



[Claudian, On the Consulship of Stilicho III.130-161](#)

Praise of Rome

Name of the author: Claudian

Date: 399 CE Dec

Place: Rome

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Eulogy / Panegyric

Title of work: On the Consulship of Stilicho

Reference: III.130-161

Commentary:

Claudian was of Egyptian origin, and was probably born in Alexandria (about Claudian's origin, see Cameron, *Poetry*, p. 1-29). Between the year he arrived in Rome, that is 394 CE, and 404 CE, he composed many poetic works in Latin, essentially panegyrics, invectives, epics or epithalamia. When he composed these works, at the beginning of the reign of Honorius, Claudian was the major official poet at the Western court. He was certainly pagan, but, contrary to Rutilius Namatianus who exposed openly his aversion towards Christians, Claudian did not engage in such criticism, nor acted as a defender of paganism. Claudian wrote first and foremost for an audience composed of Christians and pagans.

The historical context is very important to understand the text presented here. After the death of Theodosius on the 17th January 395 CE, the ruling of the Eastern and Western parts of the Empire was respectively assigned to his two sons, Arcadius and Honorius, but while the former was too weak, the latter was too young to rule alone. One of the most influential men of the time, the general Stilicho, a Vandal through his father, and a member of the imperial family as he had married the adoptive daughter of Theodosius, became the guardian of Honorius. However, Stilicho claimed that Theodosius had also made him the protector of Arcadius (the credibility of this claim remains doubtful, see Blockley, "The Dynasty," p. 113-114). This situation was not accepted by Arcadius, and during the period 395-398 CE, the relationships between the Eastern and Western governments deteriorated. In 397 CE, Stilicho was declared a public enemy by the Senate of Constantinople. That very year, the count of Africa and master of the soldiers, Gildo, revolted and stopped supplying Rome with grain from Africa; he asked Constantinople for assistance in return for transferring the African grain supply to them. The Senate of Constantinople welcomed Gildo's revolt without providing troops or means to support it. During the spring 398 CE, the revolt was entirely tamed by Stilicho's troops, a military success that was praised at length by Claudian. At the end of the year 399 CE, Stilicho was nominated as consul for the next year.

The text presented here is an excerpt from the panegyric that Claudian composed at the very end of 399 and beginning of 400 CE, to celebrate the consulship of Stilicho. This panegyric was composed of three books: the first one praising Stilicho's military successes, the second boosting his merits as consul, and the third one narrating the triumph of the new consul in Rome. Claudian may have publicly recited the two first books of this panegyric at Milan in January 400 CE, whereas the third one may have been recited at Rome in February 400 CE (Cameron, *Poetry*, p. xv). Our text is an excerpt from this third book, and more precisely from the praise of Rome that appears from verses 130 to 173. By inserting this long praise of Rome into his panegyric, Claudian used a literary *topos* that had a long tradition – one major work entirely dedicated to that theme was of course the *Roman Oration* of Aelius Aristides – but that enjoyed an undeniable success at the beginning of the fifth century CE (praises of Rome appear also in [Ammianus Marcellinus, Res Gestae XIV.6.3-6](#); [Rutilius Namatianus, On His Return I.47-164](#); these praises are compared in Zarini, "Histoire, panégyrique"). However, the context that we have previously exposed, especially the political rivalries that existed between the eastern and western governments at that time, enlightens us as to why it was meaningful to reassert the superiority of Rome over the Empire, and thus over her rival, Constantinople.

After having praised the city of Rome for its huge dimensions and beauty (I.130-135), Claudian presents the nature and the main basis of Roman power through two metaphors. In the first one, Rome is assimilated to the "parent of arms and of law" (*armorum legumque parens*, III.136). This dual metaphor characterising Rome's power is then developed. Concerning the legal aspect, Claudian presents Rome as having offered "the cradle (*cunabula*) of the beginnings of law" (III.137). Such praise goes against the tradition that Roman law would be some kind of



derivative of Greek law, an idea which is expressed, for instance, in [Pliny the Younger, Letters VIII.24](#). From Claudian's point of view, stressing the anteriority of Roman law led to justify its superiority. Rome is not only remarkable because of her legal production, but also because she contributed to diffusing it all around the Roman Empire, and because she shared it with the peoples she conquered. This idea is implicitly present when Claudian writes that Rome *dedit*, "gave," "the cradle (*cunabula*) of the beginnings of law." This idea is reused in another praise of Rome written in 417 CE by a poet from Gaul, Rutilius Namatianus. Actually, in his praise of Rome, Rutilius presents the most important and meaningful benefits that Rome brought to the peoples she conquered, and insists upon the fact that she authorised them to share her laws ([Rutilius Namatianus, On His Return I.63-66, 77](#)). The idea that Rome distributed and shared her laws with the peoples she conquered is intrinsically connected to the phenomenon of the diffusion of Roman citizenship in the Empire, which is also an important aspect that Claudian highlights when he boasts of Rome's generosity – see below. Concerning the military aspect of the metaphor presenting Rome as the "parent of arms and of law," Claudian logically connects it with the idea that thanks to her military strength, Rome succeeded to make of her small settlement between the seven hills a universal empire (about the contrast between Rome's modest origins and the extraordinary dimensions reached by her Empire, see for instance [Tibullus, Elegies II.5.39-62](#)). This idea of universality is illustrated by traditional images: the empire was so big that it reached the extremities of the earth, the cardinal points (III.139), or that it followed the solar cycle (III.140). Then, Claudian highlights Rome's military strength by praising her capacity to wage war on numerous fronts (III.140-149). In this part, the use of the verb *prosternere* when he says that he "floored" the Gauls and the Carthaginians directly refers to the vocabulary of violent submission.

After this passage resuming with Rome's power to diffuse her laws and the extraordinary strength of her armies, Claudian develops the second metaphor that he applies to Rome, namely the fact that she is the mother, *mater*, of all the peoples she submitted: "This is her who alone received the vanquished into her bosom (*in gremium*) and, like a mother (*matris*), not like a mistress (*dominae*)..." (III.150-152).

This maternal comparison refers to the protective and loving character of Rome for her subjects, but also to the benefits that she provides to them (see the interesting use of the verb *fovere*, III.151 that also takes part in the maternal metaphor). Myles Lavan has rightly noticed that the association of Rome with a maternal figure for all the peoples of the Empire is attested much more frequently from the end of the third century CE onwards than during the first and second century CE, a period during which Rome is very often represented as a mistress, *domina* (see all the occurrences of Rome presented as a "mistress of the world," "mistress of the peoples," "mistress city" in Lavan, *Slaves*, p. 91-93). Michael Roberts says that the first occurrence of the traditional characterization of Rome as a *mater* would appear in Livy, *History of Rome* V.54.2 (Roberts, "Rome personified," p. 556). However, in this passage, which is an excerpt of the long speech given by Camillus in which he prevented the Romans from migrating to Veii, Camillus asks them: "Have the soil of our native City and this land which we call our mother (*haec terra quam matrem appellamus*) so slight a hold on us?" Clearly, this maternal metaphor fits in with the tradition presenting the earth as a mother, but cannot be interpreted as the first assimilation of the city of Rome with a mother. It seems that the first explicit assimilation of Rome to a mother appears in a text from the second century, in which it is used in a specific context. This text is an excerpt from Florus's work, in which he presents the Social War as a rising of Italy "against its mother and parent city (*contra matrem suam ac parentem urbem*)" (Florus, *Epitome of the Roman History of Titus Livius* II.6.5; Lavan, *Slaves*, p. 206-207). As rightly noticed by Myles Lavan, to apply this maternal metaphor to Rome enabled the emphasis of "the beneficent aspect of Rome's power," but this metaphor concerned only the relationship between Rome and Italy, and the other subjects of Rome in the provinces were still presented as slaves (Lavan, *Slaves*, p. 207). From the end of the third century onwards, one finds the identification of Rome as a mother for all the peoples within the Empire. It appears for instance in the panegyric pronounced for the emperor Maximian in 289 CE, where Rome is presented as the "mother (*mater*) of his empire" ([Latin Panegyric II \(10\).14.4](#)), and it is also used by Rutilius in his work *On His Return*, when he presents Rome as "the mother (*genetrix*) of men and the mother of gods" (I.49), a "nurse" (*altrix*, I.145), the "mother of the world" (*mater mundi*, II.60). These different sources are representative of the shift that occurred from the third century onwards and led to the more frequent designation of Rome as mother in Late Antiquity. This phenomenon does not mean, however, that the personification of Rome as a mistress, *domina*, disappeared at that time (see Lavan, *Slaves to Rome*, p. 208-210). In this very text, Claudian writes that Rome "called citizens the peoples she tamed (*domuit*)." This sentence provides one motif of explanation for understanding the emergence of the representation of Rome as being the mother of the peoples of the Empire during the third century CE. In the first, long phase of expansion and stabilisation of Rome's Empire (approximately from the first century BCE to the end of the second century CE), even if the number of Roman citizens in the provinces of the Empire varied greatly according to area, they remained a minority in all the provinces. It thus seems logical that the relationship between Rome and the provincials was tantamount to a relationship of domination, the provincials being the slaves or the subjects of Rome, who remained the *domina*. Then, with the continuous enlargement of the number of Roman citizens and the spread of Roman citizenship to all



the members of the Empire in 212 CE, the representation of the relationship of Rome with the provincials evolved logically from domination into a much more integrative, protective and beneficial relationship.

It is interesting to study more precisely the passage in which Claudian praises Rome for her unifying capacity (III.150-153). This reflection of Claudian directly echoes Pliny the Elder, in his famous praise of Italy, when he concludes by saying that Italy had been chosen by the gods “to become the single fatherland (*patria*) of all peoples throughout the whole world” ([Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* III.39](#); see the connection between the two texts made in Ando, *Imperial Ideology*, p. 64-65). However, when Pliny gives concrete examples of the unifying effects of Roman rule, he mainly gives cultural or moral examples, but does not present it through a legal perspective. In Claudian’s praise of Rome, as in that composed by Rutilius some years later, the fact that Rome succeeded to make of its empire a single *patria* composed of men united by the same citizenship and sharing the same laws is presented as a process of achievement (see [Rutilius Namatianus, *On His Return* I.63-66](#)). Claudian’s career itself was a manifestation of this unification of the Mediterranean world under Roman rule (Ando, *Imperial Ideology*, p. 65). Being a Greek born in Alexandria, he became one of the most influential poets writing in Latin at the Western Imperial court between 394 and 404 CE.

In addition, it is interesting to note that Claudian connects his praise of Rome’s *communis patria* with the idea of peace. In his praise of Rome, Rutilius also mentions in two passages the notion of *pax* – he alludes to the fact that every Roman, wherever he lives in the Empire, has “a free neck under the yoke of peace,” and that Rome was illustrious thanks to her peace that was not arrogant –, but the connection between the two notions is neither explicit nor developed. Praises of the *pax romana* for the improvements it provided in terms of trade, security and transportation are well attested in Greek or Latin sources of the imperial period (see Ando, *Imperial Ideology*, p. 388-389). Aelius Aristides is certainly an author who, when he enumerates the material facilities brought by the *pax romana*, connects it in a more explicit way with being part of the Roman people: “Indeed, you best have proved that well-known saying, that the earth is the mother of all and the universal country of all. Now it is possible for both Greek and barbarian, with his possessions or without them, to travel easily wherever he wishes, quite as if he were going from one country of his to another. And he is frightened neither by the Cilician Gates, not by the sandy, narrow passage through Arabia to Egypt, nor by impassable mountains, nor by boundless, huge rivers, not by inhospitable barbarian races. But it is enough for his safety that he is a Roman, or rather one of those under you” (Aelius Aristides, *The Roman Oration* 100, translation by Charles A. Behr; on this text see [Aelius Aristides, *The Roman Oration* \(extracts\)](#)). Claudian fits in with this tradition and adapts it to the context that has considerably evolved compared to the time of Aelius Aristides – Caracalla’s edict occurred around two centuries before. Claudian praises Rome’s “pacific customs” (*pacifici mores*, III.154) and lists the advantages provided by them. He highlights in particular the improvement of the freedom of movement for every inhabitant of the Empire, an improvement which was made possible by the spread of Roman citizenship after 212 CE (symbolized by the visitor feeling at home everywhere in the Empire, or the possibility of changing residence easily). He also highlights the complete pacification of the most savage regions of the Empire (especially Britain, here named Thule); and the improvement of communications between opposite points of the Empire (symbolised here by the Rhone and the Orontes, III.158). He then concludes his enumeration by saying that it is also thanks to Rome’s “pacific customs” that the Romans constitute one nation (*gens*) only. Claudian’s perspective is thus different from that of Aelius Aristides: being part of the Roman people is not presented as a condition in order to enjoy the Roman peace; it is the Roman peace and the unifying nature of Roman rule which led to the integration of all the inhabitants of the Empire into one *gens*.

To conclude, in this praise of Rome, Claudian well associates the idea that the peace established by Rome and her pacific ruling largely worked for the unification of the conquered Empire. This unification manifested itself through the integration of all the conquered peoples into a unique civic body, but also by the improvement of the freedom of movement inside the Empire. Of course, this freedom of movement implied that Rome controlled every region of the Empire, even those that had caused trouble in the past.

Together with Sidonius Apollinaris, Claudian was among the few last Latin poets writing when the Western Roman Empire still existed, who constantly recalled the name of Rome in the panegyrics they wrote. For them, to praise an idealised representation of Rome was a manifestation of their loyalty to the imperial power, which was as important as how they could describe the merits of the rulers honoured in their panegyrics (Sherwin-White, *The Roman Citizenship*, p. 467). Actually, with the numerous barbarian attacks and troubles that weakened the Roman Empire at that time – let us recall the attacks and plunders perpetrated in Greece by Alaric and his Gothic troops in 395-396 CE, and the revolt of Gildo in Africa –, it must have been meaningful to enumerate to the people who read or heard these works the numerous advantages brought by the *pax romana*, advantages which were then considerably challenged (Sherwin-White, *The Roman Citizenship*, p. 468).



Keywords in the original language:

- [arma](#)
- [Britanni](#)
- [civis](#)
- [cunabula](#)
- [domina](#)
- [domo](#)
- [fatum](#)
- [gens](#)
- [genus humanum](#)
- [hostis](#)
- [imperium](#)
- [ius](#)
- [laus](#)
- [lex](#)
- [mater](#)
- [mos](#)
- [Oceanus](#)
- [orbis](#)
- [pacificus](#)
- [parens](#)
- [patria](#)
- [prosterno](#)
- [pugna](#)
- [Romana dicio](#)
- [spatium](#)
- [terra](#)
- [urbs](#)
- [vinco](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [fatherland](#)
- [foreigner](#)
- [humankind](#)
- [maternal care](#)
- [mistress](#)
- [mother](#)
- [peace](#)
- [Roman citizenship](#)
- [Roman customs](#)
- [Roman domination](#)
- [Roman empire](#)
- [Roman law](#)
- [Roman peace](#)
- [Roman people](#)
- [Rome \(city\)](#)
- [strength](#)
- [submission](#)
- [universal empire](#)
- [war](#)

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Other sources connected with this document: Text

[Pliny the Elder, Natural History III.38-39](#)

Praise of Italy.

- [Read more about Pliny the Elder, Natural History III.38-39](#)

Text

[Ammianus Marcellinus, Res Gestae XIV.6.3-6](#)

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Text

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Praise of Rome's capacity to rule a universal empire

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