

# Nobility, Ascetic Christianity and Martyrdom

## A Family's Identity in the Writings of Ambrose of Milan

*Janira F. Pohlmann*

### INTRODUCTION

Aurelius Ambrosius was born into a Christian family between the years 334 and 340. At that time, his father held the position of praetorian prefect of Gaul and his family lived in Trier.<sup>1</sup> As a boy, Ambrose lost his father, and his mother moved to Rome with him, his brother Uranius Satyrus and his sister Marcellina.

Almost twenty years after Ambrose's death in 397, Paulinus of Milan was designated as Ambrose's biographer by Augustine to write under the bishop of Hippo's supervision. Paulinus gives us little information about Ambrose's childhood; however he claimed that the bishop of Milan had dedicated himself to the study of the liberal arts in Rome.<sup>2</sup> Of course, we must be mindful of the *topoi* of a hagiographical text written over twenty years after Ambrose's death. After all, the work was intended to sanctify. The bishop's victories over heretics - especially Arians - and emperors, his miracles and predestination, noticed since his childhood; all are part of an attempt to promote a holy man and a benefactor of the Christian faith. Ambrose was an ideal model to confront the Pelagian heresy that was a major issue for the Nicene Christians Paulinus and Augustine. Taking account of

<sup>1</sup> Paulinus of Milan. *Vita Ambrosii* ed. A.A.R. Bastiaensen *Vita di Cipriano; Vita di Ambrogio; Vita di Agostino* (Verona, 1975), 3.1.

<sup>2</sup> Paulinus of Milan. *Vita Ambrosii*, 4.

these issues, we can see that the *Vita Ambrosii* is not simply a biography or historical reconstruction of the life of this Milanese bishop. In the *Vita Ambrosii* we can find the details required to understand substantial parts of Ambrose's life.

Thus, we continued our research and wrote a part of Ambrose's history. Not a history in which we intend to reproduce the world in which the bishop lived –an absurd and unimaginable task – however, a history that aims to make that old context more tangible in our present.

Ambrose's father, whose name was also Ambrose, was a praetorian prefect of Gaul under Constantine II. He died when Ambrose was young, but neither Ambrose nor Paulinus of Milan explained the context of his death. He was killed after the defeat of Emperor Constantine II by his brother, Constans I, in the Battle of Aquileia in 340.<sup>3</sup> David Natal Villazala explains that after his defeat, Constantine was executed and punished by *damnatio memoriae*, and many of his supporters were deposed.<sup>4</sup> Of course, Paulinus kept silent about the possible persecution of Ambrose's father; after all, he wrote to praise the sanctity of Ambrose and, therefore, would not allow such negative stains on the bishop's family. The fact is that the praetorian prefect died in this year and that Ambrose's family moved to Rome. If his father was persecuted as a traitor, it is unsurprising that the bishop omitted this event in his writings.

We know that once the elder Ambrose was dead, the widowed mother of the family moved to Rome with her children.<sup>5</sup> In this city, Ambrose received an education grounded in the liberal arts, in other words, an education based in the disciplines of the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*.<sup>6</sup>

The legacy of the Greeks, rhetoric and the other liberal disciplines were part of the inherited knowledge of Roman society. Despite being an ancient inheritance, it was only in the sixth century A.D. that the arts which constituted knowledge of the liberal disciplines were organized by Boethius into the *trivium-quadrivium* system.<sup>7</sup> Thus, grammar, rhetoric and dialectic now constituted the *trivium*; arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy, the *quadrivium*. For now, in order to avoid anachronisms, we prefer to emphasize that Ambrose received an education based in the liberal arts, as Paulinus of Milan says, and not in *trivium-quadrivium* system.

<sup>3</sup> A.H.M. Jones, J.R. Martindale and J. Morris, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, vol 1: AD 260-395 (Cambridge, 1971), p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> D. Natal Villazala, 'Muerte, identidad y poder en Ambrosio de Milán', in G. Bravo and R. González Salinero (eds), *Formas de morir y formas de matar en la Antigüedad romana* (Madrid-Salamanca, 2013), pp. 371-383, at p. 372.

<sup>5</sup> Paulinus of Milan. *Vita Ambrosii*, 4.1

<sup>6</sup> Paulinus of Milan. *Vita Ambrosii*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> L. M. Mongelli, 'Retórica: a virtuosa elegância do bem dizer', in L.M. Mongelli (ed.), *Trivium e Quadrivium: as artes liberais na Idade Média* (Cotia-SP, 1999), p. 77.

In a society particularly concerned about public life, the mastery of these disciplines enabled many individuals to ascend socially. Because of his aptitude with words, Ambrose was a lawyer in the hearings of the Praetorian Prefect Probus, who was a Christian man and a member of the important family of Anicii. According to Paulinus, Ambrose was successful in defending these cases, which was why he was appointed by the current prefect to contribute with his *consilium*. In the year 374, Ambrose received the title of governor (*consularis*) of the provinces of Liguria and Emilia (*Aemilia et Liguria*) and he moved to Milan. Also in this year, he was acclaimed to the episcopate of the city, after the death of Bishop Auxentius, who, according to Paulinus of Milan, was a supporter of the ideas of the Arian heresy (*arianae perfidiae*).<sup>8</sup> According to Ambrose's biographer, this election was decided by popular acclaim.<sup>9</sup>

At that time, Milan was the capital of *Italia Annonaria* and residence of the diocese's vicar. Despite being a reputable city, it was the site of constant clashes between groups supporting *homoean* ideas on one side and those supporting *homoousian* ideas on the other, the latter of which were disseminated through the creed established by the Council of Nicaea in 325, and were safeguarded by Ambrose as well.<sup>10</sup> In this way, Ambrose contributed to the development of a Nicene-Christian identity. We know this 'identity' was composed of many elements and, in the present paper, we will analyze 'a noble and ascetic Christian-identity' built by Ambrose through his own words. Nevertheless, Ambrose's wider contribution to Nicene-Christian identity lies beyond the scope of this paper.

We must return to the case of Milan. The fourth-century professor of rhetoric Decimus Magnus Ausonius passed through the city when he was returning to Bordeaux and provided a description of the Milanese infrastructure: Milan was a double walled city, a large center full of splendid homes; there was a circus, an indoor theater, temples and imperial palaces, and a mint for coins and *tremisses* in honor of Hercules.<sup>11</sup> Milan functioned as the imperial capital during most of the fourth century, until the year 404, when the western capital was moved to Ravenna.

Therefore, in Milan we have a city that was militarily and politically central to the Empire, and, even more, where social and cultural life pulsed strongly in the fourth century. In this way, Milan was a significant hub which encompassed several powers; it was perfect for the distinct *ecclesia* which, in the year 374, came to have Ambrose as bishop.

<sup>8</sup> Paulinus of Milan. *Vita Ambrosii*, 5-6; Jones, Martindale and Morris, *PLRE I*, p. 52. Paulinus of Milan. *Vita Ambrosii*, 6.1: 'Per idem tempus, mortuo Auxentio arrianae perfidiae episcopo'.

<sup>9</sup> Paulinus of Milan. *Vita Ambrosii*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> People who defended *homoeans* notions preached that Jesus was made from a similar substance to his Father (*homoean*, or similar substance), however, that He was not of the same substance of his Father. This proposition was opposed to *homoousians* notions safeguarded in the Nicene Council accomplished at 325.

<sup>11</sup> Decimus Magnus Ausonius, c.7 *Mediolanum*, ed. R. Peiper, *Ordo urbium nobilium* (Teubner, 1886).

## FAMILY LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS OF BELONGING

When we think about the context of Ambrose's election to the episcopate, we have to remember that Milan was going through periods of social unrest due to the already mentioned conflicts between defenders of the Nicene Creed and defenders of *homoean* ideas. At this time, Milan had a significant number of the latter, most notably Justina, Gratian's stepmother and mother of Valentinian II. After the death of the Emperor Valentinian I in 375 and the end of his policy of non-intervention in religious matters, clashes between Arians and Nicenes gained new impetus. Part of this context, undoubtedly, was due to the strong support provided to the Arians by Justina and hence by her son, Valentinian II. As has already been mentioned, we do not intend to dwell on the issues of identity caused by the rivalry between Nicenes and Arians in this article. However, we believe it is important to highlight the context of internal disunity experienced by the Milanese Christian community - led by Ambrose.

In a scenario where dogmas and ecclesiastical hierarchies were being contested, different factions bestowed on themselves the responsibility to be the broadcasters of the 'true principles' disseminated by Jesus.

Angelo Paredi shows us that when Ambrose was a child, he was only initiated into the Christian mysteries with the sign of the cross, but we know that Ambrose's family was certainly Christian.<sup>12</sup> Yet in attempting to define religious beliefs, it is difficult to know exactly which version of the Christian faith was held by his family when Ambrose was a child. Both the bishop himself and his biographer, Paulinus of Milan, left us meager information about Ambrose's childhood. And it may be that this household had no clear notion of the existence of such dogmatic distinctions.

We caution that, in most cases, religious practice is more dynamic and inclusive than the world of dogmatic distinctions. The raising of Ambrose to the episcopate allows us to look at an example of this ambivalence. According to Paulinus, when Ambrose was made bishop, followers of both *homoousian* and *homoean* ideas had gathered in the same church to decide who would be given this role.<sup>13</sup> On this occasion, Ambrose entered the building to act in his position as *consularis* and to promote peace and order among a group which was Christian above all else, and which lacked a leader because its bishop, Auxentius, had died. This example is significant as a demonstration of Christian integration in both special events and everyday actions. Here, it is important for us to observe the meeting of different Christians under one roof. Bonds were established based on Christianity, and only those people who did not share these beliefs were excluded from this group. For now, we are only interested in reaffirming that Ambrose's family was certainly Christian. In addition, we would like to point out that after the death of his father, his mother remained a widow

<sup>12</sup> A. Paredi, *Sant'Ambrogio e lasuaetà*. (Milan, 1941), p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Paulinus of Milan. *Vita Ambrosii*, 6.

until her death<sup>14</sup>. We can also note that at Christmas sometime between the years 352 and 354, his sister Marcellina consecrated her virginity to God in the basilica of St. Peter, under the care of Pope Liberius (352-366)<sup>15</sup>.

According to Rita Lizzi Testa, Liberius had successfully undertaken a major conversion of the Roman nobility. Moreover, the pope emphasized the need to regulate Christian practices at a time when imperial authority based on Arian notions entered into the debate about Christ's nature. In order to distinguish and adapt the practices of Nicene Christianity, Liberius claimed that perfection could be achieved through different degrees of chastity and sexual abstinence. According to Testa, this '*nuova spiritualità cristiana*' - the circle of the faithful that gathered around Liberius - produced new moral codes for a Christianity of excellence, powered by asceticism<sup>16</sup>.

Liberius gathered around him individuals who adhered to his ascetic morality, as Ambrose himself tells us. First of all, his sister, Marcellina, was consecrated as a virgin under the pope's supervision. Secondly, at the beginning of Book III of *De virginibus*, Ambrose advocated a return to the teachings of Liberius, a man 'of blessed memory'.<sup>17</sup> These points show us that Rome was the Christian universe in which Ambrose's family found its protection and training. This set of ascetic values influenced the whole family. Like Ambrose, his brother Satyrus, his mother and his sister incorporated themselves into the morality of the ascetic life. Meanwhile, we can see a lifestyle closely linked to Christian ascetic ideas.

Richard Damian Finn has recently given us a clearer picture of the appropriations and adaptations from the Platonic and Neoplatonic ascetic principles undertaken by Christian writers. Finn emphasizes Origen of Alexandria's understanding of asceticism as an integral part of every Christian's development, and the changes which required a more perfect ascetic lifestyle, based on voluntary poverty and sexual renunciation, a phenomenon observed in Christian asceticism from the end of the third century up to the fifth century<sup>18</sup>. Ambrose defended these principles and propagated them throughout the Latin West in four of his works which emphasized female virginity and, consequently, Christian asceticism; *De virginibus*, *De virginitate*, *Exhortatione virginitatis* and *De viduis*.

Peter Brown has also addressed the ascetic scenario of the sixth century. Brown argued that ascetic clerics such as Ambrose, Augustine and Jerome were reacting to the religious habits of the majority

<sup>14</sup> Paulinus of Milan. *Vita Ambrosii*, 4, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ambrose, *De virginibus*, ed. D. Ramos-Lissón, *Sobre las vírgenes; La virginidad; La educación de la virgen; Exhortación a la virginidad* (Madrid, 2011), III, 1.1. The year of Marcellina's consecration is debated. Paredi claims that it occurred in 353, while Domingo Ramos-Lisson finds the fact among 352 and 354. A. Paredi. *Sant' Ambrogio*, p. 11; Ramos-Lissón, *Sobre las vírgenes; La virginidad; La educación de la virgen; Exhortación a la virginidad* (Madrid, 2011), p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> R.L. Testa. *Senatori, popolo, papi: Il governo di Roma al tempo dei Valentiniani*, (Bari, 2004), pp. 114-116.

<sup>17</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus*, ed. D. Ramos-Lissón, *Sobre las vírgenes; La virginidad; La educación de la virgen; Exhortación a la virginidad* (Madrid, 2011), III, 1, 1: 'Quoniam quae habimus superioribus duobus libris digessimus, tempus est, soror sancta, aequae mecum conferre soles, beatae memoriae Liberii praecpta revolvere.'

<sup>18</sup> R. D. Finn, *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman world* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 104 - 107.

of their contemporaries. The austere asceticism they propagated allowed them to form the new clerical elite within the Christian community of the late-fourth century<sup>19</sup>.

It is true that in the early stages of the transition from polytheistic to Christian asceticism there was a significant clash between the ideals of sexual renunciation and abandonment of the secular world - promoted by the writings and sermons of the bishops on one side and the political and administrative authorities on the other. After all, embracing these elements of Christianity could remove women and men - who had been educated for marriage and the maintenance of secular life - from their social, civil world.

However, as the ties between Christian leaders and temporal power were strengthened, the former were often integrated into the imperial circles, and so ascetic morality needed to be reorganized to fit this new social context.

Therefore, in the case of Ambrose's family and circle of friends, we can speak of a 'moderate asceticism'; in other words, this group did not clash with imperial institutions and lived alongside other members of society. As David Natal Villazala has argued, from the early fourth century, asceticism was no longer a lifestyle which conflicted with the standards of society. It was transformed into a means of protecting a family's patrimony and a mechanism for ensuring cohesion between the different groups that inhabited the Roman Empire.<sup>20</sup>

Peter Brown has also emphasized the unity and the distinction offered by the ascetic lifestyle. In 394, when Pontius Meropius Paulinus, future bishop of Nola, was ordained as a priest, he discarded many of his family properties and adopted a life of ascetic continence. Thus, he brought great renown to his family<sup>21</sup>.

Being part of a harmonious and organized group guaranteed, at least in principle, protection and a voice to its members. Coming to Rome as a boy, the ascetic lifestyle had certainly allowed Ambrose and his family to integrate into a group which was not limited by the familial ties of blood. We know that an ascetic morality was shared by important members of the Church in both eastern and western parts of the Roman Empire. Beyond the ties of blood, this ideal united distinct *ecclesiae* and strengthened this wider group against their opponents.

The asceticism shared by Ambrose's family while he grew up in Rome was described by Paulinus of Milan. According to the bishop's biographer, Ambrose spent his adolescence in Rome (*cum*

<sup>19</sup> P. Brown, *The cult of the Saints: its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1982), p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> D. Natal Villazala, *De Ambrósio de Milán a Lérins: gestión del conflicto y construcción del poder episcopal en época Teodosiana (375- 450 d.C.)*. PhD thesis, Universidad de León (2010), pp. 102-103.

<sup>21</sup> Brown, *Cult of Saints*, p. 53.

*adolevisset et esset in urbe Roma), together with his widowed mother and his sister.<sup>22</sup> Ambrose, Uranius Satyrus and Marcellina maintained this behavior throughout their lives, probably due to benefits of the ascetic lifestyle and because of the teachings of Pope Liberius.*

As has been mentioned, through Ambrose we know that at Christmas, between the years 352 and 354, Marcellina dedicated her virginity to God in the Basilica of Saint Peter,<sup>23</sup> and, as a holy virgin, she kept a life of silence.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the bishop pointed out that his sister had been educated in the family tradition of chastity, which was transmitted within her family through a martyr relative, Soteris, who will be discussed later in this paper. According to the discourse elaborated in *De virginibus*, Marcellina had learned from Liberius and especially from Soteris.<sup>25</sup>

Ambrose addressed his brother in *De excessu fratris I*, praising the chastity of Satyrus' body, which - due to the gifts of baptism - was not contaminated. According to Ambrose, Satyrus remained single because of his affection for chastity.<sup>26</sup> This attitude kept the family close to one another, and kept the family assets undivided.<sup>27</sup> Ambrose's statement concerning the indivisibility of the family patrimony is a clear example of how, in the fourth century, asceticism became a maintenance strategy for family wealth.

Following Peter Brown's view, already highlighted in this paper, this ascetic and austere Christianity spread by Ambrose gave prominence to his family and made him part of a new clerical elite in the Christian community of his time.

Besides, these ascetic values provided invaluable protection to Ambrose's family when they needed to move from Trier to Rome, where they lacked an established powerbase. The death of Ambrose's father, whether for political reasons or not, had caused a serious problem for the family: the absence of the *pater familia*. A widow with three small children who would now be raised in Rome faced many difficulties. Surely the ascetic lifestyle chosen by the family enabled its integration into a wider network which had a certain prestige, since, for example, we know that Ambrose received a formal education based in the liberal arts, an upbringing that demanded investment of time and patronage. And the same likely happened to his brother. Sometime before 375 Satyrus was appointed as

<sup>22</sup> Paulinus of Milan. *Vita Ambrosii*, 4, 1: 'Postea vero, cum adolevisset et esset in urbe Roma constitutus cum matre viuda et sorare, quae virginitatem iam fuerat professa.'

<sup>23</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus*, III, 1, 1: 'Namque is, cum Salvatoris natali ad apostulum Patrum virginitatis professionem vestis quoque mutatione signares.'

<sup>24</sup> Ambrosius. *De Virginibus*, I, 3, 10: 'Invitat nunc integratatis amor, et tu, soror sancta, vel mutis tacita moribus, ut aliquid de virginitate dicamus.'

<sup>25</sup> As we have stressed in this article, in book III of *De virginibus*, Ambrose asked his sister to 'return to the teachings of Liberius.' Ambrose, *De Virginibus*, III, 1, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Ambrose, *De excessu fratris*, I, 52 - 54.

<sup>27</sup> Ambrose, *De excessu fratris*, I, 59: 'Inter fratres autem qualis fuerit, licet omne hominum genus benivolentia complectetur, indivisum patrimonium docet nec distributa aut delibata, sed reservata hereditas. [...] Nam hoc quoque ultimo sermone signavit, cum, quos dilexerat, commendaret, sibi nec uxoris arbitrium fuisse ducendae, ne a fratribus divelleretur.'

*consularis* to an unknown western province.<sup>28</sup> Before that he had been a lawyer, as Ambrose says while praising Satyrus' eloquence, practiced in speeches made in the forum<sup>29</sup>. Ambrose also reported that after his own election to the episcopate, Satyrus left his public career to manage the family patrimony.<sup>30</sup>

In Antiquity, education through the liberal disciplines was essential for entering a public career. However, this training was the exclusive privilege of a few elite groups; not just anyone would have the time and resources to invest in such an education. This reaffirms that being part of a group underpinned by shared ascetic ideals allowed Ambrose to stay and study in Rome<sup>31</sup>.

Ambrose made good use of the education he received in Rome to become a lawyer under Probus' leadership. In a short time, he became a member of Probus' *consilium*, and, finally, in 374, he was chosen to guide Liguria and Emilia as their *consularis*.

We have already noted the importance of ascetic morality in the lives of Ambrose's family members. Their integration into this large and significant group connected them with eminent individuals and ensured the acceptance of these newcomers from Trier - deprived of their original power - in the day-to-day life of this Roman community. The reception the family received from the group generated friendship and a sense of belonging to a land and a community.

Just as Ambrose had been forced to leave his *natio*, Trier, and seek his place among the inhabitants of Rome, he also perceived himself as a foreigner when he went to Milan. Besides not belonging to that region, his family also lacked a noble past. For many years, historians held that Ambrose was born into a prominent family. Angelo Paredi established the importance of Ambrose's family; his father had held the office of praetorian prefect of Gaul and resided in Trier,<sup>32</sup> a city described in Ausonius's *Ordo urbium nobilium* as the sixth most renowned city in the world of the Romans, on account of its powerful weapons.<sup>33</sup>

Recent research has questioned the prestige of Ambrose's family, however, by emphasizing that in the fourth century most of Gaul's prefects were drawn from the lower ranks of the aristocracy. This was the trend across the Roman Empire at the time.<sup>34</sup> Certainly the position of praetorian prefect

<sup>28</sup> Jones, Martindale and Morris, *PLRE* I, p. 809.

<sup>29</sup> Ambrose, *De excessu fratris*, I, 49.

<sup>30</sup> Ambrose, *De excessu fratris*, I, 20.

<sup>31</sup> See D. Natal Villazala, *De Ambrósio*.

<sup>32</sup> Paraedi, *Sant'Ambrogio*, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Decimus Magnus Ausonius, c.6 *Treveris*, *Ordo urbium nobilium*. In the *Ordo urbium nobilium*, written in 388, Ausonius ranks the twenty most illustrious cities of the Roman Empire taking into account the relevance of these cities.

<sup>34</sup> N.B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley, 1994), pp. 31-32.

was a significant one, but we must remember that the process of reshaping the political, administrative and military spheres, initiated by Diocletian and continued by his successors, demanded that positions of power were open to 'new men' (*homines novi*). These 'new men' needed a place in the social hierarchy: they were not aristocrats, sustained by a distinct mythic past, and often lacked rich estates, so they had to adapt and develop principles which would make them indispensable in safeguarding the *imperium*.

The bishop of Milan followed these same steps to protect his family and to ensure the scope of his authority as a representative of the Milanese See. In his first book, *De virginibus*, written in 377 and dedicated to his sister Marcellina, Ambrose found in the martyr Soteris an example from his own family whom his sister could follow in her life of consecrated virginity. The work that Ambrose offered to Marcellina provided models which served as guides to assure she maintained the respectable figure of the virgin. In order to achieve this, the author celebrated female martyrs such as Agnes, praised for her chastity (*integritatem*) and her shame (*pudoris*),<sup>35</sup> and Mary, considered the greatest model of virginity (*virginitatis*) and ideal of virtue (*forma virtutis*).<sup>36</sup>

After presenting various archetypes to develop his praise of virginity, Ambrose ended his book with an example which he claimed came from his own family: Soteris. According to McLynn, the exact connection between Ambrose's family and the martyr Soteris remains obscure. She is presented by some as Ambrose's great-aunt or similar.<sup>37</sup> Since we only have information about this martyr from Ambrose's own treatises on virginity, it is impossible to say more. In *De virginibus*, he pointed out that his sister's chastity was hereditary (*haereditariae castitatis*), because she was related to a martyr (*parentis martyris*). In the last two paragraphs of *De virginibus*, Soteris is portrayed as a martyr and as a saint. According to the author, he needed to move away from foreign examples (*alienigenis*) because Marcellina's virtue was hereditary; she received it by transmission from an ancestor and it was not a matter of learning.<sup>38</sup>

In 394, Soteris appeared again in the Milanese bishop's writings. In this year, close to the Easter celebrations,<sup>39</sup> Ambrose wrote *Exhortatio virginitatis* after a trip to Bologna to consecrate the basilica dedicated to the martyrs Agricola and Vitalis. After describing the union between the martyrs, the bishop praised the asceticism promoted by virginity. This book was offered to the widow Juliana,

<sup>35</sup> Ambrose, *De virginibus* I, 2, 5: 'Natalis est virginis, integritatem sequamur.' *De virginibus* I, 2, 6: 'Nomen virginistitulus est pudoris.'

<sup>36</sup> Ambrose, *De virginibus* II, 2, 6: 'Sit igitur vobis tamquam in imagine descripta virginitatis vita Mariae, de qua velut speculo refulgeat species castitatis et forma virtutis.'

<sup>37</sup> McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, p. 34.

<sup>38</sup> Ambrose, *De virginibus* III, 37: 'Sed quid alienigenis apud te, soror, utor exemplis, quam haereditariae castitatis inspirata successio parentis infusione martyris eruditivit? Unde enim didicisti, quae non habuisti undedisceres, constitua in agro, nulla socia virgine, nullo informata doctore? Non ergo discipulam, quod fieri sine magisterio non potest, sed baeredem virtutis egisti.'; 38. "Qui enim fieri posset ut sancta Sotheris e tibi non esset mentis auctor, sui auctor est generis? [...]'

<sup>39</sup> Ambrose, *Exhortatione virginitatis*, ed. D. Ramos-Lissón, *Sobre las vírgenes; La virginidad; La educación de la virgen; Exhortación a la virginidad* (Madrid, 2011) 7, 42.

patron of the basilica where the relics of the martyrs would rest.<sup>40</sup> After his offering, Ambrose used passages from Scripture and again applied to virginity models to support the role of this virtue in society.

In Chapter 12 of this book, Soteris was called again to protect Christianity and praised as part of Ambrose's family. Here, the bishop presented the martyrdom of his pious relative (*piae parentis*) and he described her as a beautiful (*decora*) and noble virgin (*nobilis virgo*), who did not submit her chastity even when she was beaten by her persecutors. The author also used this paragraph to praise the nobility of priests, because for him the priesthood was preferable to the prefectures and consulates, which were secular offices.<sup>41</sup>

The speeches prepared by the bishop sought, in a distant ancestor, the virtues of asceticism, martyrdom and Christianity which affirmed the value of his family. We can observe that the author also presented his relative as a woman belonging to the nobility (*nobilis*), which gave Ambrose's family the ties to the nobility held in such high esteem by that society. Above all, Soteris was portrayed as a martyr, the ultimate accomplishment for a Christian. Thus, the noble virgin (*nobilis virgo*) was designed as the perfect ancestor to support and promote a family devoid of lineage and without patriarchal power in a society in which these attributes were signs of prestige and requirements that drove public careers.

Admittedly, in the fourth century, the so-called 'new men' (*homines novi*) already played significant roles in the different spheres of Roman power. However, emphasizing the nobility of one's family through important ancestors was a Roman tradition that generated respectable ties inside the Roman Empire. Ambrose knew this tradition very well. Because of that, it is not unusual that he used this traditional practice as one of the methods to establish and support his family, albeit he did so through a noble virgin who resisted the assaults in order to remain faithful to God. From this point of view, Soteris' nobility guaranteed Ambrose's family could belong to a distinguished Roman social group, while her martyrdom asserted that his family had been Christian since ancient times. Thus, that household could find refuge in the tradition of faith and Christian virtue.

As David Natal Villazala argues, Ambrose was far from the ideal model of a Christian bishop of his time. Many of his contemporaries had been victims of persecution and exile, while Ambrose was quickly transformed from an administrative employee into a cleric without suffering any conflicting

<sup>40</sup> Ambrose, *Exhortatione virginitatis*, 2, 10.

<sup>41</sup> Ambrose, *Exhortatione virginitatis*, 12, 82: 'At non sancta Sotheris, ut domesticum *piae parentis* proferamus exemplum (habemus enim nos sacerdotes nostram nobilitatem praefectoris et consulatibus praferendam [...]; at non, ut dixi, Sotheris vultus sui curam gerebat: quae cum esset *decora* facie valde, et *nobilis virgo* majorum prosapia, consulatus eu praefecturas parentum majorum sacra posthabuit fide, et immolare jussa no acquievit: quam persecutor immanis palmis caedi praecepit; ut tenera virgo dolori cederet, aut pudori.'

situation.<sup>42</sup> However, we know this was an idealised discursive construction of his biographer, Paulinus of Milan, who emphasized the unanimous acclamation of the *consularis* of *Liguria et Aemilia* to the episcopal throne, as we have already shown. Soteris, on the other hand, perfectly fulfilled the role of martyr, and thus gave an important Christian leader the claim to great faith he required. As a result, the martyrdom of his ancestor was a positive factor to support Ambrose's episcopal activity.

Through a conjunction of nobility, asceticism and martyrdom, Ambrose built his links with the Roman society of Milan and showed this same society his value and role as a public man, proclaiming his *utilitas publica*.

In 378, a year after the publication of *De virginibus*, Ambrose faced the death of his brother Satyrus. This episode inspired the bishop to write the first of his funeral speeches which we know about: *De excessu fratris*. This work was composed in two parts: the first was proclaimed by Ambrose on the day of his brother's funeral, and the second seven days later. Information about the episodes in which these speeches were announced was recorded by the author himself.<sup>43</sup>

To praise the death of Satyrus, the bishop held a public funeral in Milan, and again he took the opportunity to espouse the Christian virtues and ascetic morality of his family, as well as to develop distinct political and social relations between his relatives and the Milanese community.

Satyrus' sacrifices for his family were proclaimed by Ambrose in these panegyrics, which were filled with imagery of the suffering inflicted by martyrdom and predictions about death, resurrection and eternal life, the latter understood as a prize reserved for the faithful Christian. A reflection about human nature, especially on the earthly finitude of being, was recurrent in the literature of that time. We know that many pagan texts dealt with the subject, and many of these writings, based on Platonic notions, contemplated the immortality of the soul. However, Ambrose's own view came from the Christian faith in the resurrection and eternal life, perceived as a reward to the faithful.

By exposing his meditations on death in *De excessu fratris I* and *II*, Ambrose followed one of the rhetorical standards required when preparing a comforting speech. Menander of Laodicea, a Greek *rhetor* of the late third century A.D. and author of two treatises about rhetoric, stated that, in the case of consolatory speech, it was common for the composer to present reflections on human nature and the imposition of death on men by a deity as a form of condemnation. Nevertheless, even if death were understood as a punishment, Menander had warned that sometimes it was better to leave the earthly life and extricate oneself from its problems and its ambitions, because such things led people to unjust ends. In this way, death could be seen as a benefit, and be presented as such in the consolatory text.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Natal Villazala, 'Muerte, identidad y poder', p. 374.

<sup>43</sup> Ambrose, *De excessu fratris*, I, 14; Ambrose, *De excessu fratris*, II, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Menander, *Tratado II*, 414 – 'Sobre el discurso de consolación.'

We maintain that in composing his *De excessu fratri*, Ambrose followed these rhetorical steps of elaboration that reinforced the finitude of human life, the eternity and the wisdom of God and the advantage of leaving behind earthly fears. Many scholars consider that Menander was very close to some Platonic circles, while we know of the defense of the Christian faith expounded by Ambrose. It is useful to remember that, as was customary in ancient times, such differences in beliefs did not separate masters from their disciples, and that Christian leaders had classical Greco-Roman culture at the foundation of their training. As mentioned earlier, Ambrose's education was based in the schools that taught the liberal arts. In these schools, Christians and proponents of Greco-Roman beliefs coexisted in the search of knowledge.

This context encouraged the theory and practice necessary for the development of major public figures. Such an atmosphere fueled much of the framework of the Milanese bishop's knowledge. This knowledge would be read and adapted to exalt Christianity and to praise the Christian God.

When he praised Christianity and, at the same time, created and strengthened a Christian identity for his family, Ambrose drew on the examples about which he had learned to establish patterns and strengthen the protectors of the Christian faith.

The asceticism of Satyrus and his attention to family matters were highlighted and presented as a model to be followed by the Milanese community. Once *De excessu fratri*, or part of it, was read publicly, virtuous actions exalted by the author in the figure of his brother were evinced to the community and contributed to everyday attitudes. As a consequence, the words of the bishop exercised a dual function: celebrating the value of his family and pushing for a strengthening of society through examples that encouraged actions based on virtues.

In the first book of *De excessu fratri*, Ambrose transformed the pain of losing his brother into a pain shared with the whole community. According to Ambrose, all mourned Satyrus' death; rich and poor, old and young. Ambrose explained that the personal pain (*privatum*) he felt at the death of his dear brother had a public character (*publicus*).<sup>45</sup> He affirmed that in the midst of a wider, common pain (*communi dolore*), the individual suffering should come to an end (*proprium vacare debere*).<sup>46</sup> Ambrose put himself forward as a consoler,<sup>47</sup> because as a leader of the afflicted *ecclesia* he had a duty to minimize the suffering caused from the loss of someone dear to that group. In his episcopal duties, he was the voice - of order, complaint, hope and tranquility - and he was the heart of his community.

<sup>45</sup> Ambrose, *De excessu fratri*, I, 5: 'Itaque licet privatum funus, tamen fletus est publicus.'

<sup>46</sup> Ambrose, *De excessu fratri*, I, 64: 'Sciptum est enim in communi dolore proprium vacare debere.'

<sup>47</sup> Ambrose, *De excessu fratri*, I, 14: 'Sed consolandi hodie, non tractandi partes recepi, quamquam abducere a maerore animum intentione tractandi consolationis usus it.'

Besides comforting the group, in the first few lines of this work the bishop presented himself as one who had sacrificed his most precious to God. His brother was offered to his Lord as a pure offering (*hostia mincontaminatam*). By offering one of his own to God, the author warned that he would rather have a disaster befall him and his home (*meam domum*) than his *ecclesia*.<sup>48</sup>

In the last paragraph of *De excessu fratris*, Ambrose reinforced this role as one who had offered a sacrifice (*hostiam meam offero*) to the almighty God (*omnipotens deus*). He asked God to accept the ‘sacrifice of the priest’ (*sacrificium sacerdotis*).<sup>49</sup> The bishop, again, put himself forward as a leader who did not fear that misfortune would fall on him, so long as this kept his community safe. With this consolatory speech, Ambrose assuaged the pain of his *ecclesia* as its priest on the one hand, while on the other he presented the body and soul of Satyrus to God as a zealous brother.

In this same passage of the work, we can see the author had entrusted his brother to God because, according to the Christian beliefs, only bathed in divine grace would Satyrus obtain eternal life. Ambrose used the term ‘*innoxiam commendo animam*’ to deliver his brother in sacrifice. The Latin verb ‘*commendare*’ can be translated into English as ‘recommend’, ‘deliver’, or ‘trust.’ Literally, Ambrose ‘entrusted the innocent soul’ of his brother to Almighty God, the One who could do everything for the good of his brother in the heavenly world.

Once more, we clearly see the use of a rule for funeral speeches recommended by Menander. According to the rhetorician, an author should include a plea at the end of the text, in which they petitioned God for the benefit of the deceased soul.<sup>50</sup> By also respecting this theme in his funeral speech, Ambrose enriched his work, recalling the immortality of the soul which, for him, was restricted to the faithful Christian. Moreover, his prayer asked for God's protection for the soul of his beloved brother. Was this a rhetorical construction? Certainly, but it was not only this. It also reflected the desires of someone who had lost a treasured person.

Furthermore, by depicting Satyrus as an ‘innocent soul’ who was given as an offering, the bishop once again presented his brother as an example. In Ambrose’s account, Satyrus’ attitudes facilitated his entry into the kingdom of Heaven. Hence those who wished to obtain the prize of eternal life should follow the virtuous path chosen by Satyrus. In this way, Ambrose praised his brother and consequently his own family. Concurrently, he provided his *ecclesia* with a model that, while serving as a guide for everyday actions, maintained the order within the group.

Ambrose turned the sorrow of a personal loss into a public act of mourning when he used a rhetoric based on his own sacrifice and the efforts of his own family. Together with the Milanese community he wept for the death of Satyrus and, in doing so, he connected his family with his entire *ecclesia*,

<sup>48</sup> Ambrose, *De excessu fratris*, I, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Ambrose, *De excessu fratris*, I, 80: ‘*Tibi nunc, omnipotens deus, innoxiam commendo animam, tibi hostiam meam offero.*’

<sup>50</sup> Menander, *Tratado II*, 422 – ‘Sobre el epitafio.’

since, according to him, all dear brothers (*fratres dilectissimi, fratres carissimi*) were gathered at Satyrus' funeral to mourn his passing. The community's grief transcended the existing bonds in the group, and brought everyone into the same family. Instead of a family linked by blood, we see a larger family, united by similar desires and sorrows.

Ambrose presented his brother as a man who prioritized public affairs over personal ones, and who preferred to die for others than to live for himself, as did Christ.<sup>51</sup> According to Ambrose, Satyrus followed the example of kindness and sacrifice given by Jesus, as well as any pious Christian could. Elsewhere in his work, Ambrose emphasized the kindness of his brother when he put into Satyrus's mouth reasoned arguments that he had been a father more than a judge, a godly arbitrator, and a man who had been constant in his judgments.<sup>52</sup> This way, the author emphasized that his brother imitated Christ in goodness and in his choice of an ascetic lifestyle.

According to paragraph 59 of *De excessu fratris I*, Satyrus decided to remain single so as not to divide the family assets, and did not make a will; consequently Marcellina and Ambrose determined a fair share to be given to the poor. Thus Satyrus' asceticism kept him linked with his sister, Marcellina, and his brother, Ambrose, and enabled the heritage and the legacy of the family to remain indivisible.

In these panegyrics we do not find any information about Satyrus' private thoughts or actions. Rather, Ambrose used these discourses to relate information concerning Satyrus' administrative career and his acts as a faithful administrator of the family business. After all, the aim was to exalt his brother's public actions and communicate to the community Satyrus' zeal for his family, and for the people of the province where he acted as *consularis*. According to Ambrose, as soon as he became bishop, Satyrus gave up his public career to dedicate himself to his public obligations.<sup>53</sup> Through this speech, we realize that Satyrus' dedication to the good of the community, and to Marcellina and Ambrose, made him abandon the prestige of a public career to devote himself to administering the family estate. This decision protected Marcellina and provided Ambrose with the necessary tranquility to exercise his episcopal functions.

The Milanese bishop also stressed that his brother's attitude was a product of his virtue, not of outside pressure or obligations. Satyrus had willingly emulated Marcellina's chastity and Ambrose's holiness<sup>54</sup>. With this statement, besides extolling Satyrus' virtues as a just man who participated in

<sup>51</sup> Ambrose, *De excessu fratris*, I, 2

<sup>52</sup> Ambrose, *De excessu fratris*, I, 58: 'Itaque qualis in universos fuerit, provincialium, quibus praefuit, studia docent, qui parentem magis fuisse proprium quam iudicem loquebantur, gratum pia enecessitudinis arbitrum, constantem aequi iuris disceptatorem.'

<sup>53</sup> Ambrose, *De excessu fratris*, I, 20.

<sup>54</sup> Ambrose, *De excessu fratris*, I, 54: 'Quis igitur non miretur virum inter fratres duos, alteram virginem, alterum sacerdotem, aetate medium, magnanimitate non inparem ita inter duo maxima munera, praestitisse, ut alteris munera castitatem, alteriurs sanctitatem referret, non professionis vinculo, sed virtutis officio?'

ascetic morality, the author also stressed the positive aspects of the other family members. The chastity of his sister and the sanctity of Ambrose were incorporated into the speech to magnify the Christianity of the whole family. It is curious to note that the author described himself as a holy man (*alterius sanitatem*) and a model to be followed by his brother. Ambrose was the youngest in his house, yet he was nonetheless considered to be an example in matters of sanctity. Therefore, we observe that the construction of the Ambrosian Holiness began with the words of Ambrose himself. These ideas were developed in the fifth century, when Paulinus of Milan, Augustine of Hippo and the ecclesiastical historians Rufinus of Aquileia and Hermias Sozomen elaborated on this rhetoric.

The death of Satyrus, who was a pious man, an imitator of the Jesus' grace, was felt and mourned throughout the community. It was on this basis that Ambrose founded and exhibited his family's constant defense of Christianity. To complete this ideological construction, the bishop turned the remains of his brother into relics for the city of Milan,<sup>55</sup> and buried his brother next to the relics of St. Victor, in one of the few places of worship with martyrs that existed in the city.

All the ceremonies arranged for Satyrus' burial were surrounded by discursive constructions and actions that produced and fixed the social, political, economic, cultural and religious links between Ambrose's family and the Milanese community. When Ambrose decided to bury his brother with the remains of St. Victor, he also established a physical, topographical links with the land and its people. From then, a bishop who had been considered a foreigner until that moment became part of the Milanese community, and had as his *patria* an important city that would receive the imperial court until 404, when the seat of Empire moved to Ravenna.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Both Ambrose and his biographer, Paulinus of Milan, are silent about Ambrose's childhood and his family's to the city of Rome, having been deprived of the paternal power. It is true that part of his training can be noticed when we read his works and, directly or indirectly, we find references from classical authors or Christian leaders.

Fortunately, Paulinus informs us with few words that the Milanese bishop had studied the liberal arts while he lived in Rome. This fact is supported by Ambrose's brilliant career as a lawyer at the court of the praetorian prefect Probus. We know that an education supported by the study of the liberal disciplines was essential for people who wanted to stand out in a public career in the ancient Rome. Thus, even with scarce information about the bishop's upbringing, we can infer something of his efforts to achieve a prestigious public role.

Ambrose's rhetorical and oratorical skills are evident when we analyze his works. In one of the cases studied, we noticed Ambrose's ability in his deployment of written and spoken words for the funeral

<sup>55</sup> Ambrose, *De excessu fratris*, I, 18: ' [...] habeo, quas conplectar reliquias [...]'

Networks and Neighbours

of his brother, which potentiated the Christianity of his family and united the bishop with the Milanese community. These elaborations asserted and propagated the role of Ambrose as a true Christian leader, and created bonds between himself and the region. Furthermore, it incorporated himself and his family into wider family.

Moreover, by forming these bonds with the group, Ambrose was presented as someone who knew and shared the concerns of his community, because he was a part of it. This approach supported Ambrose's right to speak on behalf of his diocesans and to teach them virtue that they might achieve the ultimate Christian prize: eternal life.

However, even with talent for words and a *cursus honorum* that quickly took him from the *consularis* of the provinces of *Liguria et Aemilia* to the episcopal throne, Ambrose felt the need to link his familial roots to martyrdom and asceticism, ideals which were considered essential for defenders of the Christian faith. Ambrose also sought to elevate his family's name through a noble ancestor.

Despite the differences between the discourses constructed around Soteris and Satyrus, Ambrose sought similar effects in both works. Ambrose's relationships with these figures played a fundamental role in the construction of his identity, transforming him from a secular official into a bishop overnight. These rhetorical elaborations connected the bishop with core Christian ideals, and turned Ambrose into the ideal bishop to safeguard the Christian faith and lead the Milanese community. The rhetorical argument used by Ambrose provided his family with a noble past, a *patria* and the authority which he needed to excel himself as bishop of the city of Milan, a city that until recently had been led by an Arian bishop, Auxentius.

## PRIMARY SOURCES

Ambrose, *De excessu fratris*, ed. A. López Kindler, *Discursos consolatorios*, (Madrid, 2011), pp. 11 - 223.

\_\_\_\_\_, *De virginibus; De virginitate; De institutione virginis; Exhortatione virginitatis*, ed. D. Ramos-Lissón, *Sobre las vírgenes; La virginidad; La educación de la virgen; Exhortación a la virginidad* (Madrid, 2011).

\_\_\_\_\_, *Exhortatione virginitatis*, *PL* 16, 0335 - 0364B

\_\_\_\_\_, *De virginibus*: *PL* 16, 0365 - 0384B

Decimus Magnus Ausonius, *Ordo urbium nobilium*, ed. R. Peiper, (Teubner, 1886).

Menander, *Dos tratados de retórica epidíctica*, ed. M. García García y J. Gutiérrez Calderón (Madrid, 1996).

Paulinus de Milan, *Vita Ambrosii* ed. A.A.R. Bastiaensen *Vita di Cipriano; Vita di Ambrogio; Vita di Agostino* (Verona, 1975).

## SECONDARY SOURCES

Brown, P., *The cult of the Saints: its rise and function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1982).

Finn, R.D., *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman world* (Cambridge, 2009).

Jones, A.H.M., J.R. Martindale and J. Morris, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, vol 1: AD 260-395 (Cambridge, 1971).

McLynn, N. B., *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley, 1994).

Mongelli, L.M., 'Retórica: a virtuosa elegância do bem dizer', in L.M. Mongelli (ed.), *Trivium e Quadrivium: as artes liberais na Idade Média* (Cotia-SP, 1999).

Natal Villaza, D., *De Ambrósio de Milán a Lérins: gestión del conflicto y construcción del poder episcopal en época Teodosiana (375- 450 d.C.)* PhD thesis, Universidad de León (2010).

Natal Villaza, D., 'Muerte, identidad y poder en Ambrosio de Milán', in G. Bravo and R. González Salinero (eds), *Formas de morir y formas de matar en la Antigüedad romana* (Madrid-Salamanca, 2013), pp. 371-383.

Paredi, A., *Sant'Ambrogio e lasuaetà* (Milano, 1941).

Testa, R. L., *Senatori, popolo, papi: Il governo di Roma al tempo dei Valentiniani*. (Bari, 2004).