



A pagan philosopher in salvation history: Placing the Seneca-Paul correspondence in its fourth-century context

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A Pagan Philosopher in Salvation History

Placing the Seneca-Paul Correspondence in Its Fourth-Century Context

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For Jack

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Declaration Regarding the Work

I hereby certify that this thesis is all my own work and that I have not already obtained another degree at the University of Galway or any other institution on the basis of this work.

1 Introduction

1.1 The Creative Premise of the Seneca-Paul Correspondence

The Seneca-Paul correspondence comprises fourteen short letters exchanged between the Roman pagan philosopher Seneca and the apostle Paul in the years immediately preceding the two men's violent deaths in Rome at the hands of the same emperor. Though the authorship of the correspondence has been debated since the early-sixteenth century, there remain few points on which scholars agree.¹ However, it is generally accepted on the basis of the linguistic evidence that the letters were not authored by Paul and Seneca but by a Christian writer in the second half of the fourth century, with a firm *terminus ante quem* of 392.² In the more recent works of scholarship which mention or discuss the correspondence, it tends to be referred to as an “epistolary novel” or an “epistolary fiction.”³ However, this sets up false expectations about the flow and sequencing of the letters, which do not cohere in the manner of a fourteen-chapter novel, though some, like Letters 7 and 8, are clearly paired.⁴ Taken as a whole, the sequence of letters could more aptly be described as a series of possible glimpses of a protracted, illicit conversation between Paul and Seneca, which touches on a range of themes - literary, historical, political, theological - in densely worded bursts.

That a text about a hypothetical meeting between Paul and Seneca, “the two most famous first-century AD letter-writers”,⁵ should take the form of a letter exchange is hardly surprising, especially since Paul was believed to have composed letters to the church in Philippi and to his companion Timothy while he was preaching under house arrest in Rome.⁶ However, this dissertation argues that the Seneca-Paul correspondence takes on particular significance when read against the backdrop of the late-fourth-century Christian tradition of history-writing about

¹ See Hine 2017, pp. 27-8, pp. 32-3, pp. 41-3 and Nasrallah 2019, p. 246.

² Liénard 1932; Barlow 1938, pp. 70-9; Fürst 2006, pp. 6-10; Muir 2024, p. 32. 392 CE is the date of composition ascribed to Jerome's *De Viris Illustribus*, which may be the earliest source to reference the Seneca-Paul correspondence directly. For further discussion of this point, see Chapter 2 (§2.4-2.5).

³ Hilhorst 2004, p. 35; Glaser 2014, p. 253; Molina 2016, p. 178, p. 183; Nasrallah 2019, pp. 248-9; Jackson & Soldo 2023, pp. 5-6.

⁴ See Chapter 3 (§3.2).

⁵ Hilhorst 2004, p. 35.

⁶ Eastman 2011, p. 17.

Neronian Rome. The later part of Nero's reign loomed large in Late Antique Christian thinking about the apostolic generation as it was during these terminal years that Nero was believed to have created the first Christian martyrs and ended the lives of Christ's first and last apostles, Peter and Paul.⁷ Cumulatively, there is wide-ranging evidence to suggest that the late-fourth century was a historical moment in which it would have made particular sense to supplement the apocryphal tradition concerning Paul's religious teaching in Rome with a likely fiction about the apostle's relationship with a fellow teacher from the Roman pagan elite, whose execution at the hands of Nero was historically contiguous with Paul's own.

During this time, Christian writers operating in both the Latin West and Greek East conceived and propounded creative ideas about what had befallen Paul between his arrival in Rome, which was the point at which the Acts of the Apostles had broken off, and his execution on Nero's orders. While this dissertation primarily focuses on texts produced in the Latin-speaking West of the Roman Empire, the two examples discussed below will suffice to show that this late-fourth-century intensification of interest in the possibilities afforded by the gap left in Luke's narrative encompassed both halves of the Empire. The aim of this discussion is not to draw the reader's attention to instances where one text could conceivably have influenced another but rather to give the reader a sense of the wider tradition of creative engagement with the gap in Acts, to which the Seneca-Paul correspondence is just one contribution - albeit a particularly elaborate one.

By the late-fourth century composition date of the Rome-based exegete Marius Victorinus' commentary on Philippians, Paul's parting words to the church in Philippi had come to carry the meaning that the apostle had known and even succeeded in winning over members of Nero's inner circle while he was living in Rome (*Phil.* 4:22):⁸ Ἀσπάζονται ὑμᾶς πάντες οἱ ἅγιοι, μάλιστα δὲ οἱ ἐκ τῆς Καίσαρος οἰκίας “All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.”⁹ Marius Victorinus, a teacher of rhetoric and convert to Christianity who occupied the official professorship in rhetoric for the city of Rome before resigning his position during the reign of Julian (361-3 CE), produced the first Latin commentaries on Paul's letters.¹⁰

⁷ Eastman 2019, pp. 78-102; Malik 2020, pp. 79-126.

⁸ Eastman 2019, p. 92.

⁹ The Greek text of the New Testament used throughout this dissertation is from the Tyndale House Greek New Testament (Jongkind *et al.* 2017); all translations are from the ESV.

¹⁰ Cooper 2005, pp. 5-6, pp. 16-40.

It would appear that these commentaries, of which we now possess only three: on Paul's Epistles to the Galatians, Ephesians and Philippians, played a significant role in feeding the new wave of interest in Paul in the late-fourth-century Latin-speaking world as Victorinus was quickly succeeded by "no fewer than five other Latin authors who commented either on single epistles or on the whole series."¹¹

In his commentary on Philippians, Victorinus explains that the line, "All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household", signifies that (*Ad Philippenses* 4,22.4-7): *virtutem evangelii sui ostendit, quod de domo Caesaris crediderunt multi. Qui? Utique qui erecti esse debuerant et nihil aliud quam de Caesare cogitare* "Paul has revealed the power of his gospel because many men from the household of Caesar have believed. Which men? Those who had surely been under an obligation to be proud and to think about nothing but Caesar" (text from Gori 1986; my trans.). Victorinus goes on to suggest that Paul's use of the word "especially" might be interpreted as an indication that these men of Caesar's household were particularly diligent in obeying Paul's teachings (*Ad Philippenses* 4,22.9-11): *Quod autem dixit praecipue, intellegi licet illos operam dare ut placeant in obsequio et idcirco extra ceteros dixerit quod ipsi salutant Philippenses* "Because Paul also said 'especially', it is permissible for these men to be interpreted as making a great effort to find favour in obedience, and it is for this reason that Paul might have said that they greet the Philippians over and above the rest" (text from Gori 1986; my trans.). The didactic relationship between Paul and members of the imperial household which Victorinus tentatively infers from this line of Philippians is treated as a historical reality in other late-fourth-century depictions of Paul's time in Rome, most notably the Seneca-Paul correspondence and Psuedo-Linus' Latin *Martyrdom of the Blessed Apostle Paul*, as we will explore in detail in Chapters 2 and 3. For now, though, it is enough to note that Victorinus' commentary - the earliest Latin commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Philippians - already contains the germ of the idea on which the whole of the Seneca-Paul correspondence is premised: that Paul had diligent followers inside the imperial household, whom he taught to worship God instead of the emperor.

In a homily on the same Pauline epistle most likely delivered to a congregation in Antioch in the winter of 386 or 387,¹² John Chrysostom provides a

¹¹ Cooper 2005, pp. 3-8.

¹² Mitchell 2022, p. 554.

similarly creative response to the idea that Paul spent his time under house arrest teaching and composing letters (*Hom. Phil.* 1:18):

Καὶ καθάπερ βασιλεὺς ἐπὶ τὸν θρόνον ἀναβὰς ὑπὸ τὴν ἕω καὶ καθίσας ἐν ταῖς βασιλικαῖς αὐλαῖς, μυρίας εὐθέως δέχεται πανταχόθεν ἐπιστολάς· οὕτω δὴ κάκεινος, καθάπερ ἐν βασιλικαῖς αὐλαῖς τῷ δεσποτηρίῳ καθηήμενος, πολλῶ πλείω καὶ ἐδέχετο καὶ ἔπεμπε τὰ γράμματα, τῶν πανταχόθεν ἔθνῶν ἐπὶ τὴν ἐκείνου σοφίαν ὑπὲρ τῶν καθ' ἑαυτοὺς πραγμάτων ἀναφερόντων ἅπαντα· καὶ τοσοῦτω πλείονα πράγματα τοῦ βασιλεύοντος ᾠκονόμει, ὅσῳ καὶ μείζονα ἀρχὴν ἐμπεπίστευτο. Οὐ γὰρ δὴ τοὺς τὴν Ῥωμαίων οἰκοῦντας χώραν μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοὺς βαρβάρους ἅπαντας, καὶ γῆν καὶ θάλατταν φέρων εἰς τὰς ἐκείνου χεῖρας ἐνέθηκεν ὁ Θεός.

“An emperor ascends his throne at dawn and takes his seat in the imperial court, and then immediately receives a huge number of letters from all over the world. In the very same way, Paul, sitting in prison as though in the imperial court, all the more used to both receive and send letters, as the nations from all around would refer all the matters that concerned them to the attention of his wisdom. And Paul was entrusted with an even greater authority, inasmuch as the things over which he had administrative responsibility were much more wide-ranging than those of the ruling emperor. After all, God placed into his hands not only those who lived in the territory of the Romans, but even all the barbarians, both on land and at sea” (text and trans. from Mitchell 2022).

In this passage, Chrysostom retrospectively imagines the imprisoned Paul and his prisoner, the emperor Nero, as leading “parallel” epistolary lives in Rome,¹³ with each arising at the same early hour of the morning to respond to the reams of letters he has received overnight. The creative premise of the Seneca-Paul correspondence is simply that, one day, amongst these reams of letters from various ἔθνη, Paul comes upon a short note from the emperor’s advisor and former teacher, Seneca, describing his encounter with some followers of Paul’s teachings in the Gardens of Sallust the previous day (*ESP* 1.1-7).¹⁴ These disciples of Paul were only too happy to join

¹³ Mitchell 2022, p. 564.

¹⁴ The abbreviation *ESP* will be used as a citational shorthand for the Seneca-Paul correspondence (*Epistulae Senecae ad Paulum et Pauli ad Senecam*) throughout this dissertation.

Seneca and his friend, Lucilius, in the Gardens to puzzle over (*ESP* 1.2-5): *apocrifis et aliis rebus* “the secret mysteries and other things” with them (text from Bocciolini Palagi 1985; my trans.). However, what most excited Seneca and Lucilius about this display was not the theological exposition offered by Paul’s followers but Paul’s letters themselves, which Seneca and Lucilius read with rapt attention, and whose profound moral wisdom and clarity of expression have occupied Seneca’s mind ever since (*ESP* 1.8-16):

Certe quod tui praesentiam optavimus, et hoc scias volo: libello tuo lecto, id est de pluribus aliquas litteras quas ad aliquam civitatem seu caput provinciae direxisti mira exhortatione vitam moralem continentis, usquequaque refecti sumus. Quos sensus non puto ex te dictos, sed per te, certe aliquando ex te et per te. Tanta enim maiestas earum est rerum tantaque generositate clarent, ut vix suffecturas putem aetates hominum quae his institui perficique possint. Bene te valere, frater, cupio.

“We certainly wished for your presence, and I want you to know this: after we had read your little book, that is, some of the many letters which you have directed to some city or other, or to the capital of a province, containing wondrous encouragement to live an ethical life, we were completely revived. I do not think these ideas were expressed by you, but through you, and certainly, at times, both by you and through you. For the grandeur of these things is so great, and they shed light with such nobility, that I think human lifetimes will barely suffice for people to be trained and perfected in these things. I wish you well, brother” (text from Bocciolini Palagi 1985; my trans.).

The Pauline epistles thus provide the impetus for the entire epistolary exchange between Paul and Seneca, since it is as a result of reading them that Seneca first writes to the apostle. The presence of Seneca’s friend, Lucilius, to whom the real Seneca addressed his *Epistulae Morales*, in the Gardens of Sallust simultaneously signals the author’s familiarity with the Senecan letter-writing tradition, though, in light of the fact that the rest of the correspondence “is almost devoid of explicit allusions to Seneca’s works”,¹⁵ it seems safest not to assume direct and detailed knowledge of Seneca’s letters to Lucilius on the author’s part. In the same letter,

¹⁵ Soldo 2023, p. 167. See also Torre 2015, p. 267.

Seneca expresses the wish that Paul had been there with him in the Gardens of Sallust (*ESP* 1.8): *Certe quod tui praesentiam optavimus* “We certainly wished for your presence.” Meetings in gardens often lead to philosophical discussion in Latin literature, particularly in the dialogues of Cicero,¹⁶ but as Paul is not present in the Gardens with Seneca, the text must take the form of a letter exchange instead. That Paul cannot move freely through the city because he is under house arrest is never made explicit in the correspondence, but this is likely how a reader familiar with the final chapter of the Acts of the Apostles would have understood the absence of Paul, since Luke describes him in Acts 28:16 as living under guard: Ὅτε δὲ εἰσῆλθομεν εἰς Ῥώμην, ἐπετρέπη τῷ Παύλῳ μένειν καθ’ ἑαυτὸν σὺν τῷ φυλάσσοντι αὐτὸν στρατιώτῃ “And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.”

The third-/fourth-century Christian apologist Lactantius, whose interest in and sensitivity to Seneca’s Stoicism mark him out as unusual among early Christian writers,¹⁷ provides us with a further blueprint for and window into the creative premise of the Seneca-Paul correspondence in his early-fourth-century *Divinae Institutiones*, “the most comprehensive defence and exposition of Christianity produced in Latin prior to Augustine’s *De ciuitate dei*.”¹⁸ In Book 6 of the *Divinae Institutiones*, Lactantius suggests that Seneca had come as close to knowledge of the Christian God as any pagan could have without being taught, and even contemplates what it would have taken for Seneca to renounce his Stoic worldview and become a true follower of God. This vision of how Seneca could have been converted, had he found the right people to guide him, arises in the context of a discussion about sin, repentance, and the omniscience of God. Lactantius adduces passages from Cicero’s *De Officiis* and *In Verrem*, Vergil’s *Aeneid*, and Seneca’s *Exhortationes* in support of the argument that, while those who repent will be forgiven, no one can hide their sins from God (*Div. Inst.* 6.24.15-6):

parietibus oculi hominum submoventur, dei autem diuinitas nec uisceribus submoueri potest, quominus totum hominem perspiciat et norit

¹⁶ Bocciolini Palagi 1985, p. 75; Myers 2018, pp. 263-4.

¹⁷ Torre 2015, p. 268.

¹⁸ Gassman 2020, p. 19.

“Humans’ eyes are stopped by the walls of houses, but the divine nature of God cannot even be stopped by internal organs from looking into and knowing every part of a man” (text from Brandt 1890; my trans.).

But it is specifically the last line of Seneca’s *Exhortationes* which impels Lactantius to imagine how Seneca could have been converted, had history afforded him the benefit of religious instruction (*Div. Inst.* 6.24.12-3):

Magnum - inquit - nescio quid maiusque quam cogitari potest numen est, cui vivendo operam damus. Huic nos adprobemus. Nihil prodest inclusam esse conscientiam: patemus deo. quid uerius dici potuit ab eo qui deum nosset quam dictum est ab homine uerae religionis ignaro?

“‘There is a great divine power’ - he [Seneca] said - ‘of which I am ignorant because it is greater than can be imagined, and we devote ourselves to living for it. Let us prove ourselves to it. It is useless for our knowledge to be closed: let us be open to the god.’ What truer thing could have been said by a man who had become acquainted with God than what has been said here by a man ignorant of the true religion?” (text from Brandt 1890; my trans.).

This is how Lactantius positions Seneca: as both *ex Romanis uel acerrimus Stoicus* “the very sharpest Stoic among the Romans”¹⁹ (1.5.26) and “an abeyant-Christian”,²⁰ who could be shown, as Lactantius writes in 1.5.28, *attigisse ueritatem ac paene tenuisse* “to have touched the truth and almost grasped it” (text from Brandt 1890; my trans.). The openness of Seneca’s language in this extract from the *Exhortationes* allows Lactantius to argue that, despite not having fully grasped the truth, Seneca was able to express it as well as any Christian: “Let us prove ourselves to it” and “let us be open to the god” can just as easily be rendered “Let us prove ourselves to Him” and “let us be open to God.” Spurred on by this passage, Lactantius goes so far as to claim that Seneca could have come to recognise Christianity as the true religion if someone had been there to guide him (*Div. Inst.* 6.24.14):

¹⁹ See also *Divinae Institutiones* 2.8.23: *Seneca omnium Stoicorum acutissimus* “Seneca, most discerning of all the Stoics” (text from Brandt 1890; my trans.).

²⁰ Hansen 2018, p. 549.

potuit esse uerus dei cultor, si quis illi monstrasset, ut contempsisset profecto Zenonem et magistrum suum Sotionem, si uerae sapientiae ducem nactus esset (text from Brandt 1980).

It will be useful to discuss this passage before I offer a translation as a number of points need to be clarified. In Lactantius' vision of it, Seneca's conversion seems to take the form of a two-stage process.²¹ Lactantius suggests that, in the first instance, Seneca would have needed someone to teach him about the Christian God. This first stage would have resulted in his realising the error of Zeno's and Sotion's teachings. Having rejected the false wisdom of Zeno and Sotion, Seneca would then have needed to find a guide to lead him to true wisdom. The relationship between the two *si*-clauses is not clear cut, but it would appear that Lactantius is envisaging two different people when he says that Seneca would have needed someone to show him how to worship God, and then, once he had renounced Zeno and Sotion, someone to lead him to true wisdom; in which case, we would be justified in supplying the word "and" before the second *si*-clause: "and if he had come upon one to lead him to true wisdom." Accordingly, our translation would read:

"[Seneca] could have been a true worshipper of God, if someone had shown him, such that he would surely have repudiated Zeno and his own teacher Sotion; and if he had come upon one to lead him to true wisdom" (text from Brandt 1890; my trans.).

The parallelism between Lactantius' view of Seneca as a philosopher whose Stoicism had brought him particularly close to an understanding of the Christian God with the view of Seneca projected by the author of the Seneca-Paul correspondence is striking without necessarily indicating direct influence. It is enough to say that at the beginning of the fourth century Lactantius was looking at Seneca in a markedly similar light to the author of the Seneca-Paul correspondence and marvelling at just how close Seneca had come to the truth, and wondering what more he could have become if only he had found the right teacher.

²¹ For a comparable but by no means identical pattern of conversion, see Eusebius' account of Constantine's progression from repudiation of the pagan gods toward the active pursuit of Christian instruction (*Vita Constantini* 1.27-32).

1.2 Modern Critical Editions of and Scholarly Literature on the Seneca-Paul Correspondence

There are two modern critical editions of the Seneca-Paul correspondence: Barlow 1938, which is written in English and includes an introduction to and full translation of the text as well as a detailed analysis of its ninth-to-eleventh-century manuscript transmission, and Bocciolini Palagi 1985, which is written in Italian and includes an introduction to and full translation of the text as well as extensive commentary on each of the fourteen letters into which it is divided. A noticeable trend in modern scholarship on the correspondence, which really only consists of a handful of works, is that analysis of the form and style of the letters, often with reference to the principles of ancient epistolary theory, tends to take precedence over analysis of the letters' contents.²² In the English-language scholarship, in particular, there is a marked overreliance on Claude W. Barlow's negatively skewed introduction to and loose translation of the text (1938).²³

This is unfortunate as Laura Bocciolini Palagi, the author of the most recent critical edition of the correspondence (1985), has since made a cogent case against Barlow's hypothesis that the Seneca-Paul letters originated as a school exercise assigned to a student of rhetoric at an early stage of his education.²⁴ Conversely, Bocciolini Palagi expresses the view that the Seneca-Paul correspondence, far from being a simple school exercise, constitutes a polemically rich work which displays a strong connection with the reality of the fourth-century cultural and historical context in which it was produced.²⁵ Her introduction to and extensive commentary on the correspondence represent the first attempt to make sense of the contents of the letters by reading them in the light of fourth-century Christian theological and historical thought. Why should this kind of approach be underrepresented in modern scholarship on the correspondence? Because it implicitly recognises Paul as the protagonist or main focus of the letters, something which classicists eager to interpret the text as being about the Late Antique reception of Seneca's works are reluctant to do.²⁶

²² See, for example, Fürst 1998, Malherbe 2014, and Reydams-Schils 2022.

²³ See, for example, Ehrman 2013, p. 80, p. 121, p. 958; Hen 2016; and Soldo 2023, p. 163, p. 166.

²⁴ Barlow 1938, p. 48, p. 74, pp. 91-2.

²⁵ 1985, pp. 11-6.

²⁶ See especially Smolak 2010, pp. 226-30 and Soldo 2023.

1.3 Research Questions

Following on from the work of Bocciolini Palagi, this dissertation seeks to answer the question: what can the Seneca-Paul correspondence's hypothesised late-fourth-century date of composition tell us about the nature of this enigmatic work, which is partly imaginative, partly historiographical and partly apocryphal? In particular, it interrogates what the late-fourth-century context in which the correspondence was written can tell us about the issues it raises, the historical assumptions it makes, the themes it foregrounds, and why it draws a connection between Paul and Seneca in the first place. It also seeks to answer the question: how does the Seneca-Paul correspondence compare to other fourth-century Christian texts which take equally seriously the significance of the overlap between Paul's Roman mission and the calamitous events of Nero's later reign, particularly those texts composed in the second half of the fourth century?

2 The Deaths of Paul and Seneca and the Great Fire of Rome in Fourth-Century Historiography and Eschatology

2.1 Introduction

The fourth century was a time of historiographical reckoning, in which Roman Christian historians like Eusebius and Jerome undertook the prodigious labour of integrating Judaeo-Christian and Roman history into a single historiographical unit, in which the fundamental fact was the incarnation and resurrection of Christ. In undertaking to map the providential course of world history from Abraham to Constantine, however, these early Christian historians had to grapple with a “nexus of questions” about what it meant to be both Roman and Christian in an age in which Christianity was “becoming no longer an illicit religion of alienated resistance, and when Paul’s promise of the imminent end of things” was “continuously delayed.”²⁷

This chapter focuses on synchronicity, the idea that particular events were providentially engineered to unfold simultaneously or in close succession,²⁸ as a tool which fourth-century Christian historians used to understand how Nero’s reign fit into the grand scheme of salvation history. In particular, it examines how fourth-century Christian writers - principally Jerome and Pseudo-Linus - reimagined the causal and temporal links between the four events which form the backdrop to the Seneca-Paul correspondence, namely the Great Fire of Rome, the first Christian persecution, the execution of Seneca and three other prominent members of his family, and the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul. It also explores how fourth-century Christian writers conceived of the temporal overlap between the lives of Paul and

²⁷ Goldhill 2022, p. 155.

²⁸ For the significance of synchronicity in early Christian historiography, see Goldhill 2022, pp. 132-55. Chiara Torre specifically emphasises the importance of synchronicity in the Christian reception of Seneca: “Yet Seneca’s reception among Christians was not necessarily tied up with ideological involvement. Of greater relevance is the crucial historical and geographical overlap among three key figures at the height of their careers, all of whom became martyrs under Nero: Seneca (Nero’s counselor), Peter (Christ’s heir), and Paul (the Pagans’ Apostle). This synchronicity was a hugely significant factor in making Seneca an icon in the Christian tradition, and it had little to do with a straightforward ideological investment in or agreement with Senecan thought [...] The pseudo-correspondence with St. Paul as well as other texts (see, for example, Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 6.24.13-14; Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 12) rather suggests that Seneca is regarded more as a historical and political figure than as a philosopher and thinker. In the absence of clear evidence to this effect, we should be careful to assume that the Fathers were inclined to draw substantially from Seneca’s works and thought” (2015, p. 267).

Seneca, what significance they drew from the perceived similarities between the two men's executions, and how they interpreted the relationship between Paul and the imperial court.

The chapter itself is divided into four parts. The first discusses the biblical connection between Paul and Seneca's brother, Gallio. The second introduces the reader to the mechanics and survival picture of Eusebius's *Chronicle*. The third compares Jerome's Senecan additions to Eusebius' world history with related passages from the histories of Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio, and the Seneca-Paul correspondence, before going on to consider Jerome's synchronisation of the deaths of Paul and Seneca in his *De Viris Illustribus*. Finally, the fourth explores how Pseudo-Linus' Latin *Martyrdom of the Blessed Apostle Paul* reinterprets the Great Fire of Rome and Nero's perpetration of the first Christian persecution in the light of Christian eschatology. The aims of this chapter are 1) to form a clearer picture of the wider historiographical context in which the Seneca-Paul correspondence was produced and 2) to show how the correspondence fits into a wider fourth-century Christian narrative about the historical and spiritual significance of the final years of Nero's reign.

2.2 The Meeting Between Paul and Seneca's Brother, Gallio, in the Acts of the Apostles

The Seneca-Paul correspondence, as has often been noted, “unfold[s] a historical possibility” which is already latent in the Acts of the Apostles.²⁹ In Acts 18:12-6, Paul and Seneca's older brother, Gallio, incidentally encounter one another under particularly fraught circumstances in Corinth, the capital of the Roman province of Achaia, which, at the precise time of Paul's visit, was under Gallio's jurisdiction:

Γαλλίωνος δὲ ἀνθυπάτου ὄντος τῆς Ἀχαΐας κατεπέστησαν ὁμοθυμαδὸν οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι τῷ Παύλῳ καὶ ἤγαγον αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τὸ βῆμα, λέγοντες ὅτι παρὰ τὸν νόμον ἀναπειθῆι οὗτος τοὺς ἀνθρώπους σέβεσθαι τὸν θεόν. Μέλλοντος δὲ τοῦ Παύλου ἀνοίγειν τὸ στόμα εἶπεν ὁ Γαλλίων πρὸς τοὺς Ἰουδαίους· εἰ μὲν ἦν ἀδίκημά τι ἢ ραδιούργημα πονηρόν, ὃ Ἰουδαῖοι, κατὰ λόγον ἂν ἀνεσχόμεν ὑμῶν· εἰ δὲ ζητήματά ἐστιν περὶ

²⁹ Nasrallah 2019, p. 246.

λόγου καὶ ὀνομάτων καὶ νόμου τοῦ καθ' ὑμᾶς, ὄψεσθε αὐτοί· κριτὴς ἐγὼ τούτων οὐ βούλομαι εἶναι. καὶ ἀπήλασεν αὐτοὺς ἀπὸ τοῦ βήματος.

“But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, saying, ‘This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.’ But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, ‘If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things.’ And he drove them from the tribunal.”

At the beginning of Acts 18, Paul journeys to Corinth and stays in the home of a Jewish man named Aquila, who has recently emigrated from Rome in the wake of an edict issued by the emperor Claudius ordering the expulsion of all the city’s Jews. Bolstered by a vision from God, Paul preaches in Corinth for eighteen months, though his message is poorly received by the city’s Jewish population (Acts 18:4-11). Then, as we have seen, in Acts 18:12-6, a group of Corinthian Jews attempts to bring Paul’s legal status into question by accusing him of practising a different religion before the judgement seat of Gallio,³⁰ who served as proconsul of the Roman province of Achaia from 51 to 52 CE.³¹ However, Gallio sees the group’s “vague” accusation of heterodoxy against Paul for what is and summarily dismisses the charge.³²

Luke’s portrayal of the two men as moving in concentric circles in the Empire at one and the same time is important for our study as it, firstly, roots Paul’s mission in a particular historical context, one which could be easily cross-referenced with the accounts of Claudius’ and Nero’s reigns given by Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio, and, secondly, establishes a water-tight canonical connection between the apostle and the *gens Annaea*. As we will explore in the following sections, this historical overlap between the life of Paul and the lives of Seneca and his brothers is reinforced and played up by Jerome in his Latin “translation, augmentation, and

³⁰ Martin 2006, p. 227.

³¹ For the dating and historicity of 1) Gallio’s proconsulship and 2) Claudius’ expulsion of Jews from Rome, see Eastman 2013, pp. 46-9.

³² For the difficulties of deciphering the precise nature of the charge against Paul, see Yoder 2014, pp. 258-65.

continuation”³³ of Eusebius’ *Canones*. Jerome seems to be the only early Christian writer to highlight the family connection between Gallio and Seneca. Whether or not he also recognised that Luke’s Gallio and Seneca’s brother, Gallio, were one in the same is unclear. The lack of explicit reference to Gallio’s dual identity as brother of Seneca and arbiter of the Corinthian Jews’ case against Paul could be taken two ways: as evidence that the connection was unknown to Jerome and his contemporaries, or as evidence that it was common knowledge.

What has not hitherto been noticed about Jerome’s adaptation of the Neronian part of the *Canones*, however, is that it incorporates the fall of the *gens Annaea* into the span of time Eusebius had reserved for the Great Fire of Rome, the first persecution and the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul, with the result that several catastrophes - the Great Fire, the first persecution, the executions of Seneca, his nephew and two brothers, and the executions of Peter and Paul, all perpetrated by the same emperor - are telescoped into a small chunk of time and recast as contiguous events. But before we can examine Jerome’s Neronian additions to the *Canones*, we must first come to grips with the complicated survival picture and intricate nature of the work itself.

2.3 An Introduction to Eusebius’ *Chronicle* and Jerome’s Latin Adaptation of the Second Book

Our knowledge of what the original Eusebian *Canones* contained is uneven and approximate as the text only survives through the intermediary agency of later authors: in adapted form in Latin and Armenian, in abbreviated form in Syriac, and as fragments in later Greek histories.³⁴ The *Canones* is the second volume of a two-part historical work by Eusebius called the *Chronicle*. The *Chronicle* traces the history of the world from the birth of Abraham to the reign of Constantine.³⁵ By

³³ Burgess 2002, p. 1.

³⁴ Burgess 2002, p. 8. However, parts of the *Chronographia*, the first book of the *Chronicle*, do survive in the original Greek, and much of it has also been preserved in Armenian translation (Burgess & Kulikowski 2013, p. 126). In the *Chronographia*, Eusebius sets out the research of previous historians on the various dynastic histories he will go on to map along two axes, “kingdom and time”, in the second book (Burgess & Kulikowski 2013, pp. 123-4). Unlike the Hebrew column in the *Canones*, which begins with the birth of Abraham, the Hebrew section of the *Chronographia* brings the reader all the way back to God’s banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (Grafton & Williams 2008, p. 153).

³⁵ Burgess & Kulikowski 2013, p. 124.

beginning with Abraham, whom Eusebius argues should be regarded as the first Christian in his *Ecclesiastical History* (1.4.4-15),³⁶ the *Chronicle* frames itself less as a tabulation of historical events than as “a chronology of the acceptance of Christ among men, a system with a clear apologetic value for a group striving to convince the pagan world of its antiquity.”³⁷

In the *Canones*, Eusebius uses a parallel columnar format to document the providential rise and fall of the kings of different nations and highlight “key moments” of historical synchronicity, with the goal of demonstrating “the superiority of Judaeo-Christian antiquity.”³⁸ As all the world’s rulers are eclipsed by the power of the Roman emperors, their nations’ histories, represented on the manuscript page in columnar form, are absorbed into “one long, packed column devoted only to Rome.”³⁹ Eusebius would use the same columnar format to highlight parallels and connections, this time of a textual nature, in his famous Canon Tables of the gospels.⁴⁰

Jerome’s continuation and expansion of the *Canones*, completed c. 380, augmented the Romanness of Eusebius’ history by incorporating further biographical information about Latin authors, most likely adapted from the *De Viris Illustribus* of the Roman pagan biographer Suetonius.⁴¹ Jerome also added extra snippets of Roman historical information not present in the original,⁴² though, as R. W. Burgess notes, the complicated nature of the *Canones*’ survival has caused scholars to underestimate the extent of Jerome’s adaptation and to mistake his additions for Eusebius’ original entries.⁴³ Jerome himself explains why he has chosen to supplement the Roman strand of Eusebius’ history in his preface:

Sciendum etenim est me et interpretis et scriptoris ex parte officio usum, quia et Graeca fidelissime expressi et nonnulla, quae mihi intermissa uidebantur, adieci, in Romana maxime historia, quam Eusebius huius conditor libri non tam ignorasse ut

³⁶ See Humphries 1999, p. 211 and Bay 2023, p. 121.

³⁷ Burgess & Kulikowski 2013, p. 125.

³⁸ Goldhill 2022, p. 148. See also Grafton & Williams 2008, p. 143 and Burgess & Kulikowski 2013, pp. 122-4.

³⁹ Grafton & Williams 2008, p. 141.

⁴⁰ See Crawford 2019, pp. 1-6.

⁴¹ Vessey 2015, pp. 29-30; Vessey 2021, pp. 170-1.

⁴² Humphries 2019, p. 88.

⁴³ 2002, pp. 24-7. Burgess states near the beginning of his article: “It is clear that where Jerome’s *Chronicle* is concerned fear and confusion reign supreme, for philologists and historians alike” (2002, p. 6).

eruditus, sed ut Graece scribens parum suis necessariam perstrinxisse mihi uidetur. Itaque a Nino et Abraham usque ad Troiae captiuitatem pura Graeca translatio est. A Troia usque ad uicesimum Constantini annum nunc addita, nunc admixta sunt plurima, quae de Tranquillo et ceteris inlustribus historicis curiosissime excerpsi.

“As a matter of fact, you should know that I have served as both translator and, to some extent, author, since I have translated the Greek very faithfully and I have added quite a number of items that I felt had been omitted, especially with regard to Roman history. It seems to me that Eusebius, the author of this book, was not so much unacquainted with Roman history, since he was a well-educated man, but that he treated it cursorily because it was less important for his readers, since he was writing in Greek. Therefore, from Ninus and Abraham down to the capture of Troy is straight translation from the Greek. From Troy down to the twentieth year of Constantine I have added many new entries and augmented many existing entries using material that I have most carefully excerpted from Tranquillus [i.e. Suetonius] and other famous historians” (text from Helm 1956; trans. from Burgess 2002).

By examining how Jerome has chosen to supplement Eusebius’ account of the final years of Nero’s reign, we can gain an insight into how the story of Nero’s execution of Seneca and purging of other members of Seneca’s family became integrated with the story of the first persecution and Nero’s execution of the apostles Peter and Paul. The apostles’ deaths and the first persecution were always part of Eusebius’ history, while the deaths of Seneca, his nephew and two brothers were added in by Jerome. The aim of this examination is not to determine whether or not Jerome’s Latin adaptation of the *Canones* directly influenced the Seneca-Paul correspondence, but to better understand the tradition of fourth-century Christian history-writing of which the Seneca-Paul correspondence is a part, and to gain a sense of the wider historiographical context in which it was produced.

2.4 The Great Fire of Rome, First Persecution, and Execution of Seneca’s Family in Jerome’s Additions to the *Canones*

If we examine the additions which Jerome has made to the period of Nero's reign from the Pisonian conspiracy to the deaths of Peter and Paul, it emerges that most of the new entries concern the executions by suicide, or fatal actions, of members of Seneca's family. At the end of the ninth year of Nero's reign, Jerome has added a note on the forced suicide of Seneca's nephew, the poet Lucan, who was executed for his part in Gaius Calpurnius Piso's failed scheme to assassinate Nero:⁴⁴

*M. Annaeus Lucanus Cordubensis poeta in Pisoniana coniuratione deprehensus
bracchium ad secandas uenas medico praebuit.*

“The poet M. Annaeus Lucanus of Corduba, having been discovered in the Pisonian conspiracy, offered his arm to the physician for the veins to be cut” (text from Helm 1956; my trans.).

The next entry in the chronological sequence concerns the Great Fire of Rome. This entry comes at the beginning of the tenth year of Nero's reign:⁴⁵

*Nero, ut similitudinem Troiae ardentis inspiceret, plurimam partem Romanae urbis
incendit.*

“Nero, in order that he might look upon a likeness of the burning of Troy, set a great part of the city of Rome on fire” (text from Helm 1956; my trans.).

Helm has marked this entry as an adaptation rather than an addition,⁴⁶ though Jerome's version seems to differ significantly from Eusebius', which, in this case, can thankfully be reconstructed on the basis of the surviving testimonia. The version of Eusebius' entry quoted by the Byzantine historian George Syncellus in his ninth-century world chronicle, the *Ecloga Chronographica*, is noticeably shorter and less specific than Jerome's:⁴⁷ Ἐμπρησμοὶ γεγονάσι πολλοὶ ἐν Ῥώμῃ “Many

⁴⁴ Helm 1956, p. 183f.14-7. All citations of Jerome's *Canones* in this section follow the citation method described in Burgess 2002, p. 16.

⁴⁵ Helm 1956, p. 183g.18-20.

⁴⁶ 1956, p. 183. For the layout, abbreviations and system of symbols used in Helm 1956, see Burgess 2002, pp. 10-15, pp. 24-5.

⁴⁷ Mosshammer 1984, p. 410 (636.3). Rudolf Helm also quotes the passage from Syncellus in conjunction with Jerome's entry on the fire (1956, p. 404).

conflagrations happened in Rome” (text from Mosshammer 1984; my trans.).⁴⁸

Similarly, in Karst’s German translation of the Armenian reworking of the *Canones*, the entry in question reads: *Feuersbrünste geschahen zahlreich zu Rom* “Numerous conflagrations happened in Rome” (my English trans.).⁴⁹

Jerome’s entry, unlike Eusebius’, draws a parallel between the Great Fire of Rome and the burning of Troy, a parallel which is also found in the accounts of the fire given by Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio. In those accounts, Nero sings about the burning of Troy from a rooftop, tower or raised platform as he watches Rome burn (Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.39; Suetonius, *Ner.* 38; Cassius Dio 62.18). While Suetonius and Cassius Dio charge Nero and his agents with deliberately setting the city on fire (*Ner.* 38; Cassius Dio 62.16), Tacitus prefaces his account of the calamity with the proviso that it remains unknown whether the fire broke out accidentally or was ignited on the emperor’s orders (*Ann.* 15.38): *nam utrumque auctores prodidere* “as both [stories] have generated supporters” (text from Jackson 1937; my trans.).

In Jerome’s entry, the story of how Nero started the conflagration and the story of how he sang Troy’s downfall during the conflagration have become elided: Nero’s fascination with the burning of Troy is now what drives him to set his own city on fire. This sinister reformulation of the relationship between Nero’s suspected arsonist streak and his notorious affinity for drama, performance, and the poetry of Homer, in particular,⁵⁰ became entrenched in the Latin chronicle tradition, as can be seen from its inclusion in the chronicles and histories of many later Christian authors, including Prosper of Aquitaine, Cassiodorus, Isidore, Orosius, Jordanes and Marianus Scottus.⁵¹ The idea that Nero ordered the destruction of parts of his own city out of a desire to reenact the destruction of Troy, rather than for a practical reason such as the acquisition of more land as Suetonius claims (*Ner.* 38), finds a possible model in Cassius Dio’s account of how the fire began, though the likeness is far from exact (62.16):

⁴⁸ For Syncellus’ chronicle as a monumental work and major scholarly achievement in its own right, see Ševčenko 1992 and Adler & Tuffin 2002, pp. xxix-lxxv.

⁴⁹ Karst 1911, p. 215. Helm also quotes Karst’s German translation of the Armenian in the apparatus criticus associated with Jerome’s entry on the fire (1956, p. 183).

⁵⁰ See, for example, Suetonius, *Nero* 21 and *Nero* 47.

⁵¹ Helm 1956, 183.

Μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα ἐπεθύμησεν ὅπερ πού αἰεὶ ἤχγετο, τὴν τε πόλιν ὅλην καὶ τὴν βασιλείαν ζῶν ἀναλῶσαι· τὸν γοῦν Πρίαμον καὶ αὐτὸς θαυμαστῶς ἐμακάριζεν³ ὅτι καὶ τὴν πατρίδα ἅμα καὶ τὴν ἀρχὴν ἀπολομένας εἶδεν.

“After this Nero set his heart on accomplishing what had doubtless always been his desire, namely to make an end of the whole city and realm during his lifetime. At all events, he, like others before him, used to call Priam wonderfully fortunate in that he had seen his country and his throne destroyed together” (text and trans. from Cary & Foster 1925).

According to Tacitus, Nero was unable to dispel the rumours that he had engineered the disaster, despite committing significant funds to relief and reconstruction efforts as soon as the fire had been extinguished (*Ann.* 15.43-4). Tacitus describes at length how Nero sought to exculpate himself by shifting the blame for the catastrophe on to the city’s already detested Christian inhabitants, ordering them to be burned alive, crucified, and torn apart by hunting dogs (*Ann.* 15.44):

Ergo abolendo rumori Nero subdidit reos et quaesitissimis poenis adfecit, quos per flagitia invisos vulgus Christianos appellabat. Auctor nominis eius Christus Tiberio imperitante per procuratorem Pontium Pilatum supplicio adfectus erat; repressaque in praesens exitiabilis superstitio rursus erumpebat, non modo per Iudaeam, originem eius mali, sed per urbem etiam, quo cuncta undique atrocita aut pudenda confluunt celebranturque. Igitur primum correpti qui fatebantur, deinde indicio eorum multitudo ingens haud perinde in crimine incendii quam odio humani generis convicti sunt. Et pereuntibus addita ludibria, ut ferarum tergis contecti laniatu canum interirent, aut crucibus adfixi aut flammandi, atque ubi defecisset dies, in usum nocturni luminis urerentur. Hortos suos ei spectaculo Nero obtulerat et circense ludicrum edebat, habitu aurigae permixtus plebi vel curriculo insistens. Unde quamquam adversus sontis et novissima exempla meritis miseratio oriebatur, tamquam non utilitate publica. sed in saevitiam unius absumerentur.

“Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death

penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man" (text and trans. from Jackson 1937).

This passage from Tacitus' *Annales* is the only independent source to draw a direct link between the Great Fire of Rome and the first Christian persecution.⁵² It thus held particular significance for early Christian audiences. In its Late Antique reception, Tacitus' account became fused with Suetonius' and Cassius Dio's depictions of Nero as the emperor who set his own city on fire.⁵³ In this Christian-centric view of the Neronian age, the emperor's deliberate setting of the Great Fire was bound up with his persecution of Christians and execution of the apostles Peter and Paul. As Shushma Malik states, "Although Paul was not widely considered to have suffered as a scapegoat for the AD 64 fire, his death under the same emperor allowed him to be swept up in the story of the first persecution."⁵⁴ The early-fifth-century *Chronicle* of Sulpicius Severus further synchronises the events that took place during this later phase of Nero's reign, portraying the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul as the climax of the Christian persecutions which Tacitus claims were carried out in the wake of the Great Fire to deflect blame from Nero.⁵⁵

Nero's scapegoating of Christians in the aftermath of the Great Fire of 64 is also the subject of the eleventh letter of the Seneca-Paul correspondence. Here,

⁵² Shaw 2015, pp. 78-96; Malik 2020, pp. 40-1.

⁵³ Malik 2020, p. 84.

⁵⁴ 2020, p. 85.

⁵⁵ Eastman 2019, pp. 97-8.

Seneca condemns the emperor's lies and persecution of Jews and Christians without calling him by name. In the final lines of the letter (*ESP* 11.17-21), Seneca puts an eschatological spin on the fire, portraying Nero, as he was so often portrayed in the Christian literature of Late Antiquity, as Christ's antithesis, the Antichrist, whose return and destruction would usher in the final phase of the end of the world:⁵⁶

Ave, mi Paule carissime. Putasne me haut contristari et non luctuosum esse quod de innocentia vestra subinde supplicium sumatur? Dehinc quod tam duros tamque obnoxios vos reatui omnis populus iudicet, putans a vobis effici quicquid in urbe contrarium fit? Sed feramus aequo animo et utamur foro quod sors concessit, donec invicta felicitas finem malis imponat. Tulit et priscorum aetas Macedonem, Philippi filium, Cyros Darium Dionysium, nostra quoque Gaium Caesarem, quibus quicquid libuit licuit. Incendium urbs Romana manifeste saepe unde patiatur constat. Sed si effari humilitas humana potuisset quid causae sit et impune in his tenebris loqui liceret, iam omnes omnia viderent. Christiani et Iudaei quasi machinatores incendii - pro! - supplicio adfecti fieri solent. Grassator iste quisquis est, cui voluptas carnificina est et mendacium velamentum, tempori suo destinatus est, et ut optimus quisque unum pro multis datum est caput, ita et hic devotus pro omnibus igni cremabitur. Centum triginta duae domus, insulae quattuor milia sex diebus arsere; septimus pausam dedit. Bene te valere, frater, opto. Data V Kal. Apr. Frugi et Basso consulibus.

“Greetings, my dearest Paul. Do you think I am not depressed and sorrowful that capital punishment is repeatedly inflicted on your innocent people?⁵⁷ Also, that the whole populace judges you people so unfeeling and so inclined to guilt, supposing that whatever destructive thing is brought to pass in the city is done by you? But let us endure it with an even mind and take advantage of the forum which fate allows us,⁵⁸ until unconquerable bliss puts an end to evils. The age of the ancients endured the Macedonian, the son of Philip, the Cyruses, Darius, Dionysius, our own age Gaius Caesar, too; whatever pleased them was permitted. Through whose agency the city of Rome frequently suffers fire is clearly evident. But if the common people had

⁵⁶ Malik 2020, pp. 79-126.

⁵⁷ Cicero similarly employs *innocentia* as a noun in *De Oratore* 1.46.202.

⁵⁸ A proverbial expression - see the discussion in Bocciolini Palagi 1985, pp. 122-3.

been able to reveal the cause, and if it were permitted in this darkness to speak without fear of punishment, everyone would now see everything. As is customarily the case, Christians and Jews are - alas! - put to death as incendiary engineers. That bandit, whoever he is, whose pleasure is butchery and whose cover is falsehood, has been fixed for his time, and just as the best has been offered up as one man for many, so too shall this appointed man be consumed by fire for all. One hundred and thirty-two houses and four thousand apartment blocks burned in six days;⁵⁹ the seventh brought a stop. I wish you well, brother. Five days before the kalends of April in the consulship of Frugi and Bassus” (text from Bocciolini Palagi 1985; my trans.).

Bocciolini Palagi contends that Letter 11 evokes the Nero-Antichrist connection in a number of ways. Firstly, she points out that *grassator* “bandit” is used elsewhere as an epithet of Satan and the Antichrist, and that *cremare* “to consume by fire” is often employed by Christian writers in mantic and apocalyptic contexts.⁶⁰ Secondly, she argues that the juxtaposition of Christ and Nero in the line, “and just as the best has been offered up as one man for many, so too shall this appointed man be consumed by fire for all”, sets up an antithetical relationship between the two.⁶¹ I suggest that the formulation of the following line about the devastation wrought by the fire is also striking: the six days of destruction followed by a destruction-free seventh day echoes the “sabbatical logic” of Judaeo-Christian apocalypses,⁶² like the *Apocalypse of Thomas*, in which the world is portrayed as being unmade over six days and saved on the seventh.⁶³ Finally, Bocciolini Palagi draws a parallel between the characterisation of Nero as a propagator of falsehoods and suppressor of truths in Letter 11 and the characterisation of the apocalyptic ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας “man of lawlessness” (2 Thess. 2:3) as a master of deceit in Second Thessalonians.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ It would appear from these remarkably plausible figures that the author of the correspondence carried out research on Neronian Rome in the process of writing the Seneca-Paul letters and had historical documents at his disposal which, unfortunately, do not survive (Bocciolini Palagi 1985, pp. 132-3). See also Beaujeu 1960, pp. 68-80.

⁶⁰ 1985, p. 129, pp. 131-2.

⁶¹ 1985, p. 131.

⁶² According to Adela Yarbro Collins, “The most frequently occurring pattern in apocalyptic and related literature is the use of seven and its multiples. The use of seven in these works seems to be based on a kind of sabbatical logic in which the order perceived in the week is discovered in significant large blocks of time or even in the entire history of the world” (1996, p. 76).

⁶³ See Bauckham 2015, p. 133. Pablo Alberto Molina similarly notes in relation to Letter 11: “The fire ending on the ‘seventh day’ might have biblical connotations” (2016, p. 181).

⁶⁴ 1985, pp. 129-30.

Paul, or whoever the author of this epistle might have been,⁶⁵ tells the Thessalonians that Christ will not return ἐὰν μὴ ἔλθῃ ἡ ἀποστασία πρῶτον καὶ ἀποκαλυφθῇ ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας, ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας “unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction” (2 Thess. 2:3). He further warns them (2 Thess. 2:7-8): γὰρ μυστήριον ἤδη ἐνεργεῖται τῆς ἀνομίας, μόνον ὁ κατέχων ἄρτι ἕως ἐκ μέσου γένηται· καὶ τότε ἀποκαλυφθήσεται ὁ ἄνομος “For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed.” In a letter to his Gaulish friend, Algasia, clarifying the meaning of a number of biblical passages, Jerome explains that Paul is here referring to the destruction of the Roman Empire - this is the ἀποστασία “rebellion” which will immediately precede the coming of the “man of lawlessness” (*Ep.* 121.11). Jerome explicitly identifies this manifestation of the Antichrist as Nero (*Ep.* 121.11).⁶⁶ He explains that Paul had no choice but to write enigmatically about these things for fear that his letter would be intercepted and used to justify attacks on the church (*Ep.* 121.11). Paul repeatedly expresses the same fear in the Seneca-Paul correspondence (*ESP* 2.2-7, 6.2-4, 8), penning letters which are noticeably shorter and more enigmatic than Seneca’s. In the next section, we will see how this eschatological framing of the Great Fire in relation to the first persecution was further developed in a fourth-century Latin account of Paul’s time in Rome, traditionally referred to as Pseudo-Linus’ *Martyrdom of the Blessed Apostle Paul*. For now, however, let us return to Jerome’s adaptation of the *Canones*.

Jerome’s next addition to Eusebius’ timeline concerns the execution by suicide of Seneca’s older brother, Junius Gallio, who, according to the passage from Acts 18 quoted at the beginning of this chapter, dismissed the charge of heterodoxy brought against Paul in Corinth. This entry comes at the end of the tenth year of Nero’s reign.⁶⁷

Iunius Gallio, frater Senecae, egregius declamator propria se manu interfecit.

⁶⁵ 2 Thessalonians is counted among the deutero-Pauline, or “secondary” Pauline, epistles, meaning its authorship is disputed. For the current state of research on the deutero-Pauline epistles, see MacDonald 2022.

⁶⁶ See Malik 2020, p. 57.

⁶⁷ Helm 1956, p. 183k.25-6, p. 184k.1.

“Junius Gallio, brother of Seneca, distinguished rhetorician, killed himself with his own hand” (text from Helm 1956; my trans.).

While it is unclear from this entry whether or not it was common knowledge in the late-fourth century that Luke’s Gallio - the Gallio of Acts 18 - and Seneca’s brother, Junius Gallio, were the selfsame person, it is nonetheless interesting to note that Jerome’s entry, brief as it is, provides a more detailed description of Gallio’s eventual fate than the histories of Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio, none of which report the manner of Gallio’s death.⁶⁸ It is also interesting to note that John Chrysostom, in his late-fourth-century *Catena* and *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles*, expresses a favourable view of Luke’s Gallio, portraying his decision to dismiss Paul’s Jewish accusers as the exact opposite of Pilate’s decision not to dismiss the equally disingenuous charges brought against Jesus by the Jews.⁶⁹

If we read past the eleventh year of Nero’s reign, which comprises two entries by Eusebius and one addition by Jerome on the creation of the provinces of Pontus Polemoniacus and Alpes Cottiae,⁷⁰ the next addition by Jerome which follows in the chronological sequence is a note on the execution by suicide of Seneca himself. This entry comes at the beginning of the twelfth year of Nero’s reign:⁷¹

L. Annaeus Seneca Cordubensis, praeceptor Neronis et patruus Lucani poetae, incisione uenarum et ueneni haustu perit.

“L. Annaeus Seneca of Corduba, teacher of Nero and uncle of the poet Lucan, perishes by severing of veins and swallowing of posion” (text from Helm 1956; my trans.).

The final addition which Jerome has made to the period of Nero’s reign from the Pisonian conspiracy to the deaths of Peter and Paul tells how Seneca’s younger brother, Lucius Annaeus Mela, funnelled his son Lucan’s wealth away from Nero, an

⁶⁸ Regarding the temporal proximity and procedural similarities between Seneca’s forced suicide and those of his two brothers, Mela and Gallio, Cassius Dio merely states (62.25): *καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοὶ ὕστερον ἐπαπώλοντο* “His brothers, too, perished after him” (text and trans. from Cary & Foster 1925).

⁶⁹ Martin 2006, p. 227.

⁷⁰ Helm 1956, p. 184b.4-7: *Duae tantum prouinciae sub Nerone factae, Pontus Polemoniacus et Alpes Cottiae Cottio rege defuncto* “Only two provinces were created under Nero, Pontus Polemoniacus and Alpes Cottiae, after Cottius, the king [of the Cottii], died” (text from Helm 1956; my trans.).

⁷¹ Helm 1956, p. 184e.13-6.

action which ultimately resulted in his own execution by suicide, according to Tacitus (*Ann.* 16.17). This addition serves as the second entry for the fourteenth and final year of Nero's reign:⁷²

L. Annaeus Mela Senecae frater et Gallionis bona Lucani poetae filii sui a Nerone promeretur.

“L. Annaeus Mela, brother of Seneca and Gallio, acquires the wealth of his own son, the poet Lucan, from Nero” (text from Helm 1956; my trans.).

In Tacitus' *Annales*, Mela is depicted as making an underhanded and ultimately fatal attempt to lay claim to the property of his dead son, Lucan, who, as we have already seen, was executed for his involvement in the conspiracy to assassinate Nero (*Ann.* 16.17):

Mela, quibus Gallio et Seneca parentibus natus, petitione honorum abstinuerat per ambitionem praeposteram, ut eques Romanus consularibus potentia aequaretur; simul acquirendae pecuniae brevius iter credebat per procuraciones administrandis principis negotiis. Idem Annaeum Lucanum genuerat, grande adiumentum claritudinis. Quo interfecto dum rem familiarem eius acriter requirit, accusatorem concivit Fabium Romanum, ex intimis Lucani amicis. Mixta inter patrem filiumque coniurationis scientia fingitur, adsimulatis Lucani litteris: quas inspectas Nero ferri ad eum iussit, opibus eius inhians. At Mela, quae tum promptissima mortis via, exsolvit venas

“Mela, son of the same parents as Gallio and Seneca, had refrained from seeking office, as he nursed the paradoxical ambition of equalling the influence of a consular while remaining a simple knight: at the same time, he held that the shorter road to the acquirey of wealth lay in the pro-curatorships handling private business of the sovereign. He was also the father of Lucan - a considerable enhancement of his fame. After his son's death, he called in the debts owing to the estate with a vigour which raised up an accuser in Fabius Romanus, one of Lucan's intimate friends. A fictitious charge, that knowledge of the plot had been shared between father and son, was

⁷² Helm 1956, p. 185b.3-5.

backed by a forged letter from Lucan. Nero, after inspecting it, gave orders that it was to be carried to Mela. Mela took what was then the favoured way of death, and opened an artery” (text and trans. from Jackson 1937).

Jerome’s supplementary note on the fatal actions of Mela immediately precedes Eusebius’ entry on the first persecution and Nero’s execution of the apostles Peter and Paul.⁷³

Primus Nero super omnia scelera sua etiam persecutionem in XR̄i-anos facit, in qua Petrus et Paulus gloriose Romae occubuerunt.

“On top of all his crimes, Nero is also the first to carry out a persecution against the Christians, in which Peter and Paul fell down gloriously in Rome” (text from Helm 1956; my trans.).

Most ancient sources place the executions of Peter and Paul within a similar timeframe to that which we find in Jerome’s adaptation, assigning them a date somewhere between the Great Fire of Rome and the demise of Nero, that is to say, between the years 64 and 68 CE.⁷⁴ Seneca, his nephew and two brothers were executed within an overlapping timeframe: between the years 65 and 68 CE. This overlap, however, does not exist in Eusebius’ original timeline. In fact, Eusebius’ *Chronicle* does not mention Seneca at all.⁷⁵ But in Jerome’s adaptation, the historical reality that Peter and Paul died at the hands of the same emperor, in the same place, around the same time as Seneca and three other prominent members of his family is thrown into relief. As Jerome himself explains in his preface, his additions to the Roman strand of Eusebius’ history have been drawn from a variety of historical sources: *A Troia usque ad uicesimum Constantini annum nunc addita, nunc admixta sunt plurima, quae de Tranquillo et ceteris inlustribus historicis curiosissime excerpsi* “From Troy down to the twentieth year of Constantine I have added many new entries and augmented many existing entries using material that I have most

⁷³ Helm 1956, p. 185c.6-10.

⁷⁴ Eastman 2019, pp. 78-102.

⁷⁵ In Jerome’s Latin adaptation of the *Canones*, Seneca’s name is mentioned once outside the reign of Nero, in an entry on the Stoic philosopher, Sotion, which comes at the very end of Augustus’ reign. However, it was Jerome who expanded this entry to include the fact that Sotion was also *praeceptor Senecae* “Seneca’s teacher” (Helm 1956, p. 171b.9-10).

carefully excerpted from Tranquillus [i.e. Suetonius] and other famous historians” (text from Helm 1956; trans. from Burgess 2002). However, what concerns us here is not the composite, cento-like nature of Jerome’s additions but the historical picture they paint when integrated into Eusebius’ timeline.

Jerome further synchronises the deaths of Paul and Seneca in the twelfth chapter of his *De Viris Illustribus*,⁷⁶ a “bio-bibliographical” catalogue of preponderantly Christian authors written ten years after his adaptation of the *Canones*, c. 392.⁷⁷ This chapter also contains the earliest direct reference to the Seneca-Paul correspondence:⁷⁸

Lucius Annaeus Seneca Cordubensis, Sotionis stoici discipulus et patruus Lucani poetae, continentissimae vitae fuit, quem non ponerem in Catalogo sanctorum, nisi me illae Epistolae provocarent, quae leguntur a plurimis Pauli ad Senecam et Senecae ad Paulum. in quibus, cum esset Neronis magister et illius temporis potentissimus, optare se dicit eius esse loci apud suos, cuius sit Paulus apud Christianos. hic ante biennium, quam Petrus et Paulus martyrio coronarentur, a Nerone interfectus est.

“Lucius Annaeus Seneca of Cordova, a disciple of the Stoic Sotion, and paternal uncle of the poet Lucan, was a man of very temperate life whom I would not place in a catalogue of venerable men, had those letters from Paul to Seneca and Seneca to Paul, which are read by many, not called upon me to do so. In these, when Seneca was Nero’s teacher and the most influential person of the period, he said that he wished to have the same position among his own which Paul had among the Christians. Two years before Peter and Paul were crowned with martyrdom, he was put to death by Nero” (text from Siamakis 1992; trans. adapted from Halton 1999).

Here, Jerome portrays the death of Seneca, which he is careful to frame as an execution rather than a suicide,⁷⁹ as foreshadowing the imminent executions of Peter

⁷⁶ Ker 2009, pp. 184-5.

⁷⁷ Vessey 2015, p. 30; Vessey 2021, p. 170.

⁷⁸ Ker 2009, p. 183. It is worth pointing out, however, that Pseudo-Linus’ Latin *Martyrdom of the Blessed Apostle Paul*, which also contains a reference to the Seneca-Paul correspondence, might pre-date Jerome’s *De Viris Illustribus* as we do not know when during the fourth century it was composed, but can speculate, on the basis of its dependence on the Seneca-Paul correspondence, that it was sometime during the late 300s.

⁷⁹ Hine 2017, p. 28.

and Paul at the hands of the same emperor. Jerome justifies his inclusion of Seneca in his *catalogus sanctorum* “catalogue of venerable men”, in which Seneca’s portrait is placed between those of Philo and Josephus, by deferring responsibility for this editorial decision to the Seneca-Paul letters themselves. Jerome states that it was they who *provocarent* “called upon” him to place Nero’s teacher among this predominantly Christian company of distinguished men, personifying the missives exchanged between Paul and Seneca as if they themselves were capable of speech. However, Jerome also goes on to suggest why he believes this is an honour of which Seneca is deserving, paraphrasing a line from one of Seneca’s letters to Paul (*ESP* 12.11-2), in which Seneca expresses his wish *Nam qui meus tuus apud te locus* “that my place could be yours in your letters, and yours mine” (text from Bocciolini Palagi; trans. from Römer 2003). Jerome thus defends his decision to include Seneca in his “catalogue of venerable men” by making clear Seneca’s importance in the grand scheme of salvation history: he was not only “Nero’s teacher and the most influential person of the period” but also a close friend of the lowly and beleaguered preacher Paul, a man with whom he expressed a desire to swap places, and one alongside whom he ultimately died, in the manner of a proto-martyr.

2.5 Pseudo-Linus’ Latin *Martyrdom of the Blessed Apostle Paul*

At some point during the fourth century,⁸⁰ a Latin adaptation was made of the second-century Greek account of Paul’s preaching and execution in Rome which we find alongside the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and *Third Corinthians* in the collection of apocryphal Pauline texts known as the *Acts of Paul*.⁸¹ Modern scholarship refers to the anonymous author of this fourth-century Latin text as Pseudo-Linus because his work was transmitted under the name of Rome’s eponymous second bishop, who was believed to have inherited the episcopacy from the apostle Peter.⁸² This Latin retelling of the second-century Greek account of Paul’s dissemination of the gospel in Rome and fatal confrontation with the emperor Nero enhances the Romanness of the original, portraying Paul as easily winning over the hearts of the Roman Senate, as well as that of Seneca, the emperor’s teacher, and enjoying a quick ascent to

⁸⁰ Eastman 2019, p. 16, p. 52.

⁸¹ Eastman 2011, p. 15; Gregory 2011, pp. 169-70.

⁸² Eastman 2015, p. 141.

celebrity throughout not only the city of Rome but the whole of the *orbis Romanus* (*Lin. Mart. Paul 1*):⁸³

iam enim admodum innotuerat orbi Romano signis et prodigiis et doctrina multa atque mirabili sanctitate. concursus quoque multus de domo Caesaris fiebat ad eum credentium in dominum Iesum Christum et augmentabatur cotidie fidelibus gaudium magnum et exultatio. sed et institutor imperatoris adeo illi est amicitia copulatus, uidentem in eo diuinam scientiam, ut se a colloquio illius temperare uix posset, quatinus si ore ad os illum alloqui non ualeret, frequentibus datis et acceptis epistolis ipsius dulcedine et amicali colloquio atque consilio fruere, et sic eius doctrina agente Spiritu Sancto multiplicabatur et amabatur, ut licite iam doceret et a multis libentissime audiretur. disputabat siquidem cum ethnicorum philosophis et reuincebat eos, unde et plurimi eius magisterio manus dabant. nam et scripta illius quaedam magister Caesaris coram eo relegit et in cunctis admirabilem reddidit. senatus etiam de illo alta non mediocriter sentiebat.

“Now indeed he became well known to the Roman world with signs and wonders and great teaching and extraordinary sanctity. A great throng of those believing in the Lord Jesus Christ was also coming to him from the house of Caesar, and great joy and gladness were daily growing among the faithful. But the teacher of the emperor was joined closely to Paul in friendship, seeing in him divine knowledge, such that he was scarcely able to restrain himself from conversation with Paul. Thus, if he was not able to speak to him face-to-face, he took delight in his pleasantness and friendship, and in his conversation and counsel, through letters frequently sent and received. By the action of the Holy Spirit, Paul’s teaching was being widely disseminated and well received, so that now he was teaching legally and was being heard freely by many people. He was debating with the philosophers of the unbelievers and convincing them, so that very many of them were giving themselves to his teaching. A teacher of Caesar read certain of his writings in the emperor’s presence and showed him to be admirable in all things. Even the Senate had a particularly high opinion of him” (text and trans. from Eastman 2015).

⁸³ Eastman 2015, p. 140, p. 147.

The author of the Latin *Martyrdom of the Blessed Apostle Paul* expands upon his Greek exemplar by explicitly identifying Seneca as one of the Pauline sympathisers from Nero's household, adducing the seventh letter of the Seneca-Paul correspondence, in which Seneca reveals to Paul that he has been discussing Paul's writings with the emperor (*ESP* 7.8-17),⁸⁴ as evidence of Seneca's devotion to Paul and eagerness to spread the apostle's teachings within the imperial household.⁸⁵ It seems that Paul's message is resonating with everyone in Rome, from ordinary men in the street to senators, philosophers and members of the emperor's inner circle. It is suggested that even the emperor himself has been persuaded of Paul's admirability by his teacher and advisor, Seneca.

Everything changes, however, when Nero's beloved cupbearer, Patroclus, comes to hear Paul preach in his rented *horreum* "barn" outside the city, along with some *Caesaris amicissimis* "very close friends of Caesar" (text and trans. from Eastman 2015), and suffers a fatal fall through the intervention of the Devil (*Lin. Mart. Paul* 2). Nero is devastated, until he learns that Paul has brought the young man back from the dead and converted him to Christianity (*Lin. Mart. Paul* 2-4). When Nero and his *uegetus* "enlivened" cupbearer are finally reunited, the emperor is infuriated to learn that Patroclus is not the only member of his household whom Paul has recruited for Christ's army (*Lin. Mart. Paul* 4-5). He then sends Patroclus and five more converts from his household to prison *ut nimium illos torqueret quos nimis ante amauerat* "in order to torture greatly those he had previously loved greatly" (text and trans. from Eastman 2015), and orders that all of the Christians living in Rome be hunted down, imprisoned and tortured (*Lin. Mart. Paul* 5). Paul is accordingly hauled before Nero in chains on the charge of building an army in the service of a challenger king, Jesus Christ (*Lin. Mart. Paul* 6). The suddenness of this change in the emperor's outlook may seem jarring, but it is consistent with Eusebius' division of Nero's reign into two distinct phases in his *Ecclesiastical History* (2.22.8):⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Letter 7 will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

⁸⁵ That the anonymous author of the Latin *Martyrdom of the Blessed Apostle Paul* was closely acquainted with the Seneca-Paul letters would naturally suggest that his adaptation was written in the late-fourth century.

⁸⁶ See Shaw 2015, p. 78 and Corke-Webster 2019, p. 253.

εἰκός γέ τοι κατὰ μὲν ἀρχὰς ἡπιώτερον τοῦ Νέρωνος διακειμένου, ῥᾶον τὴν ὑπὲρ τοῦ δόγματος τοῦ Παύλου καταδεχθῆναι ἀπολογία, προελθόντος δ' εἰς ἀθεμίτους τόλμας, μετὰ τῶν ἄλλων καὶ τὰ κατὰ τῶν ἀποστόλων ἐγχειρηθῆναι.

“Probably at the beginning Nero’s disposition was gentler and it was easier for Paul’s defence of his views to be received, but as he advanced towards reckless crime the Apostles were attacked along with the rest” (text and trans. from Lake 1926).

Eusebius makes this division on the basis of Paul’s Second Epistle to Timothy,⁸⁷ which was believed to have been written by Paul during his time in Rome (Eusebius, *HE* 2.22; John Chrysostom, *Hom. 2 Tim.*; Jerome, *De Vir. Ill.* 5), and from which the “military imagery” in the Latin *Martyrdom of the Blessed Apostle Paul* may also be derived.⁸⁸ According to Paul’s own testimony in 2 Timothy, he was ἤδη σπένδομαι “already being poured out as a drink offering” (4:6), despite having been ἐρύσθην ἐκ στόματος λέοντος “rescued from the lion’s mouth” (4:17) once before. Eusebius interprets these words as signalling that although Paul had previously been spared by the emperor, whom the epistle styles “the lion” on account of his “savage heart” (διὰ τὸ ὠμόθυμον),⁸⁹ he foresaw that he would ultimately be executed on imperial orders (*HE* 2.22.1-7).

The Latin *Martyrdom of the Blessed Apostle Paul* represents the consummation of this prophecy. After being hauled before the emperor as a prisoner, Paul is condemned to decapitation by Nero *secundum Romanas leges* “according to the Roman laws”, a formula which David L. Eastman construes as “a reference to Paul’s legal right to decapitation as a Roman citizen,”⁹⁰ while every other soldier of Christ in the city is to be *igne cremari* “consumed by fire” (*Lin. Mart. Paul* 7).⁹¹ What stirs up such anger in the emperor that he orders not only Paul but all the Christians in Rome to be executed, however, is the eschatological warning which

⁸⁷ 2 Timothy is counted among the deutero-Pauline, or “secondary” Pauline, epistles, meaning its authorship is disputed. For the current state of research on the deutero-Pauline epistles, see MacDonald 2022.

⁸⁸ Eastman 2019, p. 45.

⁸⁹ Corke-Webster 2019, p. 253.

⁹⁰ 2019, p. 46.

⁹¹ In the previous section, I took note of Bocciolini Palagi’s observation that *cremare* “to consume by fire” is often employed by Christian writers in mantic and apocalyptic contexts (1985, pp. 131-2). The same word is used in relation to Nero in the eleventh letter of the Seneca-Paul correspondence (*ESP* 11.20-1), which deals with the fallout from the Great Fire of Rome, as we have already seen.

Paul delivers in an effort to dissuade the emperor from his tyrannical course (*Lin. Mart. Paul* 6-7):

caeterum noli putare, quia diuitiae huius saeculi, splendor aut gloria saluare te debeant; sed si subiectus illi fueris, in perpetuum saluus eris. cum enim uenerit iudicare uiuos et mortuos, deuastabit huius mundi figuram per ignem, et ante mundi constitutionem parata et a saeculis occulta militibus suis donatiua, quae numquam deficient et quae omnem excludent indigentiam, largietur. haec audiens Nero et ira succensus, quia mundi figuram per ignem Paulus dixerat resoluendam, iussit omnes Christi milites igne cremari

“Do not think that anything else - the riches of this world, splendor, or glory - is necessary to save you. But if you will be subject to him, you will be saved for eternity. When he comes to judge the living and the dead, he will destroy the form of this world by fire. Before the foundation of the world, the lavish gifts that he will give to his soldiers were prepared and hidden from the world. They will never waste away and will eliminate all want.’ Hearing these things Nero was inflamed with anger. Because Paul had said that the form of the world must be destroyed through fire, he ordered that all the soldiers of Christ be consumed by fire” (text and trans. from Eastman 2015).

In this passage, the full polemical potential of portraying the Great Fire, the first persecution and Paul’s execution at the hands of Nero as synchronous, causally related events is realised by means of a subtle shift in the historiographical pattern we have observed throughout this chapter. The anonymous author (Pseudo-Linus) conflates the account given by Tacitus of Roman Christians being crucified, savaged by dogs and burnt alive in the aftermath of the Great Fire with the eschatologically inflected account of the disaster given by Seneca in the eleventh letter of the Seneca-Paul correspondence. However, in the Latin *Martyrdom of the Blessed Apostle Paul*, the Great Fire of Rome no longer just resembles the fire which will destroy the world at the end of time, but is inspired by it. Nero decrees that all the Christians in the city are to “be consumed by fire” in response to Paul’s speech about the fiery destruction which his Lord will unleash upon the world “when he comes to judge the living and the dead.” The “Great Fire” is no longer an urban disaster but a

large-scale burning of Christians inspired by Paul's apocalyptic prophecy. The fire is now the means by which Nero undertakes the first persecution rather than the inciting event.

The anonymous author of the Latin *Martyrdom of the Blessed Apostle* thus creates a cohesive narrative in which Seneca's friendship with Paul, Paul's imprisonment, the Great Fire of Rome, the first persecution and Paul's martyrdom are all interconnected. This synchronicity, in turn, reveals the providential design of history, enmeshing both Seneca and Nero in a new fourth-century Christian story about how Rome became the site of the first persecution and suffered death and destruction in an end-time-like conflagration, before being symbolically revived by the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that neither the historical premise of the Seneca-Paul correspondence nor the vision of Neronian Rome it conjures up is anomalous. Both fall into a pattern of fourth-century Christian history-writing about the later part of Nero's reign that is observable in different permutations in Jerome's additions to Eusebius' *Canones* and *De Viris Illustribus*, as well as in Pseudo-Linus' Latin *Martyrdom of the Blessed Apostle Paul*. We have seen how, as this pattern developed, there was a tendency to draw Paul and Seneca increasingly close together and to flesh out the final Roman chapter of Paul's life with details borrowed from classical historiography about the Great Fire of Rome and the first Christian persecution, both of which became integral to the fourth-century Christian understanding of the historical and spiritual significance of the terminal years of Nero's reign. In Pseudo-Linus' depiction, these twin catastrophes constituted an apocalypse in microcosm which cleared the way for an apostolic refounding of the city.

In developing a new narrative around how the events and principal actors of Nero's later reign overlapped with and influenced Paul's Roman mission, Christian writers were guided by synchronicity: the idea that particular moments in history were providentially designed to unfold at the same time. Synchronicity served both as an organising principle and a key to unlocking the significance of events in the grand

scheme of salvation history. As Simon Goldhill writes, to organise the past through the lens of synchronicity is to bend history “in service of an ideologically laden narrative.”⁹² But synchronicity is also magnetic, indiscriminately gathering up unrelated people and events and drawing them together. It ascribes providential significance to mere coincidence. That Seneca should be swept up in the story of Paul’s Roman mission is, in one sense, a product of the arbitrariness of using synchronicity as a lens through which to view the past. However, this arbitrariness is also what makes the Seneca-Paul connection such a rewarding case study in fourth-century Christian historical thought as it shows the extent to which “Christian chronology was also a philosophy of history”,⁹³ a pursuit of knowledge not merely of times and people and places but of the will and providential plan of God.

⁹² 2022, p. 141.

⁹³ Momigliano 1977, p. 110.

3 Revelation, Conversion, and the Language of Letter-Writing in the Seneca-Paul Correspondence and Other Fourth-Century Reimaginings of the Apostolic Age

3.1 Introduction

One of the questions which Roman Christian writers faced in looking back on the apostolic age and attempting to define its legacy from the vantage point of the fourth century was how to frame the story of Christ's ministry and his apostles' dissemination of the gospel throughout the world in such a way as to make it appealing to classically educated Roman elites, a demographic which had little in common with either Jesus or his apostles.⁹⁴ The plain, unpolished prose of the New Testament, which Augustine admits initially seemed to him (*Conf.* 3.5): *indigna quam tullianae dignitati compararem* "unworthy of comparison with the merit of Cicero's writings" (text and trans. from Carolyn J.-B. Hammond 2014) and Jerome recalls being appalled by (*Ep.* 22.30), made reaching this elite demographic particularly challenging. As Mark Edwards explains, "The documents which make up our New Testament were composed by men who, using Greek as an everyday tongue, appear to have no model for writing but the Septuagint. Their prose admits, as all prose does, of rhetorical analysis, but they have evidently not attended any school where such analysis would have guided them in the imitation of Lysias or Plato. Nor could they have held their own in philosophy with the dilettantes of the pagan world."⁹⁵

This chapter explores how the Seneca-Paul correspondence and other fourth-century reimaginings of the apostolic age approached this issue. In particular, it focuses on Seneca's problematisation of Paul's epistolary writing style in the seventh letter of the Seneca-Paul correspondence, examining how the relationship between Paul's uncultivated style and the divine nature of his knowledge is teased out within the dramatic frame of the letter. It also discusses how this problematisation of Paul's writing style relates to wider theological questions about

⁹⁴ See, for example, Sandnes 2011, pp. 65-9 and Corke-Webster 2017, pp. 568-75.

⁹⁵ 2013, p. 23.

the nature of Paul's revelation on the road to Damascus and whether or not divinely inspired men like Paul ought to avail of human instruction.

The chapter itself is divided into four parts. The first takes the reader slowly through the seventh letter of the Seneca-Paul correspondence, analysing both Seneca's criticism of Paul and his reading of Paul's conversion story before Nero. The second explores how Paul's conversion story was understood in late-fourth-century Pauline exegesis. The third compares the author of the Seneca-Paul correspondence's handling of Paul's lack of education with Eusebius' handling of Jesus' similarly unlettered reputation in the Jesus-Abgar correspondence. Finally, the fourth discusses the comparison Seneca draws between Paul's revelation and the appearance of the Dioscuri to Vatienus in the aftermath of the Battle of Pydna. The aims of this chapter are 1) to contextualise the Senecan and Neronian responses to Paul's conversion story and writing style which we find in the seventh letter of the Seneca-Paul correspondence and 2) to gain a deeper understanding of how the author of the correspondence caters his characterisation of Paul to classically educated Roman elites by portraying the apostle as Seneca's pupil in matters of style and his teacher in matters of the spirit.

3.2 A Neronian Reading of Paul's Conversion, as Related by Paul to the Galatians (1:11-24): Examining Seneca's Criticism of Paul and Audience with Nero in the Seventh Letter of the Seneca-Paul Correspondence

In the seventh letter of the correspondence, Seneca, now well advanced in his friendship with Paul, makes two admissions concerning the apostle's epistles, which he has not only been reading but also speaking about with others:

Profiteor bene me acceptum lectione litterarum tuarum quas Galatis Corinthiis Achaeis misisti, et ita invicem vivamus, ut etiam cum honore divino eas exhibes. Spiritus enim sanctus in te et super excelsos sublimi ore satis venerabiles sensus exprimit. Vellem itaque, cum res eximias proferas, ut maiestati earum cultus sermonis non desit. Et ne quid tibi, frater, subripiam aut conscientiae meae debeam, confiteor Augustum sensibus tuis motum. Cui perlecto virtutis in te exordio, ista vox fuit: mirari eum posse ut qui non legitime imbutus sit taliter sentiat. Cui ego respondi

solere deos ore innocentium effari, haut eorum qui praevaricare doctrina sua quid possint. Et dato ei exemplo Vatiens hominis rusticuli, cui viri duo adparuerunt in agro Reatino, qui postea Castor et Pollux sunt nominati, satis instructus videtur. Valete.

“I confess that I was much taken with the reading of your letters which you sent to the Galatians, the Corinthians, and the Achaean, and let us both live in the spirit which with sacred awe you show in them. For the holy spirit is in you and above all exalted ones gives expression by your sublime speech to the most venerable thoughts. I could wish therefore that when you express such extraordinary things a cultivated form of discourse should not be lacking to their grandeur.⁹⁶ And that I may conceal nothing from you, brother, or burden my conscience, I confess that the emperor was moved by your sentiments. When I had read to him about the origin of the power in you, he said that he could only wonder that a man who was not properly ingrained should be capable of such ideas.⁹⁷ To which I answered that the gods are wont to speak through the mouths of the innocent, not of those who by virtue of their erudition are able to walk crookedly. I gave him the example of Vatiens, a simple countryman, to whom two men appeared in a field at Reate who afterwards are named as Castor and Pollux; with that he seems sufficiently instructed. Farewell” (text from Bocciolini Palagi 1985; trans. adapted from Römer 2003).

In the first letter of the correspondence, examined briefly in Chapter 1 (§1.1), Seneca describes to Paul how he and his friend Lucilius had chanced on a group of Paul’s followers in the Gardens of Sallust the previous day, and by virtue of this serendipitous meeting, were given the chance to read (*ESP* 1.9-11): *pluribus aliquas litteras quas ad aliquam civitatem seu caput provinciae direxisti mira exhortatione vitam moralem continentes* “some of the many letters which you have directed to some city or other, or to the capital of a province, containing wondrous encouragement to live an ethical life” (text from Bocciolini Palagi 1985; my trans.). However, in the seventh letter of the correspondence, quoted above, Seneca singles out three of Paul’s epistles in particular: to the Galatians, to the Corinthians, and to

⁹⁶ Cicero similarly employs *maiestas* as a rhetorical term in *De Amicitia* 25.96.

⁹⁷ Suetonius likewise uses the perfect passive participle of the verb *imbuo*, which in its most basic sense has to do with staining and dyeing (*L&S*, s. v. I-II.A) - hence my translation “ingrained”, to denote the state of being only partially educated in *De Grammaticis* 4.

the Achaeans (*ESP* 7.2-3). The two modern editors of the correspondence, Barlow and Bocciolini Palagi, have identified the letters here referenced by the names “to the Corinthians” and “to the Achaeans” as First and Second Corinthians respectively, on the grounds that Second Corinthians begins with an address to the whole of Achaia (2. Cor. 1:1):⁹⁸ τῆ ἐκκλησίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ τῆ οὔση ἐν Κορίνθῳ σὺν τοῖς ἁγίοις πᾶσιν τοῖς οὔσιν ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ Ἀχαΐᾳ “To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia.”

In Letter 7, Seneca voices his unease at what he perceives as the misalignment between the brilliant, divinely inspired ideas contained in Paul’s letters and the impoverished language in which these ideas are expressed (*ESP* 7.6-8). He then reluctantly reveals that he has discussed Paul’s letters with the emperor (*ESP* 7.8-10), a revelation which causes Paul great alarm, as indicated by his response to Seneca in Letter 8 (*ESP* 8.2-10):

Licet non ignorem Caesarem nostrum rerum admirandarum, ni<si> quando deficiet, amatorem esse, permittes tamen te non laedi, sed admoneri. Puto enim te graviter fecisse, quod ei in notitiam perferre voluisti quod ritui et disciplinae eius sit contrarium. Cum enim ille gentium deos colat, quid tibi visum sit ut hoc scire eum velles non video, nisi nimio amore meo facere te hoc existimo. Rogo de futuro ne id agas.

“Although I am not unaware that our Caesar, if he does not become disaffected someday, is a lover of wondrous things, you will nonetheless allow yourself not so much to be affronted as warned. For I think you have gravely erred that you have wished to bring to his notice what is contrary to his belief and tenets. Since he worships the gods of the Gentiles, I do not see what your purpose was in wishing him to know this, unless I am to think that you are doing this out of undue love for me. I beg you for the future not to do it” (text from Bocciolini Palagi 1985; trans. adapted from Römer 2003).

Here, Paul’s qualification of the phrase, “lover of wondrous things”, with the ominous expression, “if he does not become disaffected someday”, can be interpreted as a prophecy, insofar as it hints at a later tyrannical phase of Nero’s reign which

⁹⁸ Barlow 1938, p. 142; Bocciolini Palagi 1985, p. 102.

both Eusebius and the author of the Latin *Martyrdom of the Blessed Apostle Paul* portray as following on from a milder initial phase, as we found in Chapter 2 (§2.5). The Seneca-Paul correspondence seems to be set on the cusp between these two phases. In Letter 7, Seneca appears more convinced than ever of Nero's good intentions toward Paul, despite Paul's repeated hints that he wishes to avoid drawing the attention of Nero and his empress, Poppaea Sabina, at all costs, and harbours fears about his letters to Seneca falling into the wrong hands (*ESP* 2.2-7, 6.2-4, 8). By Letter 11, however, Seneca has grown disillusioned with Nero and condemns his persecution of Christians and Jews in the aftermath of the Great Fire of Rome in the strongest terms, clearly implying that the order to set the fire came from Nero himself (*ESP* 11.9-15), as we saw in the previous chapter (§2.4). The correspondence thus shows that Paul was right all along to be wary of Nero and that Seneca really did put him in danger by discussing his writings with the emperor, but a contemporary reader would also have been able to supply the conclusion of the story - that Paul and Seneca ultimately met their deaths at the hands of Nero. This knowledge looms over the correspondence, infusing the polite exchange of views between Paul and Seneca with a sense of urgency and suspense that it would otherwise lack.

In Letter 7, Seneca informs Paul that when he had read aloud to Nero "about the origin of the power in you", Nero "said that he could only wonder that a man who was not properly ingrained should be capable of such ideas" (*ESP* 7.10-2). Whereas Barlow, in his 1938 edition of the correspondence, interprets the clause *Cui perlecto virtutis in te exordio* as referring to a "treatise" which Seneca has written about Paul's "virtue",⁹⁹ Bocciolini Palagi, in her 1985 edition of the correspondence, instead interprets *exordium virtutis* as referring to a particular Pauline passage concerning the "origin" of Paul's "power", an interpretation which was first put forward by Amédée Fleury in 1853.¹⁰⁰ Fleury's and Bocciolini Palagi's interpretation also accords with the evidence of the late-fourth-century Latin *Martyrdom of the Blessed Apostle Paul*, which directly references the seventh letter of the Seneca-Paul correspondence. As we saw in the previous chapter, the anonymous author of this contemporary work portrays Paul's gospel as being met with great interest and approval in Rome, even in the heart of the imperial household (*Lin. Mart. Paul* 1):

⁹⁹ 1938, p. 38, p. 71, p. 143.

¹⁰⁰ Bocciolini Palagi 1985, pp. 105-6. See also Fleury 1853, pp. 314-5. For a summary of the evidence adduced by Fleury in support of the now largely discredited hypothesis that Seneca and Paul really did exchange letters, see Hine 2017, pp. 36-8.

et sic eius doctrina agente spiritu sancto multiplicabatur et amabatur, ut licite iam doceret et a multis libentissime audiretur. disputabat siquidem cum ethnicorum philosophis et reuincebat eos, unde et plurimi eius magisterio manus dabant. nam et scripta illius quaedam magister caesaris coram eo relegit et in cunctis admirabilem reddidit. senatus etiam de illo alta non mediocriter sentiebat.

“By the action of the Holy Spirit, Paul’s teaching was being widely disseminated and well received, so that now he was teaching legally and was being heard freely by many people. He was debating with the philosophers of the unbelievers and convincing them, so that very many of them were giving themselves to his teaching. A teacher of Caesar read certain of his writings in the emperor’s presence and showed him to be admirable in all things. Even the Senate had a particularly high opinion of him” (text and trans. from Eastman 2015).

Here, just as in the seventh letter of the Seneca-Paul correspondence, Seneca is portrayed as reading from the writings of Paul in a private audience with the emperor. Unlike the Seneca-Paul correspondence, however, the above passage provides no clues as to which of Paul’s letters Seneca reads during this audience or how Seneca’s reading manages to convince Nero of Paul’s admirability. The seventh letter of the Seneca-Paul correspondence, by contrast, paints a more detailed picture of Seneca’s reading before the emperor. Fleury and Bocciolini Palagi argue that Seneca’s use of the phrase *exordio in te virtutis* gestures toward a particular passage from Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians. Galatians, as we have already seen, is one of the three Pauline epistles which Seneca singles out as particularly soul-stirring at the beginning of Letter 7. Fleury and Bocciolini Palagi construe Seneca’s admission that he read to Nero a certain passage from Paul’s writings “about the origin of the power in you” as a reference to Paul’s own account of how he received the gospel through a revelation and was converted on his way to Damascus (Gal. 1:11-24):¹⁰¹

Γνωρίζω δὲ ὑμῖν, ἀδελφοί, τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τὸ εὐαγγελισθὲν ὑπ’ ἐμοῦ ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν κατὰ ἄνθρωπον· οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐγὼ παρὰ ἀνθρώπου παρέλαβον αὐτὸ οὐδὲ ἐδιδάχθην ἀλλὰ δι’ ἀποκαλύψεως Ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ. ἠκούσατε γὰρ τὴν ἐμὴν ἀναστροφὴν ποτε ἐν

¹⁰¹ Fleury 1853, pp. 314-5; Bocciolini Palagi 1985, pp. 105-6.

τῷ Ἰουδαϊσμῷ ὅτι καθ' ὑπερβολὴν ἐδίωκον τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἐπόρθουν αὐτήν· καὶ προέκοπτον ἐν τῷ Ἰουδαϊσμῷ ὑπὲρ πολλοὺς συνηλικιώτας ἐν τῷ γένει μου περισσοτέρως ζηλωτῆς ὑπάρχων τῶν πατρικῶν μου παραδόσεων. ὅτε δὲ εὐδόκησεν ὁ ἀφορίσας με ἐκ κοιλίας μητρός μου καὶ καλέσας διὰ τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ ἀποκαλύψαι τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐν ἐμοί, ἵνα εὐαγγελίζωμαι αὐτὸν ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, εὐθέως οὐ προσανεθέμην σαρκὶ καὶ αἵματι, οὐδὲ ἀνῆλθον εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα πρὸς τοὺς πρὸ ἐμοῦ ἀποστόλους, ἀλλὰ ἀπῆλθον εἰς Ἀραβίαν καὶ πάλιν ὑπέστρεψα εἰς Δαμασκόν. ἔπειτα μετὰ ἔτη τρία ἀνῆλθον εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα ἱστορῆσαι Κηφᾶν καὶ ἐπέμεινα πρὸς αὐτὸν ἡμέρας δεκαπέντε· ἕτερον δὲ τῶν ἀποστόλων οὐκ εἶδον, εἰ μὴ Ἰάκωβον τὸν ἀδελφὸν τοῦ κυρίου. ἃ δὲ γράφω ὑμῖν, ἰδοὺ ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ ὅτι οὐ ψεύδομαι. ἔπειτα ἦλθον εἰς τὰ κλίματα τῆς Συρίας καὶ τῆς Κιλικίας· ἤμην δὲ ἀγνοούμενος τῷ προσώπῳ ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις τῆς Ἰουδαίας ταῖς ἐν χριστῷ, μόνον δὲ ἀκούοντες ἦσαν ὅτι ὁ διώκων ἡμᾶς ποτὲ νῦν εὐαγγελίζεται τὴν πίστιν ἣν ποτε ἐπόρθει· καὶ ἐδόξαζον ἐν ἐμοί τὸν θεόν.

“For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother. (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, ‘He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.’ And they glorified God because of me.”

In this passage, Paul adduces the story of his conversion in support of the claim that the gospel he preaches is not of human origin. Paul asserts that he did not learn it

from a human being, not even from one of the twelve, but received it through a direct encounter with Christ. How else, he reasons, could a vehement persecutor and enemy of the church become a devoted preacher of the gospel, if not through a revelation from Christ. Bocciolini Palagi argues that when Seneca speaks of “the origin of the power” in Paul, he is referring to this direct encounter with Christ, which granted Paul the “power” to conceive *res eximias* “extraordinary things” (ESP 7.7-11), in spite of the fact that he was *non legitime imbutus* “not properly ingrained” (ESP 7.12).¹⁰² As we have already seen, however, it is also this same lack of education which forms the basis of Seneca’s one criticism of Paul: that the language of his letters, being simple and unrefined, falls short of the *maiestas* “grandeur” of his ideas (ESP 7.7).

In the next section, we will explore how the significance of Paul’s conversion and reception of the gospel through divine rather than human agency was understood and explained in Marius Victorinus’ late-fourth-century *Commentary on Galatians*. The aim of this examination is not to uncover possible instances of intertextuality between Marius Victorinus’ commentary and the Seneca-Paul letters, but rather to gain an insight into the wider theological conversation surrounding Paul’s conversion story with which the author of the Seneca-Paul correspondence is engaging.

3.3 Christ’s Revelation of the Gospel to Paul in Marius Victorinus’ *Commentary on Galatians*

The fourth-century professor of rhetoric and Pauline exegete, Marius Victorinus, who was the first Latin writer to produce detailed line-by-line commentaries on Paul’s epistles,¹⁰³ discusses this large chunk of text from the first chapter of Galatians in great depth. Despite the depth of his line-by-line analysis, however, Victorinus keeps bringing the discussion of this chapter back to one overarching point. He asserts that Paul, in explaining in such detail to the Galatians how he, a persecutor and enemy of the church, was vouchsafed the gospel through a revelation from the resurrected Christ, and did not receive it (*Ad Galatas* 1,2.28) *a nullo apostolo qui cum Christo*

¹⁰² Bocciolini Palagi also points to a range of other passages from fourth-century Christian literature where the word *exordium* is used to convey the idea of religious conversion: “Per *exordium* in senso tecnico religioso si può confrontare *exordium fidei* di Girolamo (*Hom. Orig. in Exech.* 8), *exordium prudentiae* di Ilario (*Trin.* V, 26), *exordium lucis* di Firmico Materno (*Err.* 2,9)” (1985, p. 106).

¹⁰³ Cooper 2005, pp. 5-6.

fuit “from any apostle who was with Christ” (text from Gori 1986; trans. from Cooper 2005), provides powerful proof of the truth and uniqueness of his apostleship. In Victorinus’ words, Paul’s account of his conversion (*Ad Galatas* 1,0.14-5): *Verum id probat, neque ab hominibus neque per hominem se apostolum esse* “proves that he is truly an apostle neither from nor through human beings” (text from Gori 1986; trans. from Cooper 2005). This is an important and counterintuitive point: the conversion that is effected through an immediate revelation of divine truth rather than through teaching is more profound, not less, in Victorinus’ view.

While the contrast is never stated explicitly, the reader gains a clear sense from Victorinus of Paul’s separateness from the rest of the apostles. Victorinus highlights the fact that, unlike the twelve, Paul neither followed nor received instruction from Christ while Christ was on earth (*Ad Galatas* 1,0.11-29; 1,1.43-5; 1,17).¹⁰⁴ He also stresses the point that, as Paul was far-removed from the twelve when he received the revelation and only visited Peter after three whole years had elapsed and then only for a period of fifteen days, none of Paul’s knowledge of the gospel could have come from the twelve (*Ad Galatas* 1,0.14-21; 1,13.17-26; 1,17-18).¹⁰⁵ That Paul spent a portion of his life violently persecuting Christ’s followers also sets him apart from the rest of the apostles (*Ad Galatas* 1,13.19-22; 1,13.82-104; 1,23-4).¹⁰⁶

Yet Victorinus suggests that these differences only serve to elevate Paul’s conversion and make it even more extraordinary. Paul obtained his knowledge not from human beings but from the resurrected Christ through a revelation, which, as Victorinus explains (*Ad Galatas* 1, 12.18-9): *utique plus est* “is clearly something greater”, being *ipsarum rerum visio* “a vision of the things themselves” (text from Gori 1986; trans. from Cooper 2005). In Victorinus’ interpretation (*Ad Galatas* 1,18.2-8), part of what was revealed to Paul through this direct encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus was his unique mission *ut Christum revelatum sibi gentibus evangelizaret* “to preach to the Gentiles the Christ revealed to him”, hence why he does not go to Jerusalem to visit Peter until three years have passed (text from Gori 1986; trans. from Cooper 2005). Victorinus concludes his analysis of the first chapter of Galatians with an image of the redeemed Paul spreading the gospel among the

¹⁰⁴ Translated with commentary in Cooper 2005, pp. 249-50, p. 252, p. 264.

¹⁰⁵ Translated with commentary in Cooper 2005, p. 250, pp. 260-1, pp. 264-5.

¹⁰⁶ Translated with commentary in Cooper 2005, p. 260, pp. 262-3, pp. 267-8.

Gentiles in Syria and Cilicia through the sheer miraculousness of the story of his transformation from violent persecutor of the church to devoted teacher of the gospel to all the Gentiles in the world (*Ad Galatas* 1,24.4-8):

Sic fiebat ut magnificarent deum in me, id est magnum dicerent, qui conversa subito mente praedicarem deum Christum, scilicet quem ego antea expugnabam. Quid enim tam magnificum quam vinci mentem et accipere contrariam et accipere eam quam ante expugnabas?

“In this way it came about that *they magnified God* - meaning, they said God was magnificent - *in me*, who with a sudden conversion of the mind would come to evangelize Christ as God, Christ, whom previously I had been intent on wiping out! What could be so magnificent as when one’s mind is overwhelmed and one comes to accept the opposing mind-set, to accept what you had earlier been intent on wiping out?” (text from Gori 1986; trans. from Cooper 2005).

This passage is evocative not only because it shows the depth of Victorinus’ fascination with Paul’s seemingly impossible change of heart but also because it speaks to Victorinus’ own experience of leaving his life as professor of rhetoric for the city of Rome behind to write commentaries on Paul’s epistles in the years following his conversion to Christianity.¹⁰⁷ Religious conversion was a live issue in the late-fourth-century moment in which Victorinus lived, and his *Commentary on Galatians* affords us a strong impression of how Paul’s conversion story would have been received by a contemporary Latin-speaking audience. It also gives us an insight into what aspects of Paul’s account would have seemed particularly striking or significant in the eyes of such an audience. It thus provides us with a useful starting point for exploring the significance of Paul’s conversion story in the seventh letter of the Seneca-Paul correspondence.

We may note three points of commonality between Victorinus’ interests and those of the author of the Seneca-Paul correspondence. Firstly, Victorinus clearly regards Paul’s former life as a persecutor of the Christians as an important part of his conversion story. I would suggest that this element of Galatians 1 takes on particular urgency when transferred to the context of the seventh letter of the Seneca-Paul

¹⁰⁷ Cooper 2005, pp. 36-7.

correspondence, in which the recipient of Paul's conversion story is none other than Nero, who was widely portrayed in Late Antiquity as the most bloodthirsty of Christian persecutors.¹⁰⁸ Seneca's choice of Paul's conversion story from Galatians 1 for his reading before the emperor can thus be seen as both entirely appropriate, insofar as it shows how even a tyrannical persecutor of Christians can change his ways and become a follower of Christ, and deeply fraught, insofar as Nero, despite his initial positive reaction, ultimately proves unreceptive to Paul's example. Secondly, the fact that Victorinus explicitly frames Paul's conversion on the way to Damascus "as a call to the Gentile mission"¹⁰⁹ also lends itself to consideration in the context of the Seneca-Paul correspondence since the correspondence essentially represents the final chapter of that mission. The incongruence of Seneca reading before the emperor about the beginning of Paul's mission, even as the seeds of its destruction are being sown, would not be lost on a contemporary reader familiar with the extracanonical stories about Paul's suffering at the hands of Nero during his time in Rome.

Finally, Victorinus highlights the divine origin of Paul's knowledge of both the gospel and his mission. He suggests that the apostle had no need of human instruction or guidance, having received "something greater" in the form of "a vision of the things themselves." Conversely, in the Seneca-Paul correspondence, Seneca repeatedly appeals to Paul to address the mismatch between the grandeur of the ideas contained in his epistles and the inelegance of the language in which these ideas are expressed (*ESP* 7.6-8, 9.9, 13.3-9), even going so far as to send the apostle (*ESP* 9.9): *librum de verborum copia* "a book on richness of language" (text from Bocciolini Palagi 1985; my trans.), to encourage him to improve his epistolary style. Paul's lack of formal training in rhetorical and stylistic matters is thus problematised by Seneca. What Victorinus praises as a virtue Seneca identifies as a fault.

In Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians, which, as we have already seen, are among the three epistles praised by Seneca at the beginning of Letter 7 (*ESP* 7.2-3), the apostle offers his own rebuttal to the charge that he lacks the facility with language and silver tongue of a rhetorically educated pagan orator.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Eastman 2019, pp. 1-37; Malik 2020, pp. 79-126.

¹⁰⁹ Cooper 2005, p. 264.

¹¹⁰ The connection between the author of the correspondence's presentation of Paul and Paul's presentation of himself in First and Second Corinthians is discussed from a different perspective in Malherbe 2014 and Reydams-Schils 2022, pp. 341-2.

Paul tells his wayward Corinthian followers that he preaches οὐκ ἐν σοφίᾳ λόγου, ἵνα μὴ κενωθῇ ὁ σταυρὸς τοῦ χριστοῦ “not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power” (1 Cor. 1:17); that he ἦλθον οὐ καθ’ ὑπεροχὴν λόγου ἢ σοφίας καταγγέλλων ὑμῖν τὸ μαρτύριον τοῦ θεοῦ “did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:1); and that ὁ λόγος μου καὶ τὸ κήρυγμά μου οὐκ ἐν πειθοῖς σοφίας λόγοις [...] ἵνα ἡ πίστις ὑμῶν μὴ ᾔῃ ἐν σοφίᾳ ἀνθρώπων ἀλλ’ ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ “my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, [...] so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:4-5). Paul affirms that the wisdom he teaches οὐ τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου οὐδὲ τῶν ἀρχόντων τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου τῶν καταργουμένων “is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away” (1 Cor. 2:6). He explains that λαλοῦμεν οὐκ ἐν διδακτοῖς ἀνθρωπίνης σοφίας λόγοις ἀλλ’ ἐν διδακτοῖς πνεύματος “we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:13), and defends the supremacy of his gospel over those of other would-be apostles with the words, καὶ ἰδιώτης τῷ λόγῳ, ἀλλ’ οὐ τῇ γνώσει “Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge” (2 Cor. 11:6).

As will be seen in the next section, however, the author of the Seneca-Paul correspondence was not the only fourth-century writer to problematise this binary opposition between acquired human eloquence and divinely revealed knowledge and imagine what a more literate, sophisticated letter-writer could have achieved in the service of God.

3.4 Eusebius’ Creation of an “Epistolary Jesus” for the Version of the Abgar Legend Told in his *Ecclesiastical History*

As James Corke-Webster has shown, Eusebius reworks the apocryphal correspondence between Jesus and the Edessan king Abgar to address this very problem in his *Ecclesiastical History*.¹¹¹ The correspondence consists of a long letter sent by Abgar, ailing toparch of the city of Edessa, to Jesus, begging that the Son of God or God Himself - Abgar is unsure which Jesus is - travel all the way to Edessa on the eastern side of the Euphrates River to heal him, and a short letter sent by Jesus

¹¹¹ Corke-Webster 2017, pp. 568-75

in response (*HE* 1.13.6-10). In his reply to Abgar's letter, Jesus explains that he must remain in Jerusalem until he has fulfilled his mission but promises to send one of his disciples to Edessa ἵνα ἰάσηταί σου τὸ πάθος καὶ ζωήν σοι καὶ τοῖς σὺν σοὶ παράσχηται "to heal your suffering, and give life to you and those with you" after his ascension (*HE* 1.13.10). A supplementary account of the subsequent mission of Thaddaeus, one of the seventy disciples, to Edessa is also given by Eusebius (*HE* 1.13.11-22). Thaddaeus not only makes good on Jesus' promise to Abgar, healing the king with a mere touch of the hand, but converts the whole of Abgar's kingdom to Christianity by means of his miracle-working and preaching of the gospel (*HE* 1.13.11-22).

In a similar vein to Jerome, who speaks of being *provocant* "called upon" by the Seneca-Paul letters (*De Vir. Ill.* 12), Eusebius personifies the letters exchanged between Jesus and Abgar as if they themselves were capable of speech, prefacing his quotation of the letters with the statement (*HE* 1.13.5), οὐδὲν δὲ οἶον καὶ αὐτῶν ἐπακοῦσαι τῶν ἐπιστολῶν, ἀπὸ τῶν ἀρχαίων ἡμῖν ἀναληφθεισῶν καὶ τόνδε αὐτοῖς ῥήμασιν ἐκ τῆς Σύρων φωνῆς μεταβληθεισῶν τὸν τρόπον. "There is nothing like also hearing the letters themselves, taken up from the archives by me and translated in their own words from the Syriac tongue thus" (text from Lake 1926; trans. from Corke-Webster 2017). While the Jesus-Abgar correspondence "survives in early forms in the fourth/fifth-century Syriac *Teaching of Addai* (extant in a manuscript likely dating from 500 CE), and the late fourth-century diary of Egeria (*The Pilgrimage of Egeria* 17.1)", the reworked Greek version of the letters which Eusebius presents at the end of Book 1 of his *Ecclesiastical History* is in fact the earliest extant version.¹¹²

In comparing Eusebius' version of the letters with the Syriac version independently preserved in the *Teaching of Addai*, Corke-Webster has drawn attention to the ways in which Eusebius has deftly and subtly adapted the letters "to respond to elite concerns over the status of early Christians," particularly regarding "Jesus's perceived low status and lack of education."¹¹³ Whereas, in the Syriac version of the correspondence, Jesus is portrayed as dictating his response to Abgar's letter to a scribe, in Eusebius' version, Jesus is depicted not only as literate, a question which caused such controversy in the early church that an interpolation

¹¹² Corke-Webster 2017, p. 565.

¹¹³ Corke-Webster 2017, pp. 571-5.

demonstrating Jesus' ability to write was inserted in the third century into the Gospel of John, but also as a letter-writer and "correspondent of kings."¹¹⁴ The lowly origins and uneducated, unsophisticated character of Jesus and his followers were frequently cited by early critics of the church in support of the position that Christianity was a "religion of the lowest social strata."¹¹⁵ Corke-Webster argues that Eusebius' adaptation of the Jesus-Abgar correspondence is designed both to combat these attacks and "to rehabilitate Jesus's reputation in the eyes of fourth-century elites" and give them "a man for their times."¹¹⁶ He asserts that Eusebius' letter-writing Jesus "is no illiterate carpenter" - rather, "he is a writer, a member of that elite epistolary club whose methods of communication marked them as the Empire's movers and shakers."¹¹⁷

I suggest that the author of the Seneca-Paul correspondence's characterisation of Paul is similarly designed "to respond to elite concerns over the status of early Christians."¹¹⁸ Here, too, a lowly, uneducated preacher from the Eastern Mediterranean is drawn into conversation with an influential member of the pagan elite of his day and accorded a place among the "movers and shakers" who make up the Empire's "elite epistolary club."¹¹⁹ The Seneca-Paul correspondence likewise hits back against the claim that Jesus and his apostles only held sway with the poor, the ignorant and the ingenuous by presenting us with a highly educated admirer of Paul from the topmost stratum of imperial Roman society.

However, in contrast to Eusebius' "epistolary Jesus",¹²⁰ the Paul portrayed in the Seneca-Paul correspondence lacks the *maiestas* necessary to express his brilliant, divinely inspired ideas in a way that will appeal to the highly educated pagan statesmen and philosophers who populate Seneca's world (*ESP* 7.6-8). That this issue is accorded such a prominent place throughout the correspondence would seem to suggest that one of its author's aims was to encourage contemporary Christians to

¹¹⁴ Corke-Webster 2017, pp. 570-3.

¹¹⁵ Corke-Webster 2017, pp. 573-5.

¹¹⁶ Corke-Webster 2017, pp. 568-71.

¹¹⁷ Corke-Webster 2017, p. 575.

¹¹⁸ Corke-Webster 2017, p. 571. Karl Olav Sandnes likewise views the Seneca-Paul correspondence as part of a wider fourth-century literary response to the accusation that the core texts of the Christian church were culturally impoverished (2011, p. 236). In a similar vein, Gretchen Reydams-Schils suggests that the author of the letters calls upon Seneca "to help prevent the dismissal of Christianity merely on the grounds of a certain lack of sophistication, or to facilitate its effectiveness with the Roman cultural elite" (2022, p. 342).

¹¹⁹ Corke-Webster 2017, p. 575.

¹²⁰ Corke-Webster 2017, p. 571, p. 575, p. 578.

embrace the rhetorical techniques and stylistic sophistication of the classical Latin canon in order that they might match the loftiness of Christian ideas to an equally lofty form.¹²¹ The author of the correspondence chooses to convey this message in a singularly creative way; not by aligning Paul with Eusebius' "epistolary Jesus", but by exposing his shortcomings as a letter-writer and portraying him as receiving a "rhetorical-stylistic education"¹²² from a prominent teacher, letter-writer and philosopher of the Roman pagan elite. Consonantly, Seneca is, in turn, presented as receiving a spiritual education from the last apostle and soon-to-be martyr, Paul. The correspondence thus portrays Neronian Rome both as the backdrop against which Christianity first infiltrated the imperial household and the backdrop against which it first assimilated the technical, formal and stylistic knowledge of the great writers, rhetoricians and philosophers of Rome's pagan past. I will close this chapter with a brief discussion of how Seneca, in an attempt to translate Paul's road-to-Damascus experience into an idiom more familiar to the emperor, seizes on a well-known example of divine epiphany from Roman pagan historiography.

3.5 A Divine Epiphany from Rome's Distant Past: The Appearance of the Dioscuri to Vatienus

In the closing lines of Letter 7, Seneca writes of Nero's disbelief at the idea that a man as uneducated as Paul could be blessed with such divine inspiration (*ESP* 7.10-8)

Cui perlecto virtutis in te exordio, ista vox fuit: mirari eum posse ut qui non legitime imbutus sit taliter sentiat. Cui ego respondi solere deos ore innocentium effari, haut eorum qui praevaricare doctrina sua quid possint. Et dato ei exemplo Vatieni hominis rusticuli, cui viri duo adparuerunt in agro Reatino, qui postea Castor et Pollux sunt nominati, satis instructus videtur. Valete.

"When I had read to him about the origin of the power in you, he said that he could only wonder that a man who was not properly ingrained should be capable of such

¹²¹ Bocciolini Palagi 1985, pp. 13-6. See also Momigliano 1979, p. 21.

¹²² Bocciolini Palagi 1985, p. 16.

ideas. To which I answered that the gods are wont to speak through the mouths of the innocent, not of those who by virtue of their erudition are able to walk crookedly. I gave him the example of Vatienus, a simple countryman, to whom two men appeared in a field at Reate who afterwards are named as Castor and Pollux; with that he seems sufficiently instructed. Farewell” (text from Bocciolini Palagi 1985; trans. adapted from Römer 2003).

Here, Seneca adduces the story of the “simple countryman” Vatienus’ direct encounter with the Dioscuri in the aftermath of the Battle of Pydna (168 BCE), through which he learns that Rome has defeated King Perseus of Macedonia, as evidence that simple men like Paul have always been granted special knowledge by the gods (*ESP* 14.8). An account of the same epiphany is given, with some variation, by the Stoic speaker, Balbus, in the second book of Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum* (2.6). However, the way in which the story is framed in the Seneca-Paul correspondence speaks more to the Academic Cota’s incredulous response to the tale in Book 3 (*DND* 3.11).¹²³

Using almost the same collocation as Seneca does to describe Vatienus, here referred to by the variant name Vatinius, Cota asks Balbus how he can possibly believe that the gods Castor and Pollux, *quos Homerus, qui recens ab illorum aetate fuit, sepultos esse dicit Lacedaemone, eos tu cantheriis albis nullis calonibus ob viam Vatino venisse existimas et victoriam populi Romani Vatino potius homini rustico quam M. Catoni qui tum erat princeps nuntiavisse?* “whom Homer, who lived not long after their period, states to have been buried at Sparta, came riding on white hacks with no retainers, and met Vatinius, and selected a rough countryman like him to whom to bring the news of a great national victory, instead of Marcus Cato, who was the chief senator at the time?” (text and trans. from Rackham 1933; my underlining). It is implied that Nero is similarly nonplussed by Paul’s description of his encounter with the resurrected Christ. However, Seneca steps in to reassure the emperor by pointing out the historical continuity between the story of the countryman Vatienus’ encounter with the apotheosised Castor and Pollux in a field in central Italy and the story of the tentmaker Paul’s encounter with the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus.

¹²³ Cicero’s evaluation of the epiphany from multiple philosophical angles is discussed in Platt 2018, pp. 235-8 and Gartrell 2021, pp. 76-7, p. 117.

In the late-fourth-century moment in which the author of the correspondence was writing, the iconographic hallmarks which had traditionally denoted the Roman pagan cult of Castor and Pollux were being co-opted by emerging Christian cults like those of the “martyr twins” Damian and Cosmos and the apostles Peter and Paul, though worship of the Dioscuri proved difficult to stamp out, persisting well into the fifth century.¹²⁴ A late-fourth-century epigraphic poem composed by Pope Damasus I (366-84 CE) for installation in the Basilica Apostolorum on the Via Appia implicitly compares Peter and Paul to Castor and Pollux, honouring the apostles as Rome’s *nova sidera* “new stars.”¹²⁵

*hic habitasse prius sanctos cognoscere debes
nomina quisq(ue) petri pariter pauliq(ue) requiris.
discipulos oriens misit, quod sponte fatemur;
sanguinis ob meritum christumq(ue) per astra secuti
aetherios petiere sinus regnaque piorum:
roma suos potius meruit defendere cives.
haec damasus vestras referat nova sidera laudes.*

“You should know that holy men once dwelt here,
whoever you are who seek at the same time the names of Peter and Paul.
The East sent its apostles, a fact we freely acknowledge.
By virtue of their martyrdom - having followed Christ through the stars
they reached the heavenly asylum and the realms of the righteous -
Rome has earned the right to claim them as her own citizens.
These things Damasus wishes to relate in your praise, O new stars”
(text and trans. from Trout 2015).

The seven-verse poem, which Damasus wrote in Vergilian hexameters in order that it might prove both “aesthetically acceptable and conceptually challenging to Rome’s christianizing elite”, portrays Peter and Paul as taking on the iconographic attributes of the Dioscuri, “an earlier pair of apotheosized eastern heroes” who still held some

¹²⁴ Trout 2005, pp. 304-5, p. 313.

¹²⁵ Trout 2005, p. 304; Trout 2015, pp. 11-2, pp. 121-2. As Mark Humphries notes, it was over the course of Damasus’ papacy that “the cult of SS Peter and Paul was developed into a tool to help extend the influence of the Roman church” (1999, p. 54).

sway in fourth-century Rome.¹²⁶ The author of the Seneca-Paul letters' portrayal of Nero as taking comfort in this story, a story about the very gods whom Peter and Paul were, at the time of the correspondence's composition, already in the process of supplanting thus strikes a historically incongruent note, compelling the reader to reflect on the contemporary legacy of Paul's Roman mission, and the apostle's ultimate victory over Nero and the old pagan cults.

3.6 Conclusion

Despite the prevalence of the conception that the Seneca-Paul correspondence does not engage with or even touch upon issues of a philosophical or theological nature,¹²⁷ this chapter has shown that the seventh letter of the correspondence explores several interrelated questions of contemporary theological and political significance: the question of how the plain, unpolished style of the New Testament and the low social status of its authors ought to be explained to and repackaged for fourth-century Roman elites; the question of how much divine revelation is worth if the receiver lacks the training and instruction necessary to communicate the divine truth revealed to him in a compelling and persuasive way; and the question of how, and to what end, contemporary Christians ought to engage with the classical tradition. We have seen that the author of the correspondence recasts the biblical image of Paul in such a way as to emphasise the continuity between Rome's pagan past and Christian present and to counter the perception that the earliest followers of Christ were little more than uneducated zealots, portraying the apostle as finding a devoted friend and admirer among the Roman pagan elite and as receiving a rhetorical-stylistic education under his tutelage. This apologetic recasting of Paul finds a parallel in the apologetic recasting of Jesus in Eusebius' adaptation of the Jesus-Abgar correspondence, though the author of the Seneca-Paul letters engages more openly with the charge that Paul's letters are stylistically deficient by recruiting Seneca as a mouthpiece for the contemporary misgivings of classically educated Roman elites.

Seneca's juxtaposition of the grandeur of Paul's divine knowledge with the artlessness of his epistolary style gives rise to what Sandnes describes as "a

¹²⁶ Trout 2005, pp. 302-5.

¹²⁷ Sevenster 1961, p. 13; Fürst 1998, pp. 80-8; Römer 2003, p. 46; Smolak 2010, p. 226; Fürst 2014, pp. 213-4; Soldo 2023, p. 163.

theological construct [...] namely that God reveals hidden mysteries to simple people.”¹²⁸ Seneca demonstrates the universality of this “theological construct” by adducing the example of the simple pagan countryman Vatienuis, whom the Dioscuri were said to have blessed with divine knowledge in the aftermath of the Roman victory against Macedonia. However, the seventh letter of the correspondence ultimately suggests that the divine knowledge which Paul received through Christ’s revelation on the way to Damascus was not by itself sufficient to guarantee the success of his mission; to successfully spread the gospel among all the Gentiles in the world, Paul also needed to assimilate the rhetorical-stylistic knowledge of venerable pagan writers like Seneca.

¹²⁸ 2011, p. 237.

4 Final Conclusion

The fundamental point which has been made throughout this dissertation is that the Seneca-Paul correspondence is not an obscure and rarefied accretion of the Christian Senecan tradition, but rather the product of a particular set of historical circumstances, whose bearing on the ideas and assumptions we find in the correspondence can be elucidated by means of comparison with texts which were composed in the same fourth-century period. This is an intuitive point, but one which has not been made in the few in-depth studies of the correspondence which have been undertaken to date,¹²⁹ mainly due to the letters' perceived obscurity and lack of substance.

Over the course of this dissertation, the correspondence's historical premise, thematic focus, and portrayal of Paul, Seneca and Neronian Rome were compared with similar representations in other fourth-century texts, predominantly adaptations of lesser-studied historiographical and extracanonical works produced in Late Antiquity, such as Jerome's Latin version of Eusebius' *Canones* (§2.3-4), Pseudo-Linus' Latin adaptation of the third part of the *Acts of Paul* (§2.5), and Eusebius' Greek reworking of the Jesus-Abgar correspondence in Book 1 of his *Ecclesiastical History* (§3.4). The comparisons drawn in Chapter 2 demonstrated the Seneca-Paul letters' embeddedness in the wider fourth-century historiographical tradition inaugurated by Eusebius' *Canones*. This chapter also highlighted the significance of Jerome's additions to the *Canones* as a wellspring of information about how fourth-century Christians reconciled Roman pagan historiography with Christian martyrdom literature. The comparisons drawn in Chapter 3 revealed the correspondence's engagement with 1) contemporary theological issues relating to the revelatory nature of Paul's knowledge and his seeming contempt for the eloquence of classically educated Roman orators and 2) contemporary political issues relating to the growing need to update and recontextualise the biblical image of Christ and his apostles for a new elite demographic. This chapter also exposed the author of the correspondence's tendency to rely on his reader to infer the significance of events

¹²⁹ As discussed at the outset of this dissertation (§1.2), Bocciolini Palagi's 1985 introduction to and commentary on the correspondence are exceptional in this regard.

and issues to which he merely alludes on the basis of a pre-existing cultural discourse surrounding the later tyrannical phase of Nero's reign and Paul's place in it.

This research could be expanded upon in a number of ways. Firstly, it is clear that the Seneca-Paul correspondence stands in need of a thorough reappraisal in the light of the late-fourth-century context in which it was produced, since, as this dissertation has shown, the assumptions it makes about the historical relationship between Seneca, Paul and Nero are often not without precedent, appearing in different permutations in the fourth-century historiographical and Pauline martyrdom traditions. The author of the correspondence's apparent call to contemporary Christians to embrace the rhetorical-stylistic techniques of the classical tradition would repay comparison with texts not examined within the restricted scope of this dissertation, such as Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*.

Secondly, as discussed in Chapter 2, the complicated nature of the transmission and survival picture of Eusebius' *Canones* has deterred scholars from engaging with Jerome's Latin additions to the work, despite the valuable insight they offer into a crucial phase of Roman Christian identity formation. Further investigation into the nature and purpose of Jerome's additions would significantly enhance our understanding of how late-fourth-century Roman Christians saw both themselves and the Roman Empire in the grand scheme of salvation history, but would require a careful review of the methodology described in Burgess 2002 for distinguishing the Jeromian additions from Eusebius' original entries.

Finally, the politics of the Seneca-Paul correspondence also warrant closer scrutiny. In his recent study of how the Petrine and Pauline martyrdom traditions evolved during Late Antiquity, Eastman discusses how the Roman deaths of Peter and Paul became politicised in the late-fourth and early-fifth century as the ecclesiastical authority of Antioch and Jerusalem grew: "As the balance of power in the church shifted clearly toward the east, Roman authors sought to remind their readers and their rivals that Peter and Paul had not only preached together in Rome but had also died together in Rome. These authors were giving voice to the implications of the words of Tertullian, that the apostles "left the gospel sealed with their own blood" in Rome. [...] The rhetorical move of reemphasizing the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul served to remind Christians everywhere of the city's former authority and of the basis for that authority."¹³⁰ It could be argued that the

¹³⁰ 2019, pp. 35-7.

Seneca-Paul correspondence participates in the same political discourse, reinforcing not only Rome's claim to Paul but also signalling Christianity's claim, through Paul's relationship with Seneca, to the works of the great writers, rhetoricians and philosophers of Rome's pagan past.

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