# What Did Theodosius Know and Ambrose Conceal? Another Look at the Callinicum Episode (388 CE)

## 1. Introduction

Much scholarly effort has been devoted to exploring the tensions between Christians and pagans, as the former strove to establish their control over the public arena. Scholars have focused much less, however, on the polemics and violence that newly empowered Christians directed toward other Christians and Jews.[[1]](#endnote-1) These incidents must be taken together: understanding intra-Christian violence and violence between Christians and pagans cannot be separated from an analysis of brawls between Christians and Jews.[[2]](#endnote-2) Before 400 CE, anti-Jewish violence did not prevail anywhere in the Roman-Byzantine Empire.[[3]](#endnote-3) Belligerent rhetoric was not matched by violent actions.[[4]](#endnote-4) We must also note the clear discrepancy between reports of violent Christian appropriation or destruction of pagan or Jewish holy sites and the lack of an archaeological record of such episodes. Outbursts of violence between these religious rivals since Rome became Christian may have occurred, but they have left scant traces in the historical records—and, consequently, in modern scholarship. Nevertheless, some such incidents did indeed have a major impact and a high profile in the public sphere, due not least to their later deployment by extremely influential public figures.

In the annals of the study of religious violence in Late Antiquity, the destruction of the synagogue in Callinicum usually receives pride of place—though mostly for the wrong reasons. For many scholars, this episode represents a significant inflection point in the history of religious violence in the Theodosian period.[[5]](#endnote-5) A clear view of Callinicum’s social impact may elude us, though certain inferences about its legal ramifications may be drawn. In this regard, the destruction of the synagogue at Callinicum by a Christian mob, mobilized by episcopal incitement, demands attention. How, then, are we to understand the Callinicum affair?[[6]](#endnote-6)

## 2. Ambrose’s Epistles as a Historical Source

Our sole (if indirect) witness to the event, which he linked over the course of two epistles to a report of an attack on a Valentinian church, is Ambrose of Milan.[[7]](#endnote-7) Ambrose became enmeshed in a chain reaction to these incidents, becoming—according to his account and his lengthy accompanying discussion—one of the two prominent protagonists historically linked to this episode. A further historical indication of the effects of the event may be the law promulgated by Theodosius I in 393 CE, protecting synagogues from malicious acts.[[8]](#endnote-8) That this law was promulgated five years after the incident in Callinicum seems to argue against linking the two events. Yet the time that elapsed between the Callinicum event and the promulgation of the law in 393 CE could also be due to the emperor’s effort to ward off possible public sentiments that might accuse him of siding with the Jews.

Callinicum is also important for the insight it provides on the contest between *imperium* *et sacerdotium* (imperial and ecclesiastical powers). Scholars have tended to accept Ambrose’s account of his contest with Theodosius at face value, despite its invisibility in contemporary sources.[[9]](#endnote-9) This absence of contemporary reports suggests that the incident might have been quite minor, but that Ambrose retrospectively inflated its (and his own) importance to serve his own agenda. Ambrose’s epistles are, to repeat, our sole source of information for these two violent episode(s). Since they came down to us via his epistle collection, they are in fact products of a later, post-Theodosian, redaction by the bishop, even though their initial composition may have occurred closer to the events that they purport to describe.[[10]](#endnote-10) One is inclined to agree with Neil McLynn’s meticulous analysis, that Ambrose’s final account was considerably enhanced for rhetorical reasons.[[11]](#endnote-11)

McLynn argues that Ambrose used the Callinicum affair as a pretext for the promotion of a more covert agenda.[[12]](#endnote-12) In addition to that, and as the promotion of his own prestige and authority over internal ecclesiastical affairs, this episode concerned the regulation of the position of priests and the curial rank, and his general demand that priests be consulted on issues relating to *causa religiosa* (matters of religion)*.* Yet, given McLynn’s conclusion that Ambrose wrote his initial complaint knowing that Theodosius rescinded the punitive orders in his initial rescript to the *comes Orientis*, the sheer amount of space that the Callinicum incident occupies in that epistle is astonishing. This phenomenon does not contradict the idea that the Callinicum event served as a pretext but requires more explanation.[[13]](#endnote-13) The space that Ambrose devoted to this episode in the course of his entangled “dialogue” with the emperor suggests that there was more than meets the eye regarding the actual episode, and that, in fact, there is a whole hidden layer that calls for further probing.

It seems that lurking behind the Callinicum “pretext” is a layer of concealed issues, well known to both Ambrose and to the emperor, which the bishop went out of his way to suppress in the interest of his impact on his readership and posterity. Given the fact that Ambrose’s epistles divulge only the very bare facts of the incident(s)—Callinicum being mentioned only once and in passing in the course of the letter to the emperor (Ambrose, *Ep*. 74 [40]. 14), and the conflation of the incidents concerning the Jews and the Valentinians—it is not surprising that most of the scholarly discussions were and still are focused on his rhetoric. Moreover, according to the *communis opinio*, the Jews mentioned by Ambrose in his other writings were not real living Jews and those figuring in his letters served as tools in a rhetorical, polemical drama.[[14]](#endnote-14) By contrast, it is argued here that Ambrose’s vitriolic attack on “the Jews” does reflect present realities, more than has been assumed thus far.[[15]](#endnote-15) As will become apparent, the circumstances surrounding the Callinicum incident revealed the tensions between Ambrose and emperor Theodosius, which were fueled by conflicting agendas concerning public order advocated by the potentate and prelate.

The full force of Ambrose’s epistle to Theodosius becomes apparent once its structure is exposed. The letter, as brought in Zelzer’s edition, ought to be divided into two separate and near-equal units: paragraphs 1–17 (the injustice visited upon the church) and 18–33 (the impiety of the Jews and their supporters). The first part was clearly penned and formulated by a legal mind befitting Ambrose’s earlier educational formation and career.[[16]](#endnote-16) In this context, Ambrose demands from the emperor *libertas* (freedom/frankness), in its political form a desirable virtue for an emperor who, as an *optimus princeps* (supreme authority), refrains from abusing his unlimited power and allows his subjects to speak openly (*parrhesia)*.[[17]](#endnote-17) In this context, biblical *exempla* of prophetic rebukes to kings came in handy: Ambrose walked a well-trodden path, following other fellow bishops such as Hilary of Poitiers and contemporary orators such as Symmachus.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Indeed, Ambrose’s convoluted line of argument and his excessive use of rhetorical devices such as *antistasis* (the repetition of a word in an opposing sense),[[19]](#endnote-19) as well as other methods typical of an accomplished rhetorician and former pagan official, contributed to creating a facade meant to blur the real characteristics of the event in the Roman East in the service of more important issues. Thus, the textual juncture explored here is the axis between fact and fiction, which Ambrose so relentlessly tried either to distort or to conceal from his readers.

## 3. Ambrose’s Arguments Reconsidered

A good place to begin the exploration of Ambrose’s rhetorical deceits is his claim that the recent violent precedent was actually triggered by Jews in the days of Julian, when they burned down a set of basilicas in different locations in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Ambrose writes: “The Church will not be avenged; will the Synagogue be? (*ecclesia non vindicata est*, *vindicabitur synagoga*)” (Amb., *Ep*., 74 [40]. 15, ed. Liebeschuetz, 103). While Ambrose claims that justice must be carried out here according to the *ius gentium* (“code of the nations”), the reference to allegedly violent incidents in the days of emperor Julian involving Jews is fraudulent and presented in a distorted manner.[[20]](#endnote-20)

What about the time of the Callinicum incident? Most scholars dealing with the exchanges between Ambrose and Theodosius I only define the probable chronological boundaries in which the exchange might have taken place. This is based on an assessment of the time of arrival of the news from the East. Scholars date the event(s) vaguely to 388 CE.[[21]](#endnote-21) Others have suggested dates that vary between the immediate aftermath of Maximus’s defeat and the subsequent months, that is, between the end of August and the end of November 388 CE the month in which Chromatius, bishop of Aquileia, was most probably consecrated in the presence of Ambrose, following the death of Valerian on 26 November.[[22]](#endnote-22) A more precise dating places the composition of Ambrose’s letter in the latter part of the month of November or December 388 CE.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Based on the assumption that Ambrose wrote his letter when he already knew that the emperor had revoked his order to the *comes Orientis* to punish Callinicum’s bishop, requiring him to rebuild the synagogue from his own pocket, and that he punish the monks involved in the clash with the Valentinians, the actual event(s) must have taken place some weeks earlier.[[24]](#endnote-24) According to recent new assessments, informed by Roman political and military movements and communication networks, the transfer of information by courier service from Callinicum to Aquileia or Milan (where the emperor resided during the late summer and early autumn), would have taken five or more weeks and perhaps even more.[[25]](#endnote-25) If we allow for an additional five or more weeks following Theodosius’s second order to the *comes Orientis* before Ambrose’s initial version of his letter, then the event(s) in Callinicum were already “distant” incidents.[[26]](#endnote-26) Contrary to what Ambrose might have wished to convey by the heated and tense tone of his attack on the emperor, and given the time lapse between the event and its mention in writing, the whole matter was destined to be recast into a polemical and rhetorical form.

Furthermore, the geographical remoteness of Callinicum played into the hands of Ambrose, who capitalized on it: “If you are moved to anger by the burning of even the most worthless buildings—for what else could there be in such an *obscure fortified settlement*(*in tam ignobili castro*)—do you not remember, emperor, how many mansions of prefects have been burned in Rome, without anyone exacting punishment?” (Amb., *Ep*. 74 [40]. 13, ed.Liebeschuetz,101–102).[[27]](#endnote-27) This focus on the contrast between center and periphery definitely sounded impressive. As a small garrison town (*castra*) on the edge of the Eastern Roman frontier, a distant and peripheral point in the Roman *orbis terrarum* (hemisphere), Callinicum is placed in sharp contrast to Rome, or Milan, as the epicenter of that universe.

But was Callinicum indeed so unimportant? It seems not. The bishop’s subtle rhetorical presentation obscures the weakness of his point. Although Ambrose might not have been well informed, granted his good contacts within imperial circles, his claim concerning the obscurity of the Osrhoene garrison town was a gross underestimation. Nicephorium/Callinicum—better known from the Abbasid period onwards as Raqqa and situated on the river Balīkh, a small tributary of the Euphrates—was most probably founded in the Seleucid era (under Seleukos Nikator (301–281 BCE)). In the days of emperor Julian, on his final expedition against the Persians, it served as a reliable stronghold in very close proximity to the Sassanian–Roman border.[[28]](#endnote-28) Callinicum also served as an important trade center between Persia and Rome, so much so that by 408/409 CE the Roman emperors Honorius and Theodosius II promulgated the following law:

Merchants subject both to our empire as well as to the king of the Persians should not hold period markets (*nundinae*) beyond those places in which it was agreed upon by us at the time of the treaty (298 CE) with the aforementioned nation, lest the secrets of a foreign kingdom be found out (*ne alieni regni*, *quod non convenit*, *scrutentur arcana*). Therefore no one hereafter, subject to our empire, should dare to set out beyond Nisibis, Callinicum, and Artaxatafor the sake of buying and selling merchandise (*species*), nor should he think of exchanging merchandise with a Persian, except in the cities mentioned (*Nullus igitur posthac imperio nostro subjectus ultra Nisibin Callinicum et Artaxata emendi sive vendendi species*). (*Codex Iustinianus* IV 64. 4)[[29]](#endnote-29)

This legislation of 408 CE referred to an initial treaty from Diocletian’s days that concerned only the town of Nisibis, but, as seen here, was extended to include Callinicum as well. Moreover, the law cited above, albeit promulgated twenty years after the episode discussed here, no doubt attests to Callinicum’s well-established mercantile prestige and status, coupled with its regional military importance.[[30]](#endnote-30) Callinicum, in brief, was no obscure backwater town, but an important nerve center along the borders between Persia and Rome.

In order to understand the importance of Callinicum alongside the other two cities mentioned in the law, one has to be aware of the wider trade and security concerns of the region. Unlike other sections of the Roman–Persian border (mainly along the Euphrates), which consisted of fortified posts (such as e.g. Dura-Europos in the third century), the region in northeast Syria better known as Mesopotamia and Osrhoene was defended by a concentration of well-defined posts governing the open plains of the Syrian steppe to the east and southeast of Beroea. This situation constituted a difficult challenge to both superpowers, requiring special efforts to monitor the movements of groups and individuals.[[31]](#endnote-31) Following the defeat of Julian in the summer of 363, Nisibis was ceded to the Persians and only Callinicum remained within Roman borders, meriting its pivotal status.[[32]](#endnote-32) Overall, it should be emphasized that the entire area surrounding Callinicum underwent a major development during the late Roman period, proof of its strategic position close to the Roman frontier with Persia and along the trade routes reaching their apex in the fifth and sixth centuries. This state of affairs was known all too well to Theodosius I, who served as *Magister Militum* of the East and negotiator with the Persians.[[33]](#endnote-33) Ambrose’s slighting remark about Callinicum’s obscurity must therefore be considered unfounded and ridiculous.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Honorius and Theodosius II’s legislation, quoted above, was aimed not only at regulating economic activity but also at curbing the free flow of information in the bustling commercial meeting points of this frontier zone. These places provided an opportunity for (sometimes sensitive) information to be passed across the border. An army garrison would control this potential flow of information without impairing the mercantile activity that drew merchants from as far afield as the western parts of the empire.[[35]](#endnote-35) If we take into account insinuations concerning the potential or actual treachery of the Jews (discussed in more detail below), the violent act against the Jewish community of Callinicum might have become a cause for concern for the Roman authorities.

One may ask: Where were the Jews in all this? What was their role and place in this context? Although it is difficult to determine the makeup of the local Jewish community, let alone its size, we may assume that members of that community participated in the local mercantile activity.[[36]](#endnote-36) In this social, political, and military context, a few questions remain open. Nowhere in his letter to the emperor does Ambrose hint at what might have triggered the local Christians’ violent attack on Callinicum’s synagogue. Was there any provocation on the part of the Jews besides the distant, unrelated reference to violent anti-Christian outbursts by Jews in the days of Julian, conjured up by Ambrose to justify his demands on the emperor? Clearly, from his own tacit admission, Ambrose was not privy to the details of the incident; or, conversely, he opted to conceal what did not suit his agenda. If we are to follow the guidelines suggested by Johannes Hahn, religious issues alone cannot provide a viable explanation for these outbursts, since conflicts with violent outcomes were invariably mingled with other issues.[[37]](#endnote-37) What then triggered the Callinicum event? Given the town’s probable social makeup as a trade center, could competition with the local Jewish merchants have intensified existing religious grudges and resentments? When and how such grievances could turn into extreme intolerance and violence in the local context is not easy to determine.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Perhaps an incident involving the destruction of another synagogue in a remote location in the same region close to the Sassanian territory may supply a clue. According to an anecdote in the Vita of Sergius by John of Ephesus, ca. 520 CE, Sergius led his disciples into an ongoing conflict with the Jewish community of Kalesh, a small village in the territory of Amida. This story, analyzed by Fergus Millar, may shed some light on the Callinicum incident and the shared atmosphere in which these strained extra-communal relations developed. A short extract from the Vita will suffice. The narrative begins with Sergius’s wishes to begin a life as a recluse:

But before doing this, because there were many Jews in that village, and they went about with great freedom (*ܘܒܦܪܗܣܝܐ =parrhesia*), he carried on a continuous contest (ܬܟܬܘܫܐ ܐܡܝܢܐ) against them and every day he used to contend against them as with slayers of God... and he used to upbraid Christians who had dealings with them [= the Jews] in the way of taking and giving. And one day he led about twenty of their [Simeon’s and his] disciples by night, and took fire, and went and burnt their great synagogue-house, with their books (ܣܦܪ݀ܝܗܘܢ) and their trumpets (ܘܫܝܦܘܪ݀ܝܗܘܢ) and all their furniture (ܘܟܘܠܗܿ ܬܫܡܫܬܗܘܢ)...[[39]](#endnote-39) But these men, when they saw that all their hope had been cut off through the burning of their books and all of their furniture, lamented bitterly; and, because they were settled in the territory of the church of Amida (ܘܡܛܘܠܠ ܕܒܬܘܬܒܘܬܐ ܕܥܕܬܐ ܕܐܡܿܕ ܝܿܬܒܝܢ ܗܘܘ), and used to pay many contributions to the members of the church... all the members of the church became their supporters, threatening the blessed Sergius... But the zealous man, when these men [= the Jews] had gone into the church of the city to prefer an accusation, while the fire was still in their synagogue, collected all his master’s disciples with him and all the others from the village,and took water and went and put out the fire; and they cleared all the soil; and they collected stones and within three days built a small martyr’s chapel in that place.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Ignoring the time gap between the incidents in Kalesh and Callinicum and allowing for John of Ephesus’s omissions and priorities writing in Constantinople a generation or so after the actual events, there might yet be some important similarities with the Callinicum episode.[[41]](#endnote-41) Bearing in mind the differences between Kalesh (a small remote village at the northeastern edge of the Roman Empire close to the Tigris river) and Callinicum (which maintained its centrality during the sixth century), some unique similarities indicate a common ground between the two incidents, since the basic social conditions remained the same.[[42]](#endnote-42)

There were clear dissimilarities between the two incidents in these nearby locations, most prominently in the manner in which the two incidents evolved. Whereas the Roman authorities took some formal action in the case of Callinicum, no doubt following some investigation into the matter, they were absent in the ongoing violent encounter between zealot recluses and the Jews of Kalesh. Conversely, while the Callinicum incident did not involve any public or grassroots action in support of the local Jews, in Kalesh there was an open protest by local Christians in support of their Jewish neighbors.[[43]](#endnote-43)

The possible similarities are quite suggestive. In the first place, in searching for a probable cause for the Christian onslaught in Callinicum, one might argue that the “defiant” (according to Sergius) self-confidence (the *parrhesia* behavior) of the Kalesh Jews reflected a trait that was attributed to Jews in some of the early fifth-century incidents in the Syrian orbit, mentioned in some imperial laws.[[44]](#endnote-44) Local commercial competition between the different communities in Callinicum might similarly have triggered feelings of animosity and, compounded by common Christian hatredagainst Jews, spiraled into violence. A very similar atmosphere might have been triggered by “some wrong done to God, or by an insult to the church” (Amb., *Ep*. 74 [40]. 6, ed. Liebeschuetz, 99) which Ambrose suggested had led to the Callinicum bishop’s instigation of his attack.[[45]](#endnote-45) The later claim by Paulinus, Ambrose’s biographer, that the Jews “reviled some Christian monks” (*propterea quod Judaei vel Valentiniani insultarent monachis Christianis*) (Paulinus of Milan, *Life of Ambrose*,22) seems more of an afterthought.[[46]](#endnote-46) It is linked by Ambrose to the incident with the Valentinians who, as reported by him, blocked a procession of monks on the festival of the Maccabean Martyrs. It seems that Ambrose yet again exaggerated in the service of his agenda, describing the procession in memory of the Maccabees as an “ancient custom” (Amb. *Ep*. 74 [40]. 22, ed. Liebeschuetz, 106).[[47]](#endnote-47) The core of the matter was Ambrose's insinuation linking the Valentinian heretics to the local Jews. It was not the actual veracity of such a provocation, but the pretext used by Ambrose to point to allegedly negative sentiments encountered by the local Christians. This is what is meant by vitriolic utterances reaching the public arena.

An additional point of similarity between the two incidents, in Kalesh and in Callinicum, lies in the similar sense of a zealous mission, which drove Sergius and his comrades to engage in a sustained attack on the Kalesh synagogue, burning down the edifice and everything it contained (furniture, books/Torah scrolls, and trumpets/*shofar*). This zealotry can also be envisaged in the Callinicum attack. In his epistle to Theodosius, Ambrose refers to property of the Jews being reclaimed by them, to which Ambrose responds that the possessions of the Jews were consumed by the fire, adding: “What could a synagogue in a remote fortified settlement... possess, when all there is in the place is inconsiderable, and nothing of value and little in quantity? Of what then could the firehave robbed the treacherous Jews?” (Amb. *Ep*., 74 [40]. 18, ed. Liebeschuetz, 104).There might nevertheless have been some plundering here too.[[48]](#endnote-48) One thing, though, needs to be stressed: It is time to put to rest the unfounded assertion, made by several scholars, that the Callinicum synagogue was converted into a church.[[49]](#endnote-49) For in none of the contemporary sources on the Callinicum affair, Ambrose’s epistles and the account by his biographer Paulinus, is there any mention of such an outcome. All Ambrose refers to is the burning of the synagogue by an agitated mob.

Moreover, Ambrose entreats Theodosius not to grant the Jews a triumph of any sort, such as the rebuilding of the burnt-down synagogue and the return of its burnt or plundered “offerings” (*donaria*,whatever this means). For Ambrose, the fulfillment of this demand would have meant a glorious victory for the Jews, whereas the ruins of the burned down synagogue symbolized the Christian subjugation of the Jews, if not their humiliation. A converted synagogue would not have conveyed this notion in the same way. Indeed, the circumstances would likely have vanished from local collective memory. The conversion of synagogues into Christian places of worship became a (not too widespread) phenomenon after the second decade of the fifth century only.[[50]](#endnote-50) Ambrose’s belligerent attitude was enhanced by a strong sense of camaraderie with his Callinicum counterpart, perhaps fueled by his own admiring envy of the latter’s action.

As in Sergius’s later “hate crime” in Kalesh, marked by its concerted and sustained effort to rid the public arena of a Jewish presence, Ambrose’s goal was to cleanse the public domain of the presence of Jews and heretics. This would explain the opening remarks of his letter, portraying the situation of the bishop of Callinicum as a choice between becoming a martyror anapostate.[[51]](#endnote-51) Ambrose contended that he himself wished to be in a similar position, facing martyrdom: “You [the emperor] have a culprit who is on the spot, one who admits the charge. I declare that I burnt the synagogue, or at any rate that I instructed them that there should be no building where Christ was denied”(Amb. *Ep*., 74 [40]. 8, ed. Liebeschuetz, 100).What is Ambrose referring to here? In light of what follows, the meaning of his statement becomes even more complicated: “If I am faced with the further question of why I have not burnt the synagogue here [Milan or Aquileia?], [I reply that] since it had already caught fire by an act of God, my participation was not required” (Amb. *Ep*., 74 [40]. 8, ed. Liebeschuetz, 100). These extremely vague statements are a matter of speculation.[[52]](#endnote-52) It is difficult to envisage, even for the sake of argument, that Ambrose is bragging about his own involvement in the destruction of the Callinicum synagogue. However, his own admission of involvement in one way or another, whether instigating, assisting, or condoning such actions closer to home, in Milan or Aquileia, should not be dismissed. The latter possibility seems to carry more weight, although it remains quite vague.[[53]](#endnote-53) It is possible to see this as an extension of Ambrose’s vicious rhetoric, trying to gain public support.

## 4. Emperor Theodosius I and His Role in the Unfolding Events

The second protagonist in this unfolding textual or real drama is the emperor as portrayed by Ambrose. Ambrose implicitly censures the emperor for “seemingly” exceeding territorial boundaries by ruling from the far west on an issue that was supposedly under the jurisdiction of his son Arcadius, resident of Constantinople.[[54]](#endnote-54) But what was Ambrose’s own standing in this ecclesiastical incident hundreds of miles from his own diocese? Was Ambrose induced, even in good faith, to pose his incisive question in light of the novel administrative changes that were slowly taking place? For in those very same years the administrative demarcation line between East and West was being drawn with Theodosius’s own profound involvement. In fact, the layout of the eastern provinces and the dividing lines between East and West were establishedprior to the emperor’s death in 395 CE.[[55]](#endnote-55) Circumstances on the ground, however, were such that Theodosius’s presence in the west was crucial for the well-being of the empire in those years (387–391 CE). Thus, Ambrose’s claim would have aroused ire and contempt within imperial circles. Theodosius’s presence in Italy (especially in Milan) was to protect and mentor the child emperor Valentinian II, who was urged by Ambrose himself to request Theodosius’s guidance in handling the earlier crisis of the Altar of Victory in Rome (384 CE). In 387, following Magnus Maximus’s invasion of Italy, Theodosius took command of an army and moved into Italy in order to check Maximus’s aspirations and activities, by setting up headquarters in Milan in 388 and rallying support from leading pagan dignitaries such as Symmachus.[[56]](#endnote-56) In doing so, Theodosius also sought the high opinion and loyalty of the troops, whose fealty was often swayed by shows of effective military might.[[57]](#endnote-57)

There remains yet another enigmatic component in the unfolding Callinicum episode. It concerns the rather swift response of Theodosius to the complaint and query sent to him by the *comes Orientis* as to how to deal with the culprits involved in the torching of the synagogue, an action that was followed by a swift rescinding of that very same order. Was the move by the emperor to fine the bishop and punish his accomplices carried out solely on the grounds of upholding public order (*ratio disciplinae/disciplinae publicae*) (Amb. *Ep*., 74 [40]. 11, ed. Liebeschuetz, 101)? The earliest law protecting synagogues was enacted only in 393 CE (Cod.theod. XVI 87, 29 September). Back in 388 CE, the only legal definition under which Theodosius might have taken action against the rioters in Callinicum was indeed the *ratio disciplinae* (public order).[[58]](#endnote-58) Were there other reasons involved? The comparison made by Ambrose between the torching of a synagogue and the destruction of a church, which according to him was inappropriate if not amoral at the time of his rhetorical complaint, did not yet reflect, as far as the letter of the law was concerned, the privileged status of the church.[[59]](#endnote-59) We would like to postulate that Theodosius was actually also acting in the spirit of the ideal monarch, following the advice of earlier and contemporary rhetoricians such as Themistius, who entreated Theodosius as early as January 381 CE not only to guard his subjects and defend them against their enemies, but also to establish an atmosphere of social harmony.[[60]](#endnote-60)

An additional consideration may have been involved here, beyond the mundane issue of “public order.” The proposed element might also be part of the fermenting local atmosphere toward the Jews. Given the sensitive location of Callinicum, described above, especially with regard to the possible free flow of sensitive information carried by merchants across the Roman–Persian border (as indicated in the mentioned Roman law, [*Codex Iustinianus* IV 64. 4]), monitoring and checking this potential situation was of utmost importance. There may have been some rumors concerning the shaky loyalty of Jews in border towns and areas, particularly in times of political unrest. These rumors were probably based on their negative presentation as betrayers of Jesus in the New Testament gospels. In the Roman–Persian border areas such rumors were fed by official imperial sentiments as early as the fifth century and later “vindicated” by anecdotal material.[[61]](#endnote-61)

Thus, for instance, the Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylitedescribes the Persian siege of Tella which took place during the Roman–Persian war of 502/503 CE. The chronicler describes the local Jews as digging a tunnel underneath the synagogue tower, situated near the city wall, to assist the Persians’ penetration of the city. The plot, once exposed, led to a major massacre of the city’s Jews.[[62]](#endnote-62)

Although such rumors seem to have been absent in the fourth century, the following anecdotes from over a century later might be relevant. The insinuations concerning the Jews did not enter the public arena *ex nihilo*. Rather, they represented the climax of a slow and steady erosion of the image of the Jews, going back among others to Ambrose’s own vitriol against them. Thus, in the course of his epistle to his sister Marcellina (Amb. *Ep*. *ex*. 1 [41], ed. Liebeschuetz, 111–123), he emphasizes the alleged absence of genuine love among Jews, who are said to lack *fides* and are essentially treacherous.[[63]](#endnote-63)

Given the unique situation in conflict zones and with Jewish-Babylonian communities across the Persian border, such feelings might have been running high among local Romans and Christians. The Roman provinces of Osrhoene and Mesopotamia were heavily populated at least from the time of the Callinicum episode onward and probably earlier already by Jews who were culturally adapted to their environment.[[64]](#endnote-64) It has even been claimed that they interacted with and influenced the local brand of Syrian Christianity.[[65]](#endnote-65) Theodosius was most probably well aware of this potential situation. Hence, apart from securing public order, he acted on the belief that it would be in the service of the empire to pacify the local Jewish community or even “preempt” dissident Jewish feelings in the aftermath of the violent attack. This consideration carried strategic importance due to the recent treaty (387 CE) between Theodosius I and Shapor III over Armenia, following a diplomatic initiative, and trouble on the western front.[[66]](#endnote-66) Thus, Theodosius’s decision to appease the Jewish community reflects the complex political and religious landscape of the Roman Empire in the late 4th century. This strategy ultimately contributed to the empire’s resilience and its ability to navigate the challenges posed by both internal and external threats.

## 5. Conclusions

The encounter between the monarch and the bishop Ambrose who shared the same Nicene faith can be interpreted as follows. While the emperor succeeded in triumphing over his arch competitor Maximus at the end of summer of 388 CE, he received disturbing news from the eastern border of the empire, regarding the torching of a synagogue in the town of Callinicum. Aware of the possible repercussions for that sensitive region and guided by the necessity to exercise the rule of public order, he found himself at loggerheads with a bishop pursuing an entirely different agenda governed by strong animosity against all those outside of his Nicene camp and intent on cleansing the public arena from its present and potential enemies. At that moment in history, these protagonists represented different worlds. Thus, Callinicum with its rival ethnic and sectarian feuds fell prey to an alien struggle.[[67]](#endnote-67)

Ambrose’s “home front” in Milan was probably more important to him than the events in Callinicum in the East, as already rightly claimed by McLynn.[[68]](#endnote-68) However, this did not only concern the struggle for the privileges of Christian clerics in regard to curial rank and possibly other matters as well, all of which are explicitly mentioned in the letter to Theodosius. Within the highly charged encounter between Ambrose and Theodosius issues concerning public order are obvious, as evidenced by the ecclesiastical circles’ attempts to secure for themselves a greater civic role as leaders of the urban community.[[69]](#endnote-69) The latter served Ambrose as a convenient pretext for focusing public attention on the recent local gains in power and authority (17 June 386 CE), when Ambrose made a move to enhance his prestige and authority (as the recent Roman precedent set by Damasus taught him) via the *inventio* (“discovery”) and later *translatio* (transference) of the remains of two martyrs, Protasius and Gervasius, to his own recently constructed and consecrated basilica. Hence, Ambrose puts great emphasis on martyrdom (contrasted with apostasy) in his epistle. According to Lucy Grig, Ambrose was all too familiar with the cachet of martyrs’ remains and their high value as political currency. After the demise of Maximus, the supporter of heretics, favorite of pagans, and protector of the Jews, the Callinicum controversy served Ambrose’s agenda of cleansing the public space of his competition. Thus, for the sake of self-promotion, he even claimed that he himself was prepared to be martyred by the emperor on this altar of religious principles.[[70]](#endnote-70) It seems that the Callinicum episode must be understood as part of a more wide-ranging power struggle in Milan, involving Arian Goths, Ambrosius, Nicaeans, and the imperial authority. Hence, Ambrose’s efforts to conceal and divert information on Callinicum and Theodosius’s countereffort to grapple with it.

1. Even in one of the most recent, advanced, and up-to-date collections of studies, Wendy Mayer and Chris L. de Wet, eds., *Reconceiving Religious Conflict: New Views from the Formative Centuries of Christianity* (London: Routledge, 2018), the role of the Jews as victims or perpetrators of violent activities in Late Antiquity is portrayed by means of their traditional position in the *Adversus Iudaeos* literature. Other recent overviews of the late antique phenomenon of “religious violence” such as Jan Bremmer, “Religious Violence between Greeks, Romans, Christians and Jews,” in *Violence in Ancient Christianity: Victims and Perpetrators*,ed. Albert J. Geljon and Riemer Roukema (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 26–28, have very much toned down earlier portrayals of an “all-out war” between ethno-religious groups and between them and the state-run Christian imperial power during that period. Concerning the status of Jews in this paradigm, Bremmer concludes that: “Jewish–Christian relations while hardly ideal, were far from the horrors of the middle-ages and modern times, even though it would not be long before synagogues would be turned into churches by force” (at 28). To a great extent, Bremmer bases his impression on a survey carried out by Wolfram Kinzig, “Juden und Christen in der Antike. Trennungen, Transformationen. Kontinuitäten und Annäherungen,” in *Among Jews, Gentiles and Christians in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Studies in Honour of Professor Oskar Skarsaune on his 65th Birthday*, ed. Reidar Hvalvik and John Kaufman (Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press, 2011), 148–154, according to which between the early years of the post-Constantinian era (339 CE) and the final decades of the sixth century, only twenty episodes of “blutige Konflikte zwischen Juden und Christen” can be noted, and six of them are quite doubtful, which reduces the actual number to fourteen in all, a meager number by all accounts. While Bremmer might be right and the better part of Late Antiquity could or should be labeled as a rather tranquil period, especially in Roman Palestine (see too Glen W. Bowersock, “Polytheism and Monotheism in Arabia and the Three Palestines,” *DOP* 51 (1997), 1–10 although that province represents a different setting in which the Jews were a substantial minority), the inference from Kinzig’s survey is still slightly misleading. The number of incidents is far from reflecting the full reality or a definitive number, as it only reflects the incidents that left their mark in contemporary sources. Moreover, the episode at the center of the current paper, the torching of the Callinicum synagogue, would have gone unnoticed if not for Ambrose of Milan who turned it into a public event and a source of tension between bishop (Ambrose) and emperor (Theodosius I). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. A case in question which reflected how the entangled realities of ethnic identities and the religious interests of diverse communities led to a spiral of violence is that of the Alexandrian riots of 414–415, culminating in the lynching of the renowned pagan intellectual Hypatia, while an earlier chapter of this chain of violence also involved a skirmish between the local Jews and Christians, on which see Oded Irshai, “Christian Historiographers’ Reflections on Jewish–Christian Violence in Fifth Century Alexandria,” in *Poetics of Power: Jews*, *Christians*, *and the Roman Empire*, ed. Natalie B.Dohrman andAnnette Yoshiko Reed (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 137–153. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See the classic study by Lellia Cracco Ruggini, “Ebrei e Orientali nelľ Italia Settentrionale fra il 4. e il 6. secolo d. Cr.,” *Studia e documenta historiae et iuris* 25 (1959), 187–308, repr. in Lellia Cracco Ruggini, *Gli Ebrei in età tardoantica* (Opuscula Collecta 7) (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2008), 186–284. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This point has been emphasized by Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 2010), 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Since the field is replete with literature on the subject, we shall confine ourselves to mentioning only the most influential recent monographs and collected studies: Johannes Hahn, *Gewalt und religiöser Konflikt: Studien zu den Auseinandersetzungen zwischen Christen, Heiden und Juden im Osten des Römischen Reiches* (von Konstantin bis Theodosius II) (Klio Beihefte, NF 8) (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004); Harold A. Drake, ed., *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006); Brent D. Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For a catalogue of incidents in the course of which synagogues were destroyed or damaged by Christians in Late Antiquity see Kinzig, “Juden,” and John G. Gager, “Who Did What to Whom? Physical Violence between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity,” in *A Most Reliable Witness: Essays in Honor of Ross Shepard Kraemer* (Brown Judaic Studies 358), ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey et al.(Providence: Brown University, 2015), 35–48 (and the contributions in that volume). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. One to the emperor and the other to his sister, as well as in the account of his near-contemporary biographer Paulinus of Milan, see Ambrose, *Ep*. 74 (Maur. 40) and *Ep*. *ex*. 1 (41) (*extra collectionem*), in *Ep.* *liber decimus* (CSEL 82), ed. Michaela Zelzer (Vindobonna: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1982), 54–73. Reminiscences of the event were also preserved by Ambrose’s biographer, Paulinus of Milan, *Vita sancti Ambrosii*, *mediolanensis episcopi*, *a Paulino eius notario ad beatum Augustinum conscripta*, 22–23, ed. Boniface Ramsey, *Ambrose* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 204–205 (referred to as Paulinus of Milan, *Life of Ambrose* in this text). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Cod.theod. XVI 8. 7. Incidents include those in Rome, Aquileia (on which see more below), and Antioch (the confiscation of a synagogue dedicated to the memory of the Maccabean Martyrs and its conversion into a Martyrion?), see Johannes Hahn, “The Veneration of the Maccabean Brothers in Fourth Century Antioch: Religious Competition, Martyrdom, and Innovation,” in *Dying for the Faith*, *Killing for the Faith: Old-Testament Faith Warriors (1 and 2 Maccabees) in Historical Perspective*, ed. Gabriela Signori (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 79–123. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For the most recent appraisal of the episode, see Harold A. Drake, *A Century of Miracles: Christians, Pagans, Jews, and the Supernatural, 312–410* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). It is submitted that this event was but a prelude to the greater showdown between Ambrose and Theodosius following the Thessaloniki massacre in 390 CE, described in great detail by Theodoret of Cyrrhus in *Hist. eccl.* V, 17. In fact, no late fourth-century writer nor for that matter any of the Christian historiographers of the fifth century, such as Rufinus of Aquileia, Socrates, or Sozomen, so much as even hint at the Callinicum episode or the confrontation between Ambrose and Theodosius on that issue. However, in later (twelfth-century) historiographic traditions, the episode in Callinicum is transferred to Constantinople and the chronology is also confused, placing it after or parallel to the imperial massacre in Thessaloniki which should most probably be dated to the year 390 CE (see Thomas M. Banchich and Eugene N. Lane, trans. and notes, *The History of Zonaras* (London: Routledge, 2012), III 18,184–185, 268). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. On this issue, see the convincing arguments (based also on some earlier scholarly observations), by John H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, “Letters of Ambrose of Milan (374–397), Books I–X,” in *Collecting Early Christian Letters—From the Apostle Paul to Late Antiquity*,ed. Neil Bronwen and Allen Pauline (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 97–112; Gérard Nauroy, “The Letter Collection of Ambrose of Milan,” in *Late Antique Letter Collections: A Critical Introduction and Reference Guide*,ed. Cristiana Sogno, Bradley K. Storin, and Edward J. Watts (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 147–160; Kirsten Groß-Albenhausen, *Imperator christianissimus: Der christliche Kaiser bei Ambrosius und Johannes Chrysostomus* (Frankfurter Althistorische Beiträge 3) (Frankfurt am Main: Marthe Clauss, 1999), 99–112. The observation is based on the plausible presumption that the final paragraph or so (end of 32 and the whole of 33) carrying a threat to the emperor could not have possibly been in the original letter, see John H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, trans. and introd., *Ambrose of Milan: Political Letters and Speeches* (Translated Texts for Historians 43) (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005) 111 (nn. 1–2) (hereafter Ambrose, *Letters*), and was later added by Ambrose to stake out his position for posterity. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Neil B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Transformation of the Classical Heritage 28) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 300. Much has been written in the past century on the epistles of Ambrose to Theodosius and to his sister Marcellina—see among others, Hans F. von Campenhausen, *Ambrosius von Mailand als Kirchenpolitiker* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1929), 231–233; and more recently, CraccoRuggini, *Gli Ebrei*, 167–172. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 299–300. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 299–300, and n. 32. His reading of paragraph 9 of the epistle somewhat ignores the opening words of Ambrose: “yet let’s (assume)” (*esto tamen*) (Amb. *Ep*. 74 [40]. 9; ed. Zelzer, 6). which opens a lengthy chain of arguments hardly befitting a *fait accompli* situation, though we do admit it could well be used as a rhetorical ploy. However, the ensuing condensed attack on the chief protagonists of the event in Callinicum, namely the Jews, calls for further scrutiny. Ambrose’s letter to his sister, on the other hand, did in our view reflect the final stage of the drama. In it, Ambrose cites the emperor’s own admission that he “acted harshly” and that the whole matter (with the Bishop of Callinicum and perhaps with his accomplices too) was remedied (*sed emendatum est*); Ambrose, *Ep. ex. 1.* 27 (ed. Liebeschuetz, 112–123). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 302, 304. It would seem that Ambrose’s venomous attitude toward the Jews and Judaism was hardly based on first-hand acquaintance with them, but was rather founded on and exacerbated by his complete animosity toward Christian heresy and heretical groups (Arians et al.) with whom he had constant clashes and heated encounters. See the observations made by Maria Doerfler, “Ambrose’s Jews: The Creation of Judaism and Heterodox Christianity in Ambrose of Milan’s ‘Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam,’” *CH* 80, no. 4 (2011), 749–772. This might explain Ambrose’s attempt (as a sort of an innate trait) to weave together the two incidents with the Jews and the Valentinians respectively, in the course of his epistle to the emperor. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. We thus endorse and extrapolate from Lizzi Testa’s observations on Ambrose’s contemporary Chromatius of Aquileia and his attitude toward the Jews of his own city, see her recent study, Rita Lizzi Testa, “Jews and Christians in Northern Italy: Conflicts, Violences, Conversions, and Daily Coexistence,” in *Jews and Christians in Antiquity: A Regional Perspective* (Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion 18),ed. Pierluigi Lanfranchi and Joseph Verheyden (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 243–265 (261–265). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 301, 302; McLynn argues that the encounter reflected in the epistle was indeed a miscalculated clash of interests and ambitions of the two protagonists. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. On the political notion of *libertas*, including the notion of *clementia* as formulated here by Ambrose, see the important insights in the now-classic study by Chaim Wirszubski, *Libertas as a Political Idea at Rome during the Late Republic and Early Principate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 150–153. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Amb. *Ep*., 74 [40]. 14, 22, ed. Liebeschuetz, 102–103, 106; and in the sermon *Epistle ex*. 1, 2–3 (Liebeschuetz, 112–113; McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 305–307). On Hilary of Poitiers and his fellow bishops from the west and their invectives against Constantius II, see Richard Flower, *Emperors and Bishops in Late Roman Invective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). It is important to stress that the Roman world of political ideology which made possible the notion of *libertas* so carefully and succinctly described by Wirszubski, *Libertas*, underwent remodeling and reshaping into a Christian political worldview by thinkers such as Eusebius of Caesarea and his followers. Flower, however (*Emperors and Bishops*, 21), tends to somewhat qualify the possible conclusions to be drawn from the wave of invectives by contemporaries of Hilary of Poitiers (Lucifer of Cagliaris and others) on the general balance of power between emperor and Church and sees in these invectives: “rhetorical constructions created for particular polemical purposes, as stances adopted by their authors in response to unfavorable circumstances.”For other examples of *Parrhesia*, seeEdward Watts, “Introduction: Freedom of Speech and Self-Censorship in the Roman Empire,” *RBPH* 92:1 (2014), 157–166. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Like in Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* VII. 4.3 (Loeb Classical Library 126), ed. Harold E. Butler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Note the comments by Liebeschuetz, Ambrose, *Letters*, 103 n. 4: “All these places (Damascus, Gaza, Ascalon, Beirut, and Alexandria) were in an area in which paganism was long strong and where there was a strong anti-Christian reaction under Julian, but one led not by Jews but by pagans.” It is to be emphasized that in none of those instances Jews were mentioned as collaborators. More on that in Oded Irshai, “Jewish Violence in the Fourth Century CE—Fantasy and Reality: Behind the Scenes under the Emperors Gallus and Julian,” in *Jewish Identities in Antiquity: Studies in Memory of Menachem Stern*,ed. Lee I. Levine and Daniel R. Schwartz (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 391–416 (410–415). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Groß-Albenhausen, *Imperator Christianissimus*, 100; Gérard Nauroy, *Exégèse et création littéraire chez Ambroise de Milan: Ľexample du De Joseph patriarcha* (Collection des Études Augustiniennes, Série Antiquité 181) (Paris: Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, 2007), 346–347. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. The execution of Maximus near Aquileia should be dated to 28 August, rather than 28 July as postulated in the *Consularia Constantinopolitana* sub ann. 388 (*in miliario III ab Aquileia die V Kal. Aug.*); see Maria Becker et al., eds., *Consularia Constantinopolitana und verwandte Quellen* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2016), 50–51 (text–translation), 139 (commentary). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 298; Nauroy, *Exégèse*, 346–347 (ľautomne 388); Adolf Lippold, *Theodosius der Große und seine Zeit* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1968), 35 (winter 388/389, compare Liebeschuetz, *Ambrose of Milan*, 17 and 95), and again Lippold, s.v. Theodosius I, *PW*,Suppl. Bd. XIII, 1973, cols. 879–880, narrows down the possible dates of Ambrose’s letter to the emperor. He places it prior to 10 October 388 CE, when Theodosius, who was present in Aquileia during the better parts of the months of August and September (28.8—defeat of Maximus, and 22.9—annulment by law of Maximus’s actions (Cod.theod. XV 14.6)), arrived in Milan. This, however, contradicts Ambrose’s own claim that news of the incident in Callinicum came to his knowledge while he was in Aquileia, referring specifically to the initial order of the emperor sent out to the *comes Orientis* to rectify the situation, see Ambrose’s epistle to his sister Marcellina, *Ep. ex*.1. (41). 1, and Paulinus of Milan, *Life of Ambrose*,22. Ambrose most probably arrived in Aquileia quite soon after Theodosius’s arrival in Milan (hence a personal encounter on the matter at hand can be ruled out). Ambrose remained in Aquileia until after the consecration of Chromatius, most probably in early December of 388 CE, see Robert McEachnie, *Chromatius of Aquileia and the Making of a Christian City* (London: Routledge, 2017), 47–49. The letter was composed, according to McEachnie, only after initiatives by the bishop to cancel the punitive measures went unanswered. This points to a date of composition late in 388 or early 389 CE. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. We follow McLynn’s plausible ordering of events (*Ambrose of Milan*, 299–300). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. See Walter Scheidel, “The Shape of the Roman World: Modelling Imperial Connectivity,” *Journal of Roman Archeology* 27 (2014), 7–32, at 8, 17 (map). For the movement of legions at high speed between our two designated locations, one could estimate ca. 120 days (Scheidel, “Shape of the Roman World,” 24–25). For a different scale of travel time for individuals on foot or horseback, see R. W. Burgess, “The Summer of Blood: The ‘Great Massacre’ of 337 and the Promotion of the Sons of Constantine,” *DOP* 62 (2008), appendix 3, 5–51, at 49–50. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Contrary to the prevailing assumption there are reasons to contend that the incident with the Valentinians did not occur in Callinicum. On which see further below. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Emphasis added; compare (at 18): “What could a synagogue in a remote fortified settlement in the back of beyond possess, when all there is in the place is inconsiderable, and nothing is of value and little in quantity? (*Quid autem habere potuit synagoga* ***in castro ultimo****, cum totum quicquid illic est non multum sit,* ***nihil pretiosum, nihil copiosum****?*).” The latter claim might resonate with a later incident (see below). Concerning the torching of mansions of prefects in Rome, Ambrose might have been referring to the house of Symmachus’s father that burnt down ca. 375 CE, see Symmachus’s letters, 1.1–12 (Michele Salzman and Michael Roberts, eds. and trans., *The Letters of Symmachus: Book 1* (SBL: Atlanta, 2011), 1–34). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. “*In vicinia Euphratis Nicephorion*” (Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* VI.119.1(ed. and trans. William H. S. Jonesand Harris Rackham (London: Heinemann, 1989), 428–429). On Julian’s expedition, Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae*, XXIII 3, 7: “and on the following day [he] arrived at Callinicum, a strong fortress, and most welcome because of its rich trade (*Callinicum munimentum robustum et commercandi optimitate gratissimum*).” For a more comprehensive appraisal of Callinicum’s past and its development over the ages, see Murhaf al-Khalaf and Kay Kohlmeyer, “Untersuchungen zu ar-Raqqa—Nikephorion/Callinicum,” DamM 2 (1985), 133–162 (146–147) (ancient period and Late Antiquity). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Translation following *The Codex of Justinian* (A New Annotated Translation with Parallel Latin & Greek Text), ed. Bruce W. Frier et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 1056 (Latin text)—1057 (trans. and notes). The latter city’s (Artaxata’s) status was uncertain during the period after Jovian’s treaty with Persia, and it seems to have changed hands between the Sasanians and the Huns, on which see the remark by John Lydus, *De magistratibus* III 52 (on the latter’s reliability, see in brief Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 191–192). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. It is rather surprising that Callinicum with its Jewish community, however minute, did not merit an entry (only a passing mention) in the otherwise voluminous and detailed lexicon of place names by Aharon Oppenheimer, *Babylonia Judaica in the Talmudic Period* (Wiesbaden: L. Reichert, 1983). For that matter, it is important to note that only very few scholars studying Ambrose’s vehement letter have granted Callinicum and its importance more than a brief mention. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Doug A. Lee, *Information and Frontiers: Roman Foreign Relations in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 54 (with further bibliography). For more on the layout of the land and the matrix of trading and travel within the wider Syrian context, see Fergus Millar, “Caravan Cities: The Roman Near East and Long-Distance Trade by Land,” in *Modus Operandi: Essays in Honour of Geoffrey Rickman* (BICS Suppl. 71), ed. Jill Harries et al. (London: Institute of Classical Studies 1998), 119–137. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Dignas and Winter, *Rome and Persia*, 195–209 (with ample bibliography). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. See Oliver Nicholson, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), II, 1483, s.v. “Theodosius I ‘the Great.’” [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. On the major changes which that area underwent, see the succinct description by John H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, “The Impact of the Imposition of Roman Rule on Northern Syria,” in *The Impact of the Roman Army (200 BC–AD 476): Economic*, *Social*, *Political*, *Religious and Cultural Aspects*,ed. L. de Blois et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 433–437. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. *Expositio totius mundi et gentium*, 22 (Sources Chrétiennes 124), trans., intro., and notes Jean Rougé (Paris: Édition du Cerf, 1966), 156*–*157, for a reference on Mesopotamia and Osrhoene. See in more detail Mark W. Graham, *News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 112–115; Lee, *Information and Frontiers*, 62–63. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Unfortunately, apart from the testimony of Ambrose, nothing prior to the Middle Ages is known of the Jewish presence in Callinicum/a-Raqqa; see Miriam Fraenkel, “‘Al-Raqqa, Namely Kalne’—A Medieval Jewish Community in Aleppo’s Environs,” *Hispania Judaica* 11 (2015), 81–91 [Hebrew]. Any information on the local Jews must be extrapolated from observations of the region. On the religious and cultural makeup of the Jews of Syria during the later Roman period, in particular those living in the eastern regions, see the succinct and valuable appraisal by Fergus Millar, “Christian Emperors, Christian Church and the Jews of the Diaspora in the Greek East, 379–450,” *JJS* 55 (2004), 1–24; Fergus Millar, “A Rural Jewish Community in Late Roman Mesopotamia, and the Question of the ‘Split’ Jewish Diaspora,” JSJ 24 (2011), 1–24. in Millar, Empire, Church, and Society in the Late Roman Near East: Greeks, Jews, Syrians and Saracens (Collected Studies, 2004–2014) (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 505–525. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Hahn, *Gewalt und religiöser Konflikt*. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. On the latter, see Harold A. Drake, “Intolerance, Religious Violence, and Political Legitimacy in Late Antiquity,” *JAAR* 79 (2011), 193–235, 197–199. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. The translation here seems unsatisfactory: see Michael Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009), s.v. ܬܫܡܫܬܐ (holy implements), 1674. Note also the reference in the sixth-century legendary biography of the Syrian Archimandrite Barsauma, and the description of the synagogue of Rabbat*-*Moab and its holy implements; see Andrew Palmer, ed., *Vita Barsumae*, 38: 1–2; 42: 1–2; Andrew Palmer, *The Life of the Syrian Saint Barsauma: Eulogy of a Hero of the Resistance to the Council of Chalcedon* (Berkley: California University Press, 2020), 43–44. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* (Patrologia Orientalis XVII), ed. and trans. Ernest W. Brooks (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1923), 90–92 (emphasis added by the author; cited in part by Millar, *Empire*, 510). The story continues along the following lines: The Jews are unable to regain their synagogue, but in revenge burned down the huts in which the elder Simeon was living. The huts were then rebuilt by Sergius, and the Jews begin to build another synagogue which Sergius demolishes. Sergius then leaves the village, following which the emboldened Jews make another attempt to build a synagogue which Sergius’s followers burn down, and thus the Jews “desisted from building all the days of Sergius’ life” (at 92–93). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Moreover, one should not ignore the possibility that the narrative describing Sergius’s violent activities might share literary constructs and symbolism with other accounts. Note for instance the literary trope of the three-time fallen synagogue, which may have served here as an echo of the trail of destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, including the abortive plan of Julian the “Apostate” in the spring of 363 CE. At the same time, it might have been a play on a quite well-known trope prevalent in foundation legends, see for instance Cyril A. Mango et al. (eds. and trans.), *Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 476: AM 6135–AD 642/3. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Note the observation by Beat Brenk, in “Die Umwandlung der Synagoge von Apamea in eine Kirche,” in *Tesserae: Festschrift für Josef Engemann* (Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum. Ergänzungsband 18)(Münster: Aschendorff 1991), 16–17. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Apparently, there was a preference among the elites in the east to resolve the riots in their area without involving the Roman authorities (Kelly, “Riot,” at 166–167). [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Cod.theod.XVI 8. 18 (29 May 408) on burning an “effigy” of Hamman (on the festival of Purim); Socrates, *Hist. eccl.* VII 16 (from ca. 414) relates an incident in Inmestar (between Chalcis and Antioch) in which a festivity of the Jews got out of hand, leading to the scourging of a Christian boy. Note the clause attached to Cod.theod.XVI 8. 21 (from 420 CE), protecting the Jews and their synagogues but at the same time warning them against becoming insolent. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. According to Ambrose, the bishops are normally supposed, “to restrain the crowds and to be lovers of peace, except when they are themselves roused by some wrong done to God, or by an insult to the Church (*sacerdotes enim turbarum moderatores sunt, studiosi pacis,* ***nisi cum et ipsi moventur iniuria dei aut ecclesiae contumelia***)” (Amb., *Ep*. 74 [40]. 6, ed. Liebeschuetz, 99, emphasis added).The same could be adduced in regard to Sergius’s actions over a century later, and most probably in some other incidents of that kind, in all of which bishops found it difficult to tolerate the presence of a*noticeable* synagogue in the vicinity. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Paulinus of Milan, *Life of Ambrose*,22 (ed. Ramsey, 204)*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Moreover, as stated above (n. 25), it is quite doubtful whether both incidents occurred in Callinicum. As for the Christian celebration of the Maccabean Martyrs and its time of inception, see the discussion by Leonard V. Rutgers, *Making Myths: Jews in Early Christian Identity Formation* (Leuven: Peeters, 2009), 26–32, on the intricate way in which the Maccabean Martyrs were first drawn into and later venerated in the collective Christian memory and liturgy. It stands to reason that the incident with the Valentinians took place in Antioch or its vicinity. See Hahn, “Veneration of the Maccabean Brothers.” [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. On the normative religious–cultural world of the Kalesh community, see Millar, *Empire*, 513–514. In the same vein, the zealot monk Barsauma, when torching, in the company of his disciples, the Rabbat-Moab synagogue, deemed it necessary to burn all the synagogue’s possessions (furniture and holy vessels), as described in *Vita Barsumae*, 42: 1–2; ed. Palmer, 43–44. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. For instance, Amnon Linder, *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 189–191, at 189; Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 211; the possible source for this assertion might rest in a later historiographical conflation mentioned above and found in the chronicle of Johannes Zonaras, *Epit. Hist.* XIII 18 (Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae 3) ed. T. Büttner-Wobst (Bonn, 1897), 87–89. A similar story is recounted in Georgius Cedrenus, *Compendium Historiarum* I. 16–24,, ed. Immanuel Bekker (Bonn, 1838), 571–572. The episode described in Zonaras refers to the contention that arose between Theodosius I and Ambrose surrounding the burning down of the Synagogue in the Copper Market in Constantinople between 390 and 394, later traditions describing the ultimate conversion of the site. The possible conflation of the episodes within the historiographical tradition is more than plausible. For a detailed discussion concerning the Copper Market synagogue devoid of the above explicit assertion, see Alexander Panayotov, “The Synagogue in the Copper Market of Constantinople: A Note on the Christian Attitudes toward Jews in the Fifth Century,” *OCP* 68 (2002), 319–334. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. For a later fifth-century incident, see Panayotov, “Synagogue,” at 333. In between the two mentioned instances, we encounter a law (Cod.theod.XVI 8.25 from 15.2.423) promulgated by Theodosius II and addressed to Asclepiodotos (*PP Orientis*) prohibiting the indiscriminate confiscation or torching of synagogues and demanding compensation in land. This is a firm attestation that this course of action by Christians against their neighboring Jews was becoming more prevalent. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Ambrose, *Ep.* 74 (40).7, ed. Liebeschuetz, 99–100; McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 299–301. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Ambrose, *Ep.* 74 (40). 8. The very same sentiment concerning the synagogues being places where Christ is denied (*negarentur*) can be found in ample citations in sermons delivered by Ambrose’s contemporary fellow bishop and protégé, Chromatius of Aquileia (e.g. *Sermon* 32, 3). [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. The initial tradition attributing the torching of the Aquileian synagogue to Ambrose emanates from an early-modern chronicle from Aquileia (by Giovanni Candido, 1521). From the description, which includes the mention of a Valentinian edifice, one gets the impression that we might be facing a conflation with the events in Callinicum/Syria. However, on further consideration, the Aquileia incident might have some sort of early circumstantial corroboration in late fourth-century events. On the issue, see McEachnie, *Chromatius*, 112–113. For a thorough earlier appraisal of the sources, see the now-classic paper by Cracco Ruggini, *Gli Ebrei*, 197–202. For a more comprehensive treatment of the issue which leaves us with substantial doubt about the actual presence of a synagogue in Aquileia, see Lizzi Testa, “Jews.” [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Ambrose, *Ep.* 74 (40). 13, ed. Liebeschuetz, 101–102. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. These major shifts, devised in the years 386–394 CE and influenced if not orchestrated by Theodosius, manifested themselves in the famous, though problematic, administrative–military document, known as the *Notitia Dignitatum*, See Michael Kulikowski, “The ‘Notitia Dignitatum’ as a Historical Source,” *Historia* 49 (2000), 358–377. However ironic it might sound, given the newly created dividing line between eastern and western parts of the empire, Milan and Constantinople were situated at equal distances from the dividing administrative zones, see Scheidel, “Shape of the Roman World,” 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. On these developments and Theodosius’s role in defending the integrity of the empire in a kingdom ruled by young and inexperienced emperors, see Meaghan A. McEvoy, *Child Emperor Rule in the Late Roman West*, *AD 367–455* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 86–95. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Mark Hebblewhite, *The Emperor and the Army in the Later Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 2017), 20–22. See, however, there, 31 n. 73, for some dissenting views on Theodosius’s competence. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. This raises the question of whether the actual, operative legal definition here was in any way linked to the clauses of “crimes against the state,” that is according to the *lex Iulia maiestatis*; for more, see Callie Williamson, “Crimes against the State,” in *The* *Oxford Handbook of Roman Law and Society*, ed. Paul du Plessis et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 339–342.Concerning the intricate legal picture of the contemporary introduction of a set of laws protecting the synagogues and their property, and the historical context in which they developed between 393 and 423 and set into the *Codex Theodosianus*, see the careful treatment by Shira L. Lander, *Ritual Sites and Religious Rivalries in Late Roman North Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 223–229. Although the law of 393 CE was the first to defend the Jewish synagogues, the Callinicum affair should not be seen as its sole trigger. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Amb. *Ep*., 74 (40). 11, 23, ed. Liebeschuetz, 101, 106–107. Up until 409 CE in the wake of the Calama (North Africa) riot, where violence broke out between pagans and Christians, incidents such as in Callinicum were punishable by old, traditional property laws, like that in the *Constitutiones Sirmondianae*,14 (=Cod.theod. XVI 2. 31); afterward, it became punishable under a distinct clause of public crime against the church. On the Calama riot, see Hermanowicz, *Possidius of Calama*, 156–168. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Themistius, *Oration* 15 (185C) (see *Politics*, *Philosophy*, *and Empire in the Fourth Century: Selected Orations of Themistius*, trans. and intro. Peter Heatherand David Moncur (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), 237–238; 250–251). [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Cod.theod. XVI 8. 24 (10.3.418) issued in the West by Honorius and dispatched to Flavius Palladius (*PP Italiae*), and later, in a more explicit manner, in the third *novella* issued by Theodosius II in the course of implementing a general policy toward minorities, dispatched to Florentius (*PP Orientis*) on 31 January 438. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite,* 284–286., ed. and trans. Frank R. Trombley and John W. Watt (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 72–74. The incident in Tella was cited later with similar wording but in a shortened form in the *Chronicle of Zuqnīn*, II. 284 (Amir Harrak, *The Chronicle of Zuqnīn: Parts I and II. From the Creation to the Year 506/7 AD*, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2017, 414 (English)—415 (Syriac)). [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Amb. *Ep*. *ex*. 1 (41). 17, 18, ed. Liebeschuetz, 119. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Most probably subjected to at least some rabbinic influence via local or itinerant rabbis traveling between Persian Babylonia and Roman Palestine. This state of affairs has been well demonstrated by Millar, *Empire*, 505–526, esp. 521–524. See also Simcha Gross, *Babylonian Jews and Sasanian Imperialism in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024). [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. On this issue, see the appraisal by Gerard Rouwhorst, “Ritual Interactions between Jews and Christians East of Antioch,” in *Jews and Christians in Antiquity: A Regional Perspective* (Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion 18),ed. Pierluigi Lanfranchi and Joseph Verheyden (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 163–181. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Roger C. Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy: Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius* (Leeds: F. Cairns, 1992), 45; Roger C. Blockley, “Subsidies and Diplomacy: Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity,” *Phoenix* 39 (1985), 62–74; Geoffrey Greatrex and Samuel Lieu, N.C., *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars, Pt. 2, AD 363–532: A Narrative Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2002), 16–17. It is important to note that between the incident in Callinicum and the days of Kalesh a few more episodes of this kind might have taken place in the Syriac-speaking east. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Ambrose’s success in his *parrhesia*, or open discourse and frank grievance, with the emperor over Callinicum set the tone for the future, notably in the encounter following the Thessalonica massacre, which was conducted by Ambrose in an entirely different manner, despite addressing different and harsher circumstances for Theodosius and the Church; McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 315–330. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 302, a view reaffirmed recently by Lizzi Testa, “Jews,” 254. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Ambrose conceptualized this via the metaphor of the rod of the almond tree, as expressed in the course of the sermon he communicated to his sister, where he says: “We are all of us the body of Christ, of which God is the head... perhaps some people are the eyes, the prophets for instance; others the teeth” (Ambrose, *Ep. ex.* 1. 11, ed. Liebeschuetz 116–117). Ambrose’s role as a cleric entailed, in his view, the promotion of the notion that there was no place for the presence of heretics and Jews in the midst of the Christians (this view linked Ambrose with the later John of Ephesus); see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis: John of Ephesus and the Lives of the Eastern Saints* (Transformation of the Classical Heritage 18) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990),52. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Ambrose, *Ep.* 77 (Maur. 22)*.* See also Paulinus, *Life of Ambrose*,13–15; Augustine, *Confessions*,IX 7. 16; McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 209–219; Williams, *Ambrose*, 218–232; Lucy Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity* (London: Duckworth, 2004), 2–3; Shaw, *Sacred Violence*, 618–620. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)