

## Augustine's Roman Empire

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### The View from Hippo Regius

What was the Roman Empire to Augustine, or he to the Empire? Augustine's own answer in the *City of God*, the proclamation of a different citizenship entirely, has given a high philosophical tone to these questions. In this essay I propose to restate them at a more humdrum level, by examining Augustine's political horizons, as bishop of Hippo, and considering how these might have affected his dealings with, and presentation of, the representatives of imperial authority. My eventual aim is to propose a direct connection between the course of these dealings and the genesis of the *City of God*. But to measure the empire of Augustine's imagination against the viewpoint afforded by his provincial city, we can usefully begin with another, much more mundane, representation of the empire from Hippo. About thirty years before Augustine became bishop, the city council had erected a statue to the emperor Valens. And for all its formulaic grandiloquence, the accompanying inscription

CONQUEROR BY LAND AND SEA; RESTORER OF PUBLIC LIBERTY;  
TO OUR LORD FLAVIUS VALENS, CONQUEROR AND TRIUMPHANT,  
FOREVER AUGUSTUS<sup>1</sup>

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1. E. Marec, "Le Forum d'Hippone," *Libyca* (Arch/Ep) 2 (1954) v: 382–83: *Terra marique victori ac publicae libertatis restitutori d.n. Fl. Valenti, victori ac triumphatori semper Augusto*. The subsequent rubric denotes curial responsibility and civic funding.

is essentially a response to a specific event. The councilors were monumentalizing a news bulletin, teaching their readers, as Augustine did his in the *City of God*, how to interpret events on the other side of the Mediterranean.

The inscription allows us to glimpse the physical setting within which Augustine formulated his own vision. For example, Valens is the only Christian emperor known to have been commemorated at Hippo. But the triumphalism of the inscription proved premature when the emperor perished ignominiously at Adrianople (378). This must have made the monument a dubious advertisement of the efficacy of the Christian God, and a correspondingly useful exhibit for argumentative skeptics. The forum of Hippo was only a few hundred yards from the church: so when in the *City of God* Augustine argues the impossibility of judging the felicity of emperors by their success in “taming the foes of the republic, or in . . . crushing citizens who rise up as enemies against them” (5,24), and when Orosius vehemently refuses to allow pagans any legitimate consolation in the fate of Valens the “heretic” and “persecutor” (*Historia adversus paganos* 7,33,16–18), we might perhaps hear echoed their characteristically different responses to the mute reproach of the statue, or even to debates held in its shadow. It is also significant that the statue, the last imperial monument attested at Hippo, was nearly fifty years old when Rome was sacked. The strong likelihood that the “murmurers of 410” were unable to point to any incriminating inscriptions proclaiming the invincibility of the Christian princeling Honorius (only one such statue base has been found in the whole of north Africa)<sup>2</sup> helps bring home a transformation in commemorative fashions which is directly relevant to Augustine’s project. Bishops’ prayers had become more important than stone and bronze in implanting the emperor’s image in the minds of provincial citizens. Although Roman history, from Claudius to Valens, was still very much present in the forum of Hippo, it had also—in a sense—reached an end: the empire could be seen to be ripe for reconceptualization.<sup>3</sup>

But the principal interest of the Valens inscription, for students of the *City of God*, is the eccentricity of its message. Valens ruled the East, not the West; his brother Valentinian, the western emperor with direct authority over Africa, was notoriously jealous of his own prerogatives and fame; and what is more, no combined land and naval victory that restored “public liberty” is recorded

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2. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* VIII.12275.

3. See E. Marec, *Hippone le Royale: Antique Hippo Regius* (Algiers: Direction de l’intérieur et des beaux-arts, 1950) 70–79, for the gallery of statues discovered in the Forum.

in our sources for Valens's reign. The suppression of the usurper Procopius in 366, the only possible candidate for the victory, was actually achieved by attrition, contrived defections, and betrayal.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, in choosing their theme and their phraseology (which does not recur elsewhere) the councilors were not merely parroting misunderstood propaganda. The decision to fund the monument in effect denotes an investment in Valens, an emperor much underrated in the hindsight of the historiographical tradition but whose energy and efficiency in eliminating Procopius might indeed have seemed to well-informed observers to promise a lasting ascendancy over his so far lackluster brother.<sup>5</sup> And if such prospects were at best speculative, the councilors were not the only investors. Hymetius, proconsul of Africa, also celebrated the victory, erecting a statue at Carthage.<sup>6</sup> A connection can be surmised. Hymetius's gesture will have been reported to the emperors, and perhaps cost him dear;<sup>7</sup> the councilors, playing for lesser stakes, would meanwhile have looked for recognition from the proconsul.

The Hippo inscription thus offers a tantalizing glimpse of the complex dynamics of political power in Roman North Africa. The central part of this essay will sketch a similar background for Augustine's much more extensive commentary on contemporary politics, by considering the extent to which representatives of imperial authority will have noticed him, and the extent to which he sought their notice. Like the councilors, moreover, Augustine was presenting a picture of the empire that was ultimately his own, derived from information that was necessarily provisional and incomplete. Although we will never know exactly why the council decided to commemorate Valens, or why they presented him as they did, we can assume that the experience and connections of individual councilors, direct or indirect, at Carthage or at court, will have weighed heavily. In Augustine's case, on the other hand, we can suggest some direct connections between certain idiosyncrasies in his presentation of the

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4. The identification was proposed by Marec, "Le Forum," 383. The usurpation of Procopius and its suppression is fully described by J. Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus* (London: Duckworth, 1989) 191–201.

5. J. F. Drinkwater argues in a forthcoming paper that Ammianus Marcellinus has seriously distorted our perceptions of the late 360s by exaggerating Valentinian's exploits in Germany.

6. *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, ed. H. Dessau, 3 vols. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1892–1916), no. 768.

7. Hymetius's subsequent travails—a fine from Valentinian, then exile to an island after he had tried to mollify the emperor by magic—are described by Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* 28,2,17–23.

political scene and his own recorded experience. The following paragraphs will provide an introductory outline.

One experience in particular will have distinguished Augustine from his fellow citizens of Hippo: he had not merely seen an emperor's statue, but had actually met an emperor in the flesh. He had not seen imperial prowess at its most imposing. Valens's nephew Valentinian II was just thirteen when Augustine arrived in Milan, an awkward age made more awkward for Valentinian by the frailty of his regime. And Augustine's famously glum account of how he was required to tell transparent lies about the emperor's achievements (*Conf.* 6,6,9) invites us to look for traces of this experience in his vision of contemporary politics. An indication might duly be detected in his brief survey of recent history in the *City of God*. Gratian shows his outstanding merit in preferring Theodosius to his more malleable "little brother" (*Civ.* 5,26: *parvulum fratrem*); Valentinian is again a "little brother" when he is ejected by Maximus and taken in by Theodosius, who could so easily have eliminated him; he is still a "boy" (*puerum*) when Theodosius shows even more outstanding generosity and restores him to his throne. No other account makes Valentinian (who died aged twenty) so consistently so small.<sup>8</sup> We might therefore suspect that Augustine continued to see the boy he remembered from his encounter in Milan. This would allow the further suggestion that by downgrading Valentinian, Augustine might have been led to overestimate Theodosius, whom of course he never met; which will have helped sustain the belief, which continued to distort his judgment for over a decade, in the exceptional qualities of the Theodosian dynasty.<sup>9</sup>

But the Roman emperors are not central to the structure or argument of the *City of God*. The work begins instead in the city of Rome, and attacks the *superbi*, the proud men, who complained against the Christian God. Augustine was again unusual among citizens of Hippo in that he had lived in Rome. And although he says nothing about his experiences in the ancient capital in the *City of God*, a famous description in the *Confessions* of an encounter there with another embodiment of the empire is fundamental for an understanding of his complex attitude to the proud men of Rome. The account of how the

8. In Rufinus's account of the same events Valentinian grows from being *parvulus* (*Historia ecclesiastica* 11,12–13) to *adulescentulus* (*ibid.*, 15) to *adulescens* (*ibid.*, 31). The difference is sharpened by the probability that Augustine used Rufinus as a source for this passage: Y.-M. Duval, "L'éloge de Théodose dans la *Cité de Dieu* (V, 26,1)," *Recherches Augustiniennes* 4 (1966) 135–79.

9. R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 29–33.

prefect of Rome was instructed to find a rhetor for Milan, and how Augustine arranged matters so that it was he whom the then prefect, Symmachus, tested and sent, is so familiar that we easily miss how awkwardly Augustine twists the structure of the sentence.<sup>10</sup> The prefect is mentioned twice, with the result that Augustine is able to identify him by name, casually but conspicuously. No other character in the *Confessions* is introduced like this, with a bare name to adorn an office.<sup>11</sup> And here again a small detail gives an important clue to Augustine's outlook, and allows us to relate his outlook to his experience.

The significance of the care Augustine takes to mention Symmachus is that he believed, some fifteen years after meeting him, that his name was worth dropping. It is interesting in this respect that two decurions of Hippo are recorded in 399, exactly the time when the *Confessions* were composed, as clients of Symmachus:<sup>12</sup> Symmachus thus remained a name to conjure with in Augustine's own city. And Augustine's experience will have taught him that real power resided with Symmachus and his fellow nobles of Rome. His whole life had been changed by the prefect's nod of approval, which propelled him from obscurity to glittering prospects—of wealth, office, and enlightenment—at Milan. If anything, it is likely that Augustine's experience gave him an exaggerated respect for the potency of Symmachus and his kind, for his stay in Rome coincided with a period when, for political reasons, these aristocrats exerted unusually strong influence.<sup>13</sup>

Symmachus's son-in-law possibly makes an anonymous appearance in the *City of God*, as an embarrassed pagan suppliant in a Christian church (5,26).<sup>14</sup> But we cannot be sure, for Augustine now dismisses the heirs of Regulus and Scipio, and in doing so no longer cares to name names. His magnificent caricature of a Symmachian cultural milieu, where proud men soaked in Virgil (1,3) cling to their old gods and wallow in their luxury and avarice (30–31), and in

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10. *Conf.* 5,15,23: *postquam missum est a Mediolanio Romam ad praefectum urbis . . . ambivi . . . ut me probatum praefectus tunc Symmachus mitteret.*

11. J. J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 2.217–218, discusses the (short) register of persons named in the *Confessions*, but is unconvincing in singling Symmachus out as an “agent of conversion”: the proudly swollen supplier of Platonic texts at *Conf.* 7,9,13 has at least as strong a claim on this count.

12. Symmachus, *Ep.* 9,51 (of 399).

13. N. B. McLynn *Ambrose of Milan* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994) 159, 165–68.

14. Flavianus is the only known son of Theodosius's enemies known to have been at Rome in 394. But Augustine's language hardly suggests a specific reference to the urban prefect.

their insane obsession—*O mentes amentes!*—with the theater (32–33), raises questions about the social context that are of direct relevance for this study.<sup>15</sup> We face here the same delicate problems posed by Ammianus Marcellinus's (not wholly dissimilar) satirical sketches of senatorial life:<sup>16</sup> the impression made on their contemporary audience by these trenchant attacks will have depended upon the author's perceived standing in relation to his targets. In the *City of God* Augustine indeed discovered "an ideological opponent worthy of himself";<sup>17</sup> not all his initial readers, however, will have readily accepted that this provincial bishop was himself worthy of his eminent antagonists.

### Augustine and the Proconsuls

Students of the *City of God* have felt little need to examine the evidence for Augustine's links with the Roman aristocracy. After 410, Africa was awash with displaced senators: "the whole Roman nobility" was at Carthage in 411.<sup>18</sup> From there the illustrious pagan Volusianus sent polite greetings to Augustine, and set in motion the debate that issued in the *City of God*; meanwhile, Volusianus's sister Albina, one of the bishop's many well-born Christian admirers, was camped with her family virtually on his doorstep, at Thagaste. Rome, it would appear, had come to Augustine. But appearances can be deceptive, and Augustine's social access to these eminent refugees should not be taken for granted. The massive confidence with which Augustine demolishes the Roman cultural inheritance in the *City of God* has tended to govern interpretations of his encounters with the principal heirs, yet there is no evidence, for example, that he ever actually met either Volusianus or Albina.<sup>19</sup> A reassessment of the level

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15. Augustine's adversaries are specified by T. D. Barnes, "Aspects of the Background of the *City of God*," *University of Ottawa Quarterly* 52 (1982): 64–81, as "pagan Roman refugees of noble birth" (73).
16. In his digressions on Rome (14,6; 28,3) Ammianus excoriates senatorial luxury, greed, and interest in actresses, differing with Augustine only over the extent of classical learning (28,4,14). The historian's Roman audience is most recently discussed by J. Matthews, "The Origin of Ammianus," *Classical Quarterly* 88 (1994): 252–69.
17. J. J. O'Donnell, "The Inspiration for Augustine's *De civitate Dei*," *Augustinian Studies* 10 (1979): 75–79, at 78–79.
18. *Gesta collationis Carthaginensis* 1,149: *nobilitatem omnem hic esse Romanam*. The evidence is collected by P. Courcelle, *Histoire littéraire des grands invasions germaniques*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1964) 58–67.
19. Conversations between Augustine and Volusianus have been created by mistranslation of *Ep.* 135 (e.g., *Fathers of the Church* 20.13). Albina appears in a list of Augustine's noble visitors in F. van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1961) 245.

of his dealings with such people is therefore overdue; and such an investigation will have the additional benefit of bringing our initial question into sharper focus.

For Augustine's best-attested relations with senators are with those who embodied what he himself called "the power," the governors of Roman Africa.<sup>20</sup> Senatorial pride and imperial rule converged in these men, appointed by the emperor but drawn overwhelmingly from the Roman senate. The Hymetius who honored Valens, for example, was married to a sister of Symmachus's close friend Praetextatus; and the term Symmachus himself served at Carthage while Augustine was a student there had perhaps allowed the latter a first impression, from afar, of his future benefactor. And proconsular authority will have continued to impress itself upon Augustine at Hippo. One of the two proconsular legates probably retained his headquarters there, and there was also a powerful symbolic presence, nicely illustrated by another inscription from the Forum. Even the all-conquering Valens was outclassed by a monument the council had erected several decades before, to the proconsul M. Aurelius Consius Quartus, "a man of all illustrious glories, outstanding in his administration, astonishing in his virtue, exceptional in his honesty."<sup>21</sup>

The bishop's perceptions of, and approaches to, the proconsuls are again likely to have been shaped, at least in part, by his own prior experience. A notable mark of recognition during his youth had been when the proconsul Vindicianus, a "sharp old man," crowned him victor of an oratorical contest in the early 380s with his own hand.<sup>22</sup> The physical aspect here is important, for real power resided in Vindicianus's touch. The *Notitia dignitatum* represents the proconsuls with a picture of an ivory inkstand, to symbolize the judicial sentences that they solemnly wrote out.<sup>23</sup> As Augustine will have been well aware, Vindicianus's hand could as easily have marked him down as a Manichee. Later critics would allege that his sudden departure to Rome in 383 had been an escape from just such an eventuality.<sup>24</sup>

After Augustine's return to Africa the decisions fashioned by proconsuls would also concern him closely, as one of his principal instruments in the

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20. *Sermo* 302,17: *illam potestatem*.

21. Marec, "Le Forum," 388–390. For the *legatus Numidiae*, see A. Chastagnol, "Les Légats du Proconsul d'Afrique au Bas-Empire," *Libyca* (Arch/Ep) 6 (1958): 7–19.

22. *Conf.* 4,3,5: *proconsul manu sua coronam illam agonisticam imposuerat*; 7,6,8: *acuto seni*.

23. *Notitia dignitatum occidentalis* 18.

24. *Contra litteras Petilianas* 3,25,30.

conflict with the Donatists. Yet as far as our evidence shows, during the thirty years after his “friendly conversations” with Vindicianus he never enjoyed any similar intimacy with any other proconsul or comparable figure in Africa—despite his undoubted fame by the early 400s, despite the number of proconsuls from Christian backgrounds, and despite the opportunities provided by all his visits to Carthage. The real power-holding elite remained beyond Augustine’s reach. He himself describes being kept waiting in governors’ waiting rooms, and suffering humiliation in their presence.<sup>25</sup> The swaggering derision exhibited in the *City of God* toward the governors’ pagan peers acquires fresh interest when seen against this background. For as we shall see, the publication of the first installment coincides with the adoption of a newly self-assured manner in addressing a proconsul, which in turn reflects freshly acquired access to elite circles. The *City of God* should be seen as both a result of this new level of engagement, and a bid to exploit it.

First, however, the assertion that Augustine was, until 412, a politically marginal figure in Africa must be substantiated, for the opposite has often been assumed. The evidence, derived overwhelmingly from the bishop’s own writings, provides a picture that is incomplete but nevertheless coherent and consistent. During Augustine’s first decade at Hippo there is no record of any dealings with the proconsuls;<sup>26</sup> nor does the first attested encounter, in 404, suggest any previous expertise. Augustine himself, much later, reported a summons of a Donatist bishop before an unnamed proconsul on a heresy charge, and an easy conviction.<sup>27</sup> But Possidius, who was directly involved in the affair, tells a different story. The case was not easy at all. “Urgings of every kind” from Augustine were needed to bring it to court, and only after the third session was a verdict forthcoming.<sup>28</sup> Nor was this the end of the matter. Having won his case, Augustine persuaded the proconsul to remit the fine that he had imposed on the guilty Donatist. But the case was then reopened at Ravenna, and the emperor fined the proconsul, and his office staff, ten pounds of gold each for failing to exercise the proper severity.<sup>29</sup>

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25. *Sermo* 302,17.

26. It is worth noting that five of the eleven proconsuls attested between 395 and 404 feature among the correspondents of Symmachus.

27. *Contra Cresconium* 3,47,51: *facillimme convictus*.

28. Possidius, *Vita Augustini* 12,7.

29. There is a convenient summary in W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 3rd ed., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) 260–61.



Although the fines were eventually revoked, after the concerted efforts of the African bishops, we can easily imagine that strong views will have been held about Augustine at the proconsular headquarters in the intervening period; nor, perhaps, will the happy outcome fully have redeemed the meddlesome bishop's credit. It is not surprising, then, that the correspondence between Augustine and this proconsul has not been preserved. Nor ought we to be surprised at Augustine's decision, when he again approached the secular authorities soon afterward, to appeal not to the proconsul but to the lesser but partly overlapping authority of the vicar of Africa.

Augustine's Letter 86 is addressed to "His Magnificence" Caecilianus, plausibly to be identified with the man attested as a vicar in 404.<sup>30</sup> Having begun with praise for Caecilianus's administration and admiration for his Christian faith, Augustine deplores the rampages of the Donatists and regrets that Hippo and its environs have not yet felt the effects of Caecilianus's edict on the issue. He finally declares it his duty, as bishop of Hippo, to ensure that Caecilianus is aware of the omission, so that it could be rectified.

This brief letter has caused some notable confusions for modern prosopographers, whose Roman empire is much tidier than that of Augustine's imagination. André Mandouze inferred from the terms of Augustine's greeting—"Your Excellency"—that Caecilianus was a *vir illustris*, and so reassigned our letter to the following decade, when he had returned to Africa with the higher rank.<sup>31</sup> But this later mission was not an *administratio*, a term which Augustine reserves exclusively for regular administrative posts;<sup>32</sup> and the overloaded honorifics are best read as an index of the earnestness with which the bishop was seeking Caecilianus's favor.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* supposes that Caecilianus had just been promoted to proconsul, to explain how an edict that had originally been applied to Numidia but not to Hippo (which was located in the proconsular province) could now be enforced there.<sup>34</sup> The error here has arisen from Augustine's

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30. *Codex Iustinianus* 1,51,4, *ad Caecilianum vicarium*. The diocese is left unspecified.

31. *Prosopographie de l'Afrique chrétienne (303-533)*, ed. A. Mandouze (Paris: CNRS, 1982) 177–79.

32. The only other occurrences in Augustine refer to a proconsul and a *consularis* (*Epp.* 112; 116).

33. Note that *tua sublimitas*, one of the two terms on which Mandouze bases his argument, recurs in Ep. 154, to the vicar Macedonius; the other, *tua magnificentia*, also appears in laws addressed to a proconsul (*Codex Theodosianus* 12,1,149) and a *consularis* (*Constitutiones Sirmondianae* 5).

34. *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, vol. 2, ed. J. R. Martindale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) 245.

subtle crafting of his request to Caecilianus. For although he seems to imply it he nowhere states that the governor had any authority over Hippo. The careful phrasing of his lament that “the region of Hippo Regius” and the parts in its neighborhood “bordering on Numidia” had not yet merited the aid of Caecilianus’s edict instead suggests that he was stirring the delicate issue of administrative demarcation. In encouraging Caecilianus to “see to it” that his own sound policy was introduced also into the proconsular province, he offers him—should he care to use it—a stick with which to belabor the proconsul. Such an initiative would have particular point if, as the chronology allows, the proconsul with whom Augustine had made his intervention was still in office. But whatever Augustine’s motives, the letter shows clearly the distance that separated him from the governor. He did not know him personally, having been impelled to write (he says) by reports of his virtues rather than direct acquaintance; nor does the letter press for further contact.

Augustine’s next attested exchange with a governor occurred some four years later. Addressing the proconsul Donatus, the bishop omits formalities and proceeds directly to a lament about the present troubles afflicting the church, and to an appeal for help from the secular arm which he bolsters with a scriptural quotation (*Ep.* 100). This is an entirely different kind of letter, and bespeaks a very different relationship. Donatus owned estates at Hippo, and was known personally to Augustine. But the bishop could not presume upon his acquaintance with the proconsul. This letter has been misunderstood because scholars, assuming that he could, have taken it at face value and have focused upon his pleas, which fill the first two-thirds of the letter, that the newly appointed Donatus should not apply the death penalty against Donatists brought before his court.<sup>35</sup> Yet this plea sits awkwardly with the last part of the letter, which invites the governor to issue an edict to show the Donatists that the laws against them are in fact still in force. The apparent redundancy is explained by Augustine’s use of the conditional in his discussion of the trials and punishments. These were hypothetical, and contingent upon the publication of the edict requested in the conclusion. This would suggest that Augustine is uncertain whether or not the heresy laws are still to be applied against the Donatists, and that his purpose in writing to Donatus is not to offer fatherly advice but to

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35. Frend, *Donatist Church*, 271–72, speaks of Donatus’s “zeal” and eagerness to apply the death penalty; cf. G. Bonner, *Saint Augustine of Hippo*, 2nd ed. (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 1986) 267.

pump cautiously for information. The tortuously indirect politeness of his approach will be familiar to any reader of the letters of Symmachus.

This would require us to assign the letter not to the accepted date of winter 408/9 but to the months immediately following August 408, when the sudden fall of Stilicho had raised the question of the future validity of his heresy laws. The change has the significant result that the letter to Donatus will now precede Augustine's first approach, as bishop, to the imperial court. In his correspondence with Stilicho's supplanter, the new powerbroker Olympius, Augustine politely seeks reassurance that the anti-heresy laws remained in force. In other words, we should infer that Donatus had failed to satisfy Augustine, perhaps by protesting ignorance of the current mood at Ravenna and inviting Augustine to find out for himself. And in feeling his way into court politics Augustine is even more indirect than he had been with Donatus. Having devoted his first letter entirely to the business arrangements of one Bishop Boniface, he reserves the crucial question about the heresy laws for the second, which he must have written immediately upon getting an encouraging reply to his first initiative.<sup>36</sup>

Augustine's tentative approach to Olympius shows the reality of dealings between a provincial bishop and the powerful figures who controlled the government. The bishop has often been assumed to have had influence at the highest levels; his intervention with Olympius has been seen as decisive.<sup>37</sup> But he didn't, and it wasn't. There is no reason to suppose that Augustine had had any previous contact with Olympius. When he twice expresses confidence that Olympius would receive his letter in his "customary" manner (*Ep.* 96,1; 3), he means no more than that Olympius was known to be gracious toward all his correspondents.<sup>38</sup> Augustine's fulsome recapitulation, at the start of the second letter, of Olympius's reply to his first shows clearly that letters from the court did not usually feature in the bishop's mail.

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36. The second letter was sent *media hieme* (*Ep.* 97,2); *Ep.* 96 had responded to reports of Olympius's promotion in September 408. The beginning of Donatus's term is dated from the Codes to between June and November 408.

37. Frend, *Donatist Church*, 270–71, makes Augustine "well-acquainted with members of rival groupings" at court (citing Paulinus of Nola and Anicius Bassus!) and argues that his request to Olympius "found ready acceptance." The anti-Donatist law which Donatus posted at Carthage on November 24 comes too soon to be credited to Augustine.

38. When Augustine says he is raising the matter of Boniface's estate "again" (*Ep.* 96,2: *rursus*) he likewise means merely that it had exercised Olympius's predecessor.

Even Donatus, the one proconsul with whom Augustine was on familiar terms, remained beyond his direct reach. As the bishop ruefully acknowledges in another letter (*Ep.* 112), he never actually met Donatus during his proconsular term. Augustine had no privileged access to the machinery of government. Like nearly everybody else who encountered the imperial administration, he was groping through a fog in the hope of grasping and manipulating the dimly perceived, barely accessible levers of power.

And Augustine was still groping when Alaric's Goths clattered into Rome in 410. There is no record of any communication with Donatus's immediate successors. Nothing prepares us, then, for Augustine's letter to the proconsul Apringius, in 412 (*Ep.* 134). The bishop begins by reminding Apringius that proconsuls too must one day stand to receive judgment before a heavenly tribunal, and proceeds to urge him—speaking as “bishop to a Christian”—to show mercy. The arrogation of authority is remarkable. And the quality of mercy being urged was calculated to set alarm bells ringing among the proconsul's more senior officials. Fresh Donatist outrages had caused the full severity of the laws to be set in motion, but Augustine insisted that the guilty should be given the chance to repent. This was the same plea that had caused so much trouble, and the threat of a crippling fine, eight years previously. Yet now Augustine appears able to make it with serene confidence.

### Marcellinus

The reason for Augustine's confidence with Apringius, of course, was that this time he could count on a powerful seconder.<sup>39</sup> The letter to the proconsul was not sent directly but enclosed in another, Letter 133 to the proconsul's brother, who is invited to deliver it and to help plead the bishop's case. The brother, Marcellinus, was at the time in Africa on a special mission from the emperor; and by the time this letter was written he had become Augustine's trusted friend. For the first time, Augustine had established a working relationship with a high-level imperial official.<sup>40</sup>

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39. Indispensable for the following is M. Moreau, *Le dossier Marcellinus dans la correspondance de saint Augustin* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1973).

40. A further letter to Marcellinus, number 139, shows that the initial appeal to Apringius was unanswered and so warns us not to overstate the bishop's influence. Earlier constraints still perhaps applied: Augustine's request in his renewed appeal for a stay of execution so that he himself might appeal to the imperial court (citing a precedent to show that clemency would be granted “easily”: *Ep.* 139,2) suggests that Apringius (or his staff) was concerned that the Crispinus fiasco might be repeated.

Marcellinus, the *tribunus et notarius* who adjudicated the Conference of Carthage, is of especial interest to readers of the *City of God* as the “dearest son” to whom Augustine dedicated the work (*Civ.* 1, praef.; 2,1). But familiarity with Marcellinus has blinded us to the novelty, for Augustine, of this two-year friendship with a senior imperial administrator on active duty. The relationship offered Augustine access to the empire at a new level and gave him, at last, a platform from which to address Marcellinus’s peers. The dedication, then, is not incidental. Marcellinus’s name gave substance to Augustine’s campaign against Roman pride; and Marcellinus could personally ensure that the book found readers among the elite.

The friendship that Augustine developed with Marcellinus must not, by any means, be taken for granted. One reason why he had achieved nothing similar with any of the other pious Christian governors who had passed through Africa was the practical difficulty of getting close to conscientious imperial officials. When Augustine encountered Marcellinus at the opening of the Conference of Carthage in June 411—quite probably the first time the two men met<sup>41</sup>—he will have seen him attended by a staff proportionate to his authority: some two dozen members are carefully itemized in the preamble to the *Gesta collationis* (1,1). The sheer physical presence of this array helps convey the inaccessibility of men like this to Augustine. On the other hand, the *Gesta* also suggest that Marcellinus’s staff was a somewhat makeshift collection, seconded from various African bureaus. This might have helped create an opening for Augustine to make his impression. The sudden prominence he enjoys in the third session, and the encouragement Marcellinus there offers him, can plausibly be seen as a crucial stage in this courtship.<sup>42</sup>

Marcellinus, not the pagan aristocrat Volusianus, is at the center of the debates that occasioned the *City of God*. Nagged by his Christian mother, Volusianus had indeed entered into correspondence with Augustine. But we can legitimately suspect some sly teasing in his exquisite graciousness. He artfully distanced himself from his questions by attributing them to others (*Ep.* 135,2), and later made it clear that he placed little weight on the outcome of

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41. Moreau, *Le dossier*, 105–111, acknowledges the lack of evidence for prior contacts; her arguments that these nevertheless existed are not compelling.

42. The frequency of Augustine’s interventions—six in the first session, five in the second, 59 in the third—tells its own story. See the figures in S. Lancel, *Actes de la Conférence de Carthage*, vol. 1 (SC 194, Paris: Cerf, 1972) 253–73. There is also an instructive change in the manner of Augustine’s exchanges with Marcellinus: compare, for example, *Gesta* 1,78–83 with 3,19–21.

the philosophical question he had raised over the Incarnation (*Ep.* 136,2). Marcellinus, who was meeting Volusianus on a daily basis (*Ep.* 136,1), forced the central issues into the open, conveying to the bishop Volusianus's more urgent objections—about the validity of pagan sacrifice, the compatibility of Christianity and service to Rome, and the misfortunes suffered by the state under Christian emperors (*Ep.* 136,2). And Augustine's decision to address his response to Marcellinus (*Ep.* 138,1) shows that he appreciated the relative value of his two interlocutors.

Augustine's problem was not in finding an answer to Volusianus but in getting it heard. An incident reported by Marcellinus illustrates the bishop's plight beautifully: a rich landowner from Hippo had entertained his hearers at Carthage with a story about Augustine's inability to give a convincing answer to his questions (*Ep.* 136,3). Augustine lacked the social authority to bring his intellectual weight to bear upon even the gentry of Hippo, who could slip away from his sermons to belittle him at parties to which he was never invited. He therefore needed Marcellinus as the dedicatee of the *City of God* for the same reason that he needed him as a spokesman in the salons of Carthage (*Ep.* 138,1): only thus could he gain purchase on the governing elite of the empire.

The sudden execution of Marcellinus for treason in September 413 was therefore not only a grievous personal loss for Augustine, but also threatened to abort his massive vindication of the city of God almost before he had begun it. The force of the blow has been disguised by the swiftness with which fortunes were reversed. Within a year, the vicissitudes of court politics had compensated Augustine for the loss of his patron. With the formal exoneration of Marcellinus, he had a martyr on his title page.<sup>43</sup> There is a vivid illustration of Marcellinus's posthumous potency in Letter 151 of 414, where the bishop rehearses the circumstances of his friend's execution to his correspondent of ten years previously, the vicar Caecilianus, now back in Africa on a mission from the emperor. Caecilianus hardly needed to hear the details, having spent the previous year in Carthage, and being associated closely with Marcellinus's executioner. Augustine's carefully pointed letter, entirely stripped of the effusions of a decade earlier, is in fact designed to present his conditions for accepting Caecilianus's pleas that he had not been implicated in the affair. The

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43. Marcellinus's rehabilitation, while probably less immediate than implied by Orosius, *Historia adversus paganos* 7, 42,17, had been accomplished by September 414, when Marcellinus is mentioned honorably in *Codex Theodosianus* 16,5,5.

roles have been reversed. This time, in the aftermath of Marcellinus's rehabilitation, it is Caecilianus who needs Augustine's endorsement. As the acknowledged custodian of his friend's memory, Augustine was qualified to give a decisive verdict upon anyone suspected of complicity. He pressed home his advantage, requiring from Caecilianus not only a full account of his actions but also a commitment to receive baptism (*Ep.* 151,14). Caecilianus's baptism would mark not only a symbolic submission to Augustine's authority but also a dramatic acknowledgment of the claims he was making for the city of God.

But in the anxious period before Marcellinus's name was cleared, Augustine had been faced with the prospect of having somehow to relaunch his great and arduous work. Traces of his efforts remain. For during this winter of 413/4 he broke his customary policy of refusing to intercede for acquaintances in criminal cases, and sent his trusted emissary Boniface to Carthage to deliver an appeal to the vicar of Africa on behalf of a recently condemned criminal.<sup>44</sup> Macedonius, the vicar, questioned the wisdom of indiscriminate intercession and earned in reply a massive, painstaking response (*Ep.* 153); he also received, eventually, a copy of the first three books of the *City of God* (*Ep.* 154,2).<sup>45</sup> Augustine clearly knew Macedonius personally, having had ample opportunity to make his acquaintance during his extended visits to Carthage in 412/3.<sup>46</sup> His approach to him now, at a time when he had foresworn any further visits to Carthage after the shock of Marcellinus's execution (*Ep.* 151,3), looks much like a cautious attempt at reengagement with the latter's milieu. The care and effort that are evident in his two long letters were rewarded. Acknowledging the need to carry the argument of the *City of God* to the "impudently stubborn" who resisted (*Ep.* 154,2), Macedonius offers his own future services after his return to Italy (*Ep.* 154,3). In the vicar Augustine had meanwhile recognized exactly what he needed: "a man who while wearing the

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44. Augustine's policy is set out by Possidius at *Vita Augustini* 20; it is also clear that the vicar, approaching the end of his term, was surprised by the intercession. Boniface, who had delivered the letter to Olympius (*Ep.* 96) and also one to Marcellinus (*Ep.* 143), seems to have had some expertise in dealings with the secular authorities.

45. Augustine's promise to send some writings, which Marcellinus reminds him of at *Ep.* 152,3, had probably been made in the letter delivered by Boniface (the pluperfect, *promiseras*, denotes merely that the promise had preceded the books' non-arrival, *non accipi*).

46. Augustine mentions an incident when Macedonius had presented a plea to an ecclesiastical tribunal: *Ep.* 153,10.

belt of office of an earthly judge is already thinking of the heavenly republic” (*Ep.* 155,17).

However, in their combination of high political office and pious commitment to Augustine’s cause, Macedonius and Marcellinus remain exceptional, and are marked out as such by the way they are incorporated into his correspondence as partners in a dialogue. Augustine’s exchange with Macedonius clearly impressed his biographer Possidius, who gives an entirely misleading impression of the admiration the bishop commanded among with the secular “powers” by quoting extensively, and exclusively, from the vicar’s reply (*Vita Augustini* 20). Modern scholars have continued to generalize mistakenly from this untypical case.<sup>47</sup> In thus assuming a ready-made secular audience for Augustine, they have underestimated the challenge he faced in creating one, for a work that looked far beyond his customary competence. Although in the long course of its development the *City of God* would achieve a fame that guaranteed it readers, it owed its initial momentum to the aristocratic, politically involved patrons who provided Augustine a credible link with his ostensible targets.

Some fifteen years later, when Augustine brought the *City of God* to its “astonishing” culmination, he had narrowed his scope to the immediate surroundings of his own city, a place defined no longer by its statuary but by its handfuls of sacred dust.<sup>48</sup> This vast shift of perspective, from the pagan relics of Rome to the *martyria* of Hippo Regius, has gripped the imaginations of the bishop’s readers ever since. The contention of this essay is that the book presupposes another shift that represents a hardly less remarkable achievement. Augustine had reached out from his provincial city of Hippo Regius to present a plausible-sounding challenge to the stiff-necked empire of pagan Rome.

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47. P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967) 336, thus evokes a succession of administrators in Africa who “would return to Italy with presentation-copies of the *City of God*.”

48. P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 27–28.