Maxentius and the aeternae urbis suae conditores: Rome and Its Founders from Maximian to Constantine (289–313)

Raphael G.R. Hunsucker

On 21 April in a year less than two decades distant from the turn of the fourth century A.D., a special ceremony took place in the imperial capital of the western emperor, celebrating the foundation of the Eternal City.¹ The citizens and dignitaries present at the occasion would probably not have missed their emperor’s desire to connect his own rule to Rome’s primordial beginnings. Even more so, and perhaps surpassing their expectations, they witnessed how their ruler was addressed in terms that presented him as the new founder of the Urbs. That strategy of representation can be described as ‘ktistic renewal’—a strategy famously employed by Augustus, who was hailed as alter conditor, ‘second founder’ of Rome.² The late antique ceremony thus revived an old Imperial tradition of ‘ktistic renewal’, harking back all the way to the founder of the Principate.

This chapter is about political rhetoric and monuments connecting late antique Roman emperors to the founders of Rome. During the reign of Maxentius (306–312), who reaffirmed the political centrality of Rome, ideological references to the city’s founders were particularly conspicuous and high in number.³ That is perhaps unsurprising, but it will be argued that the founders of Rome were surprisingly prominent also in the political rhetoric surrounding Maxentius’ predecessors and successors, who were less dependent on the city of Rome in their exercise of power. While Maximian and Constantine based themselves in cities like Augusta Treverorum (modern Trier, Germany) and Constantinople, but connected themselves to Rome’s

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² The concept of ktistic renewal is the subject of the present author’s forthcoming PhD dissertation; see further below, note 41.
³ Cullhed 1994, 63–64.
foundation nonetheless, Maxentius combined rhetoric and reality at Rome. His ideological efforts culminated, in all probability, in the year 308,4 when the emperor dedicated a monument on the Forum Romanum to Mars and ‘the founders of his own Eternal City’.5 It is the aim of this chapter to analyse and contextualize Maxentian evocations of the city’s founders by looking at Tetrarchic and earlier precedents for such evocations, as well as their fortune under Maxentius’ successors.

To employ the adjective ‘Maxentian’ is to avoid the thorny issue of the agency behind political and ideological messages, just like the adjective ‘Augustan’ is conveniently used to cover the whole range of cultural production during the rule of Augustus, three centuries before Maxentius.6 This preliminary recourse to deliberate vagueness will give way to some insights into questions of agency at the end of this chapter. Yet even if the vexed question of agency remains largely unanswered, it may still be fruitful to further scrutinize the political rhetoric revolving around Rome’s foundation for its own sake. Drawing on the representational turn in ancient history, this analysis will venture to move away from the question what the emperor did and focus mainly on how his reign was presented and perceived.

What makes Maxentius such an interesting emperor to study when it comes to political rhetoric and ideological imagery, is that his very image, conveyed in the sources that have come down to us, is almost entirely built up from the slander produced by his (contemporary and posthumous) opponents:7 his ‘hetero-image’ completely overshadows his ‘auto-image’.8 Although, sadly, almost all literary sources favourable to Maxentius (which must arguably have existed)9

4 Wrede 1981, 141; his dating, presented as new but actually preceded by Gatti (see Groag 1930, 2459, who remained critical), has now found universal acceptance.
5 Marti invicto patri / et aeternae urbis suae / conditoribus / dominus noster / \[imp(erator) Maxentius p(ius) f(elix)\] / invictus Aug(ustus) (cIL vi.33856a = ILS 8935). See further below.
6 The exemplary study is Galinsky 1996. One may compare the use of the term ‘senatorial’ to describe both an agency group and an ideological perspective. In studies of imperial panegyric, the debate is often conducted in terms of communication descendante vs. communication ascen-
dante. See ‘The Representational Turn’ in the Introduction to this volume for further discussion.
7 See Drijvers 2007. For a similar phenomenon with a later emperor, see Woudhuysen in this volume.
8 For these notions see Leerssen 2007, 27 and ‘Imagology and the theory of representation’ in the Introduction.
9 On the author of the Historia Augusta's unfulfilled desire to treat the reign of Maxentius (HA, Heliogab. 35.6) see Straub 1972, 394; traces of such apparently favourable sources (given the interest that the author of the HA shows in co-rulers, usurpers and other imperial figures) may very well be preserved by the late-fifth century Historia Nova of Zosimus, for which see briefly Lieu and Montserrat 1996, 12–15. See also Zinsli 2014, 866 ad Heliogab. 35.6 (K662).