

This paper will argue that the early Christian liturgical hymn, a form which came to prominence in the church only in the fourth and fifth centuries AD, may be seen as an adaptation of the traditional and familiar Roman practice of acclamation. In particular, it will argue that the development of liturgical hymnody was in part a response to specific political situations in which the authority of the Christian bishop was challenged, whether in disputes within the Christian community or in a wider, secular context. The public singing of hymns offered a formidable display of unity, and helped to establish a bishop's popular influence as the acknowledged leader of a united congregation. As Christian bishops became increasingly prominent figures in later Roman political life, they were able to use hymns both to justify their authority and to advertise their own positions. Hymns, as acclamations, were a means of Christianising the conventional language of Roman political power.

The use and value of acclamations in Roman political life has long been a familiar theme, and under the Republic it was a favourite topic of Cicero's. Acclamations proved especially useful in more fluid political situations, in which a coherent group identity might be forged through the adoption of an agreed or familiar chant: there is an early example of a religious chant being used to this end in the Acts of the Apostles 19:28-34. Christian hymns were well-adapted for this purpose, and by the end of the fourth century AD rival doctrinal factions in Constantinople engaged in competitive nocturnal demonstrations of marching and hymn-singing until the emperor was forced to intervene.

This development, however, can be best traced through a focus on the the career of Ambrose of Milan. His election as bishop in 374 offers an example of straightforward political acclamation, when his attempt to quell a riot in his capacity as governor was interrupted by the unanimous cry of 'Ambrosius Episcopus!' Yet Ambrose was subsequently to be heavily involved in doctrinal disputes, and famously found himself opposed to the Emperor Valentinian II over the possession of the Portian Basilica. It was during this crisis that Ambrose is credited – by Augustine, among others – with the introduction of antiphonal hymnody to the Latin west, apparently with the explicit purpose of uniting his congregation in a show of strength and determination in the face of imperial power.

The hymns of Ambrose which have survived are often complex in their language but are predictable in rhythm and structure – and are therefore in many ways comparable to the acclamations which have survived from other contexts. Their subject matter, too, often touches on issues of significance to the Milanese church: one example is the surviving hymn describing the *inventio* of the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius. My paper will argue that late-antique hymns shared with acclamations the capacity to express power and influence, and to demonstrate and instantiate social and political unity: a congregation unanimous in support of their local bishop.