

Salvian of Marseilles

**Theology and social criticism
in the last century of the
western empire.**

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WHAT I WISH TO DO THIS EVENING is to attempt to catch behind the surface of a much read late Roman text, the sharp profile of the author himself. Salvian of Marseilles has long been known to us through one book in particular, his *de gubernatione Dei*, *On the Government [that is, on the providential rule] of God*, which he wrote at some time after 439 – probably in the early 440s. This book provides the most vivid, and by far the best known, commentary on the state of the western Roman empire in the 430s and 440s.¹ It is a suitable offering to the memory of Hugh Lord Dacre of Glanton. For what I remember most vividly about Hugh was his infectious passion for Edward Gibbon and for the Enlightenment world on which Gibbon drew in order to produce, in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, what was (to use Hugh's well-chosen words) 'probably the most majestic work of history ever written'.² It was a passion from which I benefited personally on so many occasions in a manner that was characteristic of Hugh – the short note advising me to look to the works of Giannone; the little card file, written in Hugh's elegant hand – complete with a catalog number carefully taken, not from some smooth data-bank of modern times, but from the great pasted tomes of the Upper Bodleian – bringing to my attention the *Unparteyische Kirchen – und Ketzer-Historie* of

¹ I cite from the Sources Chrétiennes edition of the works of Salvian: *De gubernatione Dei*, ed. G. Lagarrigue, *Salvien de Marseille: Oeuvres 2*, SC 220 (Paris: Cerf, 1975), translated as *The Governance of God* by J. F. O'Sullivan, *The Writings of Salvian, the Presbyter*, Fathers of the Church 3 (New York: CIMA, 1947), 23–232; and by E. M. Sanford, *On the Government of God*, Columbia Records of Civilization (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930); *Letters and Ad Ecclesiam*, ed. Lagarrigue, *Salvien de Marseille: Oeuvres 1*, SC 176 (Paris: Cerf, 1971), trans. Sullivan, *The Writings of Salvian*, 237–263 and 267–371.

² H. Trevor-Roper, *Gibbon: The Great Histories* (New York and London: Twayne 1963): xxi. See now the lucid sketch of Peter Ghosh, 'Hugh Trevor-Roper and the history of ideas', *History of European Ideas* 37 (2011), 483–505, esp. 502–505.

Gottfried Arnold. These acts of courtesy to a young scholar, based on the robust assumption that there were enthusiasms which all civilized persons (whatever their age or status) were bound to share, nourished and stretched me throughout my years at Oxford.

Hugh knew his Gibbon. And Gibbon knew his Salvian. He already saw all that we still see in Salvian. In the somber conclusion to the thirty-fifth chapter of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* he wrote that the Romans had long attempted to predict the end of their empire on the basis of the twelve vultures which had flown above the head of Romulus. By the fifth century, the twelve centuries hinted at by these prophetic birds seemed to be running out. But the fall of Rome (Gibbon wrote)

was announced by a clearer omen than the flight of vultures: the Roman government appeared every day less formidable to its enemies, more odious and oppressive to its subjects. The taxes multiplied with the public distress; economy was neglected in proportion as it became necessary; and the injustice of the rich shifted the unequal burden from themselves to the people. The severe inquisition [connected with the taxes] ... compelled the subjects of Valentinian (III) to prefer the more simple tyranny of the barbarians... . They abjured and abhorred the name of Roman citizens, which had formerly excited the ambition of mankind ...

[Indeed, he concludes] if all the barbarian conquerors had been annihilated in the same hour, their total destruction would not have restored the empire of the West: and if Rome still survived, she survived the loss of freedom, of virtue, and of honour.³

A contemporary of efficient authoritarian regimes, he went on to observe in a footnote that Salvian's

immoderate freedom serves to prove the weakness, as well as the corruption, of the Roman government.⁴

In his own times, Gibbon implied, a writer of such 'vehement invectives' would have ended up in the Bastille. Now Salvian ends up in footnotes. Reference to the *de gubernatione Dei* adds the final touch to any grand narrative of the end of the empire in the West. Salvian has become for us a 'source'. He is seldom considered as a person.

³ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J.B. Bury (London: Methuen 1897), iii, 480.

⁴ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 480, note 79.

In fact, Salvian was a vivid person, with his own, idiosyncratic ‘take’ on the problems of his day. He probably wrote in Marseilles and certainly for the *sancti* – for the religiously inclined (the clergy, monks and pious lay persons) – of southern Gaul in the late 430s and early 440s.⁵ He should not be treated as a witness to the ills of the later Roman empire as a whole, in all places and in all centuries, as he is often made to do. Rather, in his writings we catch the hopes and fears of a particular group at a particular juncture in the crisis of the empire – what he calls the *Respublica* – and in a particular region.

It is this juncture which we must first understand. By the late 430s it was plain that what had once been a universal empire had begun to unravel. Salvian looked out at a world where the *Respublica* was only one power among others. Beyond Provence and the southern valley of the Rhone lay barbarian kingdoms in the making both in Aquitaine and in western Spain. Further to the north-west (towards the English Channel) and in marginal areas of Spain lay ominous, stateless zones associated (in the public mind at least) with the *Bacaudae*. Far to the south across the Mediterranean, Africa had recently fallen to the Vandals. Salvian wrote no longer for the citizens of a world empire, but for the inhabitants of an enclave in which the grandeur of an Ancien Régime still lingered with peculiar intensity.⁶ He wrote to warn the inhabitants of this enclave that the Roman order of which they were so proud hung on a thread, and why that was so.

To this task he brought both his own experience and the experience of the vocal group for whom he wrote.

He himself was a refugee from the Rhineland. By moving to the deep south of Gaul, he had voted with his feet for the *Respublica*. Not all members of his family had followed him. A female relative with her son – a boy ‘of not insignificant family’ – had

⁵ E. Griffe, ‘La pratique religieuse en Gaule au V^e siècle: *saeculares et sancti*’, *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* 63 (1962): 241–267. See now Peter Brown, ‘Through the Eye of a Needle’, *Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), 411–414.

⁶ P. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006): 300–348, with the map on p.347; G. Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376–568* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007), 220–283; Brown, ‘Through the Eye of a Needle’, 385–407.

stayed on in Cologne. Now too poor to move, she was condemned to work for a living (so Salvian claimed). She depended on the good graces of ladies from the new barbarian elite.⁷ But already, the begging letter which Salvian wrote to his fellow-*sancti* on her behalf reveals a grey zone, where the old categories of Roman and barbarian no longer quite fitted. For this distressed lady had not been made a slave by the barbarians. Hence, she was not automatically eligible for ransom from the funds of the church.⁸ She and her son had to be treated as special cases. For she represented a new class of persons – Romans *illic* – Romans ‘over there’. It is a term which recurs in Salvian’s *de gubernatione* with ominous frequency. For it meant Romans where no Romans (other than abject slaves held against their will) should be.⁹

It is worthwhile noting that Gennadius of Marseilles, in his Catalogue of Famous Writers, called Salvian a *magister episcoporum*: a Teacher of Bishops.¹⁰ The recent study of Roberto Alciati, *Monaci, Vescovi e scuola nella Gallia tardoantica* has enabled us to recapture some of the weight of the term *magister* as it was used in fifth century Gaul. Bishops and abbots were supposed to be, each of them, a *magister* to a network of disciples whom they trained in sacred matters. The loose literary circles of an earlier age came to be crystallized into a series of more stable pyramids of intensive and continued religious instruction, conducted by spiritual mentors. The Masters transmitted sacred learning with a seriousness that anticipated the monastic schools gathered around the *sapientes* of early medieval Ireland.¹¹

Thus, we should not think of Salvian merely as the author of occasional squibs. As *magister episcoporum*, he set the tone to a wider group.

Salvian’s role as *magister* to the saints also accounts for the constructed audience of his works. We should not think of him addressing a wide circle of readers. Rather, as in

7 Salvian, *Letter* 1.5-6, p. 78.

8 W. Klingshirn, ‘Charity and Power: Caesarius of Arles and the Ransom of Captives in Sub-Roman Gaul,’ *Journal of Roman Studies* 75 (1985), 183–203.

9 Salvian, *De gub. Dei* 5.8.37, p. 340.

10 Gennadius, *De viris illustribus* 68.

11 R. Alciati, *Monaci, vescovi e scuola nella Gallia tardoantica* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura 2009), 83–100.

similar works on wealth and poverty, written thousands of miles away among members of the Buddhist *sangha* of northern India and Inner Asia, we are listening in on an intra-sectarian debate.¹² It was a debate conducted by saints for saints. Put bluntly: in such circles, one could never be quite saint enough to please all other saints. And least of all did the present state of the church please those who insisted on absolute authenticity in their Christian profession.

For this reason, Salvian's first book, the *Ad Ecclesiam* – his *Open Letter to the Church* written in around 435 – already sets the tone for the *de gubernatione*. He saw the church itself as lying in the shadow of a great regret. A chasm had opened up between the present state of the Christianity and the imagined perfection of the first Christian community.

This acute sense of decline arose from a tension within the ranks of the 'saints' themselves. Salvian's idealization of the *Ecclesia Primitiva* – the church in its first state – reflects debates in Marseilles, stirred up by the writings on monasticism of John Cassian. What both men proposed was a fundamentally monastic vision of the Primitive Church. As described in chapters two and four of the *Acts of the Apostles*, the first Christian of Jerusalem appeared, both to Cassian and to Salvian, to have lived in a monastic Utopia. All goods had been held in common and all had lived in a state of total poverty, as if in a gigantic Lérins, supported (as Lérins was largely supported) by the wealth handed over to the community by its members.

The issue was how much of this original perfection could be recaptured in modern times. John Cassian had allowed himself to be optimistic. In his view, a precious remnant of the first solidarity of Christians appeared to have survived, despite a massive 'cooling off' of zeal among the majority of believers. It was still to be found in the monasteries of Egypt and might be renewed in properly-founded monasteries in Gaul.¹³ Salvian, by contrast, made plain that he considered that this perfection had all but totally vanished:

¹² R. Burghart, 'Renunciation in the religious traditions of south Asia,' *Man* 18 (1983), 635–653, at 641.

¹³ R. Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian: Aristocrats, Asceticism, and Reformation in Fifth-Century Gaul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007), 157–177.

That exceptional and outstanding blessedness which once the first community – the *primitiva plebs* – had enjoyed has passed away... . How different the Christian people are now from what they had been!... . In a new and hitherto unheard of manner ... the Church wanes as it reaches its fullness, slipping back as it advances.¹⁴

For Salvian, the vibrant image of the Primitive Church hovered above his age as a permanent rebuke – as a sort of historical super-ego.

In writing in this way, Salvian was not only influenced by John Cassian. He knew his Sallust. He believed, like Sallust, that a moment of virtuous, collective poverty had lain at the root of the former greatness of Rome. He treated the early Republic as if it had been a lay version of the Primitive church. What its heroes had done ‘then’ those Christians who truly followed Christ – his *sancti*: mainly but not exclusively monks – were supposed to do ‘now’. The decline of the church, like the decline of Rome, could be ascribed to the same dire cause – to a loss of ancient virtue due to the corruption of wealth.¹⁵

But, as Sir Ronald Syme has reminded us, when writing of Sallust:

When Roman writers use the language of ancient virtue ... it is time to pause and look again¹⁶.

And what Salvian meant by ‘ancient virtue’ was not only the virtue of poverty. It was the virtue of a church which had once been able to pray effectively for the *Respublica*. The church had lost the power to do this in modern times. Once a *placatrix* – a body capable of placating the wrath of God – the church had become the opposite, an *exacerbatrix* – a community which stirred up His wrath against them by their sins.¹⁷ This emphasis on the wrath of God against the church, rather than his denunciations of the social ills of the declining empire, would have struck contemporary readers as the most chilling aspect of his message. It was not the *Respublica*, it was the church itself which was the Sick Man of Europe.

14 Salvian. *Ad Ecclesiam* 1.1.2, p. 140 and 1.1.4, p. 142; cf. *De gub. Dei* 6.1.4, p. 362.

15 Salvian, *de gub. Dei* 1.2.11, p. 112.

16 R. Syme, *Sallust*, Sather Classical Lectures 33 (Berkeley: University of California Press 1964), 269.

17 Salvian, *De gub. Dei* 3.9.44, p. 220.

In writing in this way, Salvian pointedly dissociated himself from the incipient ‘Christian patriotism’ of his contemporaries in the territories of the *Respublica*. We, who read Salvian’s *On the Government of God* with the advantage of hindsight tend to treat the Roman empire of the late 430s as a doomed institution. But this was not how it appeared to many contemporaries. The 430s and early 440s were seen by many as a time of consolidation, after the terrible events of the early fifth century. Having experienced widespread violence, the Christian communities of southern Gaul had begun to dig in. For the first time in their history, the cities of Gaul gained major cathedrals.¹⁸

This defiant mood prevailed in cities all over the western empire, and especially those that stood near the frontiers of the *Respublica*. Now buried in the long grass beside the Christian basilica at Salona (Solín), on the Dalmatian coast of Croatia, a little north of Split), a similar lintel declared in large capitals: *Deus noster propitius esto Reipublicae Romanae* – ‘Our God, may You be propitious to the Roman State.’¹⁹

Salvian’s answer was a firm ‘no’. God would not be propitious to the *Respublica*. The *de gubernatione* was an icy blast directed against the mood of recovery and consolidation which had comforted Salvian’s compatriots. Why did he do this?

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We must remember that the *de gubernatione* was known at the time as a book *de praesenti iudicio*: ‘On Judgement in the Here and Now.’²⁰ An overpowering sense of the imminent presence of God as the judge of human sins – and not a modern historian’s sense of the abuses of Roman society – was what drove Salvian to produce his tract for the times.

¹⁸ S. T. Loseby, ‘Decline and Change in the Cities of Late Antique Gaul,’ in *Die Stadt in der Spätantike: Niedergang oder Wandel?* Ed. J.-U. Krause and C. Witschel, *Historia Einzelschriften* 190 (Stuttgart: F. Steiner 2006): 67-104 at pp. 68-69. See in general Loseby, ‘Bishops and Cathedrals: Order and Diversity in the Fifth-Century Urban Landscape in Gaul,’ in *Fifth-Century Gaul: A Crisis of Identity?* (ed. J. Drinkwater and H. Elton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992): 144-155; J. Harries, ‘Christianity and the City in Late Roman Gaul,’ in *The City in Late Antiquity*, ed. J. Rich (London: Routledge, 1992), 77-98.

¹⁹ *Inscriptiones Christianae Latinae Veteres*, ed. Diehl, no. 773; see now *Salona: Recherches archéologiques franco-croates à Salone III. Manastirine*, ed. N. Duval, E. Marin and C. Metzger, *Collection de l’École française de Rome* 194: 3 (Rome/Split: École française de Rome/Musée archéologique de Split, 2000), 306-309.

²⁰ Gennadius, *De viris illustribus* 68.

It is precisely in his insistence on the judgment of God that Salvian emerged as a writer who was as powerful as he was idiosyncratic. We can seize the sharpness of his profile if we compare it with the views of his contemporaries among the ‘saints’ of Provence. For Eucherius of Lyons, for instance, the ills of the present age merely proved that Christians lived in the ‘old age’ of the world. It was better for them to think of their own old age and approaching death than to focus on the particular ills of Roman society.²¹ Indeed, seen from a monastery, the world seemed a somewhat diaphanous place. To use the beautiful simile of Valerianus of Cimiez, the bishop of a little town perched in the mountains behind Nice, the secular world was as pallid as a moon in the morning sky.²²

Not so for Salvian. The world was only too real and only too plainly out of joint. Like a relentless investigative cameraman, Salvian held his focus with fierce determination on the real ills of a real empire. He did so in order to persuade his readers that they were in the presence of a God who judged human sins, in the here and now, with terrifying particularity.

In this respect, Salvian was part of what the entry on Semi-Pelagianism in the encyclopedia *Augustine and His Times*, has judiciously called a ‘Gallic consensus’ in theology.²³ This consensus included a strong sense of the unrelenting rigor of the Law of God, which resembled the insistence on total obedience to the Law of God that had been put forward, only a generation previously, in Pelagian writings that were known in Marseilles. God’s Law was clear for all to obey. And so God’s judgment for breaches of this Law was also clear for all to see. A terrible sense of the what Jan Badewien has called the ‘razionale Transparenz’ — of the rationality and transparency of the justice of God — made the *Government of God* quite unlike any other contemporary writing.²⁴

21 Eucherius, *De contemptu mundi* 614–625, ed. Pricoco, p. 98.

22 Valerianus of Cimiez, *Homily* 15.2: 739A.

23 C. Leyser, s.v. Semi-Pelagianism, *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. A. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans 1999), 761–766 at p. 764.

24 J. Badewien, *Geschichtstheologie und Sozialkritik im Werk Salvians von Marseille*, *Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte* 32 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1980), 176–199, at 189.

Why was this remorselessly precise logic of crime and punishment so important to Salvian? It was because, at the back of his mind, there lay a lingering conviction that, in some way or other, the Roman empire was the Israel of modern times. Like the ancient Israel, it was a state subject to the peculiar care of God. As David Lambert has made plain – in a cogent article to which I owe much – Salvian thought of the Christian empire of the fifth century as an avatar of the kingdom of Israel:

It had become a politico-religious entity of the same kind as Israel under Moses.²⁵

The *Respublica* was an Israel writ large.

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Salvian's message was so terrible because he claimed that the Christian Roman empire was, indeed, an Israel. But it was a failed Israel. Its inhabitants had rejected the opportunity to be an Israel obedient to the Law. For this reason, they lived in an Israel deserted by God. *Vos non estis populus meus*: 'You are not my people' (*Hosea* 1.9). The words of the prophet Hosea to an abandoned Israel summed up, for Salvian, the extent of the peril which the surviving *Respublica* now faced.²⁶ It was an Israel in its last days.

In order to write in this way, Salvian deliberately brushed aside alternative, more comforting ways of seeing his world. It is instructive to compare him for a moment with a writer quite as pugnacious as he was, who had raised a stir in Marseilles a decade earlier – the Augustinian *ultra*, Prosper of Aquitaine. In the years when Salvian was writing the *de gubernatione*, Prosper had completed his *Chronicle* and was writing the *de vocatione omnium gentium* – *On the Calling of all Nations*. For Prosper, the workings of God's mighty grace in the church had effectively cut the history of Christianity loose from the history of the empire. Prosper's world of pure grace was a world with no center. Like sudden flashes of light dancing on the surface of a immense and unfathomed ocean, grace could shine out

²⁵ D. Lambert, 'The Uses of Decay: History in Salvian's *De gubernatione dei*', *Augustinian Studies* 30 (1999), 115–130, at 128.

²⁶ Salvian, *De gub. Dei* 4.1.4, p. 234.

anywhere. The hand of God was as likely to be seen at work on the shores of Ireland as in Arles. And, in any case, the workings of God's providence were beyond human scrutiny. A velvet opacity screened the relation between sin and judgment.²⁷

Nothing could be more different from Prosper's serene mystification of the workings of grace than the remorseless transparency with which Salvian traced every present disaster to the judgment of God in the here and now. Nor did the centerless world of Prosper mean anything to Salvian. His view of the *Respublica* as an avatar of the kingdom of Israel kept his attention focused on the territories of the empire. For it was there that the Law of God should have been observed in its fullness; and so it was there that blows of God's judgment had fallen with terrible force and in a manner that was chillingly intelligible.

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Let us end by lingering over two well-known examples of Salvian at work on themes which have fueled debate among modern historians. First: let us look at one revealing aspect Salvian's attitude to the barbarians.

The sound and fury of past debates on whether Salvian was pro-barbarian or anti-barbarian, whether he remained a loyal subject of the *Respublica* or whether he perceived in the makeshift power-blocs of his own time the outlines of the Germanic Europe of the early middle ages, have led us to ignore what was truly original in his approach. Salvian proposed, for the very first time, a novel map of Gaul. This was a strictly moral map. What he wanted to trace upon it were the differing shades of knowledge of the Law of God. Some groups could claim diminished responsibility. They had not known that Law or had known it only imperfectly. But others – that is, the Romans – could make no such claim. They had known the Law. They were entirely responsible for their sins. They must face the full rigor of God's judgment.

²⁷ See esp. S. Muhlenberger, *The Fifth-Century Chroniclers: Prosper, Hydatius and the Gallic Chronicler of 452* (Liverpool: Francis Cairns 1990), 48–135; Brown, 'Through the Eye of a Needle', 430–432.

As Michael Maas has made plain, in a particularly illuminating article, this involved an ‘imaginative leap’ of considerable daring. Salvian’s map was not like the usual Roman map. It did not divide the world in cultural terms. No chasm stood between the ‘uncivilized’ barbarian and the ‘civilized’ Roman. Compared with knowledge of the Law of God, such distinctions were trivial.²⁸

Salvian’s insistence on knowledge the Law of God as the only criterion according to which God judged any human society had the effect of re-arranging the barbarian groups of Gaul as if they lay around the *Respublica* in a series of concentric circles. Gaul was ringed by an outer fringe of unconverted, pagan barbarians – Saxons, Huns, Franks, Gepids and Alamans. They were a supremely nasty lot. Salvian (who had seen them at work along the Rhine) had little use for non-Christian barbarians. But, unlike the Romans, they could at least claim ignorance of God’s Law. For that reason, they would suffer less harsh punishment than would the Romans.²⁹

Next came an anomalous gray zone. Goths and Vandals were not pagans. They were Christians. But they were misinformed Christians. They were Arian heretics.³⁰ They did not know the Law in its entirety, for it had been passed on to them in garbled form by the wrong *magistri*. For that reason, they could not be judged as harshly for their errors as Roman Christians would be. They erred in good faith. Only the Catholic, Roman Christians of Salvian’s own time had no excuse. They could expect no mercy.³¹

Now Salvian, as we know, was a relentless arguing machine. It was more important for him to show that the Romans deserved punishment than to write a disquisition on the Arianism of the Visigoths. Yet this was a strangely laid back attitude to heresy. It

²⁸ M. Maas, ‘Ethnicity, Orthodoxy and Community in Salvian of Marseilles,’ in *Fifth-Century Gaul*, 275–284, at 276.

²⁹ Salvian, *De gub. Dei* 4.14.67–70, 284–288.

³⁰ E. A. Thompson, *The Visigoths in the Time of Ulfila* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 78–156. See now esp. S. Esders, ‘Grenzen und Grenzüberschreitungen: Religion, Ethnizität und politische Integration am Rande des oströmischen Imperiums (4.-7. Jh.);’ in *Gestiftete Zukunft im mittelalterlichen Europa: Festschrift für Michael Borgolte*, ed. W. Huschner and F. Rexroth (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008), 3–28 at 5–13.

³¹ Salvian, *De gub. Dei* 5.2.6, p. 314 and 5.3.10, p. 318.

opens a chink in the otherwise solid wall of Catholic condemnation.

I would suggest that Salvian's attitude to the heretical Arianism of the Vandals and Visigoths may have had its origins in a current debate at Lérins. For in precisely these years, Vincent of Lérins was wrestling, in his *Commonitorium*, with the problem of non-culpable error within the Catholic church. For Vincent, the history of the Church offered examples of similar gray zones. Great Christian writers had turned out to be great embarrassments. Tertullian and Origen had both been towering, charismatic geniuses and defenders of the Christian faith. But the passing of time had shown that they had allowed a single-minded pursuit of extreme positions to tarnish their orthodoxy. Vincent was convinced that, in his own days, Augustine (and especially the image of Augustine that was propounded by his more extreme followers – that is, by persons such as Prosper of Aquitaine) was in danger of becoming another such White Elephant of the faith.

What is interesting is the very real sympathy with which Vincent wrote of the disillusionment suffered by those who had followed such masters in all innocence.³² If Catholics who followed flawed teachers could err in a manner that was subject only to the lightest blame, why could not the Visigoths also be seen as holding to the views of their teachers with misplaced but understandable, even pardonable loyalty? In both cases, the terrible hiss of demonic inspiration (which always lay close to discussions of heresy at this time) was totally absent. Salvian's de-dramatized view of the religion of the Visigoths may well have reflected debates within the *sancti* themselves as to how to view divergences of religious opinion at every level, from a polite winnowing by experts of the less acceptable aspects of the works of Augustine to a certain tolerance of the anomalous but real Christian piety of a Visigothic Arian court.

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In Salvian's view of the world, the barbarians are still one-dimensional figures. They appear almost exclusively as the executors of the judgment of God against the Romans

³² Vincentius of Lérins, *Commonitorium* 10.2, *Patrologia Latina* 50, 650–651.

who had known and abandoned His Law. Salvian followed the Visigoths and, especially, the Vandals as they fell on one region after another, each one more guilty than the next. For Salvian saw the barbarians as the travelling assizes of God. They moved across the map of the western empire in a manner that was grimly intelligible. His insistence on the theme of judgement linked the conquest of each Roman province with the other in a seemingly inevitable sequence. In so doing, Salvian may have done modern historians of the fifth century a disservice. He turned what, at the time, were often no more than the opportunistic sallies of war-bands (hyena-packs following in the trail of Roman civil wars) into what they have remained up to modern times – ‘barbarian invasions’, their course confidently marked out by lines and arrows which still carry a touch of the ominous certainty of Salvian’s all too clear vision of the footsteps of God’s judgement, as they strode across the West in the here and now.³³

This was not so when we come to the dealings of Romans with themselves. His attitude is anything but one-dimensional. Here he holds his camera steady with unremitting focus on those current abuses which seemed to have brought down upon them condign punishment from God. Let me end with these.

On this issue, Salvian was in many ways thoroughly conventional. The late Roman tax-machine, as it had functioned for centuries, lay at the center of his field of vision. Yet his criticisms were less sweeping than they appear. They cannot be used to document the evils of taxation in all centuries and in all regions of the later empire. Rather, they were elicited by a precise moment of crisis. From the military point of view, what remained of the *Respublica* had rallied with unexpected vigor in the 430s and early 440s. Covering with mobile forces a vast area between the Rhineland and the Danube, Count Aetius had rendered the empire a power still to be reckoned with. In the words of Guy Halsall, Aetius’ campaigns amounted to a form of ‘government through punitive expedition’.³⁴

³³ Salvian, *De gub. Dei* 7.2.8, pp. 434–436 (Aquitaine); 7.13.54, p. 468; 7.16.67–68, pp. 478–480 (Carthage).

³⁴ Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West*, 250.

Quite apart from the brutality of such campaigns, they had been extremely costly. The cavalry units used by Aetius were expensive to maintain. A policy based as much on diplomacy as on the use of force drained money in the form of subsidies.³⁵

Both in Italy and Gaul, taxes were increased and collected with greater ferocity. Old exemptions were pushed aside. In this situation, the tendency of the rich – and especially of the high-ups in governmental circles – to protect themselves against taxation by shifting the burden on to lesser taxpayers became more than usually flagrant and unpopular. A rhetoric of the public good had long been deployed by subjects of the empire in their petitions for tax relief. The same rhetoric was echoed back to taxpayers in imperial edicts. In 441, the chancery of Valentinian III, in Italy, denounced tax-evaders in the same language as did Salvian:

Since they serve only their domestic profits and deprive the common good, in which is contained their true and substantial welfare. The burden which the rich man refuses ... only the weaker man bears.³⁶

Such language shows that Salvian was no innovator. He partook in what Jill Harries has called a widespread ‘culture of criticism’, whose principal vehicle had been the petition. From the ‘groans of the Britons’ addressed to Aetius when he was campaigning in Gaul to the *Novellae* which issued from the court of Ravenna, the atmosphere tingled with sound bites of protest.³⁷

Thus Salvian was not a lonely voice. Nor did he stand alone. His relentless precision on matters of taxation betrays the clear but narrow focus of those who read him. An impoverished local notable himself, he spoke with rare anger on behalf of the petty gentry of the cities – the municipal aristocracies of Gaul. It was members of this class who felt particularly threatened by policies of taxation. It placed them at the mercy of

³⁵ H. Elton, ‘Defence in Fifth-Century Gaul,’ in *Fifth-Century Gaul*, 167–176; T. Stickler, *Aëtius: Gestaltungsspielräume eines Heermeisters im ausgehenden Weströmischen Reich*, Vestigia 54 (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2002), 155–253.

³⁶ *Novella of Valentinian III*, 10. Preface 441. Compare Salvian, *De gub. Dei* 5.7.31, p. 336.

³⁷ J. Harries, *Law and Empire in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999), 97; Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 144.

their more ruthless peers. When Salvian spoke of the *pauperculi* – of the ‘poor little guys’ – who were devastated by high officials, he did not mean ‘the lower classes’ in the modern sense.³⁸ They were people like himself. In the 430s, it was they who risked sliding down the steep slope into impoverishment, as refugees and as fiscal debtors.³⁹

Though Salvian seldom lifted his eyes from the brightly lit scene of local, city-based extortion, he singled out the high ups of government as the real culprits:

Praefectura ... praeda: a Prefecture confers a license to pillage... . The whole world is destroyed so that a few should bear the title of *Vir Illustris*.⁴⁰

These were precise and bitter words. Salvian knew that the title of *vir illustris*, conferred by high office, gave access to the upper ranks of the nobility. Former holders of high offices and their children entered a charmed circle. It was easy for a man such as Sidonius Apollinaris to grow up as the son of a prefect. He could enjoy an evening with his friends, at which ‘there was no talk of taxes.’⁴¹ For they were at the center. And they were not being replaced. The social mobility of the fourth century, which had enabled members of the petty nobility (persons such as Salvian) to rise to the top as government servants, had become blocked. As John Matthews pointed out, in fifth-century Gaul ‘politics had become the preserve of the already powerful’.⁴²

We often speak as if the aristocracies of the West were stable and homogeneous. This was far from being the case.⁴³ The members of the local elites had always varied greatly one from the other in their wealth and opportunities for advancement. The events of the fifth century had made these different layers if anything more factionalized and

³⁸ Salvian, *De gub. Dei* 4.4.21 and 4.15.74, pp. 248 and 290. See now L. Pietri, ‘Riches et pauvres dans l’*Ad Ecclesiam* de Salvien de Marseille’, in *Les Pères de l’Église et la voix des pauvres*, ed. P. G. Delage (La Rochelle: Histoire et Culture 2006), 149–161.

³⁹ See esp. C. Grey, ‘Salvian, the Ideal Christian Community and the Fate of the Poor in Fifth-Century Gaul’, in *Poverty in the Roman World*, 168–182 at 173; with Brown, *Poverty and Leadership*, 67–73.

⁴⁰ Salvian, *De gub. Dei* 4.3.21, p. 248.

⁴¹ Sidonius Apollinaris, *Letters* 5.17.5, ed. W.B. Anderson, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1965), ii, 230.

⁴² J. Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court, A.D. 364–425* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1975), 347.

⁴³ Brown, ‘*Through the Eye of a Needle*’, 18–21; 195–197; 403–404; 421–423.

more resentful of each other. In Salvian's account we can hear the voice of an entire group, raised against what was fast becoming an isolated *ancien régime* – an upper aristocracy, increasingly closed against newcomers and tarnished by association with the systematic fiscal violence of the Roman state.

But when he wrote on these matters, Salvian did it his way. He presented his readers with a freak-show. The ills of his time were summed up and dramatized as a series of glaring anomalies. Well-to-do Romans had begun to flee to the barbarians, from whom they had formerly fled with horror (as Salvian himself had fled from the Rhineland). And this was because the authorities of the *Respublica* had come to treat Roman citizens as little better than barbarians. For Salvian, the Bacaudae were a glaring example of this dire process. Branded with the opprobrious name of 'Bacaudae', free-born Romans found themselves the target of vicious campaigns of repression by Roman armies. They were treated as if they were public enemies of the Roman state.⁴⁴

Salvian did nothing to soften the impact on his readers of this ultimate anomaly. He did not share the interest of modern historians in the emergence of new styles of regional politics around barbarian courts or in the imagined no-man's-land of the territories controlled by the Bacaudae. He had no sense whatsoever that a new, barbarian-Roman world was emerging. Rather, he looked at Gaul and Spain with the hard eyes of a man who wrote from within the territories of the *Respublica*. He was well aware of the ideology of those who governed his region. Any province under barbarian rule was, technically, a province taken 'captive' by the enemies of Rome.⁴⁵ In a captive province, there simply should not have been Romans who were happy to be *illic* – to be 'over there' in barbarian territory. Yet such Romans now prayed never again to become subjects of the empire.⁴⁶

44 Salvian, *De gub. Dei* 5.6.24, p. 330.

45 Salvian, *De gub. Dei* 4.2.10, p. 238 and 5.6.26, p. 332; cf. Hydatius, *Chronicle* 49 (ad ann. 411) provinces of Spain *se subiciunt servituti*; *Chronicle of 452* 126 (ad ann. 442) provinces of Britain *in dicionem Saxonum rediguntur*.

46 Salvian, *De gub. Dei* 5.8.37, p. 340.

Other authors had written before about Romans who found it easier to live among barbarians. That, in itself, was not new. What was new was the manner in which Salvian drew attention to this flight as a terrible inversion of the normal order of things. The *Respublica* should be the place of liberty. Augustine had said so, in no uncertain terms, only a decade previously, when he drafted a petition to halt the slave trade in Africa.

Barbarians are resisted when the Roman army is in good condition lest Romans be held in barbarian captivity... . Yet [faced by these slave traders] who will resist in the name of Roman freedom ... *pro libertate romana* ... the common freedom of us all.⁴⁷

Our tendency to divide up the history of the West into distinct provinces and into distinct periods measured by the life times of leading figures makes it difficult to believe that these words (written in Africa in the last years of Augustine) were written only a decade before Salvian began to compose his *de gubernatione*. But now, Salvian pointed out, the most sinister transformation of all had taken place. It was within the *Respublica* itself, the place of liberty, that Salvian perceived the ultimate anomaly – a new birth of captivity.

It is with this that we can end. High taxation meant impoverishment. And impoverishment meant a quickening of the most sinister process of all – the enslavement of Romans by Romans within the territories of the *Respublica* itself. Faced by the weight of taxes, poor farmers who could not emigrate did what little they could do: they handed themselves over to the rich as clients in return for protection. Such patronage by the great, so Salvian claimed, turned free men into slaves as surely as the magic of Circe had turned humans into pigs.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Augustine, *New [Divjak] Letter 10**, 5, Bibliothèque Augustinienne: Oeuvres de Saint Augustin 46B (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes 1987), 176.

⁴⁸ Salvian, *De gub. Dei* 5.9.45, p. 346. Much false certainty reigns on the issue of rural patronage in Gaul: the best treatments are C. R. Whittaker, 'Circe's Pigs: From Slavery to Serfdom in the Later Roman World,' *Slavery and Abolition* 8 (1987), 88–122; with Grey, 'Salvian, the Ideal Christian Community and the Fate of the Poor,' 176–180; and Grey, 'Contextualizing *Colonatus*,' 155–175. *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 12 (2008), 43–68, esp. 51–52. On the language of 'poverty' and 'destitution' in the establishment of vertical links in Gaul, see now A. Rio, 'High and Low: Ties of Dependence in the Frankish Kingdoms,' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 12 (2008), 43–68, esp. 51–52. This language does not necessarily indicate either real impoverishment or total dependence. For a comprehen-

This was an unpardonable transformation. Salvian had no objection to patronage in itself. It showed ‘greatness of soul’ in a powerful man to offer help to the weak.⁴⁹ As Cam Grey has shown, ‘reciprocal vertical relationships’ were central to his view of society.⁵⁰ Such relationships were central also to his theology. When representatives of the ‘Gallic consensus’ grappled with the problem of how to reconcile respect for the freedom of the will with a piety based on an acute sense of dependence on God, they invariably turned, as a root metaphor, to the relations of patrons and clients. These were relations between free persons. They might be marked by acute dependence of the one on the other. A free man might approach the great as a bankrupt, abject client, as fallen human beings approached God. But these free clients should never be made into slaves, either by God or by the powerful. It was precisely the hint of a Circe’s spell that turned free men into slaves – into mere droids: talking machines, to use the ancient term – which alarmed them in the doctrine of overriding grace propounded by Augustine and his followers.⁵¹

We should not be misled by Salvian’s dramatic picture of the relations between patrons and their dependents in the Gaul of the 430s. It is far from certain that such patronage represented a new development – a harbinger of feudal links of dependence which bound the peasantry as serfs to their lords. Jens Uwe Krause has shown that the patronage which Salvian described did not mark a new departure. He was only describing the normal ups and downs of farmers forced to sell part or all of their land to richer neighbors, so as to cover their tax-debts.⁵²

But what this de-dramatization of the phenomenon of patronage itself does not explain is the intensity with which Salvian fastened on it. He did so for a reason that

sive and characteristically original treatment see now W. Goffart, ‘Salvian of Marseille, *De gubernatione Dei* 3.38-45 and the ‘Colonate’ Problem,’ *Antiquité Tardive* 17 (2009), 269–288, esp. 286.

49 Salvian, *De gub. Dei* 5.8.30, p. 340.

50 See Grey, ‘Salvian, the Ideal Christian Community and the Fate of the Poor,’ 168. See now C. Grey, *Constructing communities in the late Roman countryside* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011), 148–177 and 198–226.

51 Brown, ‘*Through the Eye of a Needle*,’ 429–430, 449 and 474.

52 J.-U. Krause, *Spätantike Patronatsformen im Westen des römischen Reiches*, *Vestigia* 38 (Munich: C.H. Beck 1987), 233–283.

was deeply rooted in his thought on the justice of God. The justice of God was always apposite. By a relentless *lex talionis*, the Romans suffered at the hands of the barbarians precisely what they were inflicting on their fellows: nothing more, nothing less.

Are we surprised that the barbarians capture us, when we make captives of our own brothers?⁵³

If Salvian has misled social historians of the fifth century West by exaggerating the power exercised by rural patrons over their dependents, it was because he wished his readers to know that any captivity which Romans inflicted on each other was bound to be as brutal as that which any barbarian had inflicted on Romans. For the justice of God to stand, the one captivity – that imposed by patrons on their clients – had to be presented as quite as oppressive, as widespread and as inexorable as was the other – the captivity of Romans among the barbarians. Everything which they, as Romans, complained about in the outside world was happening within Roman society itself. It was because of the sinister growth of ‘captivity’ in their own society that they suffered ‘captivity’ at the hands of barbarians. *Labores manuum nostrarum manducamus (Psalm 127:2)*: ‘We are eating the bread of our own making.’⁵⁴

That is the Salvian sound. We should not underestimate its distinctiveness. A sense of society as a whole ruled in all its parts by the Law of God gave him the lens with which to examine the interconnections of an entire society in crisis. He did this in a manner that has gained him a permanent place (if only in the footnotes) in all modern attempts to analyze the Roman empire in its last days. I hope that I have shown that Salvian’s picture remains gripping and faithful, provided that we relate it to a precise moment in the history of the Roman state. But I also hope that I have shown that the lens which enabled him to view this picture was not ground in a modern mind. It was the notion of the present judgment of God for breaches of the Law which He had delivered first to Israel and then to the Christians of the Roman empire – as Christ was shown

53 Salvian, *De gub. Dei* 5.9.46, p. 346.

54 Salvian, *De gub. Dei* 5.9.46, p. 346.

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delivering the great scroll of His Law to the Apostles, in many mosaics of the time, and on great sarcophagi, some of whom were to be seen in Arles, in the very heart of Salvian's southern Gaul⁵⁵ – which gave that lens the unmistakable shape and focus which I have attempted to conjure up for you this evening.

55 J.M. Spieser, *Autour de la Traditio Legis* (Thessalonica: Ministry of Culture 2004); *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, ed. J. Spier (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press/Forth Worth, Texas: Kimbell Art Museum 2007), 242–243.