things, the role the senate played in the difficult situation of the papal election in 418/419.

The role of the assembly is, in this perspective, the most interesting evidence provided by the dossier in the *Collectio*. The dispute must have affected the aristocracy, whose members backed one or the other candidate, but we know virtually nothing of the terms of the fight. The *Collectio* makes it clear that there was a sharp division inside the church, with a majority of the deacons for Eulalius, with some *praesbyteri* and apparently a small portion of the *plebs*, while Bonifatius carried a majority of the *praesbyteri* and a substantial part of the people. This may have meant that Eulalius' following was among the aristocratic groups more inclined toward ascetism, and Bonifatius had the support of the clergy that wanted to administer the resources of the church with more freedom, and was more popular among the common people, the *plebs sancta* that had a very effective role in assuring his final victory.¹⁹ In fact, there is no certain proof for this hypothesis, although it has some reasonable foundation in what we know about the discussions that divided the aristocracy at the beginning of the fifth century: ascetism, and the doctrine of Pelagius and his pupil Julian of Aeclanum, who acted as guides to many of the élite, affected deeply the Christian community and the senatorial families.²⁰ The behavior of Zosimus, the predecessor of Bonifatius, had created serious problems. On the other hand, Bonifatius was not unknown to the aristocracy, and was not a newcomer. He had been the tutor of Paula, a member of the Roman aristocracy, and he had taken part in a delicate embassy to Constantinople at the time of the dismissal of John Chrysostomus. It is quite possible that the division on

¹⁸ Draucus: *CIL* VI 1725 = *ILS* 1284; Petronius Maximus: *CIL* VI 1749 = *ILS* 809; Nicomachus Flavianus: *CIL* VI 1782 = *ILS* 2948; A. Cameron, *The Last Pagans*, pp. 195-218 on the first decades of the fifth century and the Roman aristocracy, makes a case against the religious significance of the rehabilitation of Nicomachus Flavianus sr., and downplays the importance of the letters of the emperors, just a formality in his view; but see G. Clemente, *Introduction*, in Lizzi Testa (ed.), *The Strange Death*, pp. 13-29.

¹⁹ CA 14 (the *relatio* of Symmachus on the double election) and 17 (the *petitio* of the followers of Bonifatius to Honorius). J. Gaudemet, *La formation du droit séculière et du droit de l'Eglise aux IV^e et V^e siècles*, 2^e éd., Paris, 1979 on the letter of the clergy to Honorius.

²⁰ On Pelagius and the Roman aristocracy P. Brown, *Pelagius and his Supporters: Aims and Environment*, in «Journal of Theological Studies», 19, 1968, pp. 93-114; *The Patrons of Pelagius: the Roman Aristocracy between East and West*, «Journal of Theological Studies», 21, 1970, pp. 56-72, now in *Religion and Society in the Age of Augustine*, London, 1972, pp. 183-226; on pelagianism and the CA see now M. Kahlos, *Multiplex pernicioosa perversitas* (Coll. Avell. ep. 97). *The Image of Pelagianism in Collectio Avellana, especially in Gelasius' Letters*, in the 2016 Conference, see n. 1.

doctrinal problems, like the ones inherent to the Pelagian controversy, had no practical consequence on the supposed divisions of the aristocracy over the papal election. Nonetheless, an aristocracy already divided over very serious issues may have been inclined to transfer the dispute to the control of the bishopric. This involved other matters, like control over the churches and their resources, and other social groups, whose motivations are not clear in the sources. What is clear from the *Collectio* is that by now the election of the bishop of Rome was a municipal matter, from the point of view of the *praefectus urbi*, the senate and the people, but it involved wider interests, because of the relations between Africa, Gaul and the imperial family; the bishop of Rome may have been a local power, an official, to the eyes of the Romans, but it was more than that, when he exercised his authority over other bishoprics, in Gaul, as did Zosimus, or in Africa; above all, he embodied the universal aspirations of the catholic church, heir to the Roman empire.

The *praefectus urbi* Symmachus, it appears from the *Collectio*, worried about acting in the best possible way from the point of view of the rules that his office had to follow. He emphasized repeatedly that he had done what was right and possible, given the fact that he had entered office only two days before the fight over the election began. He mentioned the presence of the *proceres* at all the important turns of events, and made it clear that he had asked for the approval of the senate. Nonetheless, he was caught off guard by the reaction of the followers of Bonifatius, which caused a change of mind in the emperor, who withdrew his approval of the election of Eulalius. From then on, the main preoccupation of Symmachus was to justify his behavior, even offering apologies and trying a defense when writing to Constantius for advice and new orders. Constantius and Galla Placidia were very active, and the sister of Honorius wrote personally at least two letters. The role of the couple is far from clear, and it has been thought that they were initially in favor of Eulalius, and then had to comply with the new decision of the emperor in favor of Bonifatius. From the point of view of the role of the aristocracy, and of the senatorial assembly, it appears that they were called upon to maintain order, acting as an institution that was expected to do this, and to refrain from encouraging popular unrest. The aristocracy was divided into factions, quite possibly, although it is very difficult to make a safe guess on the motives and on the composition of the parties. It is relevant that the senate could be considered as a body responsible, as such, for governing the city, and that its support could be a safeguard for the prefect, and an interlocutor for the emperor. From this perspective, the discussion about Symmachus' religious persuasion appears to be somehow irrelevant. At the time, no imperial official could act as a pagan in any detectable and consistent way while in office. He could act in favor of one Christian faction or another, because this is what the whole dispute was about. He pointed out, in a letter to Constantius aimed at justifying his behavior that he had refused to go to the Lateran because he did not want to be accused of a partisan attitude by the other party.²¹ In the end he behaved as it was fit for a prefect, although the fact that Rome was now a Christian city, with very powerful and pervasive groups fighting each other, and with strong connections with a court marked by internal dissensions, made things much more difficult than at the time of Damasus.

²¹ CA 32, 3.

Gelasius and Hormisdas: The Acacian Schism

The last set of documents relates to another significant development in the history of the senate and the role of individual senators. It covers the period between the end of the fifth and the first decades of the sixth century: in 496 the bishop of Rome Gelasius wrote a very well-known letter, addressed to a powerful senator, Andromachus, and his fellow senators, on the celebration of the rite of the *Lupercalia* (CA 100); the same Andromachus was, most probably, the recipient of another letter from the bishop of Rome (CA 99), giving instructions on doctrinal matters. Around the same time, in 497, the *Collectio* registers a letter that some Egyptian *apocrypharii* addressed to an outstanding senator, Rufius Postumius Festus, who was a member of an embassy in Constantinople, again on matters of doctrine (CA 102); later, in 515 and 516, there was an exchange of letters between the emperor Anastasius, the senate of Rome and the bishop Hormisdas, in the attempt to solve the dispute over the Acacian schism (CA 107-115).

This evidence fits consistently into what we know about the senate and a number of senators in that period. In more than half a century after the struggle between Bonifatius and Eulalius there had been major changes: the Western emperor had ceased to exist after 476, and the only emperor resided in the East; the bishopric of Rome had become more and more relevant, and it tended to fill the power vacuum in Italy and in what was left of the Roman provinces in the West; Italy was ruled by Gothic kings, who had reached a compromise with the papacy and the Italian aristocracy who sat in the senate and was now willing to collaborate with them.

In this new situation, the senators had become more indispensable, to the bishop of Rome, to the king, and to the Byzantine emperor for different reasons. The senate, as an assembly, became the only political institution to represent continuity with the Roman tradition, and as such it lent legitimacy to the rulers in Italy, lay and religious alike. These were the real powers, but they needed the senate to deal with the Byzantine emperor, and they could not deprive their government of the expertise, prestige and wealth of the senators. So, in what would become the final stage of its history, the senate gained once again a considerable role in politics, a role that involved heavily religious issues, being religion a component, by now, of the relations between East and West. The senate played international politics, being on the receiving end of the initiatives of both emperor and king, and at the same time acted, as a mediator, both formally and informally (not always welcome) for the bishop of Rome in international relations, well beyond the municipal boundaries. The senate was at the time formed by a handful of families, strongly related one to the other through marriage alliances. The senators had lost most of their provincial posts, since Africa, almost all of Gaul, Spain were in the hands of the barbarians. They could still hold the offices of the urban and praetorian prefectures, beside the consulate, prestigious but without real power. They had, on the other hand, become closer to the court of the emperor in Ravenna first, and of the king afterwards, and filled various palatine offices.²² They had cultivated a strong sense of

²² On the senate in this period see n. 7; also A. Chastagnol, *Le Sénat romain sous le règne d'Odoacre*, Bonn 1966; for a discussion on Cassiodorus and the *Variae*, Bjornlie, *Politics and Tradition between Rome, Ravenna and Constantinople. A Study of Cassiodorus and the*

their superior status and of identity based on the recovery and observance of their unique tradition: the ingredients that made them a desirable, and often indispensable, ally for the players in the dangerous game of politics. Significant documents of this self-representation are the inscriptions in the seats of the Coliseum. There, in the final decades of the fifth century, a group of senators inscribed their names, reviving a tradition that had been kept alive for centuries, but apparently had been discontinued for a long time. The names are, as we should expect, the same we find active in politics, as ambassadors to the Byzantine emperor, and engaged in serious discussions in matters of religion; the same who appear in other contexts, at the court of the king, although the *Collectio* does not record them in this capacity; understandably so, since the documents in the collection deal with religious matters and with the role of the bishop of Rome in the disputes about orthodoxy and supremacy with the East, and only rarely, and in passing, mention the Gothic king.²³

It is not easy, though, to weigh the role of the senate and the action of individual senators: were they behaving like powerful *seigneurs*, now detached from an assembly that was nothing more than an ideological relic of the past, formally called upon, but hopelessly ineffective? Or, as we think more adherent to reality, did the very existence of the senate as an institution make the difference? Of course the assembly was no longer in charge of the most important issues and it was not part of the decision making process; on the other hand the senators were capable of individual initiative, sometimes very bold, as we shall see, but still possible because there was a senate. Its members may have acted independently, but formally they were members of a great institution. In that traditional society the past meant very much in shaping the attitudes and the actions of the élites, and the respect for the senate could not be dealt with slightly. Legitimacy depended upon it, and it would have been impossible to find an adequate substitute; the more so since the whole system was in danger of collapsing.

The documents in the *Collectio* allow us to understand better the events between the end of the fifth and the first decades of the sixth century. The letter of Gelasius already mentioned on the *Lupercalia* is a unique piece of evidence. We are left to guess why, in the vast production of this outstanding bishop, this document has been included, while others, and most of all the famous letter on the superiority of the *auctoritas sacra*

Variae, 527-554, Cambridge Univ. Press 2013; the best new analysis of the epigraphic documents and prosopography of most of the senators involved in the events of the time in S. Orlandi, *Epigrafia anfiteatrale dell'Occidente romano. VI. Roma. Anfiteatri e strutture annessi, con una nuova edizione e commento delle iscrizioni del Colosseo*, Roma 2004; C. Pietri, *Le Sénat, le peuple chrétien et les partis du cirque à Rome sous le pape Symmaque (498-514)*, in *MAH*, 78, 1966, pp. 123-139, now in *Christiana Respublica*, II, Roma, 1997, pp. 771-787; Id., *Aristocratie et société cléricale dans l'Italie chrétienne au temps d'Odoacre et de Théodoric*, in *Roma Christiana*, *BEFR* 224, Rome 1976, II, pp. 1007-1057; a useful summary of the events in O. Bertolini, *Roma di fronte a Bisanzio e ai Longobardi*, Bologna 1941, pp. 69-82; J. Moorhead, *Theodoric in Italy*, Oxford 1992, pp. 195-207; P. Amory, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489-554*, Cambridge Univ. Press 1997, pp. 128-229; see now La Rocca-Oppedisano, *Il senato romano*, pp. 63-204.

²³ In CA 113 Anastasius asks the senate to argue for religious peace *apud excelsum regem, cui regendi vos potestas vel sollicitudo commissa est*. A way to put the senate at the center of the negotiations, and possibly embarrass the pope.

pontificum over the *regalis potestas*, is missing.²⁴ Its content has called attention to the difficulties inherent in understanding how and when paganism ended and its relation to the triumph of Christianity. Recent studies have put the letter into a different perspective, making sense of it in the context of a dispute between Christian aristocrats and the bishop of Rome that had little to do with religion, and more with the persistence of rites that had lost their religious significance, and the personal struggle between Gelasius and the not always manageable senators.²⁵ The arguments used by the bishop have very little to do with religion and the condemnation of paganism; it seems that Gelasius is more willing to defy Andromachus and his fellow senators on the correct performance of the pagan rite, which they apparently are not willing, or able, to observe. It has to do with the effort of the bishop of Rome to curb the independence of the senators and to reassert the sacred nature of the city, more than to condemn paganism.

During the bishoprics of Felix, Gelasius and Hormisdas, between the end of the fifth and the first decades of the sixth century some facts fit into the picture described by the documents in the *Collectio*, and shed new light on the events. In the vacuum created by the absence of the emperor in the West a handful of senators travelled between the bishop of Rome, and less frequently the Gothic king, and the Byzantine emperor. They belonged to the most important senatorial families. Andromachus, the addressee of the letter of Gelasius, was *magister officiorum* and *consiliarius* of Odoacer in 489; probably in the same year, or not much earlier, he acted as envoy of the king to the East, charged with the task of winning recognition of the Gothic chieftain to the throne of Italy; at the same time, he was instructed by the bishop of Rome to try and persuade the heretic bishop Acacius to settle the doctrinal dispute with the Roman see. He had been briefed at length on the reasons of the schism on the basis of the document with which Felix, in 484, had excommunicated Acacius. Andromachus failed on both counts, also because of the sudden death of Acacius, but a pattern was set.²⁶ In 490 Theodoric sent the *caput senatus* Flavius Rufus Postumius Festus, who had been consul in 472, but his embassy was frustrated by the death of the emperor Zeno. He went back in 497, with the task to ensure the recognition of Theodoric as king of Italy, and bring back the *ornamenta palatii* that Odoacer had sent to the East. At the same time, the new bishop of Rome, Anastasius, sent his envoys to announce his election to the emperor. Festus, whether charged with this task, or more probably on his own initiative, went to the point of promising the emperor to obtain the signature of the bishop of Rome accepting the *Henotikon*. During his stay in Constantinople he was the addressee of a letter by some Egyptian *apocrisarii*; it is the letter in the *Collectio*, where he appears as the chief of the embassy, listed before the papal envoys. Its content was a doctrinal discussion.²⁷ The

²⁴ Gelas. *ep.* 12 Thiel.

²⁵ N. B. McLynn, *Crying Wolf: the Pope and the Lupercalia*, «Journal of Roman Studies», 98, 2008, pp. 161-175, followed by C. Machado, *The City as a Stage. Aristocratic Commemorations in Late Antique Rome*, in E. Rebillard — C. Sotinel (eds.), *Les frontières du profane dans l'antiquité tardive*, MEFRA, 428, 2010, pp. 287-301; M. Kahlos, *Pompa diaboli. The grey area of urban festivals in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries*, Coll. Latomus, 287, 2005, pp. 467-483 is less convincing on the specific interpretation of CA 100.

²⁶ Andromachus: Gelas. *ep.* 10 Thiel; PLRE 2, s.v. (3).

²⁷ Festus: PLRE 2, s.v. (5); Orlandi, *Epigrafia anfiteatrale*, pp. 482-484, nr. 74; the letter in CA 102, where it is clear that Festus was considered the head of the delegation.

whole situation shows some confusion, and competition, between important members of the senate and the bishop of Rome. Doctrinal matters were involved, meaning that these senators had the expertise (or thought they had) to discuss religious issues, and were aware that, in the politics of the time, these issues were crucial if anyone wanted to be taken seriously and have a real impact on things. Festus succeeded with the lay side of his mission, winning recognition for Theodoric, but failed in securing the signature of the pope. As a consequence, he may have had to use his influence to elect a bishop of Rome who could be more favorable to his choices, and this may have been one of the reasons of the long fight between Symmachus and Laurentius for the Roman siege; on this important event the *Collectio* does not contain any document, one of the most relevant gaps. There is also no mention of Faustus Niger, a very important member of the Anicii, who ended his career as *praefectus praetorio* between 509 and 512. Like his fellow senator Festus, he had been sent as ambassador to the East in 492 by Theodoric; again, he had no official mandate to discuss theological matters. Nonetheless, like Festus (who was his political opponent in the fight for the papal election that started in 498) he had discussions with the emperor in the effort to end the Acacian schism, and briefed the pope, who reacted sharply, refusing any compromise; Gelasius, in fact, had asked Faustus, in very strong terms, not to get involved with heretics, if he did not want to incur excommunication, at the same time elaborating on the duties and limits of the senate in doctrinal matters.²⁸

It is well known that these people, members of the core of the old Italian aristocracy, were deeply involved in church politics. They fought over papal elections, at the same time trying to curb the control of the clergy over the property of the *tituli*. This was, after all, still municipal politics, the kind the aristocracy had been playing for centuries, although with different interlocutors. In the years of the Acacian schism, some important senators, and the senate as such, played on a larger stage: the schism involved international relations that interested the bishop of Rome, the Byzantine emperor, the king of Italy. All of them had a complicated agenda, both in secular and religious matters. The senate as such had no real power, outside the issuing of decrees to curb corruption in church elections, or trying to decide who was going to be elected, or trying to retain control over donations and the property the senators had given to the churches. The senators were divided in factions most of the time, over the control of what mattered now in the city of Rome, church affairs. Nonetheless, when charged with embassies to the East, a few senators discussed doctrinal problems with the patriarch of Constantinople, and with the emperor himself, taking positions that were not always to the liking of the bishop of Rome. This meant a degree of autonomy, and an ability, or at least a disposition, to influence decisions on a greater scale. The politics of the time were complicated: an arian king had to get along with the catholic bishop of Rome to counterbalance the pressure from the Byzantine emperor, and the alliance was in the interest of the pope too, who wanted to assert his supremacy in doctrinal matters refusing and at times fighting the schism of Constantinople. The senate was in the middle of all this, called on to take sides, to play a role, relying on its prestige and expertise, but not much more.

²⁸ On Faustus Gel. *ep.* 10 and 12 (Thiel, pp. 341 and 349); *PLRE*, s.v. (2); Orlandi, *Epigrafia anfiteatrale*, pp. 476-478, nr. 62.

The Correspondence of the Emperor Anastasius

In this atmosphere the emperor Anastasius wrote two letters, to the senate of Rome and to the bishop Hormisdas, and received answers from both, between July and September 516; the letters are part of the vast dossier on the bishopric of Hormisdas, and are known only from our source (CA 111-114). The occasion is clear; the fight between Symmachus and Laurentius had weakened the papacy, provoked the intervention of Theodoric, usually very careful, at the time, not to interfere in church matters. When Hormisdas succeeded Symmachus, in 514, Anastasius had been in power a long time, since 491. He had been a *silentarius*, and had become a *decurio*, close to the empress, the widow of Zeno. He was fond of theology, considered himself an expert, and was probably personally involved in the discussions with the senators who came to Constantinople as ambassadors, or at least he was informed in detail, even before becoming emperor. He may have formed the conviction that the senate was capable of playing a role in the West, with a certain degree of autonomy from the bishop of Rome. After all, both Festus and Faustus, to name the most important, had discussed doctrinal matters (Faustus probably wrote something on the subject), and had taken a position which could encourage a move from the part of the Byzantine emperor, in order to assert his authority and at the same time mend the dissensions with Rome. Before the exchange of this correspondence, Hormisdas had sent the bishop of Pavia, Ennodius, as the head of an embassy, but that failed. The proposal to convene a synodus had not gone through, and relations were strained, also due to the difficult time the emperor was experiencing in his own domain. In the meantime, Anastasius had succeeded in defeating the *magister utriusque militia per Thraciam*, the catholic Vitalianus, and now was more secure on the throne.²⁹ The time could be right to force Hormisdas to an agreement on the emperor's terms. The letter to the senate has been considered, generally, as a formality, while the answer has been dismissed as irrelevant to prove any independent role of the council, as actually dictated by the same bishop of Rome. In the light of what Anastasius had personally experienced, it is highly probable that he was making a serious effort to form an alliance with the senate to counterbalance the power of the pope; or at least he had reasons to hope for an active role of that institution in favor of a *rapprochement* between East and West. Festus, the great member of the Decii, may have been alive then; he still was in 512; Faustus, the Anicius, was alive as late as 519. These could have been powerful allies. He knew, also from the stormy relations he had with Symmachus, that the senate could play a role: in 512 he had accused the pope of excommunicating him *conspirante senatu*, whatever that meant.³⁰ The letter of Anastasius was written very carefully: it aimed at flattering the senate as an institution. In the formal address the imperial chancery copied older rescripts; the emperor wrote *senatui suo*, listed, making some mistakes already in the models, the senatorial magistracies, evoked the tradition of the senate, spoke of the *utraque respublica*.³¹ The

²⁹ On Vitalianus *PLRE*, s.v. (2), pp. 1171-1176.

³⁰ Symm. *ep.* 10 (*PL* LXII 69).

³¹ CA 113, 2; I have discussed more in detail these documents and the role of the senatorial ambassadors in G. Clemente, *Il senato di Roma e Anastasio imperatore di Bisanzio. La religione e la politica*, in A. Corda-P. Floris (eds.), *Ruri mea vixi colendo. Studi in onore di*

attempt to win the support of the senate failed: this body could not dissociate itself easily both from the bishop of Rome and the king, and the balance of power among the aristocracy may have shifted to the alliance with these powers more than to the appeasement of the Eastern emperor. Nonetheless, the move of Anastasius was far from formal. He considered the senate, as he had known it, an institution still worth a serious effort. Not individual senators, but the senate as an institution comes once again to the foreground. The only power it had left was its tradition, its being the place where wealth and political expertise still made it a desirable, and in a way indispensable, ally. Its role in international politics was, however, beyond its means. The real power was elsewhere, and the senate could only play a vicarious role; but it was a role that made it still important in the larger arena of world politics, and not only a municipal council interested in city matters. This was an exceptional situation, however. In a few years, the same senate experienced a crisis that became irreversible: Theodoric changed policy, and Justinian was not prepared to suffer any interference in church matters. It may sound as a paradox, but the return of the emperor to the West, together of course with the consequences of the Gothic war, marked the beginning of the end of the Roman senate.

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Franco Porrà, Ortacesus (Ca) 2012, pp. 121-131; Senatorial Ambassadors between East and West: the Politics of Religion, in S. Acerbi-G. Vespignani, Studi di Tarda Antichità offerti a Ramón Teja, Roma 2016, pp.83-93.