The purpose of this paper is to take the measure of pope Damasus. It is primarily a mapping exercise, intended to assess his stature relative to other actors in the society and in the political world of fourth-century Rome, and to gauge the visibility of his person and his activities both within the Christian community and in the city as a whole. Such measurements have rarely been attempted, perhaps because the reckoning has seemed in general terms straightforward. For the epigraphist, for example, Damasus is easily the most conspicuous Roman of his generation, his name surviving on enough monuments to outscore even the most prolific of contemporary senators; he also looms large in the documentary record, featuring in correspondence between court officials and emperors, in vehement protests from victims of his brutal high-handedness and arrogance, and even in the great compilation of imperial law, the Theodosian Code, where he appears as addressee of one law and is named as a criterion of orthodoxy in another; he has been identified, too, on a number of gold-decorated glass dishes. And above all, he earned the notice of the historian Ammianus Marcellinus, who moves from a sardonic account of the violence which accompanied his election campaign to an explanatory commentary upon the conspicuous rewards that came with victory.

However, the sheer quantity of evidence available on Damasus’ public profile has led historians to neglect some basic questions about the quality of each item. Recent work has shown the importance of such questions. One of the most famous Damasus-related texts is the imperial letter, addressed directly to the pope, which was read out in the churches of Rome in 370, announcing that clergy, ex-clergymen, and so-called ‘celibates’ should be allowed neither to visit widows or female wards if the women’s relatives disapproved, nor to receive any gifts or bequests from women whom they attended “privately, under the pretext of re-
ligion”. Historians have traditionally assumed that Damasus, “the matrons’ ear-scraper”, was here on the receiving end of an imperial thunderbolt. However, a recent analysis has pointed out that the law targets not the church establishment but Christian freelancers out for personal gain, and argued persuasively for the possibility that Damasus himself was the law’s ultimate proponent of the law, having petitioned the emperor to clamp down upon unregulated competition. This would reduce Damasus to the more familiar, but much less imposing, fourth-century type of the successful lobbyist. The suggestion here that the head of the Roman church might have had difficulties keeping his house in order is also significant.

Other well-known episodes merit similar reappraisal. When the pagan grandee Symmachus was prefect of the city in 384, his campaign to recover artworks and other materials removed from temples led to allegations that he was victimizing Christians. The charge was serious enough to prompt an edict from the emperor himself condemning the reported excesses, and in his formal reply Symmachus describes lurid accusations that men were being seized from the bosom of the church, and priests dragged in chains from across Italy. The pivot of Symmachus’ defence was a letter which he had obtained from Damasus, confirming that none of the latter’s flock had been maltreated. This has been taken as a sign of the prefect’s vulnerability to unscrupulous Christian extremists, and his dependence upon the goodwill of the pope. But the text bears a quite different interpretation. Damasus’ letter is Symmachus’ trump, and he plays it gleefully to nullify the case against him. Moreover, he plays it twice, returning towards the close of his text to “the laudable bishop’s denial that any of his own are being held either in prison or in chains”. By then the pope’s testimony seems redundant, since Symmachus has announced that he had not yet in fact begun to implement the decree which authorized the examination; however, immediately after invoking Damasus he admits that he (or rather, “the laws”) was in fact holding “those charged with various crimes”. Waters are surely being muddied here. Symmachus, after all, had ascertained that his prisoners were all “strangers to the service of the Christian law” precisely on the strength of Damasus’ affidavit; and his assurance that he had not yet “attempted any quaestio” on the strength of Valentinian’s decree is nicely ambiguous, depending on the sense in which this elastic term was being employed. Damasus, on this reading,

6 Cod. Theod. 16.2.20: lecta in ecclesiis Romae (July 30, 370: a Friday).
9 Symm. rel. 21.2.
10 Rel. 21.3: respondeat litteris episcopi Damasi, quibus assectatores eiusdem religionis negavit ullam contumeliam pertulisse.
12 Rel. 21.6.
13 Quaestio is normally taken as equivalent here to inquisitio, the investigation as a whole, but more probably means the judicial examination (by torture where applicable) of a suspect: note rel. 21.3, on the allegation sub occasione iustae inquisitionis … tragicas quaestiones … agitatas.
had produced testimony that allowed Symmachus to redefine a potentially dangerous issue so as to protect himself; and if (as is likely) some at least of the temple-robbers languishing in the prefect’s prison were in fact Christians, he had in doing so (inadvertently?) sacrificed some of his own black sheep. On such an interpretation, the pope was not the prefect’s patron but his instrument, and perhaps his dupe.

Yet a third example can be found in a famous retort to Damasus by Symmachus’ friend and fellow-pagan, the pontifex Praetextatus. He was accustomed, says Jerome, “to say playfully to the blessed pope Damasus: ‘Make me bishop of the city of Rome, and I shall be a Christian immediately’”. This has been interpreted variously, but always accepting at some level Jerome’s claim that Praetextatus was acknowledging the power of the papacy. But once again, if we accept that Jerome reports the words accurately, this might well be premature. Jerome’s limited ear for humour might have missed a more personal jibe, directed at Damasus himself. For the remark is best read in relation to the fictionalized soirees presented in Macrobius’ *Saturnalia*, where Praetextatus presides benevolently over a catholic assembly which included both his immediate peers and a wider circle, some of whom were of much lower status and others distinctly uncongenial. That Damasus found himself in playful conversation with Praetextatus does not in itself imply social equality or cordiality. Instead, in a symposiastic context the comments sound like a teasing challenge, demanding a response. Damasus would of course be obliged to answer in the negative, for the bishopric (unlike most of Praetextatus’ many priesthoods) was his alone, a monopoly which in neutral company might seem to reflect badly on the post or to suggest selfishness on the incumbent’s part. Furthermore, Praetextatus might have been exploiting the fact that (as he well knew) others also called themselves ‘bishop of Rome’; we too easily forget the scope for wilful misunderstanding possible in languages without articles.

All these re-readings, however, are likely to seem mere quibbles. Damasus’ place among the masters of the Roman power game seems assured by the testimony of Ammianus, who uses him as the exemplar of the access to the carriages, the clothes and the fine dinners, his standard indices of aristocratic status, which bishops of Rome enjoyed. Moreover, the grisly conclusion of Ammianus’ report of the struggle for this prize, when “in one

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14 Vera (1981) 153 assumes that the case against the prefect was fabricated by malevolent courtiers unconnected to Rome; Sogno (2006) 52 seems more inclined to doubt Symmachus’ version, but is persuaded by Damasus’ willingness to back him.

15 Hier. c. Ioh. 8: *solebat ludens beato papae Damaso dicere: ‘Facite me Romanae urbis episcopum, et ero protinus Christianus’.*


17 The obstreperous (and from his name surely Christian) Evangelus baits Praetextatus at Macr. *Sat.* 1.7.1–13; 1.11.1 (cf. Praetextatus’ smooth retort at 1.11.2). For the grammarian Servius’ place in the conversation, see the masterly account of Kaster (1980) 223–254.

18 In his satiricial portrait of the Roman aristocracy Ammianus recurs frequently to carriages (14.6.9; 16–17), clothes (14.6.9) and dinners (14.6.14–16).
day 137 dead bodies were discovered”, is matched by a notable bloodbath described in the
detailed if vehemently partisan version of these events compiled by Damasus’ enemies,
which was fortuitously preserved in a papal archive.\(^19\) The notoriety of Damasus’ blood-
soaked accession is thus established, and seems to guarantee his contemporary promi-
nence.\(^20\) The deadly auxiliaries who won Damasus his throne have been variously inter-
preted as impassioned followers devoted to his cause and professional enforcers made
available by aristocratic supporters;\(^21\) on either explanation, he becomes a force to be reck-
oned with.

However, historians have been insufficiently attentive to the precise terms in which
Ammianus presents the rewards that awaited the successful papal candidate. He general-
izes from this single (and in fact uniquely violent) episode to argue that these extreme
measures were justified by the ostentatio of city life, the environment in which the winners
would be “free from care”.\(^22\) But this securitas is explained in an unusually elaborate, and
markedly unbalanced, pair of consecutive clauses.\(^23\) They “grow rich” upon the offerings
from matrons, and they “appear in public” riding in carriages, dressed conspicuously, and
dining royally. The distinction established here between sources of income and outlets of
expenditure, with its damaging insinuation of womanly patronage, dents the credibility of
the aristocratic pretensions being described.

But not only does Ammianus thus qualify his portrait of papal grandeur, he employs a
schematic framework which seriously misrepresents the character of the collision between
Damasus and Ursinus. He makes the two candidates the indispensible engines of the con-

19 Amm. 27.3.11–13; Avell. 1.7.
21 For the former explanation see MacMullen (2003) 490; for the latter, Cracco Ruggini (1999) 32; Lizzi Testa
22 Note the emphatic first person: non ego abnuo ... (27.3.14: Ammianus otherwise uses the pronoun only to rec-
ognize his own participation in events: 15.5.22; 18.6.12; 18.6.21). Securus in Ammianus elsewhere connotes freedom
from physical danger, on the battlefield or in the lawcourts.
23 Ammianus only rarely combines two verbs in such constructions, and elsewhere maintains parallelism
between the clauses: e.g. 15.1.3; 29.3.9 (the only other cases of ita + ut + -que). For the careful structuring of this
chapter see Colombo (2008).
24 Amm. 28.9.9.
25 Damasus’ victory in the concertatio is thus glossed with a lame ablative absolute, to acknowledge the role of
“the party that favoured him”: Amm. 27.2.13.
26 Avell. 1.6.
Ursinus’ second, and in fact marked the reversal of a government decision to allow the anti-pope to return, a year after the original affray.\textsuperscript{27} Not only does this complicate Ammianus’ analysis of the dynamics of the conflict, but their decision to recall Ursinus demonstrates that the imperial authorities did not share the historian’s analysis of the causes of the sedition.

Historians are accustomed to take refuge in the relative abundance of sources for the conflict. The Ursinians are thus invoked to corroborate Ammianus. But as was pointed out a generation ago, the two accounts do not match.\textsuperscript{28} Each admittedly shows the conflict between the parties escalating to a bloody climax in a church, which Ammianus calls the Basilica Sicinini and the Ursinians the Liberiana. The two bloodbaths, however, are very different: Ammianus’ 137 casualties were left after a pitched battle between two well-matched sides, while the Ursinians claim that all 160 victims at the Basilica Liberiana were their own.\textsuperscript{29} No attempt to correlate these accounts (which must also involve intricate topographical arguments, relating the buildings named in the texts to each other and to identifiable sites) can hope to be conclusive.\textsuperscript{30} But it is worth reviewing the implications of the various scenarios that have been proposed. Those who assign the sources to a single incident create a single, shocking and headline-grabbing collision; those who suggest (at least) two successive clashes in the same building (still accepting, that is, that Ammianus’ Basilica Sicinini and the Ursinians’ Liberiana are the same church) create a sustained period of disorder in one quarter of the city.\textsuperscript{31} But there is still merit in the earlier thesis that the two accounts refer to different episodes in the struggle, in different parts of the city.\textsuperscript{32} For the Ursinians do refer, with calculated vagueness, to a “three-day bacchanal” of violence when Damasus’ thugs attacked the Basilica Iulii, where Ursinus had been consecrated: the argument that the most sanguinary of these was in fact Ammianus’ clash deserves serious consideration.\textsuperscript{33} The Ursinians had good reason to downplay this earlier collision, where they too (presumably) had blood on their hands, and to focus instead on the massacre of their innocents at the Liberiana; Ammianus, working from the administrative records a quarter-

\textsuperscript{27} Avell. 1.10–11; cf. Avell. 5–7.
\textsuperscript{28} The difficulty of reconciling the two accounts was emphasized by Lippold (1965) 122–126.
\textsuperscript{29} The two scenarios are merged by Pietri (1976) 410 and Matthews (1989) 548 n. 38.
\textsuperscript{30} For topography, the considerations presented by Lippold (1965) 124 remain fundamental. A sicininum district is attested in several sources, especially as the location of two properties used to endow two different churches on the Esquiline: Lib. pontif. 34 [Silvester] 3; 46 [Xystus III] 3. However, there is no indication that these properties were near the churches; contrast the other urban property granted by Xystus to his foundation: Lib. pontif. 46.3: domus Palmati, intra urbe, iuxta inibi basilicae.
\textsuperscript{31} Prolonged unrest at a single site is argued by De Spirito (1994) 270; Diefenbach (2007) 227.
\textsuperscript{32} Lippold (1965) 125–126. Lippold’s identification of the Basilica Iulii with the Titulus Iulii in Trastevere has been shown to be mistaken; for a revised version see most recently Coskun (2003) 23–27. The counter-arguments of Lizzi Testa (2004) 154 n. 204 depend largely upon the assumption that the Basilica Sicinini was on the Esquiline.
\textsuperscript{33} Such an interpretation is also compatible with Hier. chron. s. a. 366, which has Ursinus personally leading his people to the Sicininum: quo Damasianae partis populo confluente crudelissimae interfectiones diversi sexus perpetrae.
A century later, would depend upon what the civic authorities had chosen to report. And it would make a considerable difference to our assessment of Damasus’ profile if half of his trail of blood could go unreported.

Any judgement on the question will depend on an analysis of the role of the city prefect Viventius. Here again Ammianus is clear, and seems to support conventional views about the scale of the violence. The sedition “terrified” Viventius, and when he found himself unable to “correct or mollify” the two parties he withdrew to the suburbs, “compelled by great force”. An explicit parallel is drawn with the experience of his immediate predecessor Lampadius, who fled to the suburbs after his arbitrary confiscation of building materials had provoked the populace to attack his house. This has seemed to provide straightforward evidence that the level of popular excitement generated by the conflict simply overwhelmed the forces of law and order. However, again the Ursinians have a somewhat different story. Viventius, in their account, succumbs to Damasus’ bribes after the latter occupies the Lateran cathedral, and sends Ursinus and the two deacons associated with him into exile. However, when seven Ursinian priests are also arrested, the “faithful people” rescue them while the office staff are preparing their expulsion. It seems reasonable to associate Viventius’ withdrawal with this direct challenge to his authority. But did it really mark a capitulation to ‘force majeure’, an acknowledgement of a humiliating failure to maintain order? Justice was not long deferred, for the immediate consequence was Damasus’ overwhelming attack on the basilica where the presbyters and their rescuers had taken refuge. In such circumstances, Viventius’ retreat can be seen not as a surrender to anarchy, but a calculated decision to leave the Christian factions temporarily to each other’s mercy. Nor need the alacrity with which Damasus’ partisans seized the opportunity, and the brutality with which they exploited this, mean that they had coordinated their plans with the prefect. Instead, by his withdrawal Viventius was perhaps deliberately distancing himself from the faction whose interests his officium had been employed to serve.

Here again, then, there are grounds to reconsider the relationship between the bishop of Rome and the secular authorities. Although Viventius acted in support of Damasus’ interests (whether from personal preferences, or simply because he had obtained possession of the cathedral) he went to no great lengths on his behalf, but left him to fight his own battle when it became clear that a battle had to be fought. This makes the prefect neither the new pope’s patron nor his partner, nor again a helpless bystander during the contest for the

34 For Ammianus’ dependence on official secular records, see Lippold (1965) 120; Lizzi Testa (2004) 154.
35 Amm. 27.3.12.
36 Amm. 27.3.13: sed hunc quoque ...
37 Avell. 1.6.
38 For the timing see Lippold (1965) 120–121; Lizzi Testa (2004) 159 seems to imply instead that Viventius retired after the attack on the Liberiana.
39 It is very significant that Viventius’ career was not damaged, but rather enhanced: on his promotion to praetorian prefect see Lippold (1965) 120; Lizzi Testa (2004) 151.
see. It is significant that despite their overwhelming exhibition of force at the Liberiana, Damasus’ party were so far from being able to eliminate the opposition that the Ursinians were able to regroup, “after three days”, and then to make the same Basilica Liberiana the base from which to make their prayers to the emperor. That they could do so was perhaps thanks to the reassertion of the prefect’s authority, following his return to the city.

The ferocity of the struggle in 366, unparalleled in the history of early papal elections, is to be attributed to the toxic legacy of the previous decade. However, the schism created when Liberius was exiled in 355 and his archdeacon Felix accepted consecration as his replacement, with the support of some of the clergy (including Damasus) and against vehement opposition from others, should be regarded as primarily a matter for a relatively small core of professionals and immediate dependants. The Ursinians admittedly have “the entire people” shunning Felix, petitioning Constantius for Liberius’ return, and rushing out to meet him when this was achieved; but much the same terminology is used for the partisan community who after electing Ursinus in 366 would similarly refuse communion with Damasus, petition Valentinian for Ursinus’ recall, and greet him when he returned. Nor do the two well-known but problematic vignettes presented by the fifth-century ecclesiastical historian Theodoret prove that the laity were committed to Liberius. He reports a delegation to Constantius of senatorial matrons, deputed by their timid husbands; if the embassy indeed took place (and there seems no prima facie reason to doubt it), the absence of the menfolk would suggest that they at least had learned to accept the status quo. Nor does the Syrian historian’s famous account of the response in the Circus Maximus to Constantius’ initial proposal, that Felix and Liberius should share the episcopal duties – the unanimous acclamation, “One God! One Christ! One bishop!” – demonstrate an assertive loyalty among racing fans to their pope. Instead (if the acclamations are reported verbatim, as Theodoret claims) we should more reasonably see here a pious gloss on the competitive proclamations by two rival teams of cheerleaders, each trumpeting a supposed commitment to their ‘own’ bishop. The emperor, certainly, does not seem to have been troubled by any opposition. Even after extracting from Liberius the signature to an “Arian” creed, which can only have damaged the pope’s credibility with those who had admired him as a confessor against heresy, he did not order that Felix be removed.

41 Avell. 1.8–9.
42 The preces addressed to the emperor (Avell. 9) imply dependence on secular channels.
44 Avell. 1.2–3 (Liberius); 6–10 (Ursinus).
45 Barnes (1992) 209–211 usefully sums up the historical value of Theodoret’s account of this period.
46 Theod. hist. eccl. 2.17.1–4: accepted by e.g. Maier (1993) 233.
47 Theod. hist. eccl. 2.17.5–7: accepted by e.g. Humphries (2007) 27–28.
48 For this interpretation, cf. Cameron (1976) 55. Amm. 16.10.13 reports Constantius’ enjoyment of the banter of the circus crowd: dicacitate plebis objectabantur.
49 Note that Liberius entered into communion with exactly the eastern bishops whom Theodoret’s senatorial matrons professed to shun: Hil. coll. antiar. Ser. B VII 8 (CSEL 65,168–170).
Felix did not yield gracefully upon Liberius’ return, and even after being removed remained within reach of the city, presumably nurturing hopes of outliving his rival and reasserting his claim.50 His shadow must have kept alive the issue of the solemn oath that he and his supporters had broken. This again was a matter primarily for the cathedral clergy. Both the principals in 366, significantly, were deacons; two of the college supported Ursinus (accompanying him into exile and on his return), indicating a very close and complex division.51 In neither of the two disputed papal elections of the fifth century was the central church establishment so bitterly divided, and this is the most likely explanation for the exceptional violence of the succession struggle.52 However, there is no reason to suppose that the poison had spread far beyond those directly responsible for the management of the church, and those most directly dependent upon it. The lay Christian elite of Rome could, and did, maintain a safe distance from the personalities and politics of the institutional church.

The point can be illustrated by the experiences of two members of the elite who joined the church during the period when the storm was brewing. In both cases, the convert’s glamour seems to have overshadowed the authority of the bishop of Rome and his priests. The conversion of the rhetorician Marius Victorinus, famous through Augustine’s impressionistic, stylized account, seems to have occurred during the mid-350s, the period during which Liberius’ exile polarized the Roman church.53 The most relevant aspect of Augustine’s account is how comfortably (and how like a rhetor) Victorinus commands the stage at the public recitation of the creed, with an enraptured audience hanging on his every word.54 We do not know whether Liberius or Felix, or a substitute of either, conducted the actual baptism, but whoever it was he failed to secure any claim upon Victorinus.55 The baptized rhetor resumed his profession, which he only resigned the following decade when Julian the Apostate created problems for high-profile Christian teachers.56 Victorinus did however become immersed in doctrinal controversy, the same struggle against the “Arian” heresy which had been the original cause of Liberius’ exile. But the series of intricate theological polemics which he began issuing during the later 350s stand in conspicuous contrast to Liberius’ failure to speak out against the heresy in the immediate aftermath

50 He would die just ten months too early, in November 365: Avell. 1.4.
51 Avell. 1.11 does not mention any companions for the second exile, and the deacons are not among the Ursinian exiles listed at Avell. 11.3. Damas. Carm. 182 seems to show one of them subsequently serving under Damasus.
52 The incidents of violence between supporters of Boniface and Eulalius in 418, and between those of Symmachus and Laurentius in 458, were not pressed towards such bloody conclusions: on these disputes (both of which pitted a deacon, supported by his colleagues, against a presbyter), see respectively Diefenbach (2007) 242–251 and Moorhead (1992) 58–60; 114–139.
53 Aug. conf. 8.2.5. For the date, see most recently Cooper (2005) 20–28.
54 Aug. conf. 8.2.5: ... et sonuit presso sonitu per ora cunctorum conlaetantium, ‘Victorinus, Victorinus’. cito sonuerunt exultatione, quia videbant eum, et cito siluerunt intentione, ut audirent eum.
56 Aug. conf. 8.5.10. For Julian’s initiative, see most recently Banchich (1993).
of his return. The vertiginous intellectual demands that Victorinus makes on his readers has encouraged historians to treat him as a marginal figure, but educated contemporaries at Rome cannot have failed to notice that the most conspicuous recent recruit to Christianity had taken a theological lead while his bishop remained silent. Above all, Victorinus’ resolutely intellectual approach to the controversy placed him far above the still unresolved struggle between Liberius and Felix, who seem to have had no doctrinal disagreements. His elevated conception of the Christian struggle left no room for such squabbles as theirs, and even if he intended no reproach, others might easily have inferred one. Although Victorinus doubtless added lustre to the Christian cause in general, his conversion did nothing to enhance the status of the bishop of Rome.

A second ‘convert’ during Liberius’ papacy was Iunius Bassus, city prefect, who was baptized in office just before his death in August 359 and was buried in a gorgeous sarcophagus directly adjacent to the tomb of Saint Peter himself. It has been deduced from the verse inscription attached to the tomb that Bassus was granted the rare, and conspicuous, honour of a public funeral. Attention has also been drawn to the prominence of the burial-spot (the precise location of which was established when the upper portion of the inscription was excavated), directly adjacent to the apostle’s grave. However, scholars have still not done sufficient justice to the extraordinary pretensions of Bassus, a neophyte who had only just formally joined the church, in claiming for himself the most prestigious conceivable ad sanctos burial spot in Rome. Moreover, the funerary inscription attached to the tomb glories not in his association with Peter but in the grief stirred up as he was carried to his burial. We hear of “the everlasting tears of the city”, of weeping women, children and old men, and tearful senators; “the highest buildings seemed to weep, and then the houses themselves along the way seemed to give forth sighs”. But the actual destination at the Vatican, the burial behind Peter’s grave, is not mentioned at all. Although baptized into the church of Rome, Bassus most certainly did not get appropriated by it. The crucial line of the inscription reads as follows: [nec l]icuit famulis domini gestare feretrum. This is translated, plausibly, as “Nor were his own servants allowed to carry his bier”, but translators have


58 Victorinus’ contemporary impact should not be measured by Jerome’s damning verdict on his obscurity: vir. ill. 101. His social status is suggested by ILCV 104, his granddaughter’s epitaph: see Hadot (1971) 16–17.

59 Soz. 4.11.11; Theod. hist. eccl. 2.17.3. Hadot (1971) 271 considers an anti-Liberian agenda possible.

60 The iconography of the sarcophagus has been frequently analysed: see most fully Malbon (1990).

61 Cameron (2002) 290. The inscription is published at CIL VI.1779a and AE 1953.239.


63 The celsius culmen in the last line, corrected from celsus by Cameron (2002) 288–289, refers to Bassus’ posthumous condition; the further inscription on the rim of the sarcophagus lid similarly has iit ad deum (CIL VI.32004).

failed to note that in Christian contexts there was by mid-fourth century a more obvious reading of the phrase *famuli domini*, the servants of the Lord God. Such expressions were already current in Christian Rome, even if the exact phrasing is not attested until the following generation.65 It is highly unlikely that the poet commemorating Bassus intended to record any exclusion of clergy or congregation from the ceremony; however, his apparent failure to realize that there might be grounds for misunderstanding is highly significant. Bassus’ tomb generates its own context, where his place beside the original “servant of the lord” counted for nothing.66 Even at the very heart of Christian Rome, then, the clergy were not allowed to interfere in the business of honouring the senatorial dead in the style to which the latter had become accustomed.

The cavalier manner in which Iunius Bassus appropriated Saint Peter’s tomb can be explained in part by the precise historical context. Liberius had good reason to appreciate the power of the prefecture, since his own exile had been arranged by the prefect Leonitus.67 But he must also have had dealings with the civic authorities after his return from exile in 357.68 In order for Felix to be “branded by the senate” and expelled from the city, a decree of the senate would be necessary, and to obtain this Liberius would be obliged, like Damasus a few years later, to make his case through the urban prefecture.69 A formal decree of the senate might also be implied by the participation of the *proceres* in defeating a subsequent attempt by Felix to reestablish himself. With Felix still very much alive in 359, waiting in the suburbs for an opportunity to claim his inheritance, Bassus (whose behaviour towards the bishop, as a Christian catechumen, would in any case be closely watched) could expect to be much courted. It will have been to Bassus, too, that Liberius made his excuses for absenting himself from Constantius’ great council at Rimini, which was still in progress when the prefect died; this is likely to have created further obligations.70

But even if the privileges allowed to Bassus in 359 were the product of a specific context, they will nevertheless have helped shape expectations both for the senators who escorted the body to its place of honour, and for the clergy who helped organize the occasion.

65 Liberius had styled himself *famulus Dei* in a letter of 355: Hil. *coll. antiar*. Ser. B VII 2.2 (CSEL 65.164); the same phrase is used of Paul by Victorinus: *In Epistolam Pauli ad Philippenses* 1.25. The exact formula occurs on the fifth-century tomb of Pope Boniface (ILCV 992); it is used of the Christian faithful by Prudentius *perist*. 3.27 (*persecution unleashed in famulos domini*) and by Damasus’ successor Siricius (ILCV 1983, on the martyrs Felix and Adauctus).

66 The complex iconography of the sarcophagus itself does not privilege Peter: for an attempt to decode the typological scheme, see Malbon (1990) 127–153.

67 *Amm*. 15.7.6–10.


69 *Avell*. 1.3. The senate was at the time chaired by the prefect Orfitus, a pagan who seems unlikely to have taken any spontaneous initiative on the pope’s behalf.

70 Pietri (1976) 261 supposes from Liberius’ absence that he was not invited; but for the mechanisms involved, see Gregory Nazianzen’s correspondence with the vicar of Pontus and governor of Cappadocia in 382: *epist*. 130–131.
From such occasions did the breezy self-confidence and independence which was (and would long remain) so distinctive a feature of elite Christian society at Rome emerge. What historians have tended to see as signs of increased papal power in the second half of the fourth century might in fact be read as indications of an increased readiness to provide services for this constituency, and (conversely) to seek favours from it.

Damasus’ first attested appearance as pope, significantly, is as a petitioner at the prefect’s court. A letter from Valentinian instructs Praetextatus, Viventius’ successor, to order that the sole church still being retained by the Ursinian dissidents “be opened to Damasus”, on the basis of a formal request which had been submitted by the pope’s legal team. Although usually treated as a mere byproduct of the second expulsion of Ursinus, this involved a quite different pattern of petition and response. Praetextatus had clearly moved decisively to remove Ursinus himself, when his presence threatened to trigger a new cycle of disturbances at Rome. But this did not make him (any more than Viventius had been) an ally or accomplice of Damasus. The Ursinians, certainly, did not identify him as such. Valentinian’s instruction about the basilica not only shows that Praetextatus had issued no eviction order himself, but also implies a previous report on the matter from prefect to emperor, in the style familiar from Symmachus’ Relationes. Praetextatus, that is, had solemnly passed Damasus’ petition upwards rather than dealing with it himself, thus obliging the pope to submit (and be seen to submit) to the stately rhythms of due process. Irritation at this unnecessarily circuitous procedure might be detected in the tone of the emperor’s response, but Praetextatus thus engineered a public demonstration of the subordination of church to state.

Nor had the basic structure changed even by the end of Damasus’ reign. In 382, two years before his death, we find Damasus going to law before another urban prefect, Auchenius Bassus, in order to proscribe a schismatic bishop who had had the temerity to establish himself at Rome. The prefect was more than a match for Damasus’ lawyers, and declared inadmissible the legislation that he was trying to invoke. The gless at the pope’s discomfiture exhibited by the two presbyters who report this incident – “then for the first time Damasus blushed” – betrays the limits of their horizons. In their sect’s previous encounter with the pope, prefectural officials had been employed in the latter’s service, and they evidently generalized from this episode. For Damasus, however, long years of doing business

71 For a notable example from the end of the fifth century, see McIynn (2008).
72 Avell. 6.2.
73 For the mechanics of the operation, see Lizzi Testa (2004) 161 n. 24.
74 Lizzi Testa (2004) 162 claims that they were constrained by Praetextatus’ rank and influence; this seems unlikely.
75 Valentinian’s instruction that Praetextatus should scrutinize the documents presented by Damasus (petitio perspecta) before acting seems to imply that the prefect was already familiar with these; note also the emperor’s vagueness about their source: defensorum ecclesiae Romae sive Damasi sacrae legis antistitis.
76 Avell. 2.83–85.
77 Avell. 2.80: clerici Damasi ... irruunt cum officialibus.
with, and through, the prefectural *officium* will have brought a succession of victories and setbacks. Bassus need not be assigned to an anti-Damasan faction: had this been the case, the pope is unlikely to have sought redress at his tribunal.\(^7\) The episode stands instead as an example of the independent judgement which the Christian nobles of Rome brought to bear upon the affairs of their church. Once again, we should resist the temptation to trace all Christian activity back to the church.

It remains very difficult, however, to discard the assumption that the church somehow owned the ideology of Christianity. A good example, again (probably) involving a city prefect during Damasus’ reign, Bassus’ immediate predecessor, concerns the bronze boat-shaped lamp found in the house of the Valerii on the Caelian, decorated with two figures representing (probably) Peter and Paul and the bold inscription: “The lord gives the law to Valerius Severus”.\(^7\) It has been taken for granted that this was a gift to Severus from the pope, and therefore symbolic of the encroachment of the church into the domestic sphere.\(^8\) There seems no reason, however, why it should not have been a gift from one layman to another. God’s law did not need to be mediated through an ecclesiastical hierarchy. We need to acknowledge the scope available for creative initiative by the lay elite, and the open-ended character of Damasus’ Christian Rome.

Similar considerations apply to two more aristocrats whose initiatives during Damasus’ reign are on record. Prudentius, when recording a generation later the catalogue of proud senators who had submitted to Christ, reports that “the heir of the name of Olybrius”:

> “Although added to the *fasti* and conspicuous in the palm-embroidered cloak,
> Is eager to lower the rods of Brutus before the martyr’s doors
> And to bend the axe of Italy to Christ”.\(^8\)

These badges of office refer more probably not to Olybrius’ city prefecture of 370 (he held the office when Valentinian issued his letter to Damasus about fund-raising) or praetorian prefecture, but to his consulsip of 379.\(^8\) Rome had seen several Christian consuls inaugurated since then (including Olybrius’ two grandsons, duly noted in Prudentius’ poem), so Prudentius is here most likely alluding to a specific event during the consul’s term of office.\(^8\) Olybrius, who had been at the imperial court in Sirmium on January 1\(^{st}\) for his investiture in the consular robes, had then moved to Antioch for a brief tenure as praetorian pre-

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\(^7\) Lizzi Testa (2004) 190–192.
\(^7\) ILCV 1592: *dominus legem dat Valerio Severo. eutropi vivas*. For discussion see Huskinson (1982) 58: 90.
\(^8\) Most recently Bowes (2008) 79: “almost certainly an episcopal gift”.
\(^8\) Contra McLynn (1996) 326 n. 55, arguing a reference to his urban prefecture, and Barnes and Westall (1991) 53–54, arguing one to his praetorian prefecture.

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fect of the east, but had probably returned to Rome before his year ended.  Olybrius’ flaunting of the ceremonial apparatus of the senior magistracy of Rome to enhance his devotions, upon his return from a memorable tour of the empire, seems to have made a lasting impression. Nor is there any reason whatever to suppose that the bishop was required to preside over this performance.

Prudentius brings his catalogue to a climax with the case of Gracchus, which is still more sensational: as prefect he first ordered the destruction of some pagan images, and then presented himself, with his lictors in attendance, for baptism.  Jerome also glories in the deed, in a letter to his protégée Laeta some two decades later, and furthermore presents the plundered images as quasi-hostages sent ahead to bolster the baptism application. There can be little doubt that when Gracchus put his name forward, many contemporaries would have thought that he was conferring as much grace upon the church of Rome as he was receiving.

The association that Prudentius makes between Olybrius and “the doors of the martyr” invites consideration of the most topographically striking aspect of Damasus’ career, his programme of promoting the cults of selected martyrs. He left his mark around Rome on all sides, in the form of marble tablets, beautifully inscribed with versified commemoration of individual saints or groups of saints, some of which can be associated with redecoration or other development of the site. Damasus’ projects have been much discussed, but in their overviews historians have tended either to pitch their explanations at an unhelpfully abstract strategic level, or to reduce the pope’s initiatives to tactical manoeuvres in a contest for territory against schismatics and heretics. But the uniformity of Damasus’ marble slabs masks the different concerns that brought him to different sites, and disguises also what were probably quite different levels of personal engagement in different projects. The prominence of his texts in the surviving record also encourages us to overestimate their contemporary profile. For Damasus was obliged to share his saints with others, who did not need his mediation when demonstrating their commitment. The flourish with which Prudentius introduces Olybrius’ consular apparatus indicates the scope available, in a zone unconstrained by any permanent ecclesiastical oversight, for creative exhibitions of lay piety. No monopoly was possible over such an environment. Even where Damasus had staked his claim with a monument, he was always liable to be eclipsed by the colourful exuberance of senatorial devotions.

84 His successor Neoterius was in office before January 15, 380: Cod. Theod. 9.27.1.
86 Hier. epist. 107.2, explaining that the images were from a mithraeum. Clauss (2000) 170 emphasizes as a likely motive the particular Christian animus against Mithras, for which see further Sauer (2003) esp. 79–88. Matthews (1975) 23 suggests attractively that Gracchus might simply have demolished a shrine on his family property.
87 Pietri (1976) 514–546, the classic account of le second établissement chrétien.
The care of their own dead remained the main incentive for Romans of Damasus’ generation, whatever their social status, to visit the *suburbium*. And there is no reason to suppose that the pope’s initiatives effected (or were designed to effect) a reorientation of the funerary practices of the Roman elite. The evidence remains tantalizingly incomplete, but in the great funerary complex at San Sebastiano on the Via Appia, for example, lavish burials continued throughout this period in the grand family mausolea that abutted Constantine’s basilica.\textsuperscript{89} It is unfortunate that there is no surviving archaeological context at the site for Damasus’ two attested interventions, his tablet commemorating Peter and Paul’s association with it or the much longer poem with which he adorned the tomb of “his” rediscovered martyr Eutychius.\textsuperscript{90} At Ad Duas Lauros on the Via Labicana, conversely, the late fourth-century graves which crowd the recently enlarged crypt housing the martyrs Marcellinus and Peter, recipients of a characteristic tribute from Damasus, are very modest in character.\textsuperscript{91} Here, at any rate, the pope’s epigraphic imprimatur did not automatically create a magnet for elite burials.\textsuperscript{92}

Those cases where a connection can be established between Damasus’ poetry and lavish funerary activity are therefore of particular interest. In the catacomb of Callistus, where there does seem to be a close correlation between the Damasan monument (his tablet honouring Pope Eusebius) and a cluster of prestige burials, one in the same chamber and two in a near-adjacent one, these tombs have plausibly been assigned to the pious benefactor who funded the project.\textsuperscript{93} A donor has similarly been unmasked behind another of Damasus’ initiatives, who (if the identification is correct) eventually earned canonization for herself through the prominence of her tomb.\textsuperscript{94} Such examples suggest that Damasus’ ventures might be more usefully understood as complex collaborations rather than as straightforward expressions of episcopal authority; to contemporaries, his activities in the catacombs perhaps bore the stamp more of project manager than of impresario. These cases also remind us that any given martyrium afforded only limited scope for “prime site” *ad sanctos* burial, and that once the “right of possession” was established future customers were likely to look elsewhere.\textsuperscript{95}

Even at the end of Damasus’ long papacy, moreover, the leading Christian families of Rome seem to have remained quite capable of taking care of their own departed. Jerome describes the funeral, at the very end of Damasus’ life, of Blesilla, the pious young widow whose enthusiasm for asceticism had proved fatal, as having been arranged in the custom-
ary way: a gold cloth covered the bier, the procession was led (like Bassus’ twenty-five years earlier) by “the order of nobles”–and as it passed the people gossiped about the family sympathetically.96 There is no mention of any participation by the church, nor any need to suppose any.

Only once can we associate Damasus with such a funeral, and the case is a most interesting one. The young bride Proiecta, who died in December 383, less than a year before Blesilla, received an eloquent lament on a marble slab, in Damasus’ signature Philocalian format.97 The lettering has traditionally been judged superior to the poetry, which one critic dismissed as “characteristically lame and frigid”, “a tissue of tags and clichés, shakily strung together and barely squeezed into the metre”.98 However, Damasus’ poetic stock has risen considerably in the last generation, and this poem has become one of his more warmly appreciated.99 A more recent, and more nuanced, analysis finds une voix hachée, brisée, pointing out that the poem carries an emotional charge far greater than those which Damasus had produced for his own mother or sister.100 However, the inference drawn from this, that Proiecta was the pope’s relative, fails, since the case for identifying her with the bride of Secundus (making her the owner of the famous Esquiline Treasure) seems conclusive.101 This poem thus represents Damasus’ sole attested commission to grieve on behalf of the aristocracy; and given the relatively good survival record for Damasus’ texts, we can reasonably infer that such commissions were in fact infrequent. The elegant vehemence of his lamentation suggests the eagerness with which he seized the opportunity to display his poetic talents. And even here there are grounds to think that he remained on the margins. The oddity of the poem, which makes the father chief mourner at the expense of the husband, has prompted the attractive hypothesis that the inscription might have been one of a pair, the other being provided by Proiecta’s husband Secundus.102 Irrespective of this, there was an important difference between Secundus, a son of the Turcii and a Roman of Rome, and Proiecta’s father Florus, who belongs not to old Rome but to the imperial court, having risen from provincial roots through the bureaucracy to become (via a family connection) Theodosius’ praetorian prefect in Constantinople.103 He was therefore the sort of Christian arriviste with whom the old families were now making accommodations; the sort, it might further be suggested, who was most likely to feel the need for a papal imprimatur.

96 Hier. epist. 39.1.5; 6.2, with commentary by Matthews (2009) 138–140. Contrast with this the psalms that attended the funeral of Blesilla’s mother Paula, whom Jerome could bury at Bethlehem, safely beyond the family’s reach: epist. 108.29.
97 Damas. carm. 51. For a vivid evocation of the possible context (“a chamber as impressive as that of any martyr”), see Brown (2000) 13.
98 Cameron (1985) 136; 137.
99 Fontaine (1986).
102 Cameron (1985) 137.
The case of Proiecta, therefore, again suggests that Damasus played a more subordinate role in Roman society than that usually assigned to him. However, the position suggested here and throughout this paper is broadly consistent with the approach advocated in recent scholarship, where “competition for resources and prestige among aristocrat-led coalitions involving lay and clerical participants, rather than competition between the clergy and laity per se, should be the guiding principle of work on Rome’s Christian topography”.\textsuperscript{104} The great energy and resourcefulness with which historians have, quite correctly, credited Damasus can be better appreciated once he is seen as a distinctly junior partner in a series of collaborations with Christian aristocrats; further investigation of his inscriptions in their context will shed further light on the character (no doubt, far from uniform) of these collaborations. No less important, for a just appreciation of his achievement, is due recognition of the large areas of Christian activity that remained beyond his reach. Damasus was just one figure in a crowded landscape. The field was populated, moreover, not just by the ‘clarissimi viri’ with whom this paper has been most concerned, but by the presbyters and deacons of Rome, whose activities must not be seen as mere extensions of the pope’s will.\textsuperscript{105} It is only when these other “Christian Romes” are taken into account that Damasus’ own contribution to shaping the city’s religious identity can be properly measured.

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