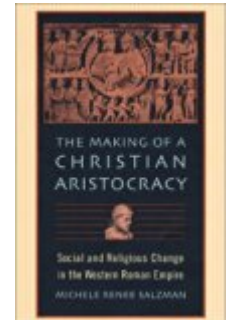


**Michele Renee Salzman.** *The making of a Christian aristocracy: Social and religious change in the Western Roman Empire.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002. XIV + 354 S. \$52.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-00641-6.



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## Was the Emperor's Preference Decisive?

Salzman presents an excellent analysis of the interaction of the Roman aristocracy with Christianity in the western half of the Roman Empire. The argument is based on prosopographical data for the years 284-423 (all dates are C.E.) drawn largely from the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* and its numerous addenda. She takes issue with the scholarly consensus as presented by prominent scholars such as R. MacMullen and T. D. Barnes to the effect that the most salient dynamic driving the conversion of the western Roman aristocracy was the Emperor's religious preference. The view with which Salzman takes issue is, simply stated, that since all emperors save one were Christian after Constantine, the conversion of the empire and its aristocracy was inevitable. The implication of the traditional view is that the emperor's influence was more or less direct and compelled conversion from the top down. The revisionist view for which Salzman argues persuasively is much more nuanced; the conversion of the Roman aristocracy had much more to do with individualized perceptions concerning the value

of traditional totems of honor and status as expressed in pagan ritual and office. These perceptions varied according to region, family history, and career path; by extension, one may identify variant paces of conversion according to these criteria. All told, "the emperor's influence was more limited and more diffuse than many have argued" (p. 5). In addition, Salzman argues that common perceptions of the role of women in hastening the Christianization of the aristocracy cannot be substantiated.

Chapter 1 develops the method. Salzman has assembled 414 short biographies representing all known western Roman aristocrats between 284 and 423 whose religious preference is expressed in the sources. Their careers are placed against the background of other available forms of evidence, especially letters of church fathers and legislation. The terminal dates represent the ascension of Diocletian and the death of the emperor Honorius. Aristocrats are defined for the purposes of this study as being at least *clarissimi*, a rank indicating senatorial standing. The study is restricted to one-half of the empire since the two halves

of the empire and their respective aristocracies enjoyed markedly different economic and social histories, and it accords with the division of the senatorial order on a geographical basis by the emperor Constantius II in the 350s. Salzman puts forth two observations that will inform the rest of the book. First, there was a marked and early correspondence between the integration of aristocratic ingenues under imperial patronage and their identification with Christianity, and, secondly, there was a great deal of overlap in the attitudes of contemporaneous pagan and Christian aristocrats with respect to noble concerns and values. The hypothesis tendered in this chapter is that the church fathers and emperors essentially Christianized the values of the western Roman aristocracy (p. 18).

Chapter 2 defines the process whereby the levels of titles and honors belonging to the senatorial order were developed and argues that the primary concern of all members of this class was the procurement of prestige, among the accouterments of which was the supervision of public cult. The corresponding priesthoods in the city of Rome were still sought and exercised well into the second half of the fourth century (pp. 64-65). Chapter 3 breaks down the aristocracy into the regional categories and shows how families with long histories in Italy and Rome as well as provincial aristocracies with strong patronage ties to Italian families, Roman Africans especially, tended to be represented at higher rates as pagans presumably because of the perceived career benefits accruing from pagan offices. Conversely, since the Gallic aristocracy was physically closer to the western emperor's capital at Trier and there existed no such "status-laden priesthoods" in Gaul (p. 88), a higher percentage of the aristocracy identified itself as Christian, or did so sooner than in Italy.

Chapter 4 expands the argument by identifying and considering the ways and means to a successful aristocratic career. The essential point is

that networks of patronage and association existed that preconditioned religious preferences of individual members of those networks and all of this practically limits the choices that an emperor could make as far as imperial appointments and promotions go. In essence, except for the highest offices, emperors made their appointments from lists they were handed, a process that was repeated at lower levels. This results in a diffused privilege of adlection (pp. 115-116). This is compounded, Salzman argues, by the reluctance of Christians to seek civic offices with obviously pagan components. This problem was recognized by Gratian in 367 in his attempts to de-paganize Roman civic offices after which Christian identification tracks upward in this category. On the other hand, the much more open track to an imperial service that had no ritual element was inviting to ingenues and Christians in which categories there was a substantial and obvious overlap. In these categories of service, a much faster rate of Christian identification is seen as early as the 340s (p. 126). The reverse dynamic is clear under the pagan emperor Julian during whose tenure members of the imperial service include converts from Christianity to paganism. However, strictly military appointments were made by all the later emperors outside of the imperial service, no doubt to discourage ambitious rivals in the civil government, and show no numerical advantage accruing to either pagans or Christians until well into the fifth century. For example, Gratian and Honorius, both zealous Christians, appointed pagans to the position of *Magister Equitem* (for the years 380-383 and 408-409 respectively). In the case of Honorius, this forced the emperor to rescind his own decree making pagan appointments illegal. This reflects, Salzman argues, the much more practical requirements of military appointments. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of chapters 2 and 3: there was a two-step process obtained in the period under question with a gradual falling away from pagan institutions followed

by a convergence of what had been two separate career paths, Christian and pagan (pp. 135-137).

Chapter 5 considers the role of aristocratic women in the Christianization of their men. Salzman argues that there is little basis for the notion, as argued for example by P. Brown, that women were in any significant way responsible for hastening the process of conversion among the aristocracy. Salzman concedes that there were elements of Christianity that acted to reinforce female independence, especially in widowhood, and therefore Christianity may have held some special appeal for women but cautions that almost all of the relevant ancient sources argued that women should not actively proselytize and, on the contrary, should respect traditional Roman patriarchal values. Against the possible objection that such strictures on women suggest the opposite in reality, Salzman notes that the controversies actually reported in the sources tend to focus on women's rights to give away their patrimony and the potential impact of either this prospect or that of their celibacy on the family (p. 152). Lacking a socially acceptable public venue for influencing others, Christian women could only have been in a position, outside of the family, to influence other Christians (p. 173). But the most telling statistic that Salzman adduces from her sample is the rarity of evidence in which a Christian wife in a mixed marriage converted her husband; only one such case is known. Finally, Salzman argues, the assumption that women were instrumental in converting their husbands stands upon an unproved premise, that aristocratic women tended to identify with Christianity before men. The sample of identifiable Christian aristocrats shows no time lag in patterns of identification according to gender.

Chapter 6, "The Emperor's Effect," returns to the central thesis. It argues briefly that the emperor was, in addition to the arguments made in chapters 3 and 4, limited in his potential zeal by his membership in the class that he was attempt-

ing to manage. He was not therefore in a position to outrun it. There is certainly no evidence of forcing an overall top-down conversion until the sixth century; rather, there was only a progressive circumscription of pagan ritual and Salzman argues, all imperial efforts concerning Christianity comported with the prevailing attitudes of the aristocracy. In chapter 7, "Aristocrats' Influence on Christianity," Salzman concludes the study by asserting that Christianity changed itself as it assimilated the values of the aristocracy the culmination of which process was the co-optation of the status culture (p. 200), the civic responsibilities of the nobility (pp. 205-209), and its literary values (pp. 213-218).

The text is followed by a series of appendices featuring lists of aristocrats whose careers inform the argument and tables weighting their progressive identification as pagan or Christian according to the criteria in the argument and there is a separate appendix for the sources for the database. There is no comprehensive bibliography, merely a list of frequently cited works, but the end notes, comprising about seventy pages, add much in the way of secondary reference.

The prose is pleasant and the argument is both thorough and accessible to non-specialists. Untranslated references appear only in the end-notes. One definitely gets the impression that Salzman controls the topic and the relevant bibliography, but the notes that support the argument are not as helpful as they might be in identifying the specific ways in which other authors depart from the arguments carried in the text. However, the overall thesis concerning imperial control of the pace of conversion seems, in the end, to depart from the standard view only by degree; where the emperor was able to affect religious identification, he did so and, therefore, the book does not fundamentally dislodge the argument that once the emperors were Christian, the rest was inevitable. The only apparent exception that emerges in the statistics seemed to be in military

appointments but as Salzman argues, imperial preferences in this sphere were tempered by practical concerns and drew heavily on the incorporation of Barbarian elites whose eventual identification as Christians was, I might argue, as politically motivated as that of anyone. The clearest spikes in Christian identifications that are indicated by Salzman come in two periods: following the death of Julian "the Apostate" and during the consolidation of Theodosius's influence in the West. Both of these periods were marked by dramatic escalations of anti-pagan, anti-heretical, and anti-Jewish rhetoric and legislation as well as by the rise in influence of the radical Christians. These key thresholds and their correlation with activist emperors would seem to vindicate the standard view but this possibility is given only cursory consideration. Salzman does mention, at various places in the text, that Christian leaders complained that too many conversions were politically motivated but since there is no way to correspond this anecdotal evidence with the quantitative approach she takes, this dynamic ends up falling through the cracks. On the other hand, the arguments put forth in the book indicate how much the process of imperial influence was in fact indirect and illustrates its practical limitations. The arguments pertaining to the putative influence of aristocratic women in the direction of conversion are quite interesting and would be decisive I think except that their identifiable numbers are so small. With that caveat, the close correlation of male and female patterns of Christian identification will stand as a compelling argument against the standard view.

All things considered, this is an excellent book that deepens our understanding of imperial influence in the conversion process and it should remain useful for a long time.

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