Chapter 14

Claudian’s Stilicho at the Urbs: Roman Legitimacy for the Half-Barbarian Regent

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Introduction

Despite being neither an emperor nor a usurper, Flavius Stilicho deserves his own place in an exploration of emperors’ images in the Late Roman Empire, as dominant political actor and de facto regent in the western Empire from 395–408. As a son of a Vandal father and a Roman mother, it was his barbarian lineage that probably prevented him from ruling as emperor, but he was still able to rise to power through military prestige and kinship ties. Stilicho enjoyed the confidence and trust of Theodosius, whose daughter Serena he married in 384, and by whom he was appointed magister utriusque militiae in 392. A later arrangement of Theodosius in 395 designated him epitropos of Honorius, who was coming of age by that time. This position was further reinforced in the same year by the wedding of his own daughter Maria to Honorius, which would enhance his influence over the young Augustus’ entourage. His control over the western half of the Empire and his command of its army was in principle accepted. However, based on a supposed last will of Theodosius, Stilicho also claimed to be entrusted with a similar position over Arcadius and the eastern army as he had over Honorius. This broad claim to

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1 This study was carried out as a part of the project ‘Romanitas e interculturalidad en la (auto)representación de emperadores tardoantiguos: Constantino, Juliano, Teodosio’ (Ref. FFI2013-41327-P; Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad). I am very grateful to the organizers and participants of the Conference ‘Images and Emperors in the 4th century AD’ for their suggestions and remarks, as well as to the editors and peer reviewers for their comments. All errors and shortcomings remaining are mine.


4 PLRE 1.853–858, Flavius Stilicho.


6 Cameron 1970; Matthews 1975, 258.

7 Matthews 1975, 20–22.
power would generate a chain of conflicts between both parts of the Empire during the years 395–400.

The main strengths of his position were his family ties, innate political qualities, and, for a few years at least, success in continuing Theodosius’ strategy of diplomatic arrangements with the Goths and of incorporating alien forces into the army. On the other hand, considerable weaknesses threatened his political dominance. His title was precarious in an official sense, as neither Arcadius nor Honorius needed a legal supervisor after Theodosius’ death, both of them being Augusti.\textsuperscript{8} He was suspected of collusion with Alaric, especially after his unsuccessful campaigns in 395 and 397, and even more so after his victories at Pollentia and Verona in 402.\textsuperscript{9} Finally, the excessive costs of his policies seriously weighed on the senatorial elite.\textsuperscript{10}

This being the situation, it can easily be imagined that Honorius’ father-in-law in his guise as magister was keen to establish a justification for his share of the emperorship.\textsuperscript{11} In literary texts, he might be portrayed as invested with imperial qualities, but without the rigour and risks of official titles and responsibilities. This kind of unofficial legitimacy was provided mainly by Claudian’s verse panegyrics,\textsuperscript{12} which operated as ‘communication descendante’, an authorized interpretation of the aims and feats of the magister utriusque militiae intended to reach a wide audience among the western elite.\textsuperscript{13} Claudian’s politically loaded poetry is not only a key historical source about Stilicho and the first years of Honorius’ reign, but it also turns the magister utriusque militiae into one of the best-documented and skilfully modelled figures of the Late Roman Empire.

In recent decades, decoding Claudian’s intricate narrative has become a central issue in Claudianic scholarship. However, little attention has been paid to how the poet deployed traditional stereotypes of Rome and the barbarians as rhetorical devices. His panegyrics, on the human and on the divine level, are placed in a fictional space and time that constitute a coherent image shared by poet and audience, derived from a traditional Roman ‘self-image’. In terms of literary space, the scene of Claudian’s political poems is a cosmopolitan empire, both Roman and Greek, stretching from Mount Helicon, Mount

\textsuperscript{8} Among other reasons, there was no official title for Stilicho’s regency: McEvoy 2013, 142–144.
\textsuperscript{9} Cameron 1970, 156–159; Liebeschuetz 1992, 57–68.
\textsuperscript{10} Matthews 1975, 269–270.
\textsuperscript{11} McEvoy 2013, 162–169.
\textsuperscript{12} With the exception of the Panegyricus Olybrio et Probino dictus.
\textsuperscript{13} On Claudian’s audience, Cameron 1970, 228–252; Charlet 2009; Gualandri 2012; Coombe 2014.