
This excellent monograph, originally a PhD thesis submitted at the Theological Faculty of the University of Jena in 2019, deals with three intersecting areas of study. Firstly, it enters into the discourse on Christian Latin consolatio, which was magisterially staked out as long ago as 1937 by Charles Favez in his *La consolation latine chrétienne*. For Favez, only Jerome plays a more important role in that discourse than Ambrose, whose literary contribution to the consolatory genre is nevertheless in part compromised by the political context of his funerary speeches. Secondly, in response to this latter aspect the present monograph engages precisely with Ambrose’s public role and his relationships with several emperors. The funeral orations on the deaths of Gratian, Valentinian II and Theodosius make up a large proportion of his consolatory oeuvre, his ‘Trotschtschriften’, although, as Durner is well aware (e.g. p. 295 n. 215), their consolatory character is also called in doubt. Thirdly, as a theological dissertation the present monograph is not content with discussing literary and historiographical aspects of works of Ambrose that deal with matters related to *consolatio mortis*, human responses to dying and death and their emotional impact, especially grief, but it is determined to outline, on the basis of a study of Ambrose’s works, “contours of a theology of consolation” including thoughts on the anthropological dimension of consolation, the meaning of Christian consolation in light of the soteriological role of death in Christianity, and the consolatory significance of Ambrose’s combination of the role of consoler with that of political agent (pp. 349–355). This aspect of the dissertation is made easier by the fact that Ambrose (unlike, for example, Jerome) did not only engage in literary consolation but also in philosophical reflection about death, for example in his work *De bono mortis*, here discussed on pp. 61–116, or in his thoughts on the Purgatory (pp. 41–44), which are here developed with a view to this concept’s consolatory potential.

Holding together three such disparate aspects as these can have its downsides. One might risk comparing apples with pears when weighing up consolatory speech against political rhetoric or theological thought. But it can also reveal itself as a strength, when new and innovative ways of interpreting the evidence can be mapped out. This is what this monograph does, as it offers new insights not only on Ambrose’s *Trotschtschriften* but also on their author and his thought.

To explore this in more detail let us look first at the overall structure and then on some sections of this monograph. Three main parts can be
identified. A first part (A) discusses “theoretical foundations of consolatio mortis” (pp. 33–116), a second part (B) deals extensively with “practical applications of consolatio mortis” (pp. 117–348), basically discussing each of Ambrose’s consolatory writings in turn, and a third part (C) concludes with outlining the already mentioned “contours of a theology of consolation” (pp. 349–356). A chronological table covering the main events in Ambrose’s lifetime, several literature lists (including lists of editions and translations of Ambrose’s works, biblical sources, inscriptions, works by ancient non-Christian and Christian authors not including Ambrose, reference works and secondary literature) and a suite of indices (source references, authors, persons and things) complete the volume (pp. 357–402).

Before taking a closer look at what is undoubtedly the main part of the monograph, Part B (“practical applications”), where Ambrose’s consolatory works are extensively discussed in their historical contexts, some brief remarks on Part A entitled “theoretical foundations”. Durner rightly begins with the ancient philosophical context of the early (pre-Christian) development of consolation (pp. 35–37). His discussion is appropriately brief and focuses on consolatio mortis. He does not go into the many other distressing occasions on which ancient philosophers felt that consolation was in order, such as loss of wealth and property (including slaves and pet animals), fatherland, health, young age or mental wellbeing. An appreciation of the breadth of consolatory applications would have additionally illustrated something which Durner does indeed point out in principle, with a view to the relevant philosophical schools, namely that ancient consolation was not so much about death and dying but about enjoying the present earthly life, the here and now, in a strongly (with a small “e”) epicurean, even hedonistic sense. The focus on death and dying narrows the scope of consolation to the teachings of those philosophical schools that were more compatible with Christian teaching about death and the afterlife (especially in Late Antiquity) and directs the view to aspects which ancient consolation would not necessarily have accepted as ‘consoling’, above all the belief in an afterlife that is potentially of better quality than life here on earth. Ancient consolation worked on the assumption that there is either no afterlife or the afterlife is of lesser quality than the present life. Christianity’s proposal that life after death is better than life on earth is not strictly consolatory but exhortatory. Still, as Durner shows, in Ambrose’s oeuvre the Christian belief in an afterlife was probably not that different from non-Christian ideas, for Ambrose was able to blend the two thought-worlds. Durner describes in some detail Ambrose’s views of the Christian afterlife (pp. 39–60), his “topography” of the “world beyond” (Jenseits), the regions of the lower heavens, Purgatory, Paradise, Hades, Hell, and the Kingdom of Heaven. These new motifs reduced
the significance of consolatory *topoi* of ancient consolation (listed on p. 38). They were now no more than stage props from a bygone era. Yet Ambrose still deployed them in his *Trostschriften*. As much as Christians may have hoped to go to heaven, when they lost a loved one, they still felt raw emotions. Despite a new philosophy of death and new teachings about the afterlife, Christians continued to weave in ancient consolatory material in their consolations.

How Ambrose does this is brilliantly illustrated in the first two sections of Part B (on Ambrose’s “practical application” of his consolatory programme). Durner discusses the two funerary orations which Ambrose held shortly after the death of his brother Satyrus, *De excessu fratris Satyri I* and *II* (pp. 119–182). Both speeches are strongly influenced by the classical tradition, yet both also breach the old tradition by displaying distinctly Christian features, albeit in different ways. The first, held shortly after Satyrus’ death, is indebted to the genre of self-consolation and bears distinct similarities to Cicero’s self-consolation on the death of his daughter Tullia. The second, held seven days later and probably on a more public occasion, is less personal and aimed more at promoting the Christian belief in the resurrection from the dead to an audience that is still inclined to understand this belief in terms compatible with the old religion. Crucially, although it is Ambrose’s intention to link himself to the classical consolatory tradition, neither of the two orations fully complies with classical genres. Strictly, Latin funerary orations were not meant to be consolatory. They were technically known as *laudationes funebres*. Yet Ambrose felt free to borrow for the first speech from Cicero’s consolation to himself on the death of his daughter, which was written as a letter. Oddly, his speech is the earliest known *laudatio funebris* that is fully extant. Interestingly, he uses this format to excuse himself for grieving and shedding tears, something his brother apparently asked him to refrain from. But with references to the inconsolable Cicero as well as the Bible (Jesus crying at Lazarus’ tomb; John 11:35) Ambrose justifies his personal grief. He then uses the second speech to refer to another classical *topos*, the question about the right timing for writing a consolation. While some authors advised to wait until the grieving person had calmed down (e.g. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 4.63), others warned not to wait too long lest the grief might harden (Seneca, *To Marcia* 1.8). With his two consolations on the death of Satyrus, Ambrose has a foot in both camps.

We should add here that since the publication of Durner’s thesis a critical edition of Ambrose’s *De excessu fratris Satyri* has been published by Victoria Zimmerl-Panagl: *Ambrosius Mediolanensis, Orationes funebres II. De excessu fratris libri II*, CSEL 107, Berlin: De Gruyter 2022.

The problematic nature, as far as their identification as consolations is concerned, of the three orations on the deaths of the emperors Gratian,
Valentinian II and Theodosius has already been mentioned. These three texts take up pp. 183 to 312 of Durner’s study. Each of them has its own particular background and in each case Ambrose pursues very different intentions, many of which have little to do with consolation. In Gratian’s case he turns on those who were responsible for the emperor’s death. In Theodosius’ case he delivers a panegyric on the dead emperor in an attempt to support Theodosius’ plans for succession and imperial commitment to the Christian Church. As Durner admits, there are very few consolatory elements in the speech (p. 250). The most consolatory of the three orations on the death of emperors is that on the death of the young Valentinian II, who had suddenly died in his early 20s and was mourned at the funeral by two sisters, Justa and Grata. Besides a number of traditional consolatory motifs Ambrose resorts to, his strongest motif, according to Durner (p. 207f.), is that Valentinian had only shortly before his death expressed a desire to get baptised. For Ambrose this is reason enough to imagine the deceased emperor in Paradise (with the murdered Gratian!) and to put this image before the mourning congregation. In a long section (pp. 214–243) Durner discusses the unclear circumstances of Valentinian’s death. Valentinian had been found hanged in his quarters. From the very beginning the question was asked whether he had ended his life himself or whether he had been killed. From a close reading of Ambrose’s oration Durner concludes that Ambrose was under the assumption that Valentinian had committed suicide. Many of the motifs in Ambrose’s oration, thus Durner, are aimed at addressing concerns among those present at the funeral regarding Valentinian’s state in Paradise and at removing any doubts that the emperor was indeed in Heaven, alongside his murdered half-brother, Gratian. Whether or not Durner’s interpretation will hold sway in the long run, it is certainly a very interesting and valuable contribution to the debate.

Compared to the long section on the imperial funerary orations, the final chapter on two consolatory letters is rather short (pp. 313–347). Ep. 51 (15 in the Maurist edition) on the death of bishop Acholius stands out because it is addressed not to an individual but collectively to the bishops of the province of Macedonia and the clergy of the city of Thessalonica. Rather than a ‘typical’, i.e. more personal consolatory letter it draws on panegyric motifs similar to the oration on the death of Theodosius. More typical is ep. 8 (39) to Faustinus on the death of his sister. It draws heavily on a classical model extant in Cicero’s Ad familiares (4.5), a letter written to Cicero by his friend Sulpicius Severus in 45 BCE, consoling Cicero on the death of his daughter and exhorting him, reminding him of his duties as philosopher and statesman (p. 336). Building on this literary model, Ambrose ‘christianises’ its consolatory potential bolstering it with motifs from Pauline Epistles. Durner sees here a parallelism:
Cicero is called on not to forget the principles of philosophical consolation. He is reminded by Sulpicius to practise self-therapy. In a similar analogous way Faustinus is reminded by Ambrose of the link between human mortality and salvation in Christ. It too requires prayer and spiritual exercise.

To conclude, this monograph makes a substantial contribution to the historical study of Ambrose of Milan, the literary study of ancient and Christian Latin consolation, and the theological study of dying and death, and can be recommended to researchers in all these areas.

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