

The Presbyters in the Late Antique West

Project financed by the National Science Centre based at the Institute of History, University of Warsaw

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Objective

The main purpose of the project is to understand and describe the role played by the presbyters in the ecclesiastical and social life of the late antique West.

In most Churches the presbyters were a prevailing group among the clergy and by the end of antiquity, with the progress of Christianisation of the countryside, they became the highest church officials that many average people ever met. Thus their importance for the function of the Church and society is beyond any doubt. Yet, we know about them relatively little, far less than about the bishops. What can be said on their position in the community, their social background, property, professional (and non-ecclesiastical) activity, connections which linked them with the rest of the society and barriers which divided them from other people is highly unsatisfying. The estimations of their number are largely intuitive, and their role is often judged on the basis of well-known, but quite untypical examples.

In this project the emergence and formation of the presbyters as a distinct group will be analysed from the late 2nd century, when the earliest testimonies of Christian communities outside Rome appear in the West, to the end of the 7th century, when the process of the formation of the clergy seems to be completed and the types of evidence dramatically change. The research will take a broad, but limited geographical perspective, examining the phenomenon in the western, (mostly) Latin-speaking provinces of the Roman Empire and the successor kingdoms.

The research will be conducted in four areas: ecclesiastical, social, economic and in the field of mentality. In the first of them the project will aim at understanding the pattern, or diverse patterns, of the presbyters' activity in western Churches. This will include, but not be limited to describing the legal framework, created by imperial constitutions and synodal canons, for such research has been largely done. The main purpose will be rather to find out how the actual situation looked like. Which spheres of presbyters' activity were regulated by the law, secular and ecclesiastical, and which were not? Where and why real behaviours differed from the model provided by the canons? How the role of presbyters took shape in the areas in which such norms were limited or did not exist at all? The research will seek to characterise the relations of presbyters to lay people, bishops and other members of the clergy, with a focus on conflicting situations. It will be done in such fields as liturgy, teaching, running church property and representing community. The position of diverse categories of presbyters will be distinguished, particularly those belonging to the urban, rural and monastic clergy.

In the second aspect, the research will focus on the presbyters' social situation. The project will seek to establish their social background, social mechanisms which made people choose the career in the Church, and the ways in which their paths of career were determined by social origins. The question will be asked about the geographical mobility of presbyters: that concerns both those who were ordained outside their communities of origin and those who changed their communities only after ordination (in spite of the formal ban of such practice by synodal canons). An attention will be paid to the ethnic origin of presbyters, both those who came from hardly Romanised but well settled peoples of the Empire and those who were Germanic new-comers. The project will study the barriers which separated presbyters from the rest of the society. This major issue will break into a string of specific questions such as: What activities did the presbyters renounce and what did they share with other people? Did their style of life (e.g. food, garments, family life) differ from that of other Christians, and if so, how did it differ and when did it start? Where did the presbyters dwell? How common was the practice of celibate? The latter problem, which is now being studied thoroughly by David Hunter, will not be analysed for its theological development, but will be approached in social terms.

The third aspect of the research, closely connected to the second, will concern the financial status of the presbyters. The question will be asked about their property, its origin and inheritance, their resources and diverse economic activities. The preliminary research shows that some priests were engaged in commerce

and agriculture, others collected rents and provided divinatory services. Other fields of activity will be sought and we will try to estimate how common they were. We will also seek to find out which presbyters were supported by the church property, and in what degree. We will study the patterns of separation of church property and individual clergymen's property, as well as these rare cases in which the community of goods among presbyters was introduced.

The fourth research path will focus on the mentality and self-consciousness of the clergy. In this field the most important questions are the following: Did the clergymen consider themselves to be a distinct part of the society and if so, how strong this sentiment was? How conscious and methodical was the process of building barriers and how strongly these barriers were emphasised? How the ethos of the clergy was constructed? What role was played in this process by diverse literary genres (especially hagiography and epistolography), legislation and legal solutions named above? Although focused on presbyters, this segment of the project will also concern the other groups of the clergy. This is caused partly by the character of the sources: the literary production of presbyters, which forms a necessary basis for such research, was very meagre when compared with that of bishops. But this approach is also founded upon the assumption (which will be verified) that the mentality of clergy did not change dramatically during the ecclesiastical career.

The underlying assumption of the project is that the legal status, ecclesiastical functions, social role, economic standing and mentality of the presbyters in Late Antiquity cannot be considered as perfectly stable and uniform. That is why two general questions will be constantly present in every aspect of the research. First, we will trace the evolution which took place in each of the aforementioned fields and will examine how this process was affected by the fall of the empire and other dramatic political, social, economic and religious transformations of Late Antiquity. Second, we will compare the evolution which took place in specific parts of the West. We will study both differences and the elements of the Mediterranean-wide cohesion of the presbyters and will seek to explain both the former and the latter.

Significance

In spite of a vivid scholarly interest in the religious history of Late Antiquity, already deep rooted and still growing, the research on the late antique clergy seems surprisingly underdeveloped. The questions named in the previous section of this application are at best partly answered, many remain even unaddressed, and some were never asked.

The research on the clergy seems most advanced in the field of the organisation of the Church (**Gaudemet 1958, L. Pietri 1995**). The studies based on normative sources dealt with several elements of the hierarchical structure, range of responsibility and power of diverse grades of clergymen. However, they described a legal ideal rather than the way in which late antique Churches actually functioned. In consequence many aspects of administration, liturgy and everyday Church life remain desperately badly known. This is partly due to the fact that not all areas of Church activity were regulated by the law. But it also results from the fact that we cannot fully assess (yet) the degree to which canonical regulations were abided. It is interesting to notice that a serious reflection on the actual function of the late antique imperial law, also in the religious sphere (**Harries 1999, Stachura 2010**), is almost entirely absent from the studies on ecclesiastical normative texts.

As for the clerical hierarchy, the scholarly interest has been focused mostly on its highest grade – the bishops. This is understandable for two reasons. First, it directly results from the state of the evidence. Famous bishops, such as Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, Augustine, Epiphanius of Pavia or Caesarius of Arles, to name but few of those who were both prolific writers and heroes of hagiographic narrative, number among the best known individuals of Late Antiquity, while the presbyters belonging to this group are few. Second, the scholarly interest in bishops ensues from the spectacular role which some of them played in ecclesiastical, social and political life of their age. However, the image of the bishops which results from this interest is far from being complete. Much research was concentrated on the literary, hagiographical model of the bishop. Although it helps to understand the mechanisms which built the authority of the bishop (**Vescovi 1997, Rapp 2005**), it remains to find out to which degree this model reflected (and affected) the self-consciousness of the clergy. On the other hand the research aimed at explaining the role of individual bishops who held major episcopal sees (e.g. **Brown 1967, McLynn 1994, Klingshirn 1994**). These studies brought a lot to our understanding of the actual social and political function of bishops, but, again, they tell mostly about outstanding individuals. All in all, the research based mostly on the hagiographic evidence can hardly shed any new light on hundreds of average bishops who held office in minor towns of the Roman Empire. There are, however, some exceptions. A rare study of the origin, social role, paths of career and alliances of the entire body of bishops was done for Gaul by **Heinzelmann 1976**

who showed how much can be done by exploiting the entire accessible evidence. On a limited scale a similar research was conducted by **Sotinel 1997** who exploited the evidence from Italy.

If there is still a deal to be done for the study of bishops, the most serious effort is needed for the research on presbyters. The trail has been already blazed, especially for the East. There is a wide and most interesting study of the clergy in Asia Minor in which **Hübner 2005** showed e.g. the social background of priests, their resources and diverse motives which made people enter the ranks of clergy. A similar, though less systematic studies based on the evidence from Egypt had been carried out even before, especially by **Wipszycka 1972** and **1996**. Thus for two large regions of the eastern Mediterranean, which have a good evidence, the work is quite advanced. For the West it has only started. A thorough study on the presbyters in Gaul (but only in Merovingian period) has been published by **Godding 2001** who asked, on a limited scale, several questions which are not unsimilar to those with which the present project will be concerned.

The evidence from other parts of the West has been hardly studied at all. In a short, but interested article **Sotinel 1998** convincingly showed social interactions between clergy and lay people in Italy. **N. Duval 1987** and **Y. Duval 2001** published concise studies on epigraphic testimonia on presbyters in two North African cities of Sbeitla and Cirta. **Leone 2006**, interested in the rural clergy in Africa, signalled problems which still have to be resolved. But this is almost all. For Spain, Danube provinces and Britain the situation is even worse (see Bibliography). It is true that the evidence from the last two regions is quite meagre, but it is not entirely so with Africa and Spain. Here the research on the presbyters can be made on the basis of rich literary and epigraphic sources.

In recent years a new light on the social position of presbyters has been shed by studies concerned with particular problems rather than specific regions. The authors dealing with the celibate (**Hunter 2007** and his forthcoming book) and divination (**Klingshirn 2005**, **Wiśniewski 2013**) showed both strong links between presbyters and lay people and a drive to separate the former from the latter. None of them, however, did it in a systematic way and their conclusions should be treated as signposts rather than proven results.

The studies named above helped to establish a catalogue of relevant questions and showed some ways of answering them. Yet, all of them suffer from two limitations which the present project will, hopefully, be able to overcome. First, even the research of Godding and Hübner, wide as they are, were focused on single regions and did not attempt to compare the situation in Asia Minor and Gaul with that in the other parts of the Christendom. The reason is understandable: their authors did not have the evidence enabling them to do so, which our project will provide. Second, neither of them showed the changes which had occurred in the position of presbyters in subsequent centuries.

To put it short, our understanding of the actual function of the presbyters in Late Antiquity, and especially in western Churches remains incomplete. We know even less about their social background, social links and barriers, and social role. The same can be said about their economic activity. The problem of the self-consciousness of this group is virtually untouched in the scholarship. Each of these problems is to be translated into a string of questions, enumerated above. The answers to these questions are in the sources, but they cannot be found by studies limited to few literary works, specific types of evidence or a narrow group of distinguished clergymen. The answers to the questions about liturgical, social, economic, and mental function of the presbyters can be given only by a massif team effort which would permit to take into account the whole literary, normative, and epigraphic evidence, and not to focus just on conspicuous but hardly representative individuals. And this is what the project is aimed at.

The project will result in a wide study of the role of presbyters and the ways in which late antique Churches were administered, served and provided for. More generally, it will contribute to a better understanding of mechanisms of the social life in the late antique West. It will have two specific outcomes. First, it will provide a series of regional at thematic studies and, more importantly, a thorough synthesis on the western presbyters, based on the massif evidence, assembled and analysed for the first time. Second, it will create a prosopographical, searchable on-line and freely accessible database of presbyters in the late antique West (in English). The database will contain the evidence, the large part of which has been never collected before. It will be constructed as a necessary instrument for the present research, but it will certainly prove an invaluable tool for all those who work on diverse topics regarding society, Church and economy of Late Antiquity.

Work Plan

The strength of the project lies in the fact that by collecting, sorting and analysing the entire western evidence it will address in a new way a set of questions concerning the late antique presbyters. Some of these questions are new, the others are old, but up to now they have not received satisfactory answers. The evidence will be collected by the systematic searching through the narrative, epistolographic, homiletic, normative, documentary and epigraphic sources. The prosopographical part of this material will be

subsequently assembled within an electronic database which will contain the complete set of extant evidence to every single presbyter in the West. The use of the massive evidence, both prosopographical and other, will permit focusing the research on hundreds of rank-and-file clergymen, most of them known from a single piece of evidence, and not, as hitherto, on outstanding individuals.

A large amount of the work necessary for assembling this evidence has been already done. The material from Africa (to 533 AD), Italy (to 604 AD) and Gaul (to 614 AD) has been collected in three volumes of *Prosopographie chrétienne du Bas-Empire* (Mandouze 1982, Pietri 1999, Pietri & Heijmans 2013); additionally for the city of Rome there is now a new prosopography of pagan, Jewish and Christian priests, published by Rüpke 2008. Thus for these regions only seventh- and partly sixth-century evidence has to be collected. The Gallic sources from the Merovingian period have been also assembled by Godding 1999. The evidence from Spain and less rich material from the Danube provinces and Britain will be collected and made accessible for the scholarship for the first time.

As far as the literary sources are concerned the richest evidence will be provided by narrative texts and epistolography. However, no literary genre will be omitted (the homiletic literature, for instance, brings normally no information about specific priests, but Augustine's *Sermo* 356 contains an exceptional detailed register of the clergymen in Hippo, which specifies their family status, property, geographical and social origin: Nehring 2012). The systematic assembling of the evidence for the regions not covered by existing prosopographies will be largely facilitated by the use of electronic databases, though it should be emphasised that they do not include all the sources to be examined. Several literary texts, particularly hagiographies and a major part of inscriptions are not digitalised and will have to be searched through using conventional methods.

The entire evidence will be systematically assembled within the electronic searchable database. Every record of the database will provide, in separate drop-down boxes, information (if accessible) about presbyter's name, origin, place and time of life, family, friends, property, career and non-ecclesiastical profession. Unlike traditional prosopographies it will permit swift finding, for instance, all information about the land-owners, church-founders, or village-dwellers among the presbyters in a specific period and region.

The massive evidence will be used to answer the questions about the social mobility, paths of career, family, financial status and economic activity of the presbyters. That will be done in three ways. First, quantitative methods will be (cautiously) employed to the prosopographical material collected in the database. Yet, these data will be too fragmentary to be treated as faithfully reflecting the situation in all the parts of the Western world (in some provinces we will possibly find no more than a single priest or two per century). And that is why two other paths of research will be proposed. Second, the prosopographical data will be systematically set against the normative evidence, including both imperial laws and church canons, and a number of remarks that late antique authors made on presbyters in general, without naming anybody. Only then it will be possible to estimate how common was a case mentioned either in a single narrative text or in a single canon (like, for instance, a business trip or a sale of relics). Third, a special attention will be paid to specific communities and small regions, identified during the process of collecting the data, whose evidence is sufficiently good to treat them as case studies. Here the same questions which will be addressed in quantitative terms through the analysis of the material provided by the database will be answered by means of a careful analysis of the activity of a group of presbyters in its religious, social, economic and cultural context.

A distinct path will be pursued in the research on mentality and self-consciousness of the clergy. This part on the project will explore wide evidence as well, but will make only a limited use of the prosopographical data collected in the database. It will be partly conducted on basis of the epigraphic sources, such as funerary or foundatory inscriptions, which will provide an important insight into a self-representation of this group. This research will also exploit a wide literary corpus consisting of three major groups. First of them are hagiographies, letters of exhortation and a few treatises on priesthood, all of which present the model of clerical life. The second group includes diverse texts written for the purpose of polemics in which the position of specific bishops of the bishops in general was contested by presbyters or had to be defended (e.g. Jerome's letters, diverse Augustine's works). The third group consists in exegetical treatises and other ancient commentaries dealing with a set of New Testament passages in which the structure of the Church was presented (e.g. Ambrosiaster's commentary on the so-called Pastoral Letters). The latter are especially interesting, because they show late antique authors' reflection on the evolution of the role of presbyters from New Testament times to their own days.

The success of the project will depend on the team members working together and systematically discussing problems, paths of research and results. Yet, every member of the group will have his/her own field of responsibility. The entire team will take part in the process of assembling the evidence and constructing the database. Two doctoral students will be closely supervised by the PI. One of them will collect the evidence from Spain, the other – from the Danube provinces and Britain.

The work on the database will start in the first year of the project, but it will be done in two steps. First, its rationale and scheme will be presented at a workshop to a narrow group of international scholars of proven expertise in the studies on Late Antiquity. Their suggestions will help to adjust the construction of the database for the needs of their potential users not involved directly in the project. Only then the doctoral researchers will be hired and start their work. The database will be completed in the fourth year of the project and then it will be presented to a wider group of scholars.

The study on the mentality of clergy will be conducted by the Post-doctoral Researcher to whom the participation in the project will help to complete his habilitation.

The PI will be responsible for the final study, a substantial synthesis on the presbyters of the West which will present the findings of the project. This work, prepared in close collaboration of the Post-doctoral Researcher, will be completed in the fifth year.

Academic environment

The University of Warsaw has a number of historians, archaeologists, epigraphists, papyrologists, Roman jurists, and classicists, closely collaborating in the field of Late Antiquity. This milieu which has proved to be attractive for many colleagues from Polish and foreign academia will be a favourable research environment for the project. Yet, this environment is clearly dominated by the scholars working on the eastern part of the Mediterranean (Tomasz Derda, Michał Gawlikowski, Włodzimierz Godlewski, Paweł Janiszewski, José Luis Alonso, Adam Łajtar, Adam Łukaszewicz, Jolanta Młynarczyk, Gregorz Ochała, Krystyna Stebnicka, Elżbieta Szabat, Jakub Urbanik, and Ewa Wipszycka). Such an interest is shared by other participants of late antique seminars, based in Warsaw, either at the Polish Academy of Sciences or at the Catholic University. Warsaw has also a strong group of medievalists. They obviously deal with the West, but rarely work on the pre-Carolingian period. The project will create a team which will fulfill the gap between the medievalists dealing with the West and the historians of Late Antiquity and early Byzantium whose research interest lies with the East. The team members will look for expertise, consultation and feedback in both circles, up to now quite loosely related, and thus will help to integrate them.

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