Leadership, Charismatic Authority and Public Office:
Bishops in Late Antique Gaul
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The gradual replacement of civic institutions by the Episcopal office in the cities of 5th century Gaul is a well-known historical process, which as such does not meet any serious scholarly disagreement. Also with regard to the course of this transformation a broad consensus has been reached. In spite of occasional attempts to understand the bishops as semi-officials of the Roman state, taking over public functions of administration within a legal and institutional framework of the Empire (Heinzelmann 1988, Elm 2003), most scholars agree that the development of Gallic "Bischofsherrschaft" was not based on delegation but on appropriation by the bishops filling a power vacuum left by the weakening of Roman administrative structures.

Though this approach is in general convincing it rests on the problematic presupposition that at the beginning of the 5th century a clearcut model of "the bishop" was at hand, ready to take over administrative functions and social authority within the cities. Against this view it has to be stressed, that a certain image of the bishop first had to develop: Though the ecclesiastical office of "the bishop" was of course firmly rooted in the tradition of the first centuries, the moulding of this cultural model was open to competing conceptions. In recent years the German medievalist Bernhard Jussen rightly has stressed this aspect, interpreting the conflicts between Martin of Tours and the majority of the Gallic episcopate of his time as being caused by competing understandings of ascetic piety, which guaranteed Episcopal sanctity – the core of the bishop's authority: Whereas Martin displayed a humility in his dress and outward appearance incompatible with elite ideas of the dignity and authority of the Episcopal office, aristocratic bishops like Germanus of Auxerre were aiming at an ascetic *sanctitas* not detrimental to the social status of this group.

Taking up Jussen's line of argumentation one will agree on the fact that the shape of bishop's office was open to competition, but one has to stress that the contrast between humble and elite concepts of ascetic piety is highly misleading. Martin of Tours' memory was in fact propagated by a network of high aristocrats, including Sulpicius Severus, Paulinus of Nola and Melania the Elder. To label Martin as a "non-elite" model of ascetic sanctity therefore does not hit the point. With regard to divergent forms of Episcopal asceticism in 5th century Gaul it seems more convincing to distinguish not between low-born and aristocratic supporters but between different types of aristocracy: Whereas Martin's supporters were part of an international network of high-aristocrats consciously setting themselves apart from the aristocratic establishment and the patronage-structures of aristocratic society, the Gallic aristocrats, who from the 420ies onwards in growing numbers were occupying the Episcopal sees, show a more regional scope and a marked tendency towards integration into the traditional working of power-structures.

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