V. SOME THEMES IN LATER ROMAN
ANTI-MANICHAEAN POLEMICS*

1. Introduction

The confused political situation which befell the Roman Empire after her successive defeats by the Sassanians, the new rulers of the Persian Empire, culminating in the capture of Valerian in 260, greatly facilitated the diffusion of Manichaeism from Persian-held Mesopotamia to the eastern provinces. One of the newly-published missionary texts from Turfan suggests that Adda, a disciple of Mani, succeeded in winning converts to the new religion at Palmyra, an important commercial centre in Syria which was strategically placed for trade with the Orient.1 The temporary extension of Palmyrene power to Egypt under Zenobia might have helped Manichaeism to gain a foothold in Egypt.2 The discovery of genuine Manichaean texts at Oxyrhynchus, Medinet Madi and Lycopolis further confirms the strength of the sect in the Nile Valley.3 A number of fragments of Manichaean missionary history also speak of another disciple, Gabryab, as having the better of a contest with Christian priests in the court of the King of Erevan in Armenia.4 The swift extension of the sect along the

* This is an updated version of an article published in two parts in Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, 68/2 (1986) 434-69 and 69/1 (1986) 235-75. The appendix on the comparison between Late Roman and Chinese anti-Manichaean polemics (i.e. pp. 250-75) is here omitted.
1 See above, pp. 26-27.
3 On the Manichaean fragments in Syriac found at Oxyrhynchus see above p. 62-64. On the discovery of Manichaean codices in Coptic from Medinet Medi see above 64-67. On Lycopolis as a possible place of origin of the Greek Cologne Mani-Codex, which contains a unique biographical account of the founder of the sect, see aove, p. 92.
4 On the missions of Mär Gabryab see above pp. 29-30 and 35.
Mediterranean littoral is borne out by a report of the Proconsul Julianus to one of the Tetrarchs, probably Diocletian, which was received in Alexandria before 302. According to a somewhat enigmatic passage in the Chronographia of Malalas, at least one Manichaean missionary was active in the city of Rome by this time.

The reaction of the pagan Roman Empire to the missionary success of the Manichaeans took the form of a rescript of Diocletian in 302 which laid down the most severe penalties against the leaders and followers of a sect engaged in undermining the morals of the Romans with “Persian” customs. At about the same time as the publication of Diocletian’s rescript, a pastoral letter was sent from the chancery of a Bishop of Alexandria, most probably Theonas, to warn the Christian communities in Egypt of the falsity of the Manichaeans on celibacy and informing them of the abominable nature of some of their practices. This letter, which is preserved on a fragmentary papyrus now in the John Rylands Library, is our earliest witness to the Late Roman Church’s campaign against the sect by means of polemics, a campaign which would reach its apogee in the voluminous anti-Manichaean writings of Augustine in the fifth century. However, the Christians were

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7 Collatio XV,3,4, pp. 580-81: de quibus sollertia tua serenitati nostrae retuli, Manichaei, audivimus eos nuperrime veluti nova et inopinata prodigia in hunc mundum de Persica adversaria nobis gente progressa vel orta esse et multa facinora ibi committere, populos namque quietos perturbare nec non et civitatis maxima detrimenta inserere: et verendum est, ne forte, ut fieri adsolet, accedenti tempore conentur per executandas consuetudines et saevas leges Persarum innocentioris naturae homines, Romanam gentem modestam atque tranquillum et universum orbem nostrum veluti venenis de suis malivolos inificere.