



# Verse and Conversion: Poetship, Christianity, and the Transformation of the Roman World, AD 400-700

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**Verse and Conversion:**

**Poetship, Christianity, and the Transformation of the Roman World, AD 400-700**

A dissertation presented by

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to

The Department of the Classics

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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**Verse and Conversion:  
Poetship, Christianity, and the Transformation of the Roman World, AD 400-700**

Abstract

This dissertation presents a cultural history of Christian Latin poetic authorship from the late Roman through the post-imperial period. It analyzes the evolution of Latin verse-writing habits, authorial practices, and routines (i.e. “poetship”) within contemporary Christian discourses surrounding spiritual self-formation, self-presentation, and behavior, and in the context of social and political reconfigurations during the period of Roman imperial transition from roughly AD 400 to 700. In particular, the study explores how classical Latin poetry, which the Roman nobility used for centuries to encode and reproduce the culture of their class, came to function as a medium for the representation of holiness and the assertion of ascetic Christian identity, often constructed in fundamental opposition to traditional Roman systems of power, morality, and belief. Investigation reveals that efforts to integrate poetic practice within post-Roman Christian life often functioned paradoxically, representing conflicting desires to retain classical poetry as an instrument of authority and to subvert the traditional modes and images of power to which poetry was connected.

Individual case studies entail historically sensitive close readings of verse writers active in the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries: Sidonius Apollinaris, Avitus of Vienne, Venantius Fortunatus, the Visigothic king Sisebut, and Eugenius of Toledo. These examinations show that Christian poets operated with new ethical and political imperatives under barbarian and ecclesiastical regimes to transfigure verse writing on social and aesthetic levels into a mode of pious practice, and to produce creative visions of authorship that both mirrored and made cultural transformations in the post-imperial world. Some poets implicated their writing practices in contemporary ascetic movements by renouncing secular themes and formal features for

the sake of their souls; others described their religious poetry as the fulfillment of a sacred vow to God or the saints. Collectively, these cases open a window onto the development of interplay among poetic experimentation, shifting structures of regional power, and emergent spiritual practices, including ascetic conversion, Christian burial, and penance. Viewed in this light, the transformation of Christian Latin poetship appears not only as an intriguing moment in literary history, but as a cultural phenomenon with significant implications for the construction of early medieval society.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	viii
List of Abbreviations.....	xi
Chapter One: Verse and Conversion, Asceticism and Authorship: an Introduction.....	1
Chapter Two: Asceticism and Poetship in Post-Roman Gaul: Sidonius Apollinaris and Avitus of Vienne.....	47
Chapter Three: The Dead, Poets, and Society (I): Christian Latin Verse Epitaphic Habits to Post-Roman Late Antiquity.....	117
Chapter Four: The Dead, Poets, and Society (II): Venantius Fortunatus.....	160
Chapter Five: Clarifying the Eclipse: Sisebut, Isidore, and the Poetics of Power in Post-Roman Iberia.....	236
Chapter Six: The Voice of the Dead King Chindasuinth: Poetry, Politics, and the Discourse of Penance in Visigothic Spain.....	275
Bibliography.....	316

Read – Sweet – how others – strove –

Till we – are stouter –

What they – renounced –

Till we – are less afraid –

Emily Dickinson

*To Emily*



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## Abbreviations

<i>CCSL</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina</i>
<i>CSEL</i>	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i>
<i>ICERV</i>	<i>Inscripciones cristianas de la España romana y visigoda</i> (J. Vives ed., Barcelona, 1942)
<i>ILCV</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Ueteres</i> (E. Diehl ed., 3 vols. Berlin, 1924-31)
<i>MGH</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i>
<i>AA</i>	<i>Auctores Antiquissimi</i>
<i>SRL</i>	<i>Scriptores Rerum Langobardicarum et Italicarum</i>
<i>SRM</i>	<i>Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum</i>
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> (Migne ed.)
<i>PLRE</i>	<i>Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire</i> (Jones, Martindale and Morris eds.)
<i>TLL</i>	<i>Thesaurus Linguae Latinae</i>

## CHAPTER ONE

### VERSE AND CONVERSION, ASCETICISM AND AUTHORSHIP: AN INTRODUCTION

#### *Coming to conversion*

As the summer of 386 pressed into early autumn, the recently converted Augustine retired from Milan with several companions to a rural villa at Cassiciacum, northeast of the city. The purpose of the retreat, for Augustine, was to foster relaxation through prayer, reading, and philosophical discourse. One imagines a bucolic scene, ripe Italian apples weighing heavily on their boughs, as Augustine reaches for the metaphor of harvest to describe their activity there. It was a time for “gathering fruit from cultured recreation.”<sup>1</sup>

Aside from Monica, Augustine’s mother, the group consisted of educated Roman men. Together they devoured half a book of Virgil every night before dinner.<sup>2</sup> Their enterprise, while leisurely, was therefore regimented. It contained elements of discipline and seriousness. In addition to reading regularly, the participants resolved to record their conversations in writing to ensure the advancement of their thinking. From the notes taken during that short countryside stay Augustine produced four dialogues on imposing philosophical and theological problems, ranging from the challenges put to Christianity by Skepticism, to the nature of human interiority.<sup>3</sup>

At the outset, however, not every member of Augustine’s retinue was so committed to the philosophical program. The least interested groupmate was a novice poet named Licentius, the young son of an African friend and benefactor. Licentius was more passionate about poetry than philosophy. At Cassiciacum he whittled away at a poem about star-crossed lovers of lore, Pyramus and Thisbe, who notoriously inflamed their illicit romance by whispering to each other through a shared wall. One night, after failing to engage the

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *De ordine* 1.2.4, W.M. Green (ed.), *CCSL* 29 (Turnhout, 1970): “et quem fructum et liberali otio carpamus, hi te libri satis, ut opinor, edocebunt.”

<sup>2</sup> *De ordine*, 1.8.26. For an analysis of Augustine’s engagement with classical authors during this time, see J. Pucci, *Augustine's Virgilian Retreat: Reading the Auctores at Cassiciacum*. (Toronto, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> *Contra Academicos*, *De beata vita*, *De ordine*, and *Soliloquia*.

musing Licentius in a metaphysical discussion, Augustine complained that his friend's obsession with poetry had become a cause for concern. "I am annoyed that you are hounding after those verses of yours, singing and howling in every kind of meter, which raise between yourself and the truth a wall more massive than they try to erect between your lovers."<sup>4</sup>

According to Augustine's telling, the artfully framed rebuke was enough to wrench Licentius out of his distractedness and to provoke him to change his tune. Before long, a philosophical conversation ensued between them and their companion Trygetius on the problems of divine providence and the place of evil in God's ordered world. Elegantly, their discourse ended where it had begun, on the topic of Licentius's relationship to poetry, and not in aporia, but with a dramatic moment of personal epiphany. Licentius, already a Christian, experienced a conversion in miniature. He made an about-face in his stance toward verse. The young poet remarked, "Suddenly I have become uninterested in that metrical stuff. Something now has been elucidated for me by a different, far different light. Philosophy is more beautiful, I confess, than Thisbe, than Pyramus, than that Venus and Cupid, and such loves of every type."<sup>5</sup> Then, the text reports, he gave thanks to Christ. Augustine, meanwhile, delighted exuberantly in his interlocutor's change of mind.

The next morning Augustine and Licentius picked up their conversation where it had left off, and reflected on the nature and consequences of what Licentius had undergone. The young man admitted surprise at how deeply regretful and disturbed he had become in view of his former poetic practice. Just hours before, he had been completely absorbed by verse writing. "Already it grieves and shames me to return to [those trifles of my poetry]." The starkness and suddenness of his self-transformation led him to wonder, "Is this not conversion to God?"<sup>6</sup> Augustine confirmed Licentius's thinking. For him, and indeed for many Christians of

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<sup>4</sup> *De ordine*, 1.3.8: "Inritor, inquam, abs te uersus istos tuos omni metrorum genere cantando et ululando insectari, qui inter te atque ueritatem inmaniorem murum quam inter amantes tuos conantur erigere."

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* 1.8.21: "Pigrior sum ad illa metra subito effectus; alia, longe alia nescio quid mihi nunc luce resplenduit. pulchrior est philosophia, fateor, quam Thisbe, quam Pyramus, quam illa Venus et Cupido talesque omnimodi amores."

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 1.8.23: "iam redire ad eas piget et pudet [...] nonne hoc est uere in deum conuerti?"

the ever more Christianized late Roman empire, conversion had come to signify not a change in belief but a change of life, discipline, habit, routine.<sup>7</sup> The real question was not *whether* Licentius was experiencing conversion with regard to his poetic practice, but *what* that conversion might entail.

Augustine had one idea. He authorized the young poet to return to his craft, and even to continue composing the poem about Pyramus and Thisbe, but with a twist:

“Right when Pyramus would have done away with himself and [Thisbe] kill herself in turn upon him, as you were about to versify, in that very moment of pain, when it is fitting for your poem to be set more powerfully aflame, you have the choicest opportunity: prosecute against the bane of that foul desire and the injurious passions that cause those miserable things to happen. And then be completely lifted up in praise of pure and honest love, whereby beautifully virtuous souls gifted with learning are joined to understanding through philosophy, and not only escape true death, but also enjoy the happiest life.”<sup>8</sup>

Augustine’s suggestion speaks to a fundamental optimism about the possibility for harmony between Roman literary culture, its classical modes of discourse and pagan foundations, and Christianity. Resolution of Licentius’s apparent conflict of identity—classical poet and Christian philosopher—was possible. For Augustine, redeeming poetry required the subordination of traditional narrative and linguistic practices, along with poetic and aesthetic preferences, to the gospel truth. To write verse in alignment with and expressive of his conversion Licentius needed only to shift his poem’s scope, to interrupt its plot with a properly moralizing voice, to invoke philosophy as his muse, to update the myth’s idealized self-destruction with a new ethic of love.

Augustine and Licentius’s conversation over the relationship between poetic practice and spiritual practice was not unique. From the perspective of the history of ideas, Augustine’s proposed resolution marks

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<sup>7</sup> P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*. (Malden, MA, 2013), p. 225.

<sup>8</sup> *De ordine*, 1.8.24: “ubi se, inquam, Pyramus et illa eius super inuicem, ut cantaturus es, interemerint, in dolore ipso, quo tuum carmen uehementius inflammari decet, habes commodissimam oportunitatem. arripe illius foedae libidinis et incendiorum uenenatorum execrationem, quibus miseranda illa contingunt, deinde totus ad tollere in laudem puri et sinceri amoris, quo animae dotatae disciplinis et uirtute formosae copulantur intellectui per philosophiam et non solum mortem fugiunt uerum etiam uita beatissima perfruuntur.”

an interesting but unsurprising development in the fraught relationship between philosophy and poetry. It resonates with the Aristotelian contention that poetry (like tragedy) could be useful for moral instruction, and fits easily within a classical Latin tradition of didactic and satiric poetry.<sup>9</sup> But the episode becomes deeply intriguing, and indeed is more aptly understood, when viewed in the context of perhaps the most critical literary and cultural process of the late Roman empire—namely, the attempt to fuse classical Roman and Christian cultural identities and practices in a post-Constantinian world, in an empire united under a Christian leader, in a culture where secular and spiritual imperatives could ostensibly align.

This chapter seeks to provide basic context and construct a methodological frame for a literary history surrounding one aspect of this late antique cultural process: the development of Christian poetic practice.<sup>10</sup> It introduces a study focused on a fairly specific, but high-stakes problem in the history of Christian Latin verse. The question is of the relationship between Latin poetic authorial habits, practices, and routines—what I call poetship—and emergent Christian rituals and spiritual behaviors, including conversion (understood in late ancient terms as the rigorization of spiritual life), from the late Roman through the post-Roman period. Most interesting is the problem of how classicizing poetry, which the pagan Roman aristocracy built and used for centuries to encode, preserve, and reproduce the *doctrina et mores* of their class, came to function as a medium for the representation of holiness, and a discourse for the assertion of Christian identity and selfhood, which often stood in fundamental conflict with (and which were even constructed in purposeful opposition to) traditional Roman systems of power, morality, and belief.

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<sup>9</sup> For a compelling review of the tensions between poetry and philosophy in western thought, see R. Barfield, *The Ancient Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry*. (Cambridge, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> For a good overview of late antique literary history and literary historical methods, see D. Shanzer, “Literature, History, Periodization, and the Pleasures of the Latin Literary History of Late Antiquity”, *History Compass* 7.3, (2009), pp. 917-954. Among the classic literary historical studies of early Christian Latin poetry are: J. Fontaine, *Naissance de la poésie dans l'occident chrétien: esquisse d'une histoire de la poésie latine chrétienne du IIIe au VIe siècle*. (Paris, 1981), and F.J.E. Raby, *A History of Christian-Latin Poetry from the Beginnings to the Close of the Middle Ages*. (Oxford, 1927).



This last point describes a combined historical and poetic phenomenon whose observation requires an unusually hybridized point of view, a critical vantage point from which one may scrutinize poetic texts as both a historian and a literary critic. To understand the cultural operations of Christian poetship in a changing Roman world, one must appreciate the domains and disciplines of power in which poetry functioned, as well as the intricacies of the textual art itself. Paradoxically, this requires the application of both constructive and deconstructive methods of interpretation.

This critical challenge has been articulated and met in recent years by late antique and medieval literary scholars and historians well-versed in postmodernist aesthetic and social theory.<sup>11</sup> Borrowing from one such scholar, Gabrielle Spiegel, I refer to my protocol for analyzing Christian Latin poetic texts as a search for their “social logic.” As a mode of literary historical inquiry, it entertains aesthetic questions of textual form and design, and probes the social and material conditions of texts’ production and consumption. Indeed, this approach explores the interconnectedness of these two spheres when possible, seeking to explain how “the purely aesthetic character of a work can be related to the social world from which it emerges.”<sup>12</sup> In adopting this methodology I ally myself with a cadre of medieval and Romance philologists, originating no later than with Curtius and Auerbach, interested in the sociology of literature.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> To cite a few influential pieces: M. Mullett, “New Literary History and the History of Byzantine Literature” in P. Odorico and P. Agapitos (eds.) *Pour une "nouvelle" histoire de la littérature byzantine: problèmes, méthodes, approches, propositions*. Actes du Colloque International Philologique, Nicosie, Chypre, 25-28 Mai 2000. (Paris, 2002), pp. 37-60; I. Nelson, *Lyric Tactics: Poetry, Genre, and Practice in Later Medieval England*. (Philadelphia, 2017), pp. 1-30; W. Pohl, “Strategies of Identification—A Methodological Profile” in G. Heydemann and W. Pohl (eds.) *Strategies of Identification: Ethnicity and Religion in Early Medieval Europe* (Turnhout, 2013), pp. 1-64; G. Spiegel, *The Past as Text: the Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography*. (Baltimore, 1997); L. Van Hoof and P. Van Nuffelen (eds.), “The Social Role and Place of Literature in the Fourth Century AD” in *Literature and Society in the Fourth Century AD: Performing Paideia, Constructing the Present, Presenting the Self*. (Leiden, 2015), pp. 1-15; M. Vessey, “Literacy and Litteratura, AD 200-800.” *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* NS 13 (New York, 1992), pp. 139-160.

<sup>12</sup> Spiegel, *The Past as Text*, p. xviii. For a conceptually parallel argument, see Vessey, “Literacy and Litteratura,” p. 146: “the social-historical or contextual approach to literacy...ought to be matched by a corresponding literary-historical or “compositional” initiative on the part of specialists in early Christian and late antique literature: only when the two approaches are combined should we expect to understand both how texts made communities and why those communities made the texts they did.”

<sup>13</sup> E. Auerbach. *Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*. R. Manheim (trans.), (Princeton, 1993); and E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. W. Trask (trans.). (Princeton, 1973). The current study is

My efforts to describe the social logic of late Roman and post-Roman Christian Latin poetry have led me to implement elements of Foucauldian “discourse” theory, which invites critics to consider the social networks, dynamics of power, constellations of symbols, and “regimes of truth” that generate and control meaning.<sup>14</sup> Pinning down the elusive and expansive concept of discourse proves difficult for even the most theoretically astute scholars. For some, “Discourse is conceived to be the impersonal medium through which thought occurs...A focus on discourse then reintroduces the world of language, symbols, and meanings without making them anyone-in-particular’s meanings.”<sup>15</sup> For others, discourse always refers to self- and culture-forming functions of power: “[Discourses] distribute the effects of power...As power disperses itself...it constitutes entire domains of action, knowledge, and social being by shaping the institutions and disciplines in which...we largely make ourselves. In these domains we become the individuals, the subjects, that they make us.”<sup>16</sup> From either angle, the transformation of the Roman world appears as a fascinating era of discursive history because of the strong and manifold fluxes of power that took place within it. The writings that have survived imperial collapse and state reconfiguration are indelibly imprinted on by such shifts in power, meaning, and belief. My interest is in showing how certain Christian poetic texts, especially those that involve overt strategies of authorial self-presentation, are laden with signs of conflict, contradiction, and paradox from these redistributions and reconfigurations, which may help historians reconstruct the transformative processes that shaped society, culture, and selfhood in Late Antiquity.

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influenced by Curtius’ excursions on a “History of the Theory of Poetry” (pp.468-486), aimed at tracing “the concept of the nature and function of the poet and of poetry, in distinction from poetics, which has to do with the technique of poetic composition.”

<sup>14</sup> See esp. M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. (London, 1989); “Truth and Power” in C. Gordon (ed. and trans.) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. (Brighton, 1980), pp. 109-133; “What is an Author?” in J. Faubion (ed.), R. Hurley et al. (trans.), *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*. (New York, 1994), pp. 205-222.

<sup>15</sup> A. Swidler, “What Anchors Cultural Practices?” in T. Schatzki, K. Knorr-Cetina, and E. von Savigny (eds.) *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*. (London, 2001), pp. 83-101.

<sup>16</sup> P. Bové, “Discourse” in F. Lentricchia and T. McLaughlin (eds.) *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. (Chicago, 1995), pp. 50-65:58.

Relatedly, cultural history and anthropology have contributed to my thinking by way of “practice theory.” This school of thought conceptualizes culture as activity (*praxis*, what people do) in dialectical interaction with structure (the social world) and discourse (the medium through which ideas and action acquire significance).<sup>17</sup> As a critical mode, it discourages “anti-humanist” modes of analysis, which rope off texts and other cultural artifacts from their social environments, or ignore the relationship between language and human agency. Practice approaches see writing and other instantiations of discursive behavior as both mirroring and generating the characteristics of subjectivity and social life.<sup>18</sup> Historians and critics are therefore impelled to ask about the types of routines or practices a text may implement and impose, and about the social structures or ideological commitments it may enforce.<sup>19</sup> Practice theory provides this study with a workable idiom for describing how the endeavors of poets pertain to the extra-literary, to institutional changes and identity conversions of the late and post-Roman world.

One central goal of this dissertation is to chart changes to the “grammar” of discourse surrounding Christian Latin poetry in Late Antiquity. I wish to clarify how the rules of communication about poetry changed across western Christian communities from the fourth to the seventh century, and to consider how those changes correlate to shifts in political power in the aftermath of empire. Another goal is to answer the question of how late antique poetic discourse related to social life, and particularly spiritual life, with a focus on the actual writing of verse. My study asks how and why poetship functioned together with developing

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<sup>17</sup> Current practice theory emerged among scholars who wished to refine and merge objectivist/structuralist and subjectivist/symbolic approaches to culture. See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*—an internalized system of dispositions, constitutive of culture, through which people may act, think, and feel in ways consistent with the limits of structure—in *The Logic of Practice*. R. Nice (trans.), (Stanford, 1990). For excellent explications of the development of practice theory, see S. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*. (Durham, 2006), pp. 1-18, and pp. 107-154; and Swidler, “What anchors cultural practices?”

<sup>18</sup> I rely on Ortner’s notion of subjectivity as “the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, and fear that animate acting subjects... as well as the cultural and social formations that shape, organize, and provoke those modes of affect, thought, and so on”—*Anthropology and Social Theory*, p. 107.

<sup>19</sup> See S. Greenblatt, “Culture” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, pp. 225-232: esp. 226.

religious activities, rituals, and experiences (like conversion) as compound cultural practices in the late and post-Roman West. At the same time, it attempts to gauge the impact of experiments in spiritual verse writing on the transfiguration of power and culture writ large.<sup>20</sup>

This introduction illustrates the problematic development of Christian poetry with episodes from the late-fourth century. But ensuing chapters will pursue the proposed lines of inquiry with a concentration on the transformation of Christian Latin poetship after the fall of the Western Roman empire. In the first chapter, for example, I trace a line of poets in post-Roman Gaul, connected both by interpersonal relationships and literary influence. Paradoxically, these poets renounced forms of poetic writing in verse. I show how their self-contradicting poetry was implicated socially and intellectually in prominent ascetic movements of the late-fifth and early-sixth century. Subsequent investigations follow the evolution of ascetic poetship in Merovingian Gaul and Visigothic Spain. There I demonstrate the development of a deep interplay between experimental verse writing, shifting structures of power, and emergent spiritual practices, such as penance, Christian burial, and worship in martyr cults.

These avenues of investigation lead primarily through two adjacent conceptual territories that have been under-explored by classical philologists working in Late Antiquity: asceticism and authorship. At this juncture, I wish to examine in detail both of these concepts from historical and theoretical angles, beginning with asceticism, to show how they can help illuminate the problems laid out above regarding the transformation of Latin poetship. Later, after having assembled these parts of the study's interpretive frame, I will refocus the argument on poetry, and return to Licentius's fluctuating relationship with verse writing.

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<sup>20</sup> For a fascinating investigation of poetic discourse, with similar theoretical undergirding, in a separate historical and cultural context, see L. Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. (Berkeley, 1986).

The history and theory of asceticism looks like promising terrain in view of a desire to explore post-Roman cultural transformation and changing practices of poetic writing. Concurrent with the progressive dissipation of the western empire and the emergence of successor states, asceticism took on a more prominent profile within the Church.<sup>21</sup> Under the leadership of religious leaders within barbarian kingdoms, the cult of saints, for example, became a mainstream phenomenon. Participating Christians from all classes approached martyrs and ascetic hermits—figures made famous by their extreme commitments of faith—as holy heroes. At the same time, monasticism gained a surer foothold in the West as individuals such as John Cassian in the fifth century and Martin of Braga in the seventh imported eastern practices of communal asceticism to Europe, and as Irish missionaries led by Columbanus established coenobitic foundations on the continent. All over Gaul, Italy, and Spain, monasteries increased in number, population and visibility. While some of the most influential sites of the time were planted in remote wilderness, on islands and mountain-tops, to cordon off their members from secular life, most were never truly detached from commerce with the outside world. For instance, in the fifth century Gallic bishoprics were consistently staffed with former monks trained in nearby coenobitic centers.

Asceticism therefore infiltrated deeply into late Roman and post-Roman society, and significantly altered ideas about and pragmatic approaches to community and self. Peter Brown has persuasively argued that the cultural and religious changes linked to increased ascetic practice were not doctrinally motivated. “[They were] based, rather, on a profound change in the imagination. The result was nothing less than a new view of sin, of atonement, and of the other world, which in turn, laid the basis of a distinctive notion of the

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<sup>21</sup> For a classic analysis of this movement, see P. Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian*. (Oxford, 1978). See also, Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*, pp. 219-247; M. Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism from the Desert Fathers to Early Middle Ages*. (Malden, MA, 2000); R. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*. (Cambridge, 1990); and F. Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich: Kultur und Gesellschaft in Gallien, den Rheinlanden und Bayern am Beispiel der monastischen Entwicklung (4. bis 8. Jahrhundert)* (Wien, 1965).

individual person.”<sup>22</sup> A burgeoning culture of asceticism in the late Roman and post-Roman world both indicated and inaugurated changes to the Roman Christian metaphysical worldview, and altered rules and habits of self-formation by stressing the spiritual stakes of every thought, word, and action. At their core, ascetic practices were motivated and structured by a belief in self-transformation.<sup>23</sup> Ascetic movements involved the rearrangement of ideology, institution, and practice to accommodate the installation of new subjectivities, new modes of being and personhood—that is, to support the process of individual conversion.<sup>24</sup> In the realm of Christianity, the rise of ascetic conversion as a cultural phenomenon and spiritual experience was implicated in “the decisive break” between the ancient practice of the faith and what ensued in the Middle Ages.

Wealthy, educated Romans were among the most affected by the evolution of imagination and techniques of self-actualization prompted by asceticism. From the late-fourth century, western monasteries began to attract handfuls of novices from the established aristocracy. But why? In his magisterial *Through the Eye of a Needle*, Brown persuasively describes this movement in economic terms as a moment of ideological and material divestment out of the empire and investment into the increasingly powerful Church.<sup>25</sup> There were, however, other mobilizing factors besides the changing ideology of wealth. In the words of Geoffrey Harpham: “The answer cannot be merely that Christianity promised ‘treasure in heaven’ to its converts, but rather that it offered a present-tense response to an increasingly nagging sense of sterility, endlessness, and *ennui* in the pagan ideology of self-formation.”<sup>26</sup> Put another way, asceticism offered practitioners a way to

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<sup>22</sup> *Rise of Western Christendom*, p. 221.

<sup>23</sup> See E. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity*. (Princeton, 1999), p. 17; and S. Elm, *Virgins of God: the Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*. (Oxford, 1994), pp. 13-14.

<sup>24</sup> An exceptionally straightforward explanation of asceticism’s means and ends, phrased in clear late ancient terms, may be found in John Cassian’s *Conferences*, 1.2-4.

<sup>25</sup> P. Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD*. (Princeton, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> G. Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*. (Chicago, 1987), p. 41.

unsettle the stagnant pools of their own self-conceptions and culturally- and institutionally-ingrained ways of being.

It would be a mistake to confuse the ascetic focus on the self should for a solipsistic discipline. Ascetics made waves of outreach, evermore so as the imperial grip over provincial Romans' imaginations and identities weakened. For example, in the fifth century Eucherius of Lyon, an early settler in the ascetic community of Lérins (an island off the coast of modern France), tried to draw in one of his still-secular kinsman. He did so by writing a treatise that pointed out, in part, how unreliable imperial institutions were in their judgement and formation of character. The bureaucratic system frequently confused the deserving and the undeserving. Instead of promoting good men of real merit, it tended to honor bad men—those who had let their ambitions determine their principles, and not the other way around. Eucherius invited his correspondent to countenance an alternative, better way of life in which his education and interests would still be valid: “Rejecting the precepts of worldly philosophy...why don’t you apply your mind to drinking up the study of the Christian dogma?” he pleaded. “Leave those others things behind now, and convert yourself to the study of our men and their literature.”<sup>27</sup>

The drive to enact forms of spiritual rebellion among educated Christians was energized by a growing fascination with learned Christian authors like Augustine and Paulinus of Nola (whom Eucherius singled out as a figure to imitate). These forerunners had attained to celebrity status by acting in stark contrast to the expectations of their class, by renouncing wealth and positions of civic power while the empire was still flourishing, and by writing about their experiences in prose and verse. Asceticism therefore offered educated, wealth-holding Romans new and attractive investment prospects in the material sense, and fresh opportunities for spiritual growth, with robust intellectual role models to follow.

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<sup>27</sup> *De contemptu mundi*, S. Pricoco (ed. and trans.), *Eucherio di Lione: Il rifiuto del mondo*. (Florence, 1990), p. 104, lines 693ff and p. 106, line 723: “Quin tu repudiatis illis philosophorum praeceptis...ad imbibenda Christiani dogmatis studia animum adiciis? ...Omitte iam illas...atque ad studia te nostrorum et scripta converte.”

In the post-Roman West, disruption to social infrastructures triggered acute crises of identity for an even wider swathe of Roman Christians. Robbed of the traditional prospects of a career in the imperial bureaucracy, and uninterested in some of the more militarized alternatives offered within emerging barbarian kingdoms, many literarily-trained men were persuaded to adopt an exacting Christian life.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, institutional upheaval affected family structures and planning. For instance, this period saw an influx of aristocratic women undertaking ascetic careers, many as “virginal daughters” who cohabited in social isolation with members of their kin, some ascetic, some not.<sup>29</sup> These radical responses to changing social environments were generated not only by conviction in evangelical calls for dramatic shows of faith, the allure of new positions of power within the Church, or material constraints on aristocratic domestic life, but also by a cultural impulse to rebel against and transcend the hackneyed visions of elite Roman selfhood, mired in traditions of pompous civic service and self-indulgent *otium*, in obsessions with wealth and rank.<sup>30</sup> It is no surprise that traditional literary culture, authorial techniques, and modes of expression transformed as a result.

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Here it will be productive to take a step back. Before we can begin to examine our ultimate object—changes to poetic authorship—through the lens of an ascetic cultural movement, it will be important to explore some more basic theoretical questions about asceticism itself. What is asceticism exactly? How does it function, and how is it structured within culture?

In the ancient world *askêsis*, or “discipline,” circulated as a word to denote the regimens of self-restraint undertaken by certain philosophers “to maintain their equanimity or free the soul from bodily

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<sup>28</sup> P. Heather, “Literacy and Power in the Migration Period,” in A. Bowman and G. Woolf (eds.), *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*. (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 177-97.

<sup>29</sup> Elm, *Virgins of God*, *passim*; see esp. pp. 374-385.

<sup>30</sup> For an influential analysis of the culture of *otium* among the late Roman aristocracy, see J. Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court, AD 364-425*. (Oxford, 1975), esp. pp. 1-12.



attachments.”<sup>31</sup> Subsequently, the term gained special Christian valences, which signaled sustained commitments to sexual abstinence most of all. In both contexts, however, *askêsis* entailed some concept of “spiritual exercises [i.e.] inner activities of the thought and the will.”<sup>32</sup>

Taking broad cultural-historical views, Richard Valantasis and the aforementioned Harpham have separately attempted to explain the mechanics of asceticism with the help of postmodern theory. Both basically define asceticism as a mode or discipline of self-transformative practice that operates through expressions of opposition to prevalent forms of power. Thus Valantasis: “Ascetic reality is by definition a resistant reality within a dominant system. This means that the ascetical universe always operates in the presence of other universes, and, therefore, it is always consciously developed and maintained as an opposing force.”<sup>33</sup> Harpham has more abstractly described asceticism as “the ‘cultural’ element in culture,” a way of being that brings awareness to culture “by structuring an opposition between culture and its opposite.”<sup>34</sup>

A form of practice theory in its own right, asceticism relies on a strong notion of human agency and belief in the empowering force of self-denial to initiate change within and without. It generates conflict with prevailing institutions and ideologies primarily by difficult acts of abstention and renunciation. According to Valantasis’s persuasive view, the ascetic practitioner functions as a *performer* of opposition to the dominant culture. Her goal is to transform not only her inner-self (or subjectivity) by these performances of self-

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<sup>31</sup> P. Rousseau and M. Edwards, “Asceticism”, in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (2016). Retrieved from <http://classics.oxfordre.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-847>.

<sup>32</sup> For a history, see P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. A. Davidson (ed.) and M. Chase (trans.). (Malden, MA, 1995), pp. 126-44:128. See also, A. Rouselle, *Porneia: on Desire and the Body in Antiquity*. F. Pheasant (trans.). (New York, 1988).

<sup>33</sup> R. Valantasis, “Constructions of Power in Asceticism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 63.4 (1995), pp.775-821:812.

<sup>34</sup> *The Ascetic Imperative*, pp. xi-xiii.

cancellation (e.g. fasting, celibacy, vows of silence), but to alter her social relations through them as well, and to articulate new matrices of meaning in which she and her peers can make sense out of their experience.<sup>35</sup>

One question pertinent to this study, then, will be how ascetic performances function in literary environments, and specifically in the theater of poetic writing. What did the oppositional performances of ascetic writers entail? And what did they mean? These questions as phrased may prompt certain objections that will be productive to address in the first place.

Some classicists and late Roman historians may be suspicious of a paradigm that uses terms of conflict to describe the dynamics of late antique literature and culture. Formerly dominant “conflict models” of literary history, which described early Christian classicizing literature as attempts to upend or silence pagan predecessors, are now viewed as reductionist or simply wrong by most critics, who rightfully see intentional negotiation and compromise between Christian authors, readers, and classical culture.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, late ancient historiographers are still dealing with the fallout from Gibbon’s narrative of imperial collapse, whose epilogue relates “the triumph of barbarism and religion,” a defeat of the Roman cultural tradition. The current consensus is that “transformation” makes for a better description of the events leading up to the dissolution of the western empire and of the political reconfigurations that followed.<sup>37</sup> And indeed, philologists and

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<sup>35</sup> “Constructions of Power in Asceticism,” p. 797, and for the idea of “textualized performance,” p. 799. In the same vein, the classic article on the anthropology of verbal performance is R. Bauman, “Verbal Art as Performance,” *American Anthropologist*, 77.2 (1975), pp. 290-311.

<sup>36</sup> For thoughtful meditations on these and related issues, see M. Formisano, “Towards an Aesthetic Paradigm of Late Antiquity,” *Antiquité Tardive* 15 (2007), pp. 277-284; R. Herzog, “Exegese-Erbauung-Delectatio: Beiträge zu einer christlichen Poetik der Spätantike” in P. Habermehl (ed.) *Spätantike: Studien zur römischen und lateinisch-christlichen Literatur* (Göttingen, 2002), pp. 155-178; and M. Mastrangelo, “Toward a Poetics of Late Latin Reuse” in J. Pucci and S. McGill (eds.), *Classics Renewed: Reception and Innovation in the Latin poetry of Late Antiquity*. (Heidelberg, 2016), pp. 28-45: esp. 31-40. To give one specific literary example of compromise in operation, consider the late antique construction of “open texts”, such as Proba’s *Cento*, which involves the rearrangement of Virgilian verses to form a biblical narrative. Such a text “creates a series of meanings that are purposefully and intentionally fluid” and therefore forces the reader to negotiate a compromised interpretation from among its classical and Christian components—see A. Peltarri, *The Space that Remains: Reading Latin Poetry in Late Antiquity*. (Ithaca, 2014), 73-114:113.

<sup>37</sup> For succinct discussion, see Shanzer, *Literature, History, Periodization*, p. 918.

historians have uncovered countless interesting manipulations and preservations of Roman culture within the post-Roman Church and barbarian kingdoms to support their arguments for continuity and compromise.

Nevertheless, I would offer a two-pronged answer to doubts about the pertinence or viability of an ascetic-conflict model in interpreting late antique Christian poetry. First, it would be misguided to deproblematize completely the synthesis of Christian and classical literary practices. Alan Cameron, for example, has argued that mythological subjects were of no concern to late Roman Christian writers. “None but a few extremists gave its pagan associations a thought.”<sup>38</sup> But this argument ignores overwhelming evidence, especially in Christian poetry, for anxiety over the classical mythical aspects of Latin literary craft. A swarm of late and post-Roman Christian poets vowed in their texts to disengage with the Muses and Apollo, pagan gods of inspiration.<sup>39</sup> Cameron has also argued against the conflictual motivations of some classicizing Christian experiments in verse. Whereas Juvenius, the first bible epicist in Latin, began his hexameter poem by contrasting his efforts to versify the gospel truth with the fallacious pagan poets, Cameron blunts the critical point of such rhetoric. “The notion that the Christian biblical paraphrases might be polemical is rendered doubtful by the occasional secular examples,” he contends, referring to the existence of contemporary verse paraphrases of Platonic dialogues.<sup>40</sup> But this argument prioritizes the interpretive value

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<sup>38</sup> A. Cameron, *Claudian: Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius*. (Oxford, 1970), p. 199. Similarly, see M. Roberts, *The Jeweled Style: Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity*. (Ithaca, 1989), p. 147: “Christian piety and secular literary preferences are woven together in a seamless web that manifests the unproblematic assimilation of the two traditions in [poets’] own creative imaginations.”

<sup>39</sup> Paulinus of Nola, *Carm.* 10.19-46; Juvenius, 1.25-7; Prudentius, *Cath.* 3.26-30; Sidonius, *Carm.* 16.1-5; Venantius Fortunatus, *Mart. Praef.* 37-40; Boethius, *Cons.* 1.1.26-41. For these citations and similar arguments about anxiety over poetry in Christian discourse, see J. Elsner and J. Hernández Lobato, “Introduction”, in Elsner and Lobato (eds.), *The Poetics of Late Latin Literature*. (Oxford, 2017), pp. 1-22:5, n.11; and W. Evenepoel, “The Place of Poetry in Latin Christianity”, in A. Hilhorst and J. den Boeft (eds.), *Early Christian Poetry: A Collection of Essays*. (Leiden, 1993), pp. 35-60.

<sup>40</sup> A. Cameron, “Poetry and Literary Culture in Late Antiquity”, in S. Swain and M. Edwards (eds.), *Approaching Late Antiquity: The Transformation from Early to Late Empire*. (Oxford, 2004), pp. 1-34:22; and see Juvenius, *Praef.* 15-18, in *Evangeliorum Libri IV*. J. Huemer (ed.). *CSEL* 24. (Prague, 1891).

of form over cultural and ideological context to a point of absurdity. Projects undertaken in the same style, medium, and linguistic register often have very different ideological undergirding and goals.

In truth, efforts to resolve the tensions between traditionally secular Roman practices (like writing metrical love poetry, in Licentius's case) and Christian spiritual practices comprise the very essence of late antique Latin literature. Whitewashing cultural conflict causes readers to miss this essence. Jas Elsner and Jesús Hernández Lobato have argued in similar terms that "Late Latin literature is an extraordinary composite of two qualities—homage to a glorious literary culture, deeply appreciated, and resistance to its fundamental pagan underpinnings."<sup>41</sup> From the turn of the fourth century this paradigm of homage and resistance to, and acceptance and rejection of classical Romanness and Christianity structured a vast architecture of cultural practice. Poetry was particularly affected by these two competing imperatives. Abandoning the verse form—an established instrument of power in the Roman imperial world—was not the primary instinct for many educated Roman Christians. Nevertheless, for its pagan connotations and traditions, classical verse writing remained a "charged" and problematic activity.<sup>42</sup> Late Latin poetry therefore retained the capacity for expressing cultural conflict, and Christian poets especially remained self-reflexively involved in resituating their craft within the shifting literary landscape of the late Roman period.

The second prong of my rebuttal to objections to an ascetic-conflict framework involves further refinement of the notion of ascetic performance. It is true that some ascetic subjects challenged the dominant secular culture by comprehensive and antagonistic acts of abstention. St. Anthony's complete renunciation of wealth and concomitant retreat into the desert (where according to his biographer he lived for a time within a tomb) makes for the most famous example of this black-and-white type of ascetic existence. But while his life served as a prominent example for Christian hermits across the Mediterranean, his intense and alienating

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<sup>41</sup> "Introduction", *Poetics of Late Latin Literature*, p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Evenepoel, "The Place of Poetry in Latin Christianity", p. 38.

form of ascetic practice was not the only one available. Other modes of asceticism, many of them monastic, incorporated elements of mainstream culture, such as routines of work and leisure, and operated in more open negotiation with prevailing institutions of power.

Harpham and Valantasis have accounted for this plurality of practice in their theories. Harpham defines “eremitism” as a system of ascetic practice that strives for otherworldliness through strict dissociation from established social customs, norms, and behaviors. Practitioners work almost combatively against the dominant culture to transform themselves into the starkest symbols of opposition to it.<sup>43</sup> Often, as in Anthony’s case, this dissociation may be represented in hagiography by saints fighting battles against demonic forces tempting them with the allures of worldly life. Performers of “coenobitism,” on the other hand, recognize the value of certain elements of secular structure and behavior, such as the organization of family, or notions of convention and routine, but they endeavor to perfect such “worldlinesses”, and to assimilate them faultlessly into their lives.<sup>44</sup>

Valantasis describes the intricacies of this second mode more broadly and in other terms as the “integrative model” of asceticism.

In this type of subjectivity the ascetic subject remains substantially the same as the socially constructed subject of the dominant culture, but through asceticism, or religious experiences, or initiations and ritual observances, or any other sort of planned exercise, the ascetic subject achieves a transformation or enlightenment that enhances and enriches the subject's life within the dominant culture. In the integrative model the emphasis remains on the development and maturing of the subject over a period of time without a strong bifurcation of old and new subjectivities, without setting up a conflict between old and new identities, but while encouraging the growth and development of the subject into a more perceptive or aware mode of existence.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative*, p. 20. See also the complementary notion of the “combative subject” in Valantasis, “Constructions of Power in Asceticism”, p. 802: “Strong opposites define [the combative subject’s] transformation and his acquiring of virtue/power as an ascetic: the city and the desert, the outer desert and the inner desert, the monastery and the mountain, God and Satan, virtue and vice, angels and demons.”

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> “Constructions of Power in Asceticism”, p. 803.

The twin concepts of coenobitism and integrative asceticism allow us to see concession alongside conflict in the ascetic's toolkit of transformation. Put another way, late ancient asceticism operated on a spectrum of "homage and resistance" towards the practices and traditions of the dominant cultural system, which was rooted most firmly in the institutions of the Mediterranean-wide empire and in the symbols and skills of the classical tradition. Literary critics suspicious of the claims of stark "conflict models" of interpretation ought to be appeased by this notion of negotiated asceticism.

*A poetic performance of ascetic identity: Paulinus of Nola to Ausonius of Bordeaux*

To help ground these assertions of ascetic theory in late antique reality, and to place them in the theater of poetry, let us consider the following case involving the poet Paulinus of Nola, who plainly used a spectrum of renunciatory practices to define and perform his own ascetic identity. In 393 Paulinus was in Spain when he received a dossier of long-lost letters from his friend, former tutor, and fellow poet, the imperial courtier Ausonius of Bordeaux. The contents were not all friendly. Ausonius's missives were provocative and caustic, even accusatory toward Paulinus, who had been out of touch for years.<sup>46</sup> Paulinus's absence disturbed his friend, who apparently could not fathom how a former high-ranking bureaucrat and talented *littérateur* could abandon the pinnacled life of *otium ruris* and become indifferent to, if not contemptuous of the aristocratic world.<sup>47</sup> To Paulinus's eye, however, Ausonius had completely misunderstood his time away. In the intervening years Paulinus had ridden a sinusoidal wave of spiritual experience through his baptism into Christianity, the untimely deaths of a child and brother, and a formative meeting with the alluring ascetic Martin of Tours. He was in fact a year away from being ordained and publicly committing himself to ascetic

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<sup>46</sup> This exchange has received abundant commentary. For the definitive account, see D. Trout, *Paulinus of Nola: Life, Letters, and Poems*. (Berkeley, 1999), pp. 67-89. An analysis equally influential for this study has been C. Conybeare, *Paulinus Noster: Self and Symbols in the Letters of Paulinus of Nola*. (Oxford, 2000), pp. 147-157. For Ausonius' side of the dialogue, see XXVII. *Epistulae* 21-24; with relevant text and helpful commentary in R. Green (ed.), *The Works of Ausonius*. (Oxford, 1991), pp. 222-231, and 647-649.

<sup>47</sup> Paulinus had served as *consul suffectus* in 378, and as governor of Campania in 381.

life when he picked up the pen to reply to Ausonius. As one prominent reader has remarked, his famous poetic rejoinders “vividly express the anxieties of a man groping toward the reconceptualization of his life.”<sup>48</sup>

It will suffice to scrutinize the first of these poems, for it shows Paulinus clearly hashing out the implications of a change of worldview for his identity. There, for the sake of his Christian faith, he disavows the gods of poetry that Ausonius had wished for him to invoke: “Why, father, do you instruct the forsaken Muses to return to my care? Hearts dedicated to Christ refuse the Latin Muses and do not lie open to Apollo...Now a different force stimulates my mind, a greater God, and He demands different ways of being.”<sup>49</sup> Language indicating radical dissociation from previous practices, poetic and otherwise, and a reimagining of his selfhood, suffuses the letter. “For if you are judging me for what I was in the past, what was known to you, I openly admit that I am not now the man I was before when I was not considered delinquent, though I was delinquent, seeing through a fog of falsehood...I confess that I have a new state of mind, a mind not my own—well, it was not my own in the past, but now it is mine through God its author.”<sup>50</sup>

But while Paulinus outlines for Ausonius a drastic reconfiguration of identity and literary practice, and claims to be someone new, there is still evidence, implicit and explicit, of the old Paulinus. It is there in the distance he creates between himself and eremitic ascetics, whom he knew to dwell in desert locales in

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<sup>48</sup> Trout, *Paulinus*, p. 78. See Paulinus of Nola, *Poems: Carmina*, 10-11, W. Hartel (ed.), *CSEL* 30 (Vienna, 1894).

<sup>49</sup> *Carm.* 10.19-22:

“Quid abdicatas in meam curam, pater,  
redire Musas praecipis?  
negant Camenis nec patent Apollini  
dicata Christo pectora...  
nunc alia mentem uis agit, maior deus,  
alios que mores postulat.”

<sup>50</sup> *Carm.* 10.131-134, 142-43 :

“nam mea si reputes quae pristina, quae tibi nota,  
sponte fatebor eum modo me non esse sub illo  
tempore qui fuerim, quo non peruersus habebam  
et peruersus eram, falsi caligine cernens...  
mens noua mi, fateor, mens non mea, non mea quondam,  
sed mea nunc auctore deo.”

order to avoid the hustle and bustle of business and concentrate solely on heavenly contemplation. “Why should I, who does not share in their glory, have the same reputation? The faith behind our prayer is the same, but even now you accuse me as I inhabit beautiful places, residing on the pleasant beach of a rich coastline.”<sup>51</sup> Evidence of the old Paulinus is there also in the very medium of his message—classicizing poetry—in which he composed without hesitation, though he had obviously rethought its purpose.<sup>52</sup> Therefore the poem itself, which harnessed classical Roman rhythm and language to make spiritual arguments with Christian imagery, distinguished Paulinus from hardcore renunciants, who completely avoided such worldly enterprises as verse writing. At the same time, it embodied the poet’s ascetic desire—a “coenobitic” wish to integrate his aristocratic literary practice and environment within an ascetic life.

Paulinus’s self-representative tactics in this poem, and the negotiated image he creates of himself as ascetic Christian and Roman aristocrat, bring to light two startling effects of ascetic literary performance. First, an ascetic could simultaneously avail himself of some “combative” maneuvers employed in eremitic asceticism and some of the less conflictual approaches of integrative practice. Secondly, and following from the first point, the mechanics of ascetic performance could create the appearance (and reality) of contradiction in the ascetic subject. In Paulinus’s case, the paradox is of the man announcing his renunciation of secular life in an elite literary mode, writing from a luxuriant seaside resort. Thus, while “strong bifurcation” of old and new identities did not always occur, overlap between apparently conflicting social roles and ideological commitments was a common feature of ascetic personhood. Walter Pohl’s work on early medieval identity has brilliantly demonstrated the complexities of this very phenomenon, which he argues is fundamental to

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<sup>51</sup> *Carm.* 10.154-185, quoting 181-185:

“at mihi, non eadem cui gloria, cur eadem sit  
fama? fides voti par est, sed amoena colenti  
nunc etiam et blanda posito locupletis in acta  
litoris . . .  
invidia est.”

<sup>52</sup> Conybeare, *Paulinus Noster*, p. 51.



the formation of individuality in the post-Roman world. Pohl points out that the rhetorical strategies and modes of communication—the verbal and non-verbal terms—with which early medieval persons shaped, shared, and enacted ideas about themselves frequently drew from seemingly opposing cultural spheres. Identity was therefore an imbricated construct.

In early medieval texts we are far from a supposed archaic, unreflective identification by individuals with powerful social groups that could rely on total conformism. The individuality of these authors is not, of course, displayed in the rhetoric of modern self-reflection that research has taken as the defining feature of the ‘modern individual’. But it can be found in the tensions and paradoxes between conflicting social roles and identifications and in the overlapping of different (Christian and classical, religious and lay, *ascetic and poetic*, philosophical or pragmatic) discourses.<sup>53</sup>

Despite the illusion of ideological fixedness and authorial conviction that texts can sometimes project—especially in an age where polemic and apologetic were common fare—Pohl’s paradigm reminds scholars to stay mindful of the dynamic mobility and multidimensionality of identity in Late Antiquity. It also brings awareness to the tactics of persuasion involved in textual representations of the self and others. In Pohl’s words yet again, “Texts do not necessarily reflect given identities, they represent efforts of identification...In many cases, the act of writing may be interpreted as an effort to explain and balance such contradictory identifications.”<sup>54</sup> As often as not, the result of these efforts appears as paradox; but as G.K. Chesterton’s charming dictum goes, paradox may just be “Truth standing on her head to attract attention.”<sup>55</sup>

As they wrote, late and post-Roman authors respun the web of connections among power structures, society, texts, subjectivities, and discourse in which they themselves were caught. Such a web was prone to entanglement in the cultural environment of the late Roman period. The Christianized empire, itself an institutional embodiment of overlapping identity, issued “a profound challenge to individuals to find a

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<sup>53</sup> Pohl, “Strategies of Identification—a Methodological Profile”, p. 30. Italics are my own.

<sup>54</sup> W. Pohl, “Introduction: Ego trouble?” in R. Corradini, M. Gillis, R. McKitterick, and I. van Renswoude (eds.), *Ego Trouble. Authors and their Identities in the Early Middle Ages*, (Wien, 2010), pp. 9-21: 15, 18.

<sup>55</sup> G.K. Chesterton, “When Doctors Agree” in *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond*. Dover Publications. (New York, 1990), p. 35.

comfortable place in determining their own identity.”<sup>56</sup> Christian writers were hard hit by it. Licentius’s poetic conversion in the *De ordine*, for example, reveals how dramatically fourth-century Christians could fluctuate in their sentiments about Romanness or the classical tradition and related practices and beliefs. Jerome’s nightmarish vision also comes to mind for the intense sense of spiritual and intellectual conflict it articulates so viscerally. The accusing voice of the dream announces the central problem in black-and-white terms to the classically-trained exegete: “*Ciceronianus es non Christianus.*” But anyone who has read more of Jerome than this letter recognizes the dichotomy as plainly false. *Ciceronianus est et Christianus.*

#### *Conversion and the Christianization of Latin literary practice*

Such paradoxes in the lives and practices of Roman Christian writers, framed by the concepts of integrative “coenobitism” and imbricated identity, prepare us for renewed contact with the question of what literary performances of asceticism entailed. It behooves us to begin by examining the pervasive phenomenon of Christianization in late antique literary culture. In manifold ways late Roman Christians transmuted the literary environments, instruments, and practices they inherited from ancient Greco-Roman traditions to suit the new purposes of spiritual enterprise.<sup>57</sup> Some ascetics, to be sure, “sanctified” ignorance and rejected traditional trajectories of education to cultivate otherworldliness instead.<sup>58</sup> But many ascetics sought holistic ways of integrating classical habits and forms of literacy within Christian life. Entrepreneurial ascetic intellectuals like Origen, Jerome, and John Cassian, well-trained in the standard literary curriculum of their

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<sup>56</sup> Elsner and Lobato, “Introduction”, *Poetics of Late Latin Literature*, p. 18.

<sup>57</sup> The scholarly literature on this topic is massive and ever-increasing. I offer a fractional and eclectic sample of studies that have informed my thinking about it: C. Chin, *Grammar and Christianity in the Late Roman World*. (Philadelphia, 2008); Clark, *Reading Renunciation*; H. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: a History of Early Christian Texts*. (New Haven, 1995); A. Grafton and M. Williams, *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book: Origen, Eusebius, and the Library of Caesarea*. (Cambridge, MA, 2006); R. Kaster, *Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity*. (Berkeley, 1988), esp. pp. 70-95; D. Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia, 2004); Markus, *End of Ancient Christianity*; O. Willemien and K. Pollmann (eds.), *Poetry and Exegesis in Premodern Christianity: The Encounter between Classical and Christian Strategies of Interpretation*. (Leiden, 2007).

<sup>58</sup> Gamble, *Books and Readers*, p. 6.

times, invented groundbreaking scholarly tools and habits for scriptural study while also implementing established, secular practices of interpretation in their biblical reading.

The Christianization of Latin literature was a social and literary process, led in part by these and other educated ascetics who policed the discursive behaviors of their communities in person and through apologetic, exegetic, and polemic writing. Augustine and Licentius's conversation about poetic conversion, recorded in a philosophical dialogue, qualifies as one example; but Augustine extrapolated his interest in the rules and goals of learned Christianity most extensively in *De doctrina christiana* (written between AD 397 and 426). There he did not provide readers with a set of rhetorical or philological rules for Christian interpretive discourse, but rather a philosophy to guide their reading. *Ne quid nimis*—"nothing in excess"—was his slogan for how to *convert* the pagan liberal arts into useful instruments for scriptural study.<sup>59</sup> Jerome, to cite another example, pushed correspondents like Paulinus of Nola to apply their literary talents to explicate the Bible, but did not approve of all efforts to poeticize the exegetical craft.<sup>60</sup> Both he and Augustine made recourse to the tools of classical rhetoric on the one hand, and on the other, to Christian ethical appeals and biblical metaphors—the captive maiden of Deuteronomy, and the despoiled Egyptians of Exodus—to teach an appropriate Christian relationship to secular literary culture.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> I use the edition and translation of R. Green, *De Doctrina Christiana: Text and Translation*. (Oxford, 1995). Here, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 2.140, and see 2.145, quoting Green's translation (pp. 125, 127): "All the branches of pagan learning contain not only false and superstitious fantasies...but also studies for liberated minds which are more appropriate to the service of the truth, and some very useful moral instruction ... [Such things] may be accepted and kept for conversion to Christian purposes."

<sup>60</sup> See, e.g., Jerome, *Ep.* 53 to Paulinus, and M. Vessey's commentary, "Quid facit cum Horatio Hieronymus? Christian Latin Poetry and Scriptural Poetics", in *Poetry and Exegesis*, pp. 29-48. For a more audacious argument that "poetry's ability to be intellectually and culturally relevant had been significantly curtailed" by patristic thinkers of Jerome's era, see M. Mastrangelo, "The Decline of Poetry in the Fourth-Century West", *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 16.3 (2009), pp. 311-329.

<sup>61</sup> See Jerome's readings of Deuteronomy 21:10-13 at *Ep.* 21 to Damasus, and *Ep.* 70 to Magnus; and Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 2.144, interpreting Exodus 3: 21-2 and 12: 35-6.

Late antique Christians, and especially ascetic Christians, created new “textual communities” that sponsored revised rules and goals for literary enterprise.<sup>62</sup> Among them, the moral imperatives of the faith were amplified in the spheres of language and discourse. This was partially catalyzed by the notion that Christians could and ought to communicate the truth always, not just about the external world, but about their inner lives as well. Ideal language was “understood to be a fundamentally transparent medium for the spirit” in stark contrast to the aggrandizing or obfuscating functions of secular rhetoric.<sup>63</sup> Under these guidelines some established genres and traditional modes of writing, such as epic verse, were easily and quickly Christianized; others, like fiction, were scrutinized or discarded. Over time, the job descriptions of various kinds of writers were rewritten to account for the Christian ethical outlook. So Paulinus asserted in one poem composed well after he had settled into his ascetic vocation as impresario of the cult of St. Felix: “Although I employ poetic art, I will not sing invented stuff. I will narrate with the trustworthiness of history, without the poet’s fraudulence. Indeed let not a servant of Christ tell lies.”<sup>64</sup> Among many Christian authors in prose and verse, such guarantees of truth-telling became established steps in the choreography of the prologue and preface.<sup>65</sup>

As Paulinus redefined the role of a poet, he also illuminated a key feature of the process of literary Christianization—that it not only entailed a change in content and reforms to the canon, but the

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<sup>62</sup> For “textual communities” see B. Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*. (Princeton, 1983), pp. 88-93. For a careful and succinct exploration of the phenomenon in late ancient society, see K. Haines-Eitzen, “Textual Communities in Late Antique Christianity”, in P. Rousseau (ed.), *A Companion to Late Antiquity*. (Malden, 2009), pp. 246-257.

<sup>63</sup> For discussion, see A. Cullhed, *The Shadow of Creusa: Negotiating Fictionality in Late Antique Latin Literature*. M. Knight (trans.). (Berlin, 2015), pp. 96-97. Augustine, unsurprisingly, is the most forward and articulate proponent of these new *mores* for Christian writing; see, e.g., *Confessions*, 10.1.1.

<sup>64</sup> *Carm.* 20.28-30:  
non adfecta canam, licet arte poematis utar.  
historica narrabo fide sine fraude poetae;  
absit enim famulo Christi mentita profari.

<sup>65</sup> See P. Turner, *Truthfulness, Realism, Historicity: A Study in Late Antique Spiritual Literature*. (Farnham, 2012), pp. 30-40.

reconceptualization of literary practice as spiritual exercise.<sup>66</sup> For many Christians, writing activity became a practical enactment of faith. Viewed in spiritual terms, compositional activity took on new meaning and higher stakes. Suddenly among late antique Christians “what seem[ed] like a purely literary device could, from another viewpoint, be treated as something more active and experiential: the exercise of a philosophical technique.”<sup>67</sup> An explosion of new literary habits, rhetorical strategies, modes of argumentation, and practices of authorship occurred under these conditions.<sup>68</sup> Augustine’s suggestion to Licentius that he turn his poem from a passionate love story into a moral critique of lust is a clear manifestation of this Christian literary worldview. However, his admonitory response was preceded, if not informed by a slew of Roman Christian writers who had already attempted to combine spiritual convictions and secular literary habits. Lactantius, an African Christian rhetorician employed as a tutor in the court of Constantine, was among the first and most eloquent to theorize the merger of classical verbal art with the Gospel message. Like Augustine, he saw the pagan liberal arts as tools that could be converted to a Christian purpose. “I wish to combine wisdom with religion, so that all that empty learning is no obstruction to enthusiasts, and the scholarship of letters not only does no harm to religion and justice but actually assists them as far as possible [...] Simply rim the cup of wisdom with honey from heaven, so that bitter medicine can be drunk unawares with no hostile reaction.”<sup>69</sup> Noticeably, Lactantius’s directive performs the job it describes, for he deploys a classical philosophical

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<sup>66</sup> The best explication of this process, focused though on its development in late antique Greek hagiography, may be found in Krueger, *Writing and Holiness*, esp. pp. 1-15. This study is indebted to Krueger’s work on Christian authorship.

<sup>67</sup> Turner, *Truthfulness, Realism, Historicity*, p. 6.

<sup>68</sup> See M. Vessey’s intriguing discussion of the changing image of the Christian author and corresponding depictions of writing in “From Cursus to Ductus: Figures of Writing in Western Late Antiquity (Augustine, Jerome, Cassiodorus, Bede)” in P. Cheney and F. de Armas, (eds.), *European Literary Careers. The Author from Antiquity to the Renaissance*. (Toronto, 2002), pp. 47-103. Similarly stimulating is G. Stroumsa’s exploration of the developing relationship between cultures of the book and religious practice in Late Antiquity—“The Scriptural Movement of Late Antiquity and Christian Monasticism”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 16.1, (2008), pp. 61-77.

<sup>69</sup> *Divinae Institutiones*, 5.1.19-21. I use the edition by Samuel Brandt, *CSEL* 19. (Vienna, 1890). The translation is quoted from A. Bowen and P. Garnsey, *Lactantius: Divine Institutes*. Translated Texts for Historians 40. (Liverpool, 2003), pp. 282-83.

metaphor—the medicine cup of philosophy lined with honeyed eloquence—to make a fundamentally Christian appeal.<sup>70</sup>

But the practice of Christian writing was not only theorized as a means for converting learned non-Christians to the faith, or converting non-Christian material (like Licentius' mythological subject) into healthy fodder for faithful readers. As the surge of late and post-Roman asceticism catalyzed a mutation of imagination and lifestyle, so it fostered the development of new writing practices for the cultivation of ascetic subjectivity. Within coenobitic communities, monks began to couple intense routines of scriptural reading with acts of writing meant to exercise their rigorous habits of self-reflection and spiritual vigilance.<sup>71</sup> Athanasius's biography of Anthony, for example, records the saint's instructions for keeping a journal of thoughts and action to hold oneself accountable for sin. "Let writing replace the eyes of our fellow ascetics, so that, blushing as much to write as to be seen, we might never be absorbed by evil things. Patterning ourselves in this way, we shall be able to enslave the body."<sup>72</sup> The sixth-century *Regula Benedicti* mandates the performance of a different literacy ritual before entering a monastery, requiring petitioners to "write an appeal in their own hand" (*petitionem manu sua scribat*) declaring "their stability, the conversion of their ways of life, and obedience" (*de stabilitate sua et conuersione morum suorum et oboedientia*), and then to seal their vow by reciting scripture over the document on the altar.<sup>73</sup> Writing was therefore employed as an instrument of social cohesion within ascetic groups. Along these lines, John Cassian's *Institutes* reports of a curious situation in Egypt where an Italian monk, hindered from communing with fellow monks for his lack of Greek, was hired by one of his brothers to write and copy books in Latin though they were of no use to him, being ignorant of that language.

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<sup>70</sup> See Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, 1.936ff. and 4.11ff. Observed by Bowen and Garnsey, *op. cit.*, p. 282, n. 6.

<sup>71</sup> Stroumsa, "Scriptural Movement", pp. 71-77.

<sup>72</sup> Life of Anthony, 55. I reproduce the translation of R. C. Gregg, *Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*. (New York, 1980), p. 73. For commentary on this passage, see Stroumsa, "Scriptural Movement", pp. 72-73.

<sup>73</sup> *Regula Benedicti*, 58.17-21, R. Hanslik (ed.), *CSEL 75*. (Vienna, 1977).

The futile act of writing became for the writer a way to sustain himself and avoid dangerous acedia, and for the patron an opportunity to exercise selfless charity.<sup>74</sup>

Still other literate ascetics rooted their dramatic resistance to the secular and material world in narrative composition. Certain forms of writing became genres of “textualized” ascetic performance that served crucially to fortify established ascetic practitioners. No mode of writing operated according to this dynamic more than hagiography. As the programmatic statements of its ascetic writers so often declare, hagiography was grounded in cultural practices surrounding emulation and exemplarity<sup>75</sup>. In the fourth century Sulpicius Severus prefaced his *Life of St. Martin*, a foundational text in Latin hagiography, with a lament over the lack of holy role models available in literature. He stated that the purpose of his work was to make known a man who truly deserved to be imitated.<sup>76</sup> Likewise in the sixth century, Ennodius of Pavia, author of two hagiographies, pledged to supply readers with exemplars of salvific Christian virtue for replication. “Those whose righteousness has been entrusted to books,” he wrote, “give life in their deaths.”<sup>77</sup> Spiritually introspective and hagiographical writing functioned as highly patterned forms of literature for the reproduction of models and regimes of ascetic practice for future imitation, mainly in the image of the idealized saint. The making and consumption of these texts proved crucial to ascetic structure and practice. In the words of Geoffrey Harpham, “Ascetic discipline is a science of imitation made possible by the mimetic imitations of texts.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> John Cassian, *Institutes*, 5.39. For a sophisticated analysis of Cassian’s attempts to shape monastic reading and writing practices, see R. Krawiec, “Monastic Literacy in John Cassian: Toward a New Sublimity”, *Church History* 81.4 (2012), pp. 765-795.

<sup>75</sup> See P. Brown, “The Saint as Exemplar”, *Representations* 1.2 (1983), pp. 1-25.

<sup>76</sup> Sulpicius Severus, *Life of St. Martin*, 1.1.6.

<sup>77</sup> *Vita Epifani*, #80, in F. Vogel (ed.) *MGH AA 7* (Berlin, 1885), and for the quote *Vita Beati Antoni*, #240.1-7, 3: “quorum tamen probitas libris mandata fuerit, eorum vitalis est obitus.”

<sup>78</sup> *The Ascetic Imperative*, p. 13.

One segment of the reception history of the aforementioned *Life of St. Anthony* strikingly illustrates Harpham's definition of asceticism as a "science of imitation." Consider Augustine's well-known conversion scene, how his introspective moment in the garden follows on a discussion of the saint's *vita* and its powerful influence over readers. A man named Pontitianus tells Augustine his story of discovering and reading the *Life of Anthony* with a small company of colleagues. The text inspires Pontitianus and his companions to resolve to imitate the ascetic figure, to leave their secular careers behind and lead monastic lives. By sharing the story of his profound readerly response, Pontitianus in turn incites Augustine to contemplate conversion. Later, in fact, Augustine connects his bibliomantic interpretation of the famous chant, *Tolle, lege*, to a moment in Anthony's life when the saint had felt directed by a chance Gospel reading to sell all his possessions. In the end, readers of the *Confessions* are confronted with a chain of ascetic imitations of Anthony, one forged out of Augustine's retelling of Pontitianus's retelling of Athanasius's retelling of Anthony's life, which was itself an imitation of Christ's life.<sup>79</sup>

How does our view of these dynamics of ascetic literary behavior change, however, if we flip the script so to speak? What do we discover about this literacy system when we consider Christian spiritual literature not from the reader's vantage point, but from the writer's? In his study *Writing and Holiness* Derek Krueger has produced a remarkable analysis of late antique Greek hagiography from just this perspective. Krueger convincingly demonstrates the myriad writerly techniques late ancient Christian biographers employed both to represent the holiness of saints and to inscribe their own holiness. Under Krueger's interpretation, the image of the author behind the hagiographical text's creation functions just as integrally within ascetic literary practice as the image of the subject saint. Authorial anonymity, self-deprecation, deliberately humble style, and pious autobiographical poses, occasionally viewed as unattractive formal qualities of postclassical texts, may be understood as more than generic tropes emerging from the formative

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<sup>79</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 8.6.14-16 and 8.12.29.



literary influence of the Bible. Instead, the implementation of these narrative and generic devices “can be seen from the writer’s point of view as the ritualization of literary patterns and the adherence to traditions and structures as authors conform themselves to preexisting models.” From this perspective, Christian authorship functions as a genre of ascetic performance, “a new way of writing that integrated literary habits with other forms of Christian life.”<sup>80</sup>

Returning to Augustine’s conversion scene, we may observe that his entry into a genealogy of ascetic actors entailed not only a readerly response, but an act of self-inscription as well. By recording his own literarily-induced conversion in the *Confessions*, Augustine wrote himself into the role of exemplary emulator, and so produced a template of spiritual experience in text around which future readers and writers could model their own.

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Poetry was hardly immune to these discursive developments in Christian religious authorship. In fact, it became one of the most fruitful fields of experimentation for Christian Latin *auteurs*. We have already examined one such experiment in the verse letter from Paulinus to Ausonius. Rather than following the ritual choreography of classical poetic writing by summoning the Muses, Paulinus made the Christian God his source of inspiration.<sup>81</sup> Rather than defending himself with a rhetorical set piece in self-aggrandizement, the poet emphasized his desire to become God’s servant. Elsewhere, Paulinus gestured ascetically toward his craft, renouncing poetic license and fictional discourse to make verse writing a medium for the “Truth.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Krueger, *Writing and Holiness*, pp. 1-15:6. For the idea of artistic production as ritual, see also Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, p. 34, where he describes creative acts as “a *mimesis*, or symbolic gymnastic – like ritual or dance.”

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Paulinus of Nola, *Carm.* 15.30-33 and Juvenius, *Praef.* 26-27.

<sup>82</sup> Paulinus of Nola, *Carm.* 20.28-30; cf. Juvenius, *Praef.* 15-18. For good discussion of these and other rhetorical strategies used by Paulinus, see C. Witke, *Numen Litterarum: the Old and the New in Latin Poetry from Constantine to Gregory the Great*. (Leiden, 1971), pp. 75-101.

Consequently, he rooted his practice not in the Classics, but in the Bible, identifying the psalmist David, rather than Virgil or Horace, as his authorial role model.<sup>83</sup>

These devices were not all brand-new, innovative flourishes. To describe himself and justify his poetic art, Paulinus tapped into a growing tradition of Christian poetic self-fashioning.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, a good number of Christian poets were keen to address their place as authors and the status of their texts in a symbolic universe where the Word was God, and where God was *Auctor*. For some versifiers, this involved the paradoxical work of denying their authorial roles as they composed, while simultaneously claiming special benefits for their efforts. So the very first Christian Latin poet, a Spanish bible-epicist named Juvencus writing under Constantine, prefaced his verse paraphrase of the Gospels by naming the Holy Spirit as the poem's actual author (*auctor*). Yet still he hoped his verses would "rescue [him] from hellfire."<sup>85</sup> Juvencus later closed his work with an exultant assertion: "the grace of Christ shines so brightly on me that the glory of the divine law has happily put on the worldly trappings of language in our verses."<sup>86</sup> Such a metaphor of verbal incarnation glorified Juvencus's poem (and the participating poet) as it implicated biblical versification in the same metaphysical process by which Christ assumed the flesh.

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<sup>83</sup> *Carm.* 6. 22-24, 20.43-47; cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 53.8 (to Paulinus): "David, our Simonides, Pindar, and Alcaeus, our Horace too, Catullus, and Serenus, sounds Christ on his lyre."

<sup>84</sup> Related motifs with relevant citations are presented in P. Klopsch, *Einführung in die Dichtungslehren des lateinischen Mittelalters*. (Darmstadt, 1980), pp. 3-17, and reproduced with additional analysis in Evenepoel, *The Place of Poetry*, pp. 45-48.

<sup>85</sup> Juvencus, *Praef.* 22, 25-26:

Hoc opus; hoc etenim forsitan me subtrahet igni...  
Ergo age! sanctificus adsit mihi carminis auctor  
Spiritus."

The best study of Juvencus in English is R. Green, *Latin Epics of the New Testament: Juvencus, Sedulius, Arator*. (Oxford, 2006), pp. 1-134.

<sup>86</sup> Juvencus, 4.803-805:

"in tantum lucet mihi gratia Christi,  
Versibus ut nostris diuinae gloria legis  
Ornamenta libens caperet terrestria linguae."

For a different, but insightful reading, see Green, *Latin Epics of the New Testament*, pp. 126-128.

Almost a century later, the poet Prudentius used similar strategies to integrate his poetic practice within the cultural project of asceticism.<sup>87</sup> Like his contemporary Paulinus, he reported his biography in terms of conversion from a privileged life in the imperial administration to one of Christian service.<sup>88</sup> But still, Prudentius was his own man. “Lacking in holiness and not rich enough to relieve the poor”—that is, distinguishing himself from hermits like Anthony and wealthy renunciants like Paulinus—Prudentius presented his verse-composition as a devotional offering unique to his talents and circumstances.<sup>89</sup> His poetship, cultivated in diverse apologetic, anti-heretical, allegorical, hymnic, and martyrological writings, also contained a certain element of self-cancellation. “As I write or announce these things, oh! If only I would spring free from the body’s chains to where my fluent tongue will move with its final sound.”<sup>90</sup> The author’s recognition of the inescapability of his own writerly imperfection, and his wish to find his perfect utterance in the life to come, represents just one of several types of ascetic performance to appear in his poetry. More audaciously, Prudentius connected poetic dictation and compositional activity to the passions of certain martyrs, which he described in verse.<sup>91</sup> The wounds of saints Cassian and Romanus, for example, are inflicted as “inscriptions” in his poems—the former is stabbed to death by the pens of his students, the latter has his

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<sup>87</sup> See Witke, *Numen Litterarum*, pp. 102-145; C. Gnllka, *Prudentiana*. 3v. (München, 2000-2001); M. Mastrangelo, *The Roman Self in Late Antiquity: Prudentius and the Poetics of the Soul*. (Baltimore, 2008); G. O’Daly, “Prudentius: The Self-Definition of a Christian Poet” in *Classics Renewed*, pp. 221-240.

<sup>88</sup> Prudentius, *Praef.* esp. 15-21, 34-45 in H. Thomson (ed. and trans.), *Prudentius*, 2v. Loeb Classical Library. (Cambridge, MA, 1949).

<sup>89</sup> *Epilogus*, 7-10. I adapt Thomson’s translation, v. 2, p. 373.

“nos citos iambicos  
sacramus et rotatiles trochaeos  
sanctitatis indigi  
nec ad levamen pauperum potentes.”

<sup>90</sup> *Praef.* 43-45:

“haec dum scribo vel eloquor,  
vinclis o utinam corporis emicem  
liber, quo tulerit lingua sono mobilis ultimo!”

<sup>91</sup> J. Ross, “Dynamic Writing and Martyrs’ Bodies in Prudentius’ *Peristephanon*” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3.3, (1995), pp. 325-355; and O’Daly, “Prudentius: The Self-Definition of a Christian Poet”, pp. 236-239.

face disfigured by the “scribbling nails” (*ungulis scribentibus*) of a torturer.<sup>92</sup> For the poet, “the names of the martyrs were written in blood” (*sanguinis notis [martyrum vocabula] scripta*).<sup>93</sup> By such metaphorization, Prudentius transfigured his writing practice into an intimate mode of participation in the sufferings of the saints.

The transformations of Christian authorial practice were therefore just as profound and visible in Latin verse as in Greek prose hagiography. Many of the narrative devices and self-fashioning strategies constituent of authorship even mutated similarly in these distinct areas of discourse. But despite some common ground, a crucial facet of historical context sets classicizing poetry apart from hagiography, and demands different social- and political-historical sensitivities to understand the conversion of Christian Latin poetship. Unlike biographical prose, classicizing poetry was, as Alan Cameron has put it, “*paideia* in its most concentrated form,” and *paideia* was the prevailing discourse of power in the late Roman world.<sup>94</sup> Classicizing Christian poets therefore improvised with a special instrument of power in a way that prose hagiographers did not.<sup>95</sup>

#### *Authorship: an interlude*

Before delving into the politics of poetship, however, it may prove worthwhile to linger over the concept of authorship a little longer. For as with asceticism, an idea so central to the remainder of this study could use a more comprehensive introduction to ensure stability going forward. This is especially important given the squeamishness surrounding authors that has pervaded literary criticism since New Critics and

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<sup>92</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon*, 9. 44-64, and 10.556-560.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* 1.3.

<sup>94</sup> For the quote, see A. Cameron, “Poetry and Literary Culture in Late Antiquity”, p. 18. For treatment of the larger point, see P. Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian empire*. (Madison, 1992).

<sup>95</sup> Consider, for example, Juvencus’ poignant sphragis, 4.806-812, where he credits the peace of Christ and of Constantine for allowing his poem to come to fruition.

Deconstructionists first posed formidable challenges to the idea that knowable writers lie behind texts.<sup>96</sup> It has often proved difficult for critics even to agree to the terms of the debate over author-centric interpretation, and indeed “the question as to whether the author is the same as the historical writer and whether he has control over the meaning of texts cannot be answered until notice is given to the fact that our term “author” does not describe a single function, but covers an array of functions.”<sup>97</sup>

Most basically, the historical agent behind a text’s production and the voice that speaks within a text (the *persona*) would seem to belong to different orders of reality.<sup>98</sup> Observation of this essential difference has not led to a shift in vocabulary—it is still relatively common to refer to both figures as “authors”—but it has motivated tenacious objections to certain modes of critical inquiry. One of the most persistent of these protests has been the “Intentional Fallacy.” When it was first formulated by Wimsatt and Beardsley, the “Intentional Fallacy” argued against entertaining questions of the historical author-agent’s design in the aesthetic evaluation of a text.<sup>99</sup> Subsequently, however, this argument has been adapted by critics to champion different arguments about the invalidity of *auteurist* interpretation (separate from evaluation). Barthes, for instance, radically opposed intentionalist, author-based interpretation, but not for the same reasons as the New Critics. He challenged basic presuppositions about the very act of writing, denied any relationship between the creative “author” and created “scriptor”, abandoned an interest in correct interpretation of

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<sup>96</sup> I have found the following studies invaluable for tracking the complex debates over the nature, function, and validity of the author concept: H. Hix, *Morte d’author: An Autopsy*. (Philadelphia, 1990); and S. Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*. 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, 1998).

<sup>97</sup> Hix, *Morte d’author*, p. 9.

<sup>98</sup> This idea manifests frequently. See, e.g., R. Barthes, “Authors and Writers”, in R. Howard (trans.), *Critical essays*. (Evanston, 1972), pp. 143-150.

<sup>99</sup> W. Wimsatt, and M. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy”, *The Sewanee Review* 54.3, (1946), pp. 468-88; and A. Patterson, “Intention”, in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, pp. 135-146.

literary works, and sought instead to liberate texts from the oppressive “Author-God” by declaring the author dead.<sup>100</sup>

Nevertheless, despite such objections, a number of literary theorists have now demonstrated that it is possible and often fruitful for critics to treat both the “creative” and “created” author simultaneously, and to make the relationship between the two an object of historical investigation.<sup>101</sup> These arguments, which implicitly support intentionalist criticism and literary histories of authorship, share one fundamental claim. They conceive of texts (at least in part) as products of historical agents’ “purposive behaviors.”<sup>102</sup> To reconstruct the intentional activity constitutive of texts is therefore defensible as a method of interpretation. This does not pigeonhole the critic into making interpretive claims about an author-agent’s conscious intentions. The author-agent responsible for a text may himself be a subject determined by institutions of power, society, ideology, discourse, etc. His purposive behavior would then need to be situated in the context of those larger structures. Even in this case, however, the author-agent is not irrelevant to interpretation. To quote Sean Burke: “If the author is the site of a collision between language, culture, class, history, *episteme*, there is still every reason to assume that the resultant subject should be constructed in each case differently, the psyche thus forged being irreducible to any one of those forces in particular.”<sup>103</sup> In short the particularity

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<sup>100</sup> R. Barthes, “The Death of the Author”, in *Image, Music, Text*. S. Heath (trans.). (New York, 1977), pp. 142-148; for a critical review of Barthes’ arguments, see Hix, *Morte d’Auteur*, pp. 41-60. It has been not unfashionable for critics to invoke Barthes ideas to describe early medieval literary theory, but more comprehensive comparative work remains to be done; see, e.g. Elsner and Lobato, “Introduction,” p.11, who note in Late Antiquity a “considerable weakening of the notion of authorship... redolent of Barthes’ ‘Death of the author’”; and A. Obermeier, *The History and Anatomy of Auctorial Self-criticism in the European Middle Ages*. (Amsterdam, 1999), p. 11, on the medieval literary concept of “Author-God.”

<sup>101</sup> For the helpful distinguishing terms “creative” and “created” author, see Hix, *Morte d’Auteur*, *passim*. The larger point here is in fact closely related to Spiegel’s notion of “social logic”, which declares an interest in “how the aesthetic character of a work can be related to the social world from which it emerges.” The “created” author may be said to be part of a text’s aesthetic character, whereas the “creative” author belongs to the social world in which a text is embedded; see above n. 12.

<sup>102</sup> M. Heath, *Interpreting Classical Texts*. (London: 2002), p. 60; Hix, *Morte d’Auteur*, p. 39. For the importance of intentionality from a practice theory perspective, see Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory*, pp. 134-136.

<sup>103</sup> Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*, p. 156.

of a text is the result of an individual—a specific, historically and socially contingent person.<sup>104</sup> Intentional author-agents are individuals who mediate the production of texts, and are therefore legitimate objects of study for the literary critic and historian.

A study of authorship (or in this case poetship) entails, on the one hand, searching for places where authors surface in texts and analyzing their patterns of self-stylization. Following Krueger, we have seen already how many Christian authors inscribed themselves openly in their works, and “struck autobiographical poses, bringing their portraits of themselves as artists into conformity with religious ideals.”<sup>105</sup> Elsewhere, we may find Christian poets inclined to broadcast their spiritual identities according to established rules of genre, and with rhetorical strategies and intertextual borrowings from the classical poetic tradition.<sup>106</sup> On the other hand, as this brief excursus has just argued, the study of authorship also involves describing the intentional activity of historical author-agents implicated in the making of texts. In blending this historical project with the literary-critical one, we need to be wary of the fact that self-styling performances offer more information about how an author wanted to be perceived than what he truly believed. Rather than thinking of these rhetorical performances as obfuscations that stymie historical understanding of the author-agent, however, we may conceive of them as illuminating cultural practices of authorship embedded in emergent discourses. Viewed this way, authorial self-presentation appears to provide a kind of evidence for how institutions of language, class, and education were enacted, how they evolved, and how identity was constructed in literature. I have already tried to show how Christian Latin authorship was enmeshed in the

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<sup>104</sup> Heath, *Interpreting Classical Texts*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>105</sup> *Writing and Holiness*, p. 9. These performances are especially frequent at paratextual sites, like prefaces and epilogues, as in the cases of Juvenecus and Prudentius reviewed above. For a good analysis of the way in which prefaces may have affected late antique readers of poetry, see Peltari, *The Space that Remains*, pp. 45-73

<sup>106</sup> For the standard treatment of the author from these angles in classical verse, see F. Cairns, *Generic Composition in Greek and Roman Poetry*. (Ann Arbor, 1971), esp. pp. 177-217, although I find Cairns’ argument that “the whole of classical poetry is written in accordance with the sets of rules of various genres” too constrictive.

emerging Christian culture of asceticism, for example, which offered specific ideas about ideal spiritual practice and discursive behavior. But—and this is directly tied to the point I had begun to make just before this section—the medium of classicizing verse that Roman Christian poets used had its own history, its own social and political character, a special relationship to power distinct from other forms of writing. Understanding Christian Latin poetship will require coming to grips with that relationship.

*Negotiating the power of poetry: Augustine, Licentius, and Paulinus of Nola*

Poetry was tightly woven into the fabric of Roman aristocratic education, a grammatical and rhetorical curriculum, which the first-century schoolroom theorist Quintilian described as teaching “the science of speaking correctly and the explanation of the poets.”<sup>107</sup> Schoolroom poetic interpretation was not simply a mode of formalist criticism for Roman students and teachers. Reading classical poetry entailed attention to *doctrina et mores*. It involved intense memorization of the language, historical instruction, and ethical lessons, which together functioned as a mode of cultural indoctrination. As Robert Kaster has argued, this kind of regimented and partially poetic education emerged from and reproduced a specific structure of power in the Roman world. “The grammarian himself was embedded in a social system where what mattered were wealth, distinction and eloquence... [T]he grammarian’s school did one thing superbly, providing the language and *mores* through which a social and political elite recognized its members.”<sup>108</sup> Literary education culturally homogenized and united its target demographic—the powerful elite—by supplying a common knowledge base, set of skills, and vocabulary for their use. Poetic language, drawn from a fairly limited and stable canon of texts, molded and upheld by the grammarian’s rules, functioned as a language of power.

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<sup>107</sup> *Institutio oratoria*, 1.4.2, L. Radermacher and V. Buchheit (eds.), Teubner. (1971): “haec igitur professio, cum brevissime in duas partis dividatur, recte loquendi scientiam et poetarum enarrationem.”

<sup>108</sup> *Guardians of Language*, pp. 13-14. For a theoretical discussion of the way in which literary education may replicate and protect systems of culture and power, see P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, John B. Thompson (ed.), G. Raymond and M. Adamson (trans.), (Cambridge, MA, 1991), pp. 57-65.



By and large, Romans reared in this system entered into the field of education themselves as teachers, or took up careers involved in the imperial bureaucracy. Alan Cameron's seminal social-historical study of the "wandering poets" of Late Antique Egypt, for example, paints a vivid picture of how poetry functioned as a profession in the eastern Roman world. Into the fifth century, a school of migrating, Greek-speaking versifiers sustained themselves by moving from city to city in search of patronage opportunities. Cameron concludes:

It is not hard to see why poetry became such a popular profession in the later empire. A good poet could always reckon on his services being in demand. If he was content to remain a poet he could rely on a steady income from the writing of panegyrics and epithalamia for high officials, epics on the campaigns of generals, [etc.]... A few years residence in one place would normally exhaust the subject matter it could offer in the way of both local history and dignitaries, and he might then set up school as a grammarian, or if he had ambitions in other directions, seek a post in the Imperial administration, or cast in his lot with a politician and become a propagandist.<sup>109</sup>

Expertise in classical poetry provided an access route to power in late Roman society. It functioned, if not as a prerequisite, then at least as a common skillset among those who attained positions of influence within the traditional Roman *cursus*.

This observation is significant for our understanding of the transformation of Latin poetship. Given the tight connection between institutional power and poetic discipline in the late Roman world, attempts to unsettle and alter established modes of poetship—such as those we have reviewed so far—functioned not simply as contained literary experiments, but as extra-textual efforts to upend the standard structures of authority by altering its cultural and linguistic paradigms.

Yet another episode in the relationship between the ascetic Augustine and his poet friend Licentius illustrates the self-awareness and sophisticated social tactics with which late Roman Christian writers approached the complex relationship between poetry and power.<sup>110</sup> In 395, almost a decade after their first

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<sup>109</sup> A. Cameron, "Wandering Poets: A Literary Movement in Byzantine Egypt" *Historia* 14.4, (1965), pp. 470-509:507.

<sup>110</sup> See Trout, *Paulinus of Nola*, pp. 3-5.

philosophical conversation about poetry was recorded in *De ordine*, Augustine wrote a letter to Licentius that expressed urgent anxiety about his friend's future. Whereas Augustine had joined the priesthood and become a well-known figure in the Latin-speaking Christian intellectual community, Licentius was presently angling for a post in state administration. He was still writing classicizing (if philosophical) poetry, and sending his verses to the North African cleric for review no less. For Augustine, these were ominous developments. "My Licentius, refusing and fearing the bonds of wisdom over and over again, I am afraid that you are fettered most tightly and ruinously to mortal things."<sup>111</sup> He lamented that Licentius had not yet committed himself to an ordered spiritual life, but had rather devoted himself earnestly to mastering the craft of versification.<sup>112</sup> Hoping to redirect his friend back to the pursuit of Christian wisdom, Augustine naturally made recourse to some teachings of the Gospel; but he also implemented another of the basic instruments of the ascetic's toolkit—a call to imitate a new role model. The chosen exemplar was none other than Paulinus of Nola, who had joined the clergy and relocated from Spain to the Italian settlement of Nola since his correspondence with Ausonius. "Head to Campania," Augustine wrote. "Learn from Paulinus, God's outstanding and holy servant, how he promptly cast from his neck the grandiose pride of this world, more ennobled the more it was humbled, so that he might subject it, as he has, to the yoke of Christ. . . . Go, learn with what treasures of talent he offers [God] a sacrifice of praise."<sup>113</sup>

Invoking Paulinus made perfect sense in that he was nearly the mirror image of Licentius—a poet protégé who had lessoned his former tutor Ausonius in proper Christian verse, and warned the courtier off worldly life. Most importantly, he could speak from experience about conversion, about forsaking secular

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<sup>111</sup> Augustine, *Ep.* 26.2, A. Goldbacher (ed.) *CSEL* 34.1, (Vienna, 1895): "mi Licenti, etiam atque etiam recusantem et formidantem compedes sapientiae timeo te rebus mortalibus ualidissime et perniciosissime compediri."

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*.3-4.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* 5: "vade in Campaniam, disce Paulinum, egregium et sanctum dei seruum, quam grandem fastum saeculi huius tanto generosiore quanto humiliore ceruice incunctanter excusserit, ut eam subderet Christi iugo, sicut subdidit. . . . uade, disce, quibus opibus ingenii sacrificia laudis ei offerat."

verse and material ambition. The pairing was so ideal that Augustine did not wait for Licentius to make an appointment with Paulinus. He contacted the renunciant poet himself, and asked that he reach out to Licentius. In 396, Paulinus did just that. His letter, written in an avuncular tone, established two elements of commonality with his correspondent. One point of connection was their mutual respect for Augustine. Paulinus nudged Licentius simply to follow the venerable man's advice because of his evident authority. "Truly Licentius will be a pontifex, truly a consul, if he clings to Augustine's footsteps," he promised.<sup>114</sup> But in case the appeal to authority proved unconvincing, Paulinus had another maneuver ready at hand. He moved Licentius to a second area of common ground by making his case in verse. He prefaced the ensuing poem as such:

Mindful of your knowledge of literature, I have invented for myself a remedy for soothing your mind, in case I should irritate it in some way. With the tune of a poem I wish to call you to the Lord, the maker of every kind of harmony. I beg of you, have ears to hear, and do not reject the source of your salvation in my words, but freely welcome my holy concern and paternal mindset, even if my discourse provokes disdain. The name of Christ, which is above every name, resides in it, demanding such veneration that a believer cannot condemn it.<sup>115</sup>

In this brief, rhetorical prologue Paulinus openly explains to Licentius his central ploys of persuasion, and declares his intentions behind the 108 hexameter verses that follow. Most worthy of note is that he does not quarrel with Licentius' love of verse as Augustine had in his letter to the poet. Instead, he adopts a more optimistic position about the fusion of Christianity and verse writing, somewhat in line with the stance that Augustine had taken earlier in the *De ordine*. Here, however, Paulinus creates extra space for poetry by justifying it typologically, linking together God and the poetic concept of harmony. In a later poem, he expands on the significance of this exact mystical connection for his poetic practice. Essentially, he argues

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<sup>114</sup> Paulinus of Nola, *Letters: Epistulae*, 8.1, ed. Hartel, *CSEL* 29, 1 (Vienna, 1894): "uere enim pontifex et uere consul Licentius erit, si Augustini uestigiis ...adhaereat."

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* 3: "Itaque mihi ad tuam mentem, si in aliquo exulcerassem, deleniendam remedium litteras tuas recordatus repperi, ut te ad dominum harmoniae omniformis artificem modulamine carminis euocarem. quaeso te, ut aure audias neque causam salutis tuae in uerbis meis spernas, sed piam curam et mentem paternam etiam in despiciendis sermonibus libenter accipias, quibus insitum Christi nomen, quod est super omne nomen, hanc deberi uenerationem facit, ut non possit a credente contemni."

that the harmony of the Trinity—Godhead, man, and spirit—may be described analogously to poetry and music. Christ is God’s harmonious instrument, broken and then restored to the Church, “a single mortal lyre readied for celestial melodies, joining peoples of every nation in one body...the sound of the evangelical lute fills everything with the praise of God.”<sup>116</sup> According to Paulinus then, to write Christian poetry or to play music is to perform ritually one of the religion’s most fundamental metaphysical mysteries. Paulinus punctuates this symbology in the later poem and in his letter to Licentius the same powerful way. With an ascetic performance of self-negation he attempts to remove himself and his authorship from the equation of the text. He suggests instead that it is Christ who functions as author. “Our one faith, music, art is Christ,” is his audacious claim, a succinct but staggering equivalence, one which, as he writes to Licentius, “demands such veneration that a believer cannot condemn it.”<sup>117</sup>

For the most part, the message of Paulinus’s poem to Licentius echoes the advice that Augustine had given in his letter to the young poet. The imagery and the rhetoric are even much the same, with special emphases on the easy yoke of Christ, the Pauline paradox of freedom in spiritual slavery, and warnings against *bona falsa* of the material world. “Go on, burst forth from delay and the tight chains of the world. Do not be afraid of the peaceful Lord’s easy yoke”; “now the bad temptress Rome in various forms arouses you—alas, able to turn even stout men”; “may you shun the hazards of hard state service. Public office brings a flattering reputation, but evil servitude, and a poor end”; “believe in God, bring your neck to the easy yoke, give your mouth to the gentle harness.”<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> See Witke’s insightful reading of this poem and image in *Numen Litterarum*, pp. 89-94. Here, Paulinus of Nola, *Carm.* 20.54-56, 58-59:

atque ita mortalem numeris caelestibus aptam  
composuit citharam variis ex gentibus unam,  
omnigenas populos conpingens corpus in unum.  
...uox euangelicae testudinis omnia complet  
laude dei.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* 32: “at nobis ars una fides et musica Christus.”

<sup>118</sup> *Ep.* 8.3 vv. 1-2, 5-6, 12-13, 28-30

Quare age rumpe moras et uincla tenacia saeculi

More interesting than the poem's argument, however, is its mode of argumentation. Different from Augustine, in this scenario Paulinus is able to model performatively for Licentius a viable practice of Christian poetship. His prosimetric letter not only supplies instruction in the *doctrina* of Christian verse writing, set in fundamental opposition to the teachings of the secular world, but also provides an enactment of its ascetic, self-denying *mores*. Paulinus takes poetry, an established instrument of secular Roman power, and fundamentally alters its timbre with his play. He creatively combines asceticism and authorship, verse and conversion, to demonstrate a Christian practice of poetic composition in which "right believing implies right writing."<sup>119</sup> He mobilizes ascetic poetship in an effort to reconfigure the cultural commitments of a secularized late Roman intellectual.<sup>120</sup>

As to whether Paulinus's message and mode of delivery hit home with Licentius, there can be no certainty. The evidence breaks off here. But of Paulinus's long-term impact on Christian Latin literary practice, there can be no doubt. Helen Waddell, author of the enchanting introductory history to Medieval Latin literature *The Wandering Scholars*, went so far as to assert that "The sharp severance in the life of Paulinus is the history in little of the literature that came after."<sup>121</sup> To paraphrase, Paulinus's renunciation, enacted and explored through literary composition, functioned as a well-worn template for ascetic Christian writers of

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nec metuas placidi mite iugum domini.

nunc te sollicitat uariis malesuada figuris  
heu! ualidos etiam uertere Roma potens.

...fugias durae lubrica militiae.  
blandum nomen honos, mala seruitus, exitus aeger.

...crede deo  
et caput adde iugis, da mollibus ora capistris.

<sup>119</sup> Witke, *Numen litterarum*, p. 100.

<sup>120</sup> For another prosimetric effort in evangelization where Paulinus employs similar tactics, see his correspondence with the philosophically-inclined aristocrat Jovius: *Ep.* 16 and *Carm.* 22.

<sup>121</sup> H. Waddell, *The Wandering Scholars*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (London, 1949), p. 13.

the ensuing centuries. In fact, however, Waddell's charmingly phrased argument may overstate the case. The job of clarifying how and where poets could perform in the Christianized Roman empire was not for one creative act or actor. We have seen already how the transformation of poetship was produced in a complex alembic, via an array of experiments in the intermingling of Romanness, the Classics, and Christianity, executed over the course of two centuries or more, by writers in different corners of the Latin West. But Waddell's larger point still stands. The energy that Paulinus exerted toward repurposing literature to meet spiritual ends continued to guide and empower communities of lettered Christians a century or more after they had taken place. The conservation of that energy was owed in part to the rapid creation and distribution of an "iconic" Paulinus by his peers. As in Augustine's letter to Licentius, contemporary Christian authorities (including Jerome and Ambrose) reduced the poet's biography to its essential markers of conversion, and turned him into a symbol of secular renunciation and an icon of Christian discourse, good for instruction and easy to disperse.<sup>122</sup> Post-Roman Christian poets inherited in Paulinus and other contemporary ascetic writers a set of authorial exemplars, separate from those fossilized in the canon, after whom they could choose to model themselves out of piety, whose literary practices they often endeavored to replicate for intellectual and spiritual reasons. That they did so, and how they did so, remains to be explained (at least in part) through asceticism, that "science of imitation made possible by the mimetic imitations of texts." But the account must also factor in the new local political conditions post-Roman writers found themselves in; it must seek to detail how and why the barbarian kingdoms and ecclesiastical institutions that rose to power in the empire's stead supported ascetic authors as they championed converted ideals of selfhood, society, and sovereignty.

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In this dissertation, I argue that the evolution of Christian Latin poetship from the late fourth through the seventh century went hand in hand with changes to ascetic ideology, practice, and performance. It was a

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<sup>122</sup> See Trout, *Paulinus of Nola*, pp. 1-22, esp. 3.

process often played out in terms and acts of spiritual conversion, and other related rituals of piety including Christian burial and penance. The following chapters carry this line of argument into the post-Roman period, during which the dynamics of the relationship between poetry and power destabilized. Though the association itself remained intact, the cultural function and significance of poetic power changed. These changes were not purely rooted in the theological, nor privately interpersonal. Rather, the reconceptualization of poetic practice was affected by profound and fundamental alterations to social and institutional structure stemming from the fall of the Western Roman empire and the rise of the Christian church. Shifts and variance within imperial infrastructures, the composition of ecclesiastical leadership, the cultural programs of barbarian rulers, and Christian metaphysical worldviews were all reciprocally linked with the transformation of Christian Latin poetic practice.

Chapter Two, “Asceticism and Poetship in Post-Roman Gaul,” examines the poetship of Sidonius Apollinaris and Avitus of Vienne, members of the Roman aristocracy who both became bishops in the last decades of the fifth century, and who connected themselves to an ascetic movement that spread from coastal monasteries through the bishoprics of southern Gaul. The leaders of this ascetic movement introduced to the Gallo-Roman Christian communities they infiltrated new ideas about the moral imperatives and ethical impact of literary activity. Consequently, views and practices of poetry changed. Despite the fame he had gained as a poet (encapsulated by a statue in honor of his literary achievements at Rome), Sidonius renounced verse composition under the influence of asceticism for over a decade once he began his episcopal tenure. All the while, however, he continued to reflect in prose letter writing on the shifting social and cultural environments around him, and to address his compatriots’ relationships, and his own lingering fascinations with secular verse. Sidonius’s renunciation of poetry served as a model of ascetic posturing toward literature, and his epistles mirrored and made the transformations of Roman literary culture of his day, which, I argue, Avitus inherited in the next generation. Avitus was Sidonius’s kin, and one of his biggest fans. As bishop, he looked to Sidonius as a model for dealing with the emergence of Arian barbarian regimes in their country. As a poet,

he found in Sidonius an exemplar of eloquence, and a paradigm for a kind of poetic ambivalence. Where Sidonius had given up on poetry altogether, Avitus devised a way to convert verse composition into an ascetic activity. Through a combination of austere aesthetic techniques, and by using classicizing verse to make a statement in praise of his ascetic sister Fuscina, Avitus achieved a complete reimagining of the power of classical Roman poetry. He showed how an established literary discourse of the Roman nobility could be leveraged to promote radically new cultural agendas, such as to praise a celibate nun as the patron of an illustrious family line. The work of these poet-bishops, therefore, opens a window on to the continued and creative negotiations over verse writing that Christians undertook in the post-Roman West.

Chapter Three, “The Dead, Poets, and Society (I)” marks the first of two consecutive chapters to treat the development of a “verse epitaphic habit” among Christian commemorators in late ancient communities. The western Roman epigraphic data shows that, from the early fourth century, the production of inscriptions increased, especially for the purposes of Christian funerary monuments. Among these texts, the verse epitaph emerged as a peculiarly late antique Christian type. In general, Christian Latin epitaphs functioned in the construction of communal memory among the living. They often reflected a growing belief in the ability of the living and the dead to interact, and contributed to active negotiations over the symbols and language of character evaluation. In Late Antiquity, authors of epitaphs stood to gain from designing and coordinating strategies of interaction between themselves, readers, and the deceased through their commemorative texts. Christian epitaphic poets proved especially adept at formal innovation and self-promotion in light of these circumstances. The chapter concludes by examining the commemorative choreography and poetic self-fashioning of two influential Christian authors, Pope Damasus and Sidonius, who inserted themselves into their own epitaphic productions. Their work shows how the verse epitaph became a special space for poets to perform high-stakes social and religious interventions in late ancient communities.



Chapter Four, “The Dead, Poets, and Society (II): Venantius Fortunatus,” carries the social-historical study of epitaphic poetship into Merovingian Gaul. Fortunatus has long been recognized as a purveyor of Romanness to his post-imperial Gallic community, and as an important praise poet to secular potentates, but treatments of his career have tended to underestimate the formative influence of asceticism on his practice of authorship and autobiography. This chapter argues for Fortunatus as a Christian poet primarily, and as a cog in the wheel of religious ideological programs enacted by Gregory of Tours and the queen-turned-nun Radegund. Both championed ascetic visions of Christian community through Fortunatus’s poetry. The study reveals how, through his work in as diverse genres as Christian verse panegyric, hagiography, and epistolography, Fortunatus developed a practice of poetry with a Christianizing function in the Merovingian world, and shaped his own self-image to accord with it. His practice especially thrived in the graveyard, where Fortunatus applied established ascetic-poetic tactics, and introduced new ones, to confirm and describe the holy power and saintly status of his epitaphic subjects.

Chapter Five, “Clarifying the Eclipse: Sisebut, Isidore, and the Poetics of Power in Post-Roman Iberia,” examines a fascinating moment of intellectual exchange between a barbarian poet-king and his Catholic scholar-bishop following an anomalous sequence of eclipses in the Iberian Peninsula. After Sisebut commissioned a scientific treatise from Isidore on such natural phenomena, he responded to the bishop’s prose work with a short poem on lunar eclipses. This study reads the swap of texts not as a pure literary game, but as a correspondence imbued with a political charge. More specifically, it situates the king’s verse composition in an ongoing process of cultural construction in Visigothic Spain, led prominently by Isidore himself, but also tied to a rising ascetic movement within the kingdom. The chapter interprets Sisebut’s poem as a sophisticated response to the ascetically-influenced Isidorian project, as a text attuned to Isidore’s designs to manage the discourses through which Christian power was proclaimed and the forms in which it was expressed. For Isidore, poetry posed particular linguistic, scientific, and ethical problems. Ancient poets had taken liberties with the meanings of words, offered erroneous explanations of natural and supernatural reality,

and indulged in the description of immoral acts, all of which threatened to destabilize the intellectual and ethical systems of the Visigothic kingdom. Forced to navigate these anxieties surrounding poetry, I argue that the poet-king deployed subtle tactics of cultural negotiation as part of his literary effort. He attempted a poem in accord with scientific truth in order to play the role of expert Christian verse-writer, in a way that Isidore had failed to imagine. The poet-king's composition therefore strengthened his ideological bond with Isidore, even as it helped to assert his superior position within that relationship. That Sisebut's political intervention and literary gambit manifested in verse reveals the power to which poetry still laid claim in yet another post-Roman world.

Chapter Six, "The Voice of the Dead King Chindasuinth," treats a fascinating intersection of poetry, politics, and an emergent ritual of conversion—penance—within the late Visigothic Kingdom. Around 653 AD, Eugenius II, Bishop of Toledo, composed a verse epitaph for the deceased Visigothic king Chindasuinth (r. 642-653) in which the monarch is made to speak from the grave with self-deprecating candor. This chapter reassesses the poem's rhetorical strategy and self-critical language by situating it within Eugenius's broader ascetic-poetic practice, as well as contemporary legal and liturgical discourses of admonition and penance. I challenge the consensus critical reading of the text as an act of defamation by Eugenius, and show instead how the epitaph may be read as a dignifying expression of atonement. This reading corresponds with other specimens of Eugenius's poetry and habits of penitential self-fashioning, and dovetails with evidence from a developing literary culture of penance at Chindasuinth's court. The study therefore blends legal, religious, and literary history to reconstruct the epitaph's cultural function as an artifact that both mirrored and generated the transformation of kingly identity, penitential ritual, and literary practice in Visigothic Spain. As elsewhere at the end of Late Antiquity, an ascetic poet conspired with leaders of political and ecclesiastical regimes to transfigure verse writing into a mode of pious practice, to alter the language of poetic power, and to produce a creative vision of authorship, contributing to the cultural transformation of the post-Roman West.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ASCETICISM AND POETSHIP IN POST-ROMAN GAUL: SIDONIUS APOLLINARIS AND AVITUS OF VIENNE

*Introduction: Avitus of Vienne and the ascetic's poetic paradox*

While bishop of Vienne, a cathedral city of the Burgundian kingdom, Alcimus Ecdicius Avitus (490 - 518 AD) wrote a poem for his youngest sister Fuscina, who lived as a virgin dedicated to God from childhood. Later manuscripts give the title *De virginitate*, but he called his verses “on the comforting praise of chastity.”<sup>1</sup> For the poet, the composition had been an exercise in “secluded meditation” not meant for wide public consumption. In the opening lines he invited his sister to use his work for private contemplation as well. Avitus suggested that she read the 666 hexameter verses after rounds of chanting the psalms as a form of encouraging entertainment to help “relax [her] tired mind in meditation.”<sup>2</sup>

For much of the poem, Avitus built up a sense of imitative intimacy between Fuscina and himself. As his sister read the poem, she would hear her brother offer to “ponder and share in [her] troubling anxieties;” for like her, he recognized the ascetic life was hard and dangerous work. It was to walk the tightrope of a life of perfection.<sup>3</sup> Gallo-Roman ascetics like Fuscina carried a deep sense of their own vulnerability to the pervasive moral dangers coursing through the world. They often acknowledged to one another the difficulty

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<sup>1</sup> Prologue to *De virginitate*, R. Peiper (ed.), *MGH AA VI.2*, Berlin (1883), pp. 274-75: 275 “de consolatonia castitatis laude.”

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*: “quod germanae sanctimoniali secreta meditatione conpositum”; *De virginitate*, line 10: “Atque fatigatam meditando absolvere mentem.”

It is uncertain when exactly Avitus wrote the poem. We know he wrote the prefatory letter, addressed to his brother Apollinaris, bishop of Valence, sometime after the year 506, since Avitus indicates he is writing after the publication of his first set of poems, the five-book biblical epic *De spiritalis historiae gestis*.

For a useful introduction to Avitus's life, and a sophisticated study and translation of his letter collection, see D. Shanzer and I. Wood, *Avitus of Vienne: Letters and Selected Prose*. (Liverpool, 2002). For commentary on this letter see pp. 262-3. For a relatively recent translation and close reading of Avitus's poetry, see G. Shea, *The Poems of Alcimus Ecdicius Avitus*. (Tempe, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> *De virginitate*, 115-16, 118-19:

“Nunc decet adtonitos cauta te voce monere  
Sollicitas tecum partiri ac volvere curas  
[...]  
Dum pugnat varius per crebra pericula casus,  
Lubrica dum fragili currit sub tramite vita.”

of the path they had chosen. So one anonymous fifth-century preacher wrote to an audience of monks: “Great snares have been set at our soul’s feet. Innumerable spying enemies haunt our way. Deep pitfalls and tremendously sheer cliffs and such difficult circumstances lie between us and our end on the way which is narrow and difficult in and of itself.”<sup>4</sup> Given these insidious hazards, the best Avitus could do to increase his ascetic sister’s confidence in her vocation was to express admiration of her holiness and to assure her that he walked right behind. “Forgive the love of the one who encourages you, who advises the runner even though he himself barely follows along,” he wrote in his poem. “And if we follow, now maybe it will be reckoned unto us. But that we your brothers are following—that is your doing. Your brothers’ conversion is due to your pious example.”<sup>5</sup>

Conversion was indeed on Avitus’s mind, one of a Christian poetic kind. The poem to Fuscina would turn out to be the bishop’s last surviving experiment with poetry, just as he claimed to have wanted it. In fact, he insisted that he had not intended to write the piece at all. Even before composing, Avitus sensed a transformation of his literary self right around the corner. “I was about to draw back from versifying and joining foot to foot, had not a clear and compelling reason insisted on the need for a poem,” he told his blood-brother Apollinaris in a letter that came to serve as the poem’s preface. “For a while it has suited my profession and now too our age, if something needs writing, to spend my time and effort in a more serious literary

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<sup>4</sup> Eusebius Gallicanus, *Collectio Homiliarum*, F. Glorie (ed.), CCSL 101A, (Turnholt, 1970-71) Sermo 40.3: “Tanti laquei obiecti sunt ante pedes animae nostrae! Tam innumeri hostes observant et custodiunt iter nostrum! Tanta foveae et tanta praerupta, tanta rerum difficultates interiacent inter nos et finem nostrum! via ipsa, quae per se ardua est.” For a thoughtful study of these ascetic sermons, see L.K. Bailey, *Christianity’s Quiet Success: The Eusebius Gallicanus Sermon Collection and the Power of the Church in Late Antique Gaul*. (Notre Dame, 2010), esp. pp. 105-126.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p. 279, lines 141-2, 148-150.

“.da veniam, qui te exhortatur, amori  
Currentem monens, cum vix tamen ipse sequatur.  
[...]  
Et si consequimur, iam nostrum forte putetur:  
Quod sequimur tamen, hoc tuum est: conversio fratrum  
Exemplo debenda pio.”

mhode, not wasting it on work that, in keeping a metrical pattern, sings for a few knowledgeable people.”<sup>6</sup> Avitus’s reflection discloses a waxing pessimism about the place and power of classical Latin verse in a post-Roman Christian landscape. Poetry was potentially too trivial and too esoteric for a bishop, he thought. But yet, despite his clear reservations, couched in terms of personal piety and social relevance, Avitus did choose to compose. In this chapter I will ask: why, and how?

The following study seeks to answer these questions through a literary-critical and historical examination of the logic of the poet-bishop’s self-fashioning at this moment of inner conflict, caught as he was between an ascetic impulse to renounce poetic writing (ostensibly for the sake of age and occupation) and a greater imperative to compose a poem of ascetic encouragement. Such a study demands an unpacking of Avitus’ family history, political and cultural situation, authorial techniques, poetics and rhetoric. In turn, the search promises to uncover more about the rich history of the intersection between cultures of asceticism and classical Roman literature. One part of the investigation will be formalist in focus; that is, it will look to the poem itself for answers and explore how the text may literarily and rhetorically reflect the poet’s contorted posture. On the other hand, the social dimensions of Avitus’s authorial practices need to be outlined for the logic of this moment to come into clear view. It will be necessary to trace the contours of Avitus’s environment as a bishop, and as a reader and writer, if we wish to understand the pressures that shaped his expression of ambivalence about poetry and his desire to enact a literary conversion; and separately, if we wish to know how that expression may have affected his community.

More specifically, this chapter interweaves discussion of Avitus’s life and poetic practice with those of his kinsman, and one of his most influential predecessors as a poet and bishop—Sidonius Apollinaris.

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<sup>6</sup> “Sane a faciendis versibus pedibusque iungendis pedem de cetero relaturus, nisi forte evidentis causae ratio extorserit alicuius epigrammatis necessitatem [...] Decet enim dudum professionem, nunc etiam aetatem nostrum, si quid scriptitandum est, graviori potius stilo operam ac tempus insumere nec in eo inmorari, quod paucis intellegentibus mensuram syllabarum servando canat.” The phrase “clear and compelling reason” is borrowed from Shea, *The Poems*, p. 133.

Sidonius was a high-ranking imperial bureaucrat and renowned verse writer in the last days of the Western empire. After the collapse of Roman rule in Gaul, however, he found himself at a crossroads. Essentially, he was forced to decide between becoming a courtier with one of the rising barbarian regimes, or enter the clergy. Sidonius chose the latter course and became a bishop. The decision had consequences for his poetic practice. In his episcopal position he gave up verse composition for more than a decade, but did not go completely silent. The renunciant poet's many self-reflective letters to the secular and Christian elite of post-Roman Gaul shed light on the complex negotiations of culture, practice, and identity that Gallo-Roman writers faced in the aftermath of empire, and reveal a living and fraught relationship to poetry in particular. Framing Avitus as a cultural heir to Sidonius, and as part of a line of hesitant poet-bishops, permits us to see these figures not as isolated actors, voices crying out in the post-Roman wilderness, but as members of an intellectual and spiritual milieu, and more specifically, as developers of a new mode of ascetic-poetic practice.

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What makes Sidonius's renunciation of poetry and Avitus's poetic conversion especially fascinating moments in the history of Christian Latin poetry is their placement on the event horizon of the Western Roman empire. Sidonius had to grapple with the end of the imperial machine as an adult, while Avitus was a member of the first generation to reach adulthood after the empire's fall. The collapse of the imperial system culturally affected both men, their Gallo-Roman community, and aristocratic class in myriad ways. It affected career trajectories, the discourse of power, modes of authority, as well as fundamental notions of identity and approaches to self-definition. In the aftermath, post-Roman Gallic society became a site of confluence for various vectors of intellectual and cultural influence—ascetic Christian, classical Roman, and barbarian. In what follows, we will see that, for Sidonius and for Avitus, these lines crossed strikingly in the episcopate. The college of bishops in Gaul included a healthy mix of aristocrats who had opted out of the civic *cursus* in the fifth century while it still existed, and who turned down secular careers in barbarian courts, along with ascetic monks who had left the monastery for the world of pastoral care.

At this point of intersection, where cultured Christians with different cultural commitments worked in the same positions of power and exchanged ideas through various discursive channels, literary habits (including the practice of writing poetry) were reconceived. By the late fifth century, writing poetry had become one of the most pronounced ways to demonstrate cultural Romanness, or *romanitas*.<sup>7</sup> But Avitus's use of the poetic medium as a staging ground for his Christian renouncing act prompts a reconsideration of the dynamics of poetic culture in the post-Roman world. One way of measuring the impact of the Western empire's fall (and, in the aftermath, the continued development of Christianity as a cultural hegemony) involves reading closely, critically, and historically those clear moments of authorial self-fashioning as responses to a changing, post-Roman landscape. Avitus's paradoxical self-stylization as a poet compelled to renounce and simultaneously engage his craft reveals a complex overlap of cultural influences on literary activity. The resulting poem on virginity, I argue, shows how such literary activity, and specifically practices of poetship, could be leveraged to promote radically new cultural agendas in the space created by the erosion of the empire.

The ensuing chapter entails a lengthy investigation into both Sidonius's and Avitus's modes of self-presentations and practices of poetic authorship, covering the ways they speak of themselves as poets, and the authorial voices each uses in poetry. It will not simply rehash these performances of self-stylization, or examine them in isolation, but rather seek to situate them within the history of Christian Latin poetry and the particular Roman, barbarian, and ascetic-Christian cultures in which Sidonius and Avitus operated. A central goal of this literary and cultural historical exercise is to show that their responses were not idiosyncratic or out of touch with contemporary Christian thinking about poets and poetry. Rather, both authors partly

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<sup>7</sup> There were others ways to display one's Romanness—food, dress, housing, etc. See, for example, Shanzer on Roman versus Barbarian eating habits in “Bishops, Letters, Fast, Food, and Feast,” in D. Shanzer and R. Mathisen (eds.), *Society and Culture in Late Antique Gaul*. (Burlington, 2001), pp. 217-235, esp. 231-232. For a study of the preservation and manipulation of Roman identity in another post-Roman territory, see J. Conant, *Staying Roman: Conquest and Identity in Africa and the Mediterranean, 439-700*. (Cambridge, 2012).

designed and defined their authorship as a negative responses to the secular poetic culture of his Gallo-Roman community, and as positive affirmations of a living tradition of Christian Latin authorial self-fashioning. More specifically, this study presents the motivating force behind the making of their literary selfhood in terms of an ascetic anxiety that was both intensely personal, and yet also present publicly in a widespread discourse throughout his Gallic world. Avitus and Sidonius represented a burgeoning movement of post-Roman poets who came to regard their poetry as an important practical element of their Christianity, and who announced these convictions in and through their poetic texts.

*Roman aristocracy and literary Romanness in post-imperial Gaul*

Little is known of Avitus before he joined the line of the bishops of Vienne. We know he was the son of a certain Audentia and Hesychius. His father was his predecessor as bishop of the same city, and may also have worked as an ambassador for the emperor Avitus to the Visigothic king Theodoric in the mid-450s.<sup>8</sup> His family was linked to the Gallic senatorial aristocracy through connections (perhaps marital) to such men of high status as Sidonius Apollinaris.<sup>9</sup> Sidonius himself was the son of a former consul, and related to the emperor Avitus by marriage. He had participated in the court of the emperors Majorian (457-461) and Anthemius (467-471), and served as a Prefect of the City of Rome from 468 to 469.<sup>10</sup> Yet despite these important connections and an illustrious history, at some point, Avitus of Vienne's nuclear family forsook secular living to take ascetic vows or enter religious life. After Fuscina was born, his parents committed themselves to lives of chastity. Even before Fuscina took an oath of virginity as an adolescent, her sister Aspidia

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<sup>8</sup> *PLRE* ii. 554 makes a distinction between the tribune (10) and the bishop (11). At the end of *De virginitate*, Avitus mentions that both his father and an uncle took up service in the church after careers in public office, for which, see lines 658-659.

<sup>9</sup> See Shanzer and Wood, *Avitus of Vienne*, pp. 4-5. The classic study on the regional senatorial aristocracy remains K.F. Stroheker, *Der senatorische Adel im spätantiken Gallien*. (Tübingen, 1948). For Avitus's connections to Sidonius, see no. 60. See further, R. Mathisen, *Roman Aristocrats in Barbarian Gaul: Strategies for Survival in an Age of Transition*. (Austin, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> For an important study of Sidonius's full career, see J. Harries, *Sidonius Apollinaris and the Fall of Rome, AD 407-485*. (Oxford, 1994).



had done the same at age twelve.<sup>11</sup> Later, of course, Avitus and his brother Apollinaris became bishops themselves. Avitus's ascetic-and-noble Roman family, therefore, was practically a paradigm of the overlapping and contradictory cultural commitments that became the hallmarks of post-Roman identity.<sup>12</sup>

Avitus retained some of his old Roman cultural inheritance through literary training, and education, and exercise, albeit of a predominantly Christian nature. Before writing *De virginitate*, he was a well-practiced hexameter poet. Most famously, he had composed five books of poetry on Old Testament themes: among them, the fall of Adam and Eve, the Flood, and the Crossing of the Red Sea. These books, collectively titled *De spiritalis historiae gestis*, put him in the roll of Latin bible epicists, alongside such poets as Juvencus, Sedulius, Marius Victor, and Cyprianus Gallus.<sup>13</sup> In addition, Avitus claimed to have lost sheaves of *epigrammata*—perhaps short, occasional poetry—in an obscure series of disasters.<sup>14</sup>

By necessity, Avitus read widely in Latin poetry. In his poem to Fuscina he flashed specific knowledge of Prudentius's *Psychomachia*, and spoke of their common familiarity with Christian poets in general, whom he called “our poets.”<sup>15</sup> He read more than just Christian verse, though. Study of his imitative techniques has

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<sup>11</sup> *De virginitate*, 19-26 and 87-89. Though undeniably drastic, it was not totally out of the ordinary in fifth-century Gaul for families and couples to renounce collectively their lives as lay Christians to convert to ascetic living or seek ordination. One example is Eucherius of Lyon, who moved to the island of Lérins with his wife and two sons around 410 to live as a monk, and later became bishop. For more examples, and a discussion of the practice of conversion from secular life in fifth-century Gaul, see L.K. Bailey, *The Religious Worlds of the Laity*. (London, 2016), pp. 33-53.

<sup>12</sup> On this concept, see W. Pohl, Pohl, “Strategies of Identification—a Methodological Profile”, in G. Heydemann and W. Pohl (eds.) *Strategies of Identification: Ethnicity and Religion in Early Medieval Europe*. (Turnhout, 2013), pp. 1-64.

<sup>13</sup> For the text of the epic and its prefatory letter, see Peiper (ed.), *MGH AA VI.2*, pp. 201-273. For the tradition of Latin Bible epic, see esp. R. Herzog, *Die Biblepik der lateinischen Spätantike*. (München, 1975); M. Roberts, *Biblical Epic and Rhetorical Paraphrase in Late Antiquity*. (Liverpool, 1985); R.P.H. Green, *Latin Epics of the New Testament: Juvencus, Sedulius, Arator*. (Oxford, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> The loss of the poems may have been related to the Frankish invasion of the Burgundian Kingdom in 500. From the early 470s, there are also reports of fires and earthquakes at Vienne, for which, see Sidonius, *Ep.* 7.1.3. For discussion of these lost poems, plus the term *epigrammata*, see Shanzer and Wood, *Avitus of Vienne*, pp. 259-260.

<sup>15</sup> *De virginitate*, lines 371-78 and 409-10.

revealed an easy familiarity with (or at least access to) much of the classical Latin poetic canon.<sup>16</sup> Like most Latin poets of his age, he had a deep and impressive knowledge of Virgil—the poet whom, as Cassiodorus once explained, it was enough to call “*the poet*” to get your meaning across in the sixth century.<sup>17</sup> The bishop was even involved in one particularly pedantic squabble with a rhetorician named Viventiolus over the pronunciation of the word *potitur*, which, for Avitus, really boiled down to who had the better grasp of the premier Augustan poet, whose poetry divulged the true answer.<sup>18</sup>

Such antiquarian language and argument was typical of Avitus’s class, the Roman aristocracy of barbarian Gaul, which still reared itself on the Latin classics into the late fifth century. Sidonius Apollinaris, for example, waxed nostalgic about learning poetry from “the lofty utterance of the epic poet, the wit of the comedian, and the tunefulness of the lyric poet.”<sup>19</sup> He reminded another fellow compatriot in a mock-macabre tone of “the whipping-sticks” they had experienced while reading Virgil under their schoolmasters.<sup>20</sup> To be sure, Avitus’s attitude toward classical poetry was more distant. However well he knew Virgil, he did not think of him as *his* poet, but the poet of his secular Gallo-Roman correspondents. In conversation with cultured aristocrats he referred to the classical master as “your poet.”<sup>21</sup> In a similar way he disparaged Greek bards in his bible epic, branding them all liars for their tall-tales about giants and titans.<sup>22</sup> For Avitus, and for

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<sup>16</sup> See A. Arweiler, *Die Imitation antiker und spätantiker Literatur in der Dichtung "De spiritalis historiae gestis" des Alcimus Avitus* (Berlin, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Cassiodorus, *Institutiones* 2, (ed.) R. Mynors, (Oxford, 1961), praef, 4 in “...ut Poeta dictus intellegitur apud Graecos Homerus, apud Latinos Virgilius.”

<sup>18</sup> *Ep.* 52, in Peiper (ed.), *MGH AA VI.2*, pp. 85-87. See Shanzer and Wood, *Avitus of Vienne*, pp. 270-3.

<sup>19</sup> Here I borrow W.B. Anderson’s translation. For the text, see Sidonius Apollinaris, *Poems and Letters*. W.B Anderson (ed. and trans.), 2/2 vols., (Cambridge, 1965), *Ep.* 4.1.2: “heroicus arduum comicus lepidum, lyricus cantilenosum [...] condiderunt.”

<sup>20</sup> Sidonius Apollinaris, *Ep.* 5.5.2: “ferulas lectionis Maronianae.”

<sup>21</sup> E.g. *Ep.* 51 to Sidonius’s son Apollinaris.

<sup>22</sup> *De spiritalis historiae gestis*, 2.108-109.

many of his Christian poetic predecessors, the fictional nature of some classical texts in the mythopoetic canon made their authors fraudulent figures and their texts potentially harmful to Christian readers.<sup>23</sup>

Avitus's ambivalence toward classical poets stands out distinctly when seen in the light of mainstream secular poetic culture in post-Roman Gaul. Clearly, the Gallo-Roman nobility continued to cultivate its traditional classical, literary education and to communicate with one another using a kind of highbrow, classicizing literary discourse despite the diminishing returns of such a skillset without a context of imperial bureaucracy. Among Roman aristocrats in the mid-to-late fifth century, participation in this discourse was one mode of insisting on elite status and Romanness even after the imperial political system that had propped up their class, and whose loftier administrative institutions had put a premium on such discourse, slowly disappeared. With this perspective Sidonius wrote to his friend Johannes, likely in the 470s: "Now that the old ranks of office have been disbanded, through which the highest used to be discerned from the lowest, the only marker of nobility from here on out will be knowledge of literature."<sup>24</sup> Johannes, like many of Sidonius's correspondents, had no reason to fear a slip in status—he was a "second Cicero" in the bishop's book.

Despite assertions of classical literary ability, the reality of *romanitas*, and the inherent connections between literary skill and power had changed. As traditional opportunities for Roman education, a legal or administrative careers, and patronage diminished, reasons for doubting the utility, power, and purpose of Roman literary prowess increased. Even Sidonius and his circle of second Ciceros felt this. While they proposed classical comparisons for one another to reinforce their sense of Roman superiority, they also frequently lamented the fact that men like them, eloquent and with classically-trained minds, were a rare and

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<sup>23</sup> For a study of late antique notions of fictionality, with attention to Christian distrust of the classical tradition of poetic fiction, see A. Cullhed, *The Shadow of Creusa: Negotiating Fictionality in Late Antique Latin Literature*. Michael Knight (trans.). (Boston, 2015), esp. pp. 570ff for an interpretation of Avitus's thinking.

<sup>24</sup> *Ep.* 8.2.2: 'nam iam remotis gradibus dignitatum, per quas solebat ultimo a quoque summus quisque discerni, solum erit posthac nobilitatis indicium litteras nosse'.

dying breed.<sup>25</sup> Sometimes, they assigned blame to the barbarians. Sidonius, for example, once quipped that “the Muse has been put to flight by barbarian lays, spurning the six-foot hexameter style after seeing seven-foot tall patrons.”<sup>26</sup>

But men of letters responded to the changing conditions not only with deflective humor, but with a rhetoric of action, as though duty-bound to stave off the decline of Latin literary culture. “The number of apathetic people has grown to such an extreme that, unless the very few will reclaim the purity of the Latin language from the stain of low-rank barbarisms, we will soon mourn its end and extinction,” Sidonius wrote to rouse one well-lettered friend, Hesperius.<sup>27</sup> He saw in him a glimmer of hope, his younger self as *littérateur*. Hesperius was a teacher of rhetoric. Literary instructors in oratory and poetry like him were highly esteemed by the aristocratic community, since they offered training in the skills and subjects said to prevent Romans from becoming barbarians.<sup>28</sup> For these reasons in the late 470s Ruricius of Limoges sought to hire the *rhetor* Hesperius (perhaps the same as above) to tutor his children. He told him he was not just looking for an

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<sup>25</sup> For an extreme example of the practice of comparing peers with classical figures, see Sidonius, *Ep.* 4.3 to Claudianus Mamertus, a priest of Vienne and a respected philosopher, whom he compared to some thirty-eight Greek and Latin intellectual figures of renown. For the theme of literary decline, see Mathisen, *Roman Aristocrats*, pp. 105-110, with citations from contemporary sources other than Sidonius.

<sup>26</sup> *Carm.* 12. 9-11:

“ex hoc barbaricis abacta plectris  
spernit senipedem stilum Thalia,  
ex quo septipedes videt patronos.”

See also *Ep.* 4.8, where Sidonius refused to compose verses for the silver cup of a Visigothic queen on the grounds that the barbarians valued metal more than poetry. For a recent analysis that appreciates the potential for irony in Sidonius’s anti-barbarian sentiments, see T. Kitchen, “Sidonius Apollinaris” in R. Corradini, M. Gillis, R. McKitterick, and I. van Renswoude (eds.), *Ego Trouble. Authors and their Identities in the Early Middle Ages*. (Wien, 2010), pp. 53-66.

<sup>27</sup> *Ep.* 2.10.11: “tantum increbuit multitudo desidiosorum, ut, nisi vel paucissimi quique meram linguae Latiaris proprietatem de trivialium barbarismorum robigine vindicaveritis, eam brevi abolitam defleamus interemptamque.”

<sup>28</sup> Sidonius, *Ep.* 3.3.2-3.

instructor, but a savior of their status. “In this great state of confusion,” he wrote, “they would certainly lose nobility if they did not have someone showing them the way.”<sup>29</sup>

To a certain degree, this was a group of over-anxious parents sounding false alarms about their children’s generation. Although there was an apparent lack of secular educational institutions in Gaul from the late fifth century, the post-Roman cultural environment was conducive enough for the practice and appreciation of classical literary skills, and remained so into the seventh century.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, not everyone in the Gallo-Roman nobility agreed that barbarian rule spelled trouble for literary culture, or their own status and rank, or their economic capital. A segment of the upper class welcomed barbarian rule, accepted positions of power in their kingdoms, and infused the courts of Visigothic and Burgundian strongmen with a spirit of provincial *romanitas*. Leo of Narbonne, a *vir spectabilis*, makes for a good example. He brought his skill in law, poetry, and speech-writing to the court of Visigothic king Euric (r. 466-484) at Toulouse, where he served as an influential consigliere through the 470s.<sup>31</sup> Other landowning aristocrats such as Count Victorius and Namatius, both Sidonius’s correspondents, achieved high status in the Gothic court for their military service, the former as a *dux*, the latter as a leader of an Atlantic coast guard.<sup>32</sup> Syagrius, a descendant of a consul, was nicknamed the “new Solon” of the Burgundians for his legal disputation at their court. Sidonius joked that he had become so skilled at the Burgundian language that when he was present, barbarians were afraid of committing a barbarism in their own tongue.<sup>33</sup> Even Sidonius himself, depending on the occasion, could see

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<sup>29</sup> Ruricius, Bruno Krusch (ed.), *MGH AA VII*, Berlin (1887), p. 302: “*quae utique in tanta rerum confusione amitterent nobilitatem, si indicem non haberent.*” For a study of Ruricius’s letters alongside those of his contemporaries, see R. W. Mathisen (ed. and trans.), *Ruricius of Limoges and Friends: a Collection of Letters from Visigothic Gaul*. (Liverpool, 1999).

<sup>30</sup> See P. Riche, *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West, Sixth Through Eighth Centuries*. J. Contreni (trans.). (Columbia, 1976), pp. 184-210, and 282.

<sup>31</sup> *PLRE* 2:662-663, Leo 5. He was the addressee of two of Sidonius’s letters, see *Ep.* 4.22, and 8.3

<sup>32</sup> *PLRE* 2:1162-63, and 771.

<sup>33</sup> *Ep.* 5.5.3: “*praesente formidet linguae suae facere barbarus barbarismum.*”

the potential in barbarian court culture. In 469, he fawned over king Euric's brother and predecessor, Theodoric II (r. 453-466) and depicted his subject as a man of special talent and character, and his court as a cosmopolitan paradise of "Greek elegance, Gallic abundance, Italian swiftness, stately ceremony, personal industry, and royal order."<sup>34</sup>

Several historians have lately pitched the mutual attraction between barbarian rulers, receptive to Roman culture, and regional Roman elites, accepting of non-Roman leadership, as a primary socio-political catalyst for the end of the empire in the West. To quote from Peter Brown:

Put bluntly: what brought down the western empire was the speed with which the barbarian armies were able to create local power blocs through collaboration with the local Romans. For the local elites, the barbarians brought a Rome of sorts to their own region. These power blocs attracted Roman litigants, Roman bureaucrats, Roman courtiers, and Roman military personnel [...] The western empire was not so much destroyed as eroded and finally rendered unnecessary by a score of little Romes...largely in the hands of the local nobilities.<sup>35</sup>

The attractive power of what has been called "central Romanness" waned for many Gallic aristocrats during the late fifth century. Gradually, these elites found that the wealth, power, and status they had once derived from involvement with the Roman imperial government and its cultural traditions were more easily acquired from "local leaders, local armies, and local systems of patronage" centered at barbarian courts.<sup>36</sup> The "local Romanness" practiced in these circles came to replace "central Romanness" as the essential texture of the cultural fabric of post-imperial Gaul.

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<sup>34</sup> *Ep.* 1.2.6: "Videas ibi elegantiam Graecam, abundantiam Gallicanam; celeritatem Italiam; publicam pompam, privatam diligentiam, regiam disciplinam."

<sup>35</sup> P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*. (Malden, MA, 2013), pp. xxvi-ii.

<sup>36</sup> For the idea of 'Central Romanness', see P. Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD*. (Princeton, 2012), pp. 392-394; P. Heather. *The Fall of the Roman Empire: a New History of Rome and the Barbarians*. (Oxford, 2006), pp. 432ff. For a sympathetic reading of this view in a study of the development of Frankish identity, see H. Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550-850*. (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 15ff.

What then to make of the rhetoric of literary and cultural decline that circulated among Avitus and Sidonius's peers? Why did Gallo-Roman aristocrats represent themselves as members of an elite unit of last-line defense against literary decline? One answer is that this rhetoric emerged in response to genuine desperation over the dwindling quality of literary knowledge and practice. Perhaps also it was the natural reaction of those elites who still clung to the worldview of "central Romanness" even in the face of a fading empire. At any rate, it is hard to hear this particular refrain as anything other than a self-serving tune; for the aristocrats who decried decline did so in such a way as to imply or insist on the perpetuation of their own high positions in the shifting, post-Roman cultural landscape. The rarer the "knowledge of letters" became or was made to seem, the more exclusive the nobility became, at least defined according to restrictive literary criteria. Along these lines, some historians interpret the convoluted prose style of letters of contemporary aristocrats not as a sign of cultural decay, but as a culturally "unifying element"—a deliberate aesthetic choice that limited prestige-bearing literary practices to a self-selecting nobility.<sup>37</sup> The rhetoric of intellectual decline couched within a dense and esoteric writing style may be viewed as a compound cultural and literary strategy enacted by members of the Gallo-Roman nobility who were interested in reserving cultural capital for their classically lettered class, a group "deeply wedded to a sense of its own excellence."<sup>38</sup>

*Poetic practice and its cultural significance at the end of empire*

The practice of poetry fits into this picture alongside the most advanced literary methods that an educated Gallo-Roman might use to demonstrate his nobility and Romanness to peers. Writing quantitative

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<sup>37</sup> See Mathisen, *Roman Aristocrats*, p. 111 and n. 53. For a contrary opinion, see E. Auerbach, *Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*. R. Manheim (trans.). (Princeton, 1993). Auerbach lumps Avitus of Vienne together with Cassiodorus, Ennodius of Pavia, Arator, and Venantius Fortunatus as "authors whose style shows a trace of the classical traditions...mannered to the point of absurdity" (p. 87).

<sup>38</sup> Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, p. 404. If true, the strategy was remarkably effective, for as Ian Wood has put it, "almost every major writer from fifth-century Gaul can be placed within a single, well-defined nexus of family, social and religious relationships"; see I. Wood, "Continuity or Calamity: the Constraints of Literary Models," in J.F. Drinkwater and H. Elton (eds.), *Fifth-century Gaul: A Crisis of Identity?* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 9-18, p. 10 for the quote.

Latin poetry was a prestige skill developed through a rigorous grammatical and metrical education that involved intense reading of the classical poets. In the mid-fifth century under Roman rule, poetic skill sometimes earned members of the Gallic nobility an invitation to the emperor's court, where versification was practiced as a kind of jocular and competitive sport among courtiers, especially as an event related to banqueting.<sup>39</sup> Even after opportunities for imperial patronage dissipated, private and small-scale patronage still remained. Verse composition continued to function as a prestige commodity that could “[grease] the wheels of friendship” as the poetic epistles Venantius Fortunatus (over half a century later) nicely show.<sup>40</sup>

To be a poet in late antique Gaul was to perform a social and sometimes very public role. As Sidonius saw it, verse composition was the means by which he had set an “anchor of sufficient glory in the port of public judgment,” i.e. had earned a solid literary reputation, even before he revised and published his second collection of letters, totaling seven books, in the late 470s.<sup>41</sup> His poetry had garnered him not just friends, but fans, at least one of whom reckoned him “comparable, and even preferable to some of the most esteemed poets.”<sup>42</sup> Even in a post-imperial world, that kind of recognition could pay dividends far into the future. For some Gallo-Romans, to have had a poet in the family was a matter of renown.<sup>43</sup>

But while Gallo-Roman writers leveraged poetry and classical learning all different ways to raise secular social prestige and to reinforce a mutual sense of superiority, other cultural factors threw a wrench

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<sup>39</sup> See Sidonius, *Ep.* 9.13.4-5. Sidonius mentions competing with three other poets—Domnulus, Severianus, and Lampridius—as part of dinner-party festivities. Each were assigned a meter by lot and composed in competition with one another. The first nine poems of Sidonius's published *Carmina* are addressed to figures of high rank in the Roman imperial system.

<sup>40</sup> See Harries, *Sidonius*, p. 4. Sidonius's *Carmen* 9 is exemplary in this regard—it reads as a roll call of the most illustrious men of letters in his circle; see especially lines 302-317.

<sup>41</sup> Shortly after entering the clergy in 469, as bishop of Clermont, Sidonius published twenty-four poems. For the quote, see *Ep.* 1.1.4: “contenti versuum felicius quam peritius editorum opinione, de qua mihi iam pridem in portu iudicii publici . . . sufficientis gloriae ancora sedet.”

<sup>42</sup> *Ep.* 9.13.1: “Est quidem, fateor, versibus meis sententia tua tam plausibilis olim, tam favorabilis, ut poetarum me quibusque lectimissimis comparandum putes, certe compluribus anteponendum.”

<sup>43</sup> E.g. Sidonius, *Ep.* 5.5.1.



into the machine during the fifth century. Christianity, a key piece in the late antique Gallo-Roman cultural apparatus, was one such factor. Christian discourse promoted theoretical and practical alternatives to secular ideas surrounding status. In the literary sphere, as we saw in the introductory chapter, Christian Latin writers formulated and practiced new models of authorship, poetship, and readership, which differed socially and ethically from classical, Roman models. The tensions that emerged from these differences reached a special peak in the post-Roman world where the traditional influence and prestige attached to *romanitas*, both politically and culturally defined, fell into doubt—or at least underwent significant changes—after the collapse of the empire. Barbarian kings welcomed established Roman courtiers, generals, and bureaucrats to their courts to carry on the administration of government in late Roman miniature. At the same time, a Christian ascetic cultural and intellectual movement, radiating from the deserts of Africa, the wilderness of Gaul, and island monasteries along the coast, kicked into high gear during the late fifth century. It spun out a number of literary theoreticians and practitioners who encouraged the rejection of worldly (including secular Roman) ideals, traditions, authorities, and practices in favor of Christian ones. In the decades leading up to the sixth century—the period during which Avitus’s generation came to maturity—Gallo-Roman literary culture was particularly primed to generate innovative attempts at developing writing practices and literary habits compatible with Christian beliefs and “Roman” artistic sensibilities. Poetic culture served as one special laboratory for such tests and trials.

In the following section, I will explore the relationship between poetry, Romanness, and Christianity in late antique Gaul through close study of one fifth-century poetic career that intersected perfectly with the fall of the empire and the rise of a particular Gallo-Christian ascetic movement. I will scrutinize the trajectory of Sidonius Apollinaris who, after joining the clergy in 469/470, made manifold changes to his literary habits, especially with regard to writing verse. His story of spiritual and intellectual crisis resonates with Avitus’s professed desire to change as poet. Even more, Sidonius’s struggle to understand the place of versification in his life as a bishop involved philosophical reflection, rhetorical strategy, and creative literary experiments that

fundamentally altered the trajectory of Christian Latin poetic practice after him. All of this contributes to our understanding of Avitus's own eventual solution.

*Sidonius Apollinaris and a change of poetic practice*

The letters of Sidonius Apollinaris have so far served as a pillar of evidence in this reconstruction of Gallo-Roman aristocratic culture at the end of the Western Roman empire.<sup>44</sup> Through middle age, he enjoyed some of the best benefits bestowed to men of letters under the late Roman empire: a decent career in imperial service, including a term as Prefect of the City of Rome in 468, and connections to a network of powerful aristocrats. He even had a statue erected in his honor in Rome for his literary service to the empire.<sup>45</sup> Specifically, Sidonius achieved great success as a public poet with imperial patronage. By his late thirties, he had performed as a poetic panegyrist for three emperors. Given all this, Sidonius made perfect sense as a front man in the band of Gallo-Roman nobility who wished to preserve the prestige and honor of traditional Roman literary skill in a post-imperial landscape.

In January of 468 Sidonius recited a praise poem in Rome for the emperor Anthemius. Though the *princeps* was raised and educated in the East, the poet used the opportunity to portray him as he would any of his fellow Gallo-Romans whose reputation he sought to promote.<sup>46</sup> He painted a portrait of a scholarly emperor: a sagacious reader of Greek and Roman philosophy, history, rhetoric, and poetry, a man fit to lead a circle of second Ciceros such as Sidonius's educated friends and correspondents.<sup>47</sup> The poet also tapped into the ancient religious spirit of the Roman imperial tradition. Although the poet was a Christian layman at the

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<sup>44</sup> The scholarship on Sidonius is imposingly large. It is well maintained and organized by Joop van Waarden at the University of Amsterdam at <http://www.sidoniusapollinaris.nl/bibliography.htm>.

<sup>45</sup> For the statue, see *Ep.* 9.16, lines 25-28.

<sup>46</sup> For Anthemius, see *PLRE* II.96, and Harries, *Sidonius*, pp. 142ff.

<sup>47</sup> *Carm.* 2.156-192.

time, he (in line with a tradition of secular Latin praise poetry) presented a world in which it was still viable to think of interaction with the emperor in terms of non-Christian devotion. In the panegyric's preface, for example, the poet cast his performance as a form of worship.<sup>48</sup> As *numina* (divine beings) had gone to venerate Jove upon his rise to the Olympic throne, he said, so he had come to pay homage to the emperor.<sup>49</sup> Elsewhere, he depicted Anthemius as semi-divine, as the son-in-law of the god-emperor Marcian (r. 450-457), and he attached stories of miraculous agricultural abundance to his subject's birth.<sup>50</sup> The poet's picture of himself was also congruent with the poem's Roman religious tenor. Sidonius did not hesitate, for instance, to invoke the god Apollo for poetic inspiration, or to speak of his heart as a temple dedicated to the emperor.<sup>51</sup>

Sidonius concluded the poem with a prayer to God, unmarked as Christian, for future opportunities to compose for the imperial family.<sup>52</sup> The ease with which he, as a believer, could remain religiously ambivalent, and infuse his poetry with pagan-religious elements suggests that, before the empire's fall, not all Christian poets had misgivings about the non-Christian character of their literary activity. Indeed, some scholars would insist that the poetics of the panegyric for Anthemius are in line with mainstream late antique literary culture in which there was no conflict between the Christian faith and Roman poetic writing.<sup>53</sup> According to this interpretation, Christian poets carried on writing classical, pagan-sounding verse into the late fifth century in agreement with the prevailing aesthetics of the period, without anxiety about the moral

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<sup>48</sup> *Carm.* 1. 29: "ergo colat variae te, princeps, hostia linguae."

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.* lines 1-24.

<sup>50</sup> *Carm.* 2.105-17, 210.

<sup>51</sup> *Carm.* 2.307-309, and *Carm.* 1.30.

<sup>52</sup> *Carm.* 2.542.

<sup>53</sup> See, for instance, Alan Cameron, *Claudian: Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius*. (Oxford, 1970), p. 199: "In literature the old mythology had long since become merely decorative, and in any case bore so little relationship to contemporary paganism, that none but a few extremists gave its pagan associations a thought"; and Roberts, *The Jeweled Style*, p. 147: "Christian piety and secular literary preferences are woven together in a seamless web that manifests the unproblematic assimilation of the two traditions in [poets'] own creative imaginations."

or ethical implications of their artistic decisions. Nevertheless, the next stages in Sidonius's poetic career show how quickly complicated things could become for Gallo-Roman Christians composing poetry in a post-Roman world; for he had unwittingly delivered his last panegyric under imperial auspices.

Approximately one year after performing for Anthemius, Sidonius published his only collection of poems. It comprised a selection of twenty-four pieces in all, without any front matter describing the impetus behind its publication. The first eight poems relate to his connections to the imperial administration, including the panegyrics for the emperors and their prefaces. Sidonius addressed two of these poems to imperial officials in his literary circle. One was for Petrus, a *magister epistularum*, dubbed the "Maecenas of this age"; the other was for the *praefectorius* Priscus Valerianus, whom Sidonius called upon to critique his poetic "trifles."<sup>54</sup> *Carmen* 9, dedicated to the poet's childhood friend Magnus Felix, starts the anthology's second section, comprising a series of 12 poems on people, places, and events germane to the Gallic region. Topics and themes range from weddings (e.g. *Carm.* 11, 15), to descriptions of baths (e.g. *Carm.* 18 and 19), to dinner invitations (e.g. *Carm.* 17). Only one poem, *Carmen* 16, addressed to Bishop Faustus of Riez, former abbot of the monastery of Lérins, contains thoroughly Christian resonances. It will receive more detailed analysis later on. For now a more curious fact demands attention: after publishing this collection, Sidonius stepped away from the versification scene for more than a decade.<sup>55</sup> Why?

The answer seems to lie in a conspicuous change of vocation. In 469 or 470, Sidonius entered the clergy, having been elected bishop of Clermont, a small provincial town situated between Limoges to the east and Lyon to the West.<sup>56</sup> While it might not have marked a divergence from regulatory protocol within the

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<sup>54</sup> For Petrus, see Sidonius, *Carm.* 3 and *PLRE* II: 866 (Petrus 10). For Priscus Valerianus, see Sidonius, *Carm.* 8.3 and *PLRE* II: 1142 (Valerianus 8).

<sup>55</sup> For discussion of the collection and this problem, see Harries, *Sidonius Apollinaris and the Fall of Rome*, pp. 4-7.

<sup>56</sup> For the date, see C.E. Stevens, *Sidonius Apollinaris and His Age*, (Oxford 1933), pp. 113-114 and 205-207. See Harries, *Sidonius Apollinaris and the Fall of Rome*, pp. 169-186.

church, to call a lay aristocrat directly to the bishop's chair was not the usual way of doing things in Gaul, at least not yet.<sup>57</sup> There was a lack of interest on both sides. At the twilight end of the Roman empire, a career even of high rank in the church seems not to have been all that attractive an option for men with opportunities in the secular *cursus*. Once the empire fell, many Gallo-Roman nobles opted instead for careers in barbarian courts. Sidonius's election also ran counter to the outright antagonism that sometimes surfaced between secular elites and clerics outside the church, and which produced a kind of factionalism within it.<sup>58</sup> A century after Sidonius, for instance, Gregory of Tours complained about hasty inductions of laymen to the clergy, and the preference royal bureaucrats received in deciding episcopal promotions.<sup>59</sup>

Sidonius was well aware of such tensions. In the episcopal election at Bourges a year after his consecration, he worried aloud about nominating another lay aristocrat for the position. He imagined that detractors from within the church would snipe at him for being too proud of his former secular status and past offices to support a humble clergyman for election.<sup>60</sup> Soon after taking on his new episcopal role, the anxiety resultant from all of these factors surfaced in dramatic fashion for Sidonius. He reported that he had been brought to the brink of death by a fever that gripped him while he was feeling depressed and overwhelmed by the “weight of such a high calling imposed on one completely unworthy of it.”<sup>61</sup> But

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<sup>57</sup> Harries, *Sidonius Apollinaris and the Fall of Rome*, p. 12: “It was unprecedented in Gaul for a prefect and patrician suddenly to abandon high office and ostensibly dazzling prospects to accept consecration to the episcopate of a small provincial town.” Eventually, the lay aristocracy would be funneled to the episcopate at a more consistent rate—though no one quite of Sidonius's rank and stature made the leap. Other contemporaries who held government office prior to consecration include Germanus of Auxerre, Chelidonius, Avitus's father Hesychius, and perhaps the former praetorian prefect Tonantius Ferreolus, for all of which, see Harries, pp. 170-171. Just a year after his consecration, Sidonius supported the candidacy of an elite layman, the *vir spectabilis* Simplicius of Bourges, in that town's episcopal election, for which see *Ep.* 7.9.

<sup>58</sup> See, for instance, *Ep.* 4.14.3. Similarly, a century earlier, Jerome commented on the low appeal of asceticism among secular elites. It seemed to them “strange, ignominious, and debasing;” see *Ep.* 127.5.

<sup>59</sup> See Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, VI.46, in ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison (eds.), *MGH SRM I.1*, Hanover (1951).

<sup>60</sup> Sidonius, *Ep.* 7.9.14.

<sup>61</sup> *Ep.* 5.3.3: “Ego autem, infelicis conscientiae mole depressus, vi febrium nuper extremum salutis accessi, utpote cui indignissimo tantae professionis pondus impactum est.”

desperate times called for desperate measures. Gaul was in dire need of episcopal leadership. By the late 470s Sidonius could easily rattle off a list of towns—Bordeaux, Périgueux, Rodez, Limoges—where congregations were left in the lurch after the death of a bishop—Javols, Eausze, Bazas, Saint-Bertrand, and Auch. He saw the bad personnel situation as the “secret malady of the body Catholic,” and he himself could not shrink from the call to serve.<sup>62</sup>

These were the conditions in which Sidonius found himself a bishop. But, to return to the point at hand, they were also the circumstances that saw the publication of his poetry, and then his ensuing poetic silence. The close coincidence of these events stokes curiosity. Plumbing Sidonius’s epistolary corpus, one finds that he did not conceive of it as a coincidence at all. At numerous points in his letters, he drew a line between the end of his poetic career and the beginning of his clerical one. His most explicit reflection comes in his last book of epistles, which appeared perhaps a decade after his consecration.

Right from the start of my religious profession, I renounced this exercise [of versification] in particular, seeing as undoubtedly it could be ascribed to a lack of seriousness if I’d occupied myself with the frivolity of versification (*levitas versuum*), when serious behavior (*gravitas actionum*) had begun to be expected of me.<sup>63</sup>

It is easy to infer, therefore, that Sidonius conceived of his book of poems as a literary testament to a past life; or as one scholar has put it, “[a] farewell to his unclerical poetical vocation, as well as to all that was meant in terms of office and worldly pleasures by his secular past.”<sup>64</sup> That all of this remained unarticulated by the author at publication may suggest that his audience implicitly understood the complexities of his literary act of renunciation. For modern readers of Sidonius, however, more explanation

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<sup>62</sup> *Ep.* 7.6.7, Anderson (ed. and trans.), II/II, pp. 318-319: “catholici status valetudinem occultam.” Translation borrowed from Anderson.

<sup>63</sup> *Ep.* 9.12.1, Anderson (ed.), II/II, p.560: “Primum ab exordio religiosae professionis huic principaliter exercitio renuntiavi, quia nimirum facilitati posset accommodari, si me occupasset levitas versuum, quem respicere coeperat gravitas actionum.”

<sup>64</sup> Harries, *Sidonius Apollinaris and the Fall of Rome*, pp. 6-7. Likewise, Phillip Rousseau argues that “a change, a development in his attitude” is visible in Sidonius’s literary output after consecration; see “In Search of Sidonius the Bishop,” *Historia* 25 (1976), pp. 356-377:370. In contrast, Stevens viewed Sidonius as a stilted *poseur* whose letters post-election entail “not the development of a character, but a collection of formal pictures.” See *Sidonius Apollinaris and His Age*, p. ix.

is required. The bishop's clever turn of phrase to explicate the disavowal of poetry in his letter, playing the *levitas versus* off the *gravitas actionum*, is a pretty opposition, but it is not self-explanatory. We need to inspect the terms of the dichotomy, both individually and in relation to one another, if we are to understand the inherent disconnect between the two vocations, poet and prelate, in Gallo-Roman society. Scholars have not yet satisfactorily described the origin of this specific literary ascetic behavior—the renunciation of poetry—or its afterlife in the late and post-Roman Gallic episcopate. Was Sidonius a trailblazer, or did he have forerunners on whom to model his actions? What particular group or ideology, if any, inspired him to forsake verse composition of all things?

If these uncertainties sound familiar, it is because they revolve around the same problems that faced us at the outset with regard to Avitus's poetic practice. This investigation began by asking why Avitus wrote a complicated poem framed by a paradoxically concurrent desire to renounce poetic writing. He had similarly named his episcopal duties as a reason for wanting to cease versifying—and yet that was not enough to override the imperative to compose. The similarities between Avitus and Sidonius and their histories of poetic practice only multiply when we confront a comparable response to this conflict in Sidonius's literary output post-consecration. Several years into his career as bishop, he returned to writing new poems from time to time, and dusted off old, uncirculated compositions on occasion to drop them in letters to compatriots.<sup>65</sup> In fact, in the letter that follows the one quoted above outlining his disavowal of poetry, Sidonius did both of these things. He sent his friend Tonantius the younger a poem from his days at the court of Majorian, and yielded to a separate request for fresh "Asclepiads shaped on the Horatian anvil" to be recited at a wine party.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> e.g. *Ep.* 9.13.5. For compelling analysis of these final letters, see M. Hanaghan, "Intertextuality and Allusion in the Epistles of Sidonius Apollinaris." PhD Thesis. University of Sydney (2014), pp. 206-257; and S. Condorelli, "Improvisation and Poetical Programme in Sidonius, *Ep.* 9.13" in J. van Waarden and G. Kelly (eds), *New Approaches to Sidonius Apollinaris*. (Leuven, 2007), pp. 111-132.

<sup>66</sup> *Ep.* 9.13.2: "Horatiana incude formatos Asclepiadeos."

Yet, in a maneuver that shares fascinating parallels with the one Avitus employed, the bishop used these poetic spaces as an opportunity to assert his desire to abstain from versification. “Please allow this orator’s caution to keep his promised restraint to the end of his work,” he wrote. “Nothing is worse than if a man is resolute at the start, but weak at the end.”<sup>67</sup> He then advised the man to read religious stories instead of poems at his dinner party, turning Ferreolus’s symposium into a bible study. With Sidonius here, as with Avitus above, we are inclined to wonder why the bishop took this rhetorical route to circumvent restrictions on versification rather than to renounce poetry with firmer resolve.

Forgoing a close literary reading of these final letters and the allusive poetry they include, I wish to follow up on a more basic observation.<sup>68</sup> Sidonius’s ascetic gesture toward poetic writing made at the beginning of his clerical life seems not to have drawn a permanent, uncrossable line in his literary practice after all. What did it mean then? And where did it come from? To answer these questions it will be necessary to place Sidonius’s ideas about versification in the wider context of his theory and practice of Christian literary habits, and to understand those ideas and behaviors within his episcopal milieu.<sup>69</sup>

*Between Roman noble and Christian bishop: Sidonius’s flexible literary practice*

So far we have seen many of the various ways that, even into his episcopal career, *romanitas* suffused Sidonius’s epistolary writing with the rich dye of imperial purple prose and ideology. But his Christianity was often detectable as well. While Sidonius continued to espouse a classicizing literary discourse in his letters as

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, lines 25-28,:

“Quaeso, pollicitam servet ad extimum  
oratoris opus cura modestiam,  
quo nil deterius, si fuerit simul  
in primis rigidus, mollis in ultimis.”

<sup>68</sup> For recent critical analysis of Sidonius’ late use of Horace, see A. Peltari, “Sidonius Apollinaris and Horace, *Ars Poetica* 14-23.” *Philologus* 160.2 (2016): pp. 322-336.

<sup>69</sup> For a recent study of Sidonius’s theory of poetry see, S. Condorelli, *Il Poeta Doctus nel V Secolo D.C.: Aspetti della Poetica di Sidonio Apollinare*. (Napoli, 2008).



a bishop, in both style and content those epistles indicate that he conceived of his prose writing as a demonstration of status and Romanness reconcilable with his Christian faith. This cultural reconciliation involved constant negotiation, however. After undertaking his episcopal post, Sidonius described other compromises he had made with regard to his literary practices besides his renunciation of poetic writing. Those compromises, and the way he talked about them, varied according to context and changed over time.<sup>70</sup> Sidonius did not endorse one ideal, stable formula for achieving compatibility between Christianity and his Roman habits of reading and writing, but each attempt at harmonization tells us something more about his shifting poetic practice.

A few years prior to his prosimetric letter to Tonantius Ferreolus, but still during his episcopacy, Sidonius had reason to compose another poem. Close reading of it illuminates more of the complexity of the bishop's poetic backtracking. It was around the year 476. He was living in exile from Clermont at Bordeaux.<sup>71</sup> From there he wrote verses in reply to a poem from one of his most esteemed correspondents, a man named Lampridius, who was an orator, poet, and teacher active in Bordeaux as well.<sup>72</sup> Formerly a member of Majorian's court at Arles in the 460s, Lampridius had since fallen in with those Gallo-Romans who had found places for themselves in the circle of *littérateurs* surrounding king Euric's Visigothic court. Sidonius, meanwhile, had been ousted from his see by Euric for his resistance to the Visigothic advances against Clermont. Presently, he was stuck in Aquitaine while waiting for an appearance before the king to plead for the return of his see and one of his family estates. Stuck in this position, the bishop found a kind of freedom

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<sup>70</sup> For a multifaceted reading of Sidonius's corpus that emphasizes the author's hyperawareness of his audience and context, see again T. Kitchen, "Sidonius Apollinaris."

<sup>71</sup> Sidonius was exiled to Liviana, west of Narbonne, late in 475 after Clermont was taken over by the Visigoths in the same year, for which, see *Ep.* 8.3. He probably remained there until 477, and returned to Clermont only after a minimum two-month layover in Bordeaux. See Mathisen, "Dating the Letters of Sidonius," in J. van Waarden and G. Kelly (eds.), *New Approaches to Sidonius*, (Leuven, 2013), pp. 221-247:227. For further explication of the circumstances surrounding his exile, see Harries, *Sidonius Apollinaris and the Fall of Rome*, pp. 238-239.

<sup>72</sup> *PLRE* II:656-657. See Sidonius, *Carm.* 9. 311-314, *Ep.* 9.13, *Ep.* 8.9, and for Lampridius's murder at the hands of his own slaves, *Ep.* 8.11.

to express himself poetically. He at least did not overtly express the feeling of being limited by his episcopal vocation.

However, Sidonius did warn his friend that his own creative ability was impinged upon by other circumstances. As an exile, he was distressed, out of his comfort zone, and without the resources Lampridius had at his disposal, all of which made for “strained and uncheerful verses.”<sup>73</sup> He tried to explain his state in terms his friend would understand. Lampridius was the man whose old nickname was Orpheus, and who used to call Sidonius “Phoebus”.<sup>74</sup> Their common ground was poetry. “Of course, you well aware of the mood of poets,” Sidonius wrote. “Their minds are as wrapped up in troubles as fish are in nets. And if anything tough or sad happens, their poetic sensitivity does not free itself right away from the distressing predicament.”<sup>75</sup> The anxiety he felt at his situation was all-consuming; “[it] absolutely forbids me to make the content of my poetry different from the content of the life I lead,” he said.<sup>76</sup> By this Sidonius meant that his poem would be about his present trouble, and it was, yet expressed in tones and images borrowed from the classical Roman poetic canon. He harnessed the dialogue between Tityrus and Meliboeus in Virgil’s first *Eclogue* on the dislocating practices of land expropriation to expound upon the theme of his own exile.<sup>77</sup> He

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<sup>73</sup> *Ep.* 8.9.4: “versus otii et hilaritatis expertes.”

<sup>74</sup> *Ep.* 8.11.3. For another example of the practice of nicknaming with classically drawn epithets involving a late antique Gallic bishop, see Ruricius of Limoges, *Ep.* 1.10 in B. Krusch (ed.) *MGH AA VIII*, pp.305-306. Ruricius wrote in reply to a certain Lupus of Périgreux, a poet and orator in Sidonius’s circle, who had compared his friendship with Ruricius to that of Patroclus and Achilles and other mythological duos. Neither wanting to engage fully in the hero-cult worship nor dispense with the discourse completely, Ruricius drove a middle way with his classically-minded friend. He sought to make sure that he and Lupus did not revel in the vain feeling of renown attached to these figures, which was the product of “fake stories manufactured by lying poets.” What he and his friend could do instead was strive to enact the model behavior of these heroes in their own lives, to leave behind something real and truthful for their descendants to imitate. For the identification of the addressee and a translation of the letter, see Mathisen, *Ruricius of Limoges*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>75</sup> *Ep.* 8.9.2: “nosti enim probe laetitiam poetarum, quorum sic ingenia maeroribus ut pisciculi retibus amiciuntur; et si quid asperum aut triste, non statim sese poetica teneritudo a vinculo incursi angoris elaqueat.”

<sup>76</sup> *Ep.* 8.9.3: “me tamen nequaquam sollicitudo permittit aliud nunc habere in actione, aliud in carmine.”

<sup>77</sup> For an intensive study of intertextuality in Sidonius, see Hanaghan, “Intertextuality and Allusion in the Epistles of Sidonius Apollinaris.”

cast Lampridius as the carefree Tityrus, his “land recovered,” while he postured as Meliboeus, the shepherd dispossessed of his own property.<sup>78</sup> Still more, Sidonius picked up the instruments he had once used as a poetic panegyrist to trumpet for Euric, who in this poetic analogy played Augustus. Sidonius provided a reverent description of all the world’s nations—Burgundians, Parthians, Huns, and even he, a Roman—making rightful supplication to the stand-in emperor.<sup>79</sup> It is likely that he hoped the indirect praise would reach Euric’s ears and do him some good.

Nonetheless Sidonius showed some signs of reservation toward aspects of classicizing versification, paradoxically using classical techniques to signal his reluctance. From the outset, he pretended to lack the impulse and the talent to write poetry. He interrogated his friend for unwisely instigating the composition—why in the world did Lampridius think that he (Sidonius) possessed the “Delphic instruments” of poetic writing?<sup>80</sup> Moreover, he craftily avoided drawing connecting lines between himself and the pagan, mytho-poetic figures that secular poets traditionally applied in their self-fashioning performances. He casually disowned the god Apollo on whom he had once called for inspiration (in the panegyric to Anthemius) by calling him “your Delian god.”<sup>81</sup> Sidonius used the tactics and topoi of a rhetorical *recusatio* to create the persona of a poet-by-obligation, versifying out of external compulsion rather than any internal impulse. He denied any claim to the talent and commitments that Lampridius held, grounded in the secular Latin poetic

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<sup>78</sup> *Ep.* 8.9 *carm.* lines 12, 59.

<sup>79</sup> lines 34-54. See Harries, *Sidonius and the Fall of Rome*, p. 241.

<sup>80</sup> lines 1-11.

<sup>81</sup> line 7-8:

“ac si Delphica Delio tulissem  
instrumenta tuo...”

For a reading of Sidonius as less ambivalent, see S. Mratschek, “The Letter Collection of Sidonius Apollinaris” in C. Sogno, B.K. Storin, and E.J. Watts (eds.) *Late Antique Letter Collections: A Critical Introduction and Reference Guide* (Oakland, 2016), pp. 309-336: 316-317. “After invoking Apollo and the Muses, the poet deprives the god of his weapons, that he be enabled to bear the lyre...for himself, a ‘new Apollo’.” Mratschek misses the contrafactual syntax, however.

tradition, while simultaneously drawing from that tradition.<sup>82</sup> These maneuvers were not simply part of a conventional strategy of humble self-presentation. After the poem was over, Sidonius foreswore poetic writing once again. He told his friend in prose that this foray in verse was a one-time deal: “For the future, there is no reason for you to suspect that I intend to repeat this kind of offering, however pleased you may be with the present one.”<sup>83</sup>

Sidonius’s rejection of poetry did not, therefore, result in the formation of an unbreakable moral principle. Ousted from his episcopal situation, the adverse conditions of personal life prompted him to contravene his own rules about versification. On balance, the potential advantages of seeking Lampridius’s solidarity and courtly connections through poetry seemed to outweigh whatever negative consequences would come to his reputation as a bishop. In a time of trouble, locked outside of his dioceses and needing to get the ear of a barbarian lord, Sidonius looked to well-placed friends and secular colleagues for help. Real and pressing concerns about regaining his position and property offset anxiety over hypocritical literary practices and the possible concomitant pain of regret. The easiest way to gain his peers’ assistance would be to engage them in the language and self-supporting discourse of their class, which had once worked (and still worked in barbarian court circles) to bring men of their status valuable bureaucratic benefits.<sup>84</sup>

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Even while writing within the safety of his see, Sidonius often exuded personal insecurity with many of his epistolary friendships. He constantly worried aloud to addressees about their silence or delayed replies or the potential condescension of his style. Not all of this must be assigned to personal idiosyncrasy, of course.

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<sup>82</sup> For a thought-provoking analysis of this rhetoric in Horace’s poetry, see G. Davis, *Polyhymnia: the Rhetoric of Horatian Lyric Discourse*. (Berkeley, 1991), esp. chap. 1, “Modes of Assimilation.”

<sup>83</sup> *Ep.* 8.9.6 “de reliquo non est quod suspiceris par me officii genus repetiturum, etiamsi delectere praesenti.” Translation borrowed from Anderson, pp. 450-451.

<sup>84</sup> It was with the help of the aforementioned Leo of Narbonne that the exiled Sidonius received some relief. In gratitude, Sidonius sent him a copy of Philostratus’s *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*; see *Ep.* 8.3.2.

Paranoid self-disparagement was a fairly common tic or tactic of many authors of late antique Gaul. But Sidonius tended to respond to this nervousness with acute literary self-awareness, and to supply incisive observations regarding his own writing habits and stylistic choices. These moments offer a treasure-trove of evidence to help chart his changing stances toward literary practices—like poetic writing—over time and in different contexts.

With one man in particular, Sidonius seems to have been especially desperate for recognition. For several years after his term as Prefect of the City ended in 469, he could not get his schoolboy friend Magnus Felix, a man he had once called his “affectionate brother,” to reply to his letters. Jill Harries has suggested that Felix’s distance was a reaction to Sidonius’s support during his city prefecture for the praetorian prefect of Gaul, Arvandus, who was convicted in Rome in 469 for treasonously offering to assist the barbarians in dividing up Gallo-Roman land behind the emperor Anthemius’s back.<sup>85</sup> The explanation appears plausible. There is little doubt as to where Felix placed his loyalty. The son of a former consul, a praetorian prefect himself, and a patrician from 469, he was a man of the empire, probably one of the last few proponents of “Central Romanness” in fifth-century Gaul.<sup>86</sup>

Despite his friend’s icy silence, the bishop continued writing Felix to update him on his authorial endeavors, since they had grown up had grown up learning and practicing literature side by side. In the mid-470s, he reported to his old friend that he was modifying his method of gathering and polishing letters, which would have consequences for the admiration Felix felt for his eloquence. He was going to start bringing together his letters in “ordinary speech.” Knowing what we do about how Sidonius explained changes to his literary habits elsewhere, we might expect him to have named his episcopal vocation as motivation for this stylistic choice, or perhaps to have articulated a desire to have his voice reach a wider audience in humbler

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<sup>85</sup> See *Ep.* 3.7, 4.10, and Harries, *Sidonius and the Fall of Rome*, pp. 177-178.

<sup>86</sup> *PLRE* 2:463-464 (Felix 21).

tones. However, Sidonius gave his noble compatriot a rationale more self-serving than self-denying: “It just isn’t worth brushing up sentences that will not be published,” he wrote.<sup>87</sup>

As he had in his poem to Lampridius, Sidonius switched his discursive channel and shifted rationale to meet a secular correspondent’s expectations, and establish contact with a friend from a former life. Whether sincere or dissembling, his rhetoric in this letter to Felix suggests that, among those likely proponents of “Central Romanness” in secular circles, one’s Christianity was not yet solidified as a reasonable excuse to alter one’s style or literary practice. In fact, the opposite was true. Christian practice could be scorned by members of the secular aristocracy. Sidonius himself was keenly aware of the contempt some lay elites felt for the dramatic and variable displays of humility put on by members of the clergy.<sup>88</sup>

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In his correspondence with Christian clerics and intellectuals Sidonius sang a different tune about his new prose style. With them he attributed modifications to his literary practices and aesthetic directly to his Christian profession. An exchange of letters with Claudianus Mamertus of Vienne demonstrates this habit well. Claudianus was a priest, theologian, and Christian-Neoplatonic philosopher of some regional renown. In the early 470s he dedicated his treatise *De statu animae* to Sidonius, and submitted a metrical hymn to his inspection. Sidonius responded with gratitude, but warned his correspondent that his critical capacity was low. He plead his religious calling (*professio*) as an excuse, just as he had in his letter to Tonantius Ferreolus. Not only did this mean he was out of practice, it meant he was changing over to a “new mode of writing little by little, and unlearning the old.”<sup>89</sup> This new mode of writing was likely the same one Sidonius had attempted

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<sup>87</sup> *Ep.* 4.10.2: “non enim tanti est poliri formulas editione carituras.” Sidonius admittedly uses this same excuse with a bishop, Lupus of Troyes, in his final book of letters, probably published ca. 482; cf. *Ep.* 9.11.7.

<sup>88</sup> E.g. *Ep.* 4.14.3, “at si videtur humilitas nostrae professionis habenda contemptui...” The letter is addressed to Polemius, a supposed descendant of the historian Tacitus and the last Praetorian Prefect of Gaul, c. 471-472 AD, cf. *PLRE* 2:895.

<sup>89</sup> *Ep.* 4.3.9: “Nam dum inpactae professionis obtentu novum scribendi morem gradatim appeto et veterem saltuatim dedisco, de bono oratore nil amplius habeo quam quod malus poeta esse plus coepi.”

to describe to Felix, only here framed as a decision motivated by piety, fashioned as a natural consequence of his vocation.

A later letter to Bishop Faustus of Riez provides even more insight into Sidonius's reconceptualization of ideal literary style as a church leader. Faustus had come to Gaul by way of Romano-British territory, and to the episcopacy by way of the monastery of Lérins on the modern day Île Saint-Honorat, located just off the coast of Cannes. He was active in the Christian literary scene, mainly as a writer of sermons and letters, but also as the author of the theological tractate *De gratia*. In this work, Faustus tried to reel in what he saw as extreme stress on God's election and to give more line to the role of the individual agent in achieving salvation.<sup>90</sup> Sidonius had heard the man preach, and he was impressed. In a letter to Faustus he praised his complex, tropic style, which yet managed to drive a middle way between the norms of religion and traditional oratory.<sup>91</sup> Still more, he claimed to have reined in his own writing style out of obedience to and in imitation of Faustus's didactic literary mode, which provided instruction not only in speaking well, but in acting commendably.<sup>92</sup> Put briefly, Sidonius responded favorably and imitatively to Faustus's ascetic Christian ethos and his learned aesthetic.

Forging such close relationships with Christian men of letters like Faustus and Claudianus made it easier for Sidonius, even from his clerical position, to continue to espouse his vision of a new, post-imperial nobility based on learning. For Sidonius, Christian erudition became yet another emblem of nobility to wear alongside the badge of classical learning. In a verse funerary lament composed on the death of the aforementioned Claudianus, for example, Sidonius praised the deceased man's knowledge in "the threefold

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<sup>90</sup> Faustus of Riez, *De gratia*, A. Engelbrecht (ed.), CSEL 21 (Vienna, 1891), pp. 3-98. For the letters, I use B. Krusch (ed.) *MGH AA VIII* (Berlin, 1887), pp. 265-298. For a brief intellectual profile, see P. Brown, *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity*. (Cambridge, MA, 2015), pp. 131-137.

<sup>91</sup> *Ep.* 9.3.5: "te inter spiritalis regulas vel forenses medioximum quiddam contionantem."

<sup>92</sup> *Ep.* 9.3.6: "temperavi stilo temperaboque...neque enim, quisquis auscultat docentem te disputantemque, plus loqui discit quam facere laudanda."

library,” i.e. Greek, Roman, and Christian.<sup>93</sup> In a later chapter, Christian Latin poetic, epitaphic writing such as this will be scrutinized as a particular kind of poetic practice. At this juncture, it is interesting to note that, even after some poetic obsolescence had set in, the bishop felt reauthorized and energized to versify for eulogistic purposes, to remember and give praise to a Christian for his intellectual and spiritual virtues.<sup>94</sup>

Men like Claudianus were worth promoting, and in poetry, for the way they had bridged the divide between pagan classics and Christian learning, finding ways to make the former contribute to the latter; but for late antique Gallic Christians, and especially ecclesiastical leaders like Sidonius, there were rules to this game of cultural negotiation. Sidonius conceived of his Christianity as a cultural and discursive category of the same type as Greekness or Romanness, and as an intellectual discipline near to classical philosophy. But as the bishop’s writings show, he was also aware of the limitations that his faith placed on the intellectual behaviors and practices of its participants. He cultivated admiration for those Christian men of letters who expertly navigated the boundary-marked waters of philosophy and literature without capsizing their convictions of faith. Consequently, he lauded Claudianus as a thinker who had “untiringly philosophized without doing harm to religion.”<sup>95</sup>

Sidonius had similar praise for Faustus after reading one of his philosophical dialogues. Relying upon the image of the captive maiden drawn from Deuteronomy 21—a familiar metaphor ever since Jerome had used it to explain the ideal relationship between Christianity and secular learning—Sidonius described how the bishop of Riez had safely married philosophy to the Christian faith.<sup>96</sup> Faustus had shaved from his

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<sup>93</sup> *Ep.* 4.11, *carm.* lines 4-5, p. 108.

<sup>94</sup> *Ep.* 4.11.5: “faceret dictandi desuetudo difficultatem.”

<sup>95</sup> *Ep.* 4.11.1: “indesinenter salva religione philosopharetur.”

<sup>96</sup> *Ep.* 9.9.12-13. For Jerome’s deployment of the metaphor, see *Ep.* 21 to Damasus, and *Ep.* 70 to Magnus. Modern readings of Sidonius’s use may be found in Harries, *Sidonius and the Fall of Rome*, p. 113 and C. Kapsler, *Theologie und Askese: Die Spiritualität des Inselmönchtums von Lérins im 5. Jahrhundert*, (Münster, 1991), pp. 177-178.



metaphorical bride the hair of superstition and the eyebrows of secular knowledge. He had made her swear off worldly studies to preach heavenly ones as his attendant.

Sometime between 460 and 469, and so before Sidonius's consecration, Faustus earned for himself a poem from Sidonius. Just as his addressee had done with philosophy, the poet tried to arrange a similar marriage between a cleansed, classical discipline (in this case, poetry) and Christianity. *Carmen* 16, a thanksgiving piece, is the only poem in Sidonius's collection addressed to a clergyman.<sup>97</sup> It marks his longest and most rigorous attempt at composing Christian Latin poetry. Although he composed the poem prior to the start of his tenure as bishop and before his rejection of poetic practice, the poem's opening lines nevertheless present the poet in an ascetic mood, making a public renunciation of classical poetic *mores*. "Spurn, lyre," Sidonius wrote, "Phoebus and the nine muses made ten with Pallas, and Orpheus, the fictional water of Pegasus' spring, and the Theban instrument moving obsequious stones with songs to build with a poem walls that can hear."<sup>98</sup> The next 64 verses invite instead the Holy Spirit, presented in an array of its biblical manifestations, to bring inspiration to the poem, following on a tradition of Christian Latin poets who had traded Apollo and the Muses for the Paraclete.<sup>99</sup> In the second section of the poem, Faustus earns Sidonius's gratitude for helping an unnamed brother stay on the straight and narrow (lines 71-77), for showing

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<sup>97</sup> For a recent commentary, see S. Santelia, *Carme 16: Eucharisticon ad Faustum episcopum*. (Bari, 2012).

<sup>98</sup> *Carm.* 16.1-5:

    "Phoebum et ter ternas decima cum Pallade Musas  
    Orpheaque et laticem simulatum fontis equini  
    Ogygiamque chelyn, quae saxa sequacia flectens  
    cantibus auritos erexit carmine muros,  
    sperne, fidis."

<sup>99</sup> For discussion of Christian inspiration topoi, see P. Klopsch, *Einführung in die Dichtungslehren des lateinischen Mittelalters*. (Darmstadt, 1980), pp. 33-37.

the poet hospitality (lines 78-82), and for encouraging him in religious behavior obliquely described as “approaching the holy threshold of the holy mother.”<sup>100</sup>

The poet then adopts a laudatory mode. In doing so, he assumes a posture that bears some similarity to the one he took with the emperor Anthemius, though with recognizable differences. Again he fashions himself as a devotee of his subject, but this time his reverence is filtered through petition to God: “I confess my great affection in meager poetry, honoring you without end even in prayers,” he writes.<sup>101</sup> Fittingly, the poet’s praise is structured around a set of ascetic images and ideals. Faustus is first imagined as an anchorite wandering through the wilderness, following in the footsteps of Elias, John the Baptist, and other religious hermits (lines 91-103); then, importantly, as the abbot of the monastery at Lérins where he lived and served from the mid-430s until his term as bishop began, probably in the 460s (lines 104-115). The subject is not praised for his eloquence, or his learnedness, or his nobility, but rather for his rejection of secular paradigms in leading a life of self-denial. “Often when you are worn out, you come to serve your pupils instead of taking a long rest. And you live your life so abstemiously, rarely taking the leisure of sleep, rarely eating cooked food,” the poet writes. “With you in their midst, the younger generation has the courage to scorn the proud ways of their elders.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Carm. 16.83-84: “Voluisti | ut sanctae matris sanctum quoque limen adirem.” For a more literal reading of this phrase as referring to an introduction to a community of nuns guided by Faustus, see F. Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich: Kultur und Gesellschaft in Gallien, den Rheinlanden und Bayern am Beispiel der monastischen Entwicklung (4. bis 8. Jahrhundert)* (Wien, 1965), p. 54.

<sup>101</sup> Carm. 16.89-90:  
quapropter te vel votis sine fine colentes  
affectum magnum per carmina parva fatemur

<sup>102</sup> Carm. 16.105-107, 116-117:  
“qua tu iam fractus pro magna saepe quiete  
discipulis servire venis vixque otia somni,  
vix coctos capture cibos abstemius aevum  
[...]  
seu te commissus populus tenet et minor audet  
te medio tumidos maiorum temnere mores”

On the verge of entering the clergy, about to disavow poetic writing altogether, Sidonius surely counted himself among Faustus's brave followers who were rejecting the ways of their ancestors. This group included a portion of the last generation of lay nobility in Roman Gaul, who opted out of the secular world and their high, inherited positions in it throughout the fifth century. Their conversions and renunciations were linked in a chain reaction caused in part by the introduction of powerful cultural reagents to the social order of fifth-century Gaul; namely, the ascetic ideas and practices espoused by men like Faustus. The poem to Faustus marks just one product of this mixing of people and ideas. Sidonius himself was responsible for many others. We have already glimpsed one further example from the next generation of bishops; for with its vocal rejection of classical tropes and traditional forms of inspiration, and with its embrace of a Christian ascetic worldview, Sidonius's *eucharisticon* to Faustus would seem to offer a model for comparison with Avitus's poem for Fuscina. What remains is to find and describe with greater exactitude the network of people and ideas that may historically and intellectually wire more tightly together these poets, their compositions, and their programs.

In the following section, I will attempt to do just that by investigating more closely this key moment of cultural intersection between ascetics and aristocrats. The goal will be to detail the discursive character of their interactions, especially within the episcopacy. By further examining Sidonius's exchanges with Faustus's company of Lerinian monks and his experiments with their ideas, we do justice to the changes he made to his literary habits during his clerical career, and especially to his renunciation of verse writing. In addition, the ascetic-episcopal discourse of late fifth-century Gaul offers points of connection between Sidonius and Avitus's episcopal careers and brands of poetship.

#### *Sidonius, Lérins, and literary asceticism*

When Faustus entered the episcopacy, probably around 460, he brought a measure of monastic austerity to his Gallic Christian community, and especially the clergy. In his letters and sermons, the bishop

of Riez promoted a set of ascetic intellectual and spiritual practices to monks, fellow bishops, and lay people alike, meant to inspire them to make or persevere in drastic, penitential conversions—not from one faith to another, but to more rigorously Christian and less secular ways of being.<sup>103</sup> Faustus even managed to deliver this message to Sidonius’s friend Magnus Felix, who had decided to turn to religious life after all, possibly in the late 470s. The monk-bishop invited the secular magnate to a continuous penitential review of his past, and to a life of twofold abstinence, one involving restraint from various carnal pleasures, the other involving control of the mind and passions of the soul. He advised spiritual and intellectual exercises to help him achieve this abstemious existence, including fasting, contrite prayer, and reading into the night.<sup>104</sup>

Restraint and renunciation were keywords in Faustus’s ascetic program, and literary habits fell well within its purview. He advised colleagues to avoid too much study, to distrust their own thinking, and to read in search of models for imitation rather than to strive to be read.<sup>105</sup> “Use rather laborious occupation to set straight your upright intellect, which does not bear the weight of heavy reading and does not know how to disburse the treasure of knowledge,” he counseled one Gallic deacon, who was running the risk of intellectual hubris.<sup>106</sup> His ascetic agenda therefore encouraged Christian clerics like Sidonius to regard literary activity as an important practical element of their Christianity, to be guided by the same ethical imperatives that determined other spiritual and bodily behaviors. Sidonius seems to have hit the nail on the head, therefore, when he described Faustus’s pedagogy as interested in teaching honest behavior as much as eloquence and erudition.

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<sup>103</sup> On the concept of conversion in late antique Gaul, see Bailey, *The Religious Worlds of the Laity*, pp. 33-50. For the discourse of penance in late antique Gaul, see P. Brown, *The Ransom of the Soul*, pp. 124-149.

<sup>104</sup> See Faustus of Riez, *Ep. XVI*, B. Krusch (ed.), *MGH AA VIII*, pp. 282-284.

<sup>105</sup> Faustus of Riez, *Ep. XVII*: “Numquam cogitationibus tuis credas, sed magis imitanda legas quam legenda conscribas.”

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*: “rectum animi sensum, qui multae lectionis pondus non sustinet nec novit thesaurum scientiae dispensare magis laboris occupatione castiga.”

Faustus's was hardly an isolated voice crying out from the eremitic desert. His ideas were in line with the steady infusion of ascetic thought into the Gallic episcopal community through the fifth century.<sup>107</sup> The main source was the monastery of Lérins. Founded at the turn of the fifth century by a hermit named Honoratus, the 'isle of saints' soon began producing a stream of monkish talent that flowed to the pastoral domain, with the result that, as Phillip Rousseau has written, "the virtue of monks became less a textbook model of spiritual health for other men, and more a transfusion into the bloodstream of the whole community."<sup>108</sup> When ascetics like Faustus of Riez and Lupus of Troyes moved from their cells in Lérins to their episcopal posts in Gaul in the mid-fifth century, they followed in the footsteps of monastic predecessors from a generation before—men like Honoratus, Eucherius of Lyon, Hilary of Arles, and Maximus of Riez, who had made the same transition.<sup>109</sup> All of these island ascetics brought with them to their sees the very ideas that had been circulating around "the palestra of the hermit crowd" and among "the senate of Lerinian monks," as Sidonius phrased it.<sup>110</sup>

While their ascetic behavior and commitments distinguished these monk-bishops from their non-religious peers, it did not bar them from contact with the secular world. Many of these monks were from secular elite backgrounds themselves. Their biographies often emphasize their aristocratic character, and

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<sup>107</sup> The history of Lérins's cultural influence in late antique Gaul has received numerous treatments by historians of religion, theology, sociology, and literature. The classic studies are F. Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich*, see esp. pp. 47-87; and A. de Vogüé, *Histoire littéraire du mouvement monastique, dans l'antiquité*. v.7: *L'essor de la littérature lérinienne et les écrits contemporains* (411-500). (Paris, 2003). Other studies that I have found helpful include Kasper, *Theologie und Askese*; R. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*. (Cambridge, UK, 1990), see esp. pp. 199-213; P. Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, pp.411-432; and L.K. Bailey's sensitive study of sermons probably preached to the monks at Lérins, *Christianity's Quiet Success*, pp. 105-126.

<sup>108</sup> Rousseau, "In Search of Sidonius the Bishop," p. 366.

<sup>109</sup> Sidonius knew the Lerinian lineage well. All of these characters, except for Caesarius who belonged to a later generation, appear in a review of the monastery's heroes in his poem to Faustus. See *Carmen XVI*, lines 110-115.

<sup>110</sup> Sidonius, *Ep.* 9.3.4, Anderson (ed.), II/II, p. 512: *precum peritus insularum, quas de palaestra congregationis heremitidis et de senatu Lirinensium cellulanorum in urbem...transtulisti.*"

especially their eloquence, derived from early serious training in the literary arts.<sup>111</sup> These skills put them in good position to empathize and communicate with the lay members of the educated class by whom they were often sought as counsel. As their migration to the pastoral world shows, Lerinian monasticism was not cloistered in character. It stressed instruction as an important active element of its brand of asceticism. The imperative to teach sometimes manifested itself in literarily erudite and persuasive appeals written to non-religious peers to encourage them in conversion, to guide them in the renunciation of their secular ways of life, just as Faustus had with Magnus Felix and Ruricius of Limoges. The gist of the message was simple. To quote again from one of Faustus's letters: "Let us now serve the Lord with a devotion equal to the energy we expended in our service to secular studies."<sup>112</sup>

Eucherius of Lyon's *De contemptu mundi*, written probably in the first decades of the fifth century to convince his secular kinsman Valerianus to give up his pursuit of earthly rank, wealth, and philosophy, is exemplary of this Lerinian literary tradition.<sup>113</sup> The persuasiveness of his pitch was enhanced by the fact that he had already taken the plunge into the ascetic life. He therefore spoke from experience. Eucherius had settled with his wife and two sons on an island that neighbored Lérins as one of Honoratus's earliest followers. Eventually, he left the isle community to become bishop of Lyon, but not before he had taken on a self-image antithetical to the average member of his class. Eucherius began to champion the supreme value of societal withdrawal, poverty, celibacy, and a mastery of the Christian canon in the pursuit of salvation. In his pamphlet to Valerianus, he worked with the same knife to cut free his fellow educated Gallo-Roman from what he saw as the two thorniest briars snagging men in earthly affairs—desire for wealth and the honors of rank.<sup>114</sup> To

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<sup>111</sup> E.g. *Vita sancti Lupi episcopi*, B. Krusch (ed.), *MGH SRM VII*, (Hanover, 1880), p. 296: "scolis traditus, rethoricis imbutus studiis, quem deinceps adprimae eruditum per regiones florentes eloquii fama vulgabat."

<sup>112</sup> Faustus, *Ep.* II: "quanta dudum alacritate saecularibus studiis militavimus, tanta nunc devotione domino serviamus."

<sup>113</sup> S. Pricoco (ed. and trans.), *Eucherio di Lione: Il rifiuto del mondo*. (Florence, 1990).

<sup>114</sup> *ibid* p. 70, lines 218ff.

do so, Eucherius pointed out the central flaw in the secular system: it could not distinguish the good from the bad. In fact, it frequently confused the deserving and the undeserving, and promoted bad men to the top alongside good men of real merit.<sup>115</sup>

The worldly world did not promote the real heroes worth emulating, Eucherius thought. One genuine hero whom he avidly read and, more impressively, with whom he corresponded, was the Gallo-Roman Paulinus of Nola, whose liquidation of a massive estate to fund his ascetic projects (not to mention his repudiation of secular poetic writing) in the late fourth century sent shockwaves through the Christian Mediterranean.<sup>116</sup> Eucherius pointed to Paulinus as the “special and blessed example of our home Gaul,” a figure worthy of Valerianus’s imitation.<sup>117</sup> Paulinus’s iconic history (and the histories of others like him) would, ideally, motivate his readership to surrender the obsession with honor and money, and secular erudition as well. “Rejecting the precepts of worldly philosophy... why don’t you apply your mind to drinking up the study of the Christian dogma?” he pleaded. “Leave those others things behind now, and convert yourself to the study of our men and their literature.”<sup>118</sup>

Faustus and Eucherius’s exhortations give good insight into the ascetic ideology that trickled into the urban ecclesiastical environments of Gaul from the Mediterranean island of Lérins through the fifth century, and into Avitus’s generation. But it would be wrong to describe the ascetic influence as a process of passive osmosis. Gallo-Roman monks engaged in outreach. They crafted morally exhortatory appeals to non-religious

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<sup>115</sup> *ibid* p. 72, lines 261ff. For another example of this rhetorical trope, see the biography of the Lerinian bishop Hilary of Arles, in S. Cavallin (ed.), *Vitae Sanctorum Honorati et Hilarii, Episcoporum Arelatensium*, 4: “In studiis saeculi... nonumquam humanis auribus blandientes speciem iustitiae oratoriae artis venustate celavimus.”

<sup>116</sup> See Paulinus of Nola, *Ep.* 51, translated by P.G. Walsh in *Letters of St. Paulinus of Nola*, in *Ancient Christian Writers* 36, (Westminster, MD, 1967). For a biographical study of Paulinus, see D. Trout. *Paulinus of Nola: Life, Letters, and Poems*, (Berkeley, 1999).

<sup>117</sup> *ibid* p. 82, line 385ff: “peculiare et beatum Galliae nostrae exemplum.”

<sup>118</sup> *ibid* p. 104, lines 693ff and p. 106, line 723: “Quin tu repudiatis illis philosophorum praeceptis... ad imbibenda Christiani dogmatis studia animum adiacis? ... Omitte iam illas... atque ad studia te nostrorum et scripta converte.”

outsiders to embrace poverty, lead lives of self-denial, and withdraw from secular intellectual disciplines. The mechanics of this ideological diffusion were of course more complex and multifaceted than simple written exchanges of ideas. They involved various types of ascetic practice. Lerinian monks lived their art, demonstrating the power of asceticism by performance of their rigorous behavioral principles—by practicing celibacy, fasting, and donning humble clothing, while also cultivating and promoting Christian intellectual disciplines and literary habits set in opposition to secular forms of the same practices. This amalgamation of ascetic modes meant there were multiple channels for Lerinians to use to broadcast their version of spiritual self-fashioning to urbane Christians in their congregations and to colleagues in the episcopal community.

Over the course of the fifth century, this ascetic program continued to proliferate. Its spread had profound and lasting affects for ecclesiastical structure and discourse. Historians have long recognized its importance in the dramatic reconfiguration of Christian authority among the churches of late antique Gaul.<sup>119</sup> The powerful allure of ascetic charisma made impressions on their congregations, and attracted other Gallic bishops from non-monastic backgrounds to adopt the ascetic mode for their own self-definition. Martin Heinzelmann demonstrated this ascetic shift in the *Darstellungsform* of Gallic bishops and lay nobility through the analysis of epitaphs. He found that from the fifth and sixth centuries “there is practically no biography, hardly a single epitaph of an aristocratic layman or a bishop, in which even the slightest trace of an ascetic stylization has not been left behind.”<sup>120</sup>

Ascetic monk-bishops trended not only as role models for their Christian communities, but as co-signers on the conversions of men who desired to fashion themselves as ascetics in their own right. As Peter Brown has put it, ascetic leaders “represented a notion of the holy that was starkly opposed to the profane

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<sup>119</sup> See esp. P. Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. (Notre Dame, 2010); C. Leyser, *Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great*. (Oxford, 2000).

<sup>120</sup> M. Heinzelmann, *Bischofsherrschaft in Gallien*. (München, 1976), pp. 233-246: 235 for the quote.



world. This cliff face of difference was crucial... [It] ensured that holy men were holy and that they could bring blessing and empowerment to laypersons.”<sup>121</sup> The ascetic-episcopal faction had the authority to legitimize the conversions of lay nobles, and to sanction the rise of those who attained the bishop’s chair. Aristocrats like Sidonius could tap into the Lerinian ascetic network could use its members as recommenders of righteousness and Christian rigor in communications with strangers.<sup>122</sup>

The terminology Sidonius used to talk about his own episcopal vocation was borrowed from Lerinian monks. Most strikingly, he spoke of the clerical life as a *professio*.<sup>123</sup> The sermons delivered to a monastic audience at Lérins collected in the Eusebius Gallicanus anthology are chock full of reminders to monks to protect their *professio*—their set of ascetic duties—against violation. “The name of a great *professio* must be defended with great strength,” wrote one anonymous preacher. “Truly, that soul...which guards its *professio* in every way will not fear the inevitability of that final hour.”<sup>124</sup> Above we saw how Sidonius had used his *professio* to explain to Claudianus of Vienne some changes to his literary habits, especially his lack of practice in literary criticism. Writing to Leo of Narbonne, he indicated that his *professio* had altered his character. Where he had once borne proudly the imprint of his Roman literary education, Sidonius now claimed “my old reading is of no use to me, again religion is my *professio*, humility my desire.”<sup>125</sup> The Christian ascetic concept of *professio* infiltrated deeply enough to affect the bishop’s reflections upon literary interactions with

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<sup>121</sup> Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, p. 442.

<sup>122</sup> Sidonius did so. See *Ep.* 8.14.2.

<sup>123</sup> The terminology was not limited to the religious field. For a reading of late antique *professio* in the sphere of literary education, and a comparison with the modern concept of a profession, see R. Kaster, *Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity*. (Berkeley, 1988), pp. 32-35.

<sup>124</sup> *Sermo* 42.8, line 105 and .10, line 155 in F. Glorie (ed.). *CCSL* 101A: “Ideoque magnis viribus defendendum est magnae nomen professionis [...] At vero anima illa [...] quae professionem suam per omnia custodierit : non timebit ultimae horae illius necessitatem.” For other passages wherein *professio* is emphasized see *Sermo* 39.3, line 58; 40.2, line 43 and 40.6, line 180. For further discussion of the Lerinian concept of *professio*, see Kasper, *Theologie und Askese*, pp. 80-86.

<sup>125</sup> *Ep.* 4.22.4: “nec usui lectio vetus, tum religio professioni est, humilitas appetitui.”

his son. On one occasion, he confessed with mild regret that while “mindful of predisposition but forgetful of *professio*” he had joined in the boy’s study of the playwright Terence.<sup>126</sup> Poetry had once been his favorite port of call, the place where he had set “an anchor of sufficient glory in the harbor of public judgment.”<sup>127</sup> But as clerics, Sidonius and others in his company heeded the Lerinian invitation to weigh anchor and sail to new harbors. “Bring your eyes round,” Eucherius had advised Valerianus and likeminded secular readers on the brink of conversion. “Turn the prow from the sea of your worldly affairs toward the port of our *professio*.”<sup>128</sup>

Steering one’s life according to an ascetic concept of *professio* entailed a range of ideological recommitments and strategic action to insist on and demonstrate internal, spiritual change. The humility that had once been contemptible to the aristocratic class became a virtue in Christian self-definition for those in Sidonius’s episcopal circle. In his letters to men of Lérins like Lupus of Troyes, Sidonius often opened up and emphasized his corrupt condition: *homo peccator sum*, “I am a sinful man.”<sup>129</sup> Faustus had likewise recommended contrite attitudes and honest moral self-assessment: “Watch out that elation does not come from excess humility and vice is not born of virtue,” he said. “This can be easily overcome by bringing the confusing history of one’s past way of life before the eyes, and by presenting a guilty conscience to fearful senses.”<sup>130</sup> Penitential meekness, though, was not flatly denigrating. It could serve as a sign of rank among bishops and men with ascetic inclinations. Sidonius’s conviction in this new social order was so strong that he wrote the former

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<sup>126</sup> *Ep.* 4.12.1-2: “naturae meminens et professionis oblitus.”

<sup>127</sup> See n. 43 above.

<sup>128</sup> *De contemptu mundi*, Pricoco (ed. and trans.), p. 114, lines 828-842: “Circumfer oculos, et de pelago negotiorum tuorum, velut in quemdam professionis nostrae portum prospice, proramque converte.” Note especially the language of conversion in the metaphor: “proramque *converte*.”

<sup>129</sup> *Ep.* 6.1.2. See the letters of Bishop Ruricius of Limoges to Faustus of Riez for similar penitential self-fashioning, translated in Mathisen, *Ruricius of Limoges and Friends*, pp. 87-90

<sup>130</sup> *Ep.* XVI: “observandum est enim ne elatio etiam de nimia humilitate generetur et vitium de virtute nascatur; quae tamen facile superabitur, si confusibilis illa praeteritae conversationis historia ante oculos adducatur et rea conscientia trepidis sensibus praesentetur.”

praetorian prefect Tonantius Ferreolus, a man of office whom he had formerly adulated as the “pilot and pillar of Gallic lands,” and insisted it was more prestigious for him as a converted bishop to be listed “among those perfect in Christ than among the prefects of Valentinian.” He assured Ferreolus that “in the view of the best men the lowest cleric is ranked higher than the greatest man of office.”<sup>131</sup>

To those who had not yet adopted openly religious life, Sidonius sometimes offered words that rang in tune with Lerinian calls to conversion. As a bishop, he encouraged the layman Elaphius, who was already performing his Christian duty by repairing church roofs, to act piously in the future “not just with hidden faith, but in manifest conversion.”<sup>132</sup> He had a similar message for his old fellow poet and court companion Consentius of Narbo.<sup>133</sup> In the mid-460s, Consentius had received 500-plus hendecasyllable verses from Sidonius, later included in Sidonius’s book of poems. There the poet had lavished his friend, and his friend’s family and homeland, with effusive praise in traditional Roman rhetorical style.<sup>134</sup> After 469, however, the bishop spoke differently. He still remembered nostalgically Consentius’s poetic elegance and skill in an array of meters. Versification had earned his friend fame, as it had for him earlier in life. But now the bishop asserted that he himself had moved on from those poetic pursuits. He prompted Consentius to do the same. “Now is the time for serious reading, serious writing, and for thinking about eternal life rather than remembering the past,” he said.<sup>135</sup> His aim was to convince his friend to move from being “saintly in private” to “publicly

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<sup>131</sup> *Ep.* 7.12.4: “censuitque [stilus noster] iustius fieri, si inter perfectos Christi quam si inter praefectos Valentiniani constituerere [...] Sic absque conflictatione praestantior secundum bonorum sententiam computatur honorato maximo minimus religiosus.”

<sup>132</sup> *Ep.* 4.15.2: “quod restat, optamus, ut deo nostro per uberes annos, sicut vota redditis, ita reddenda voveatis, idque non solum religione celata, sed et conversione manifesta.”

<sup>133</sup> *PLRE* 2:308-309. Consentius was a *tribunus et notarius* in the court of the emperor Valentinian III, and then *cura palatii* at the court of emperor Avitus, where Sidonius met him, being the son-in-law of that emperor.

<sup>134</sup> *Carm.* 23.

<sup>135</sup> *Ep.* 8.4.3: “modo tempus est seria legi, seria scribi deque perpetua vita potius quam memoria cogitari.”

religious”—to cultivate “a tongue intent on heavenly praise, a soul attentive to heavenly thoughts, and a hand diligent in heavenly giving.”<sup>136</sup>

We can best appreciate Sidonius’s attempted renunciation of poetic writing, and prepare to read Avitus’s ascetic poem, in light of this prevalent discourse surrounding literary asceticism in fifth-century Gaul. Sidonius’s letter to Consentius shows clearly the kind of convictions about the ethics and spirituality of literary habits he both held and was willing to promulgate as a bishop. Like Faustus and others in the Lerinian circle, he considered oratory, epistolary writing, verse making, and reading to be spiritual practices with moral significance, best geared to the development of Christian learning. Reading and writing with this attitude was how literary *gravitas* was achieved.

In the very last letter in his ninth and final book of letters, Sidonius wrote that he did not want people to think of him as self-indulgent because of his “pretty language,” and he hoped his renown as a poet would not defame his reputation for rigor as a cleric.<sup>137</sup> But negotiating one’s reputation as a Christian figure of authority was no easy thing to do, ascetics recognized. It required a self-policing conscience that controlled the tongue and the pen, and prevented *lapsus oris cordisque*: “slips of the mouth and heart.”<sup>138</sup> One had to be vigilant about how and to what end learning was used, and this necessitated more than individual effort. Gallo-Roman ascetics established communal safeguards against wayward literary practice. They could always look to each other for help and stern criticism *in litteris aequae ut moribus*: “in literature just as in behavior.”<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> *Ep.* 8.4.4: “qui Christo favente clam sanctus es, iam palam religiosa venerandus iugo salubri colla pariter et corda subdare invigiletque caelestibus lingua praeconiis, anima sententiis, dextra donariis.”

<sup>137</sup> *Ep.* 9.16:

Neu puter solvi per amoena dicta,  
schema si chartis phalerasque iungam,  
clerici ne quid maculet rigorem  
fama poetae.

<sup>138</sup> Faustus, *Ep.* I.2, in B. Krusch (ed.), *MGH AA VIII*, p.267.

<sup>139</sup> Sidonius, *Ep.* IX.11.2: written to Lupus of Troyes, a bishop and former monk of Lérins.

With Sidonius, though, we still have to confront the fact that certain occasions or correspondents could elicit from him secularized literary action, which sometimes exceeded his preferred bounds of restraint. In his poetic writing, he could lapse in view of these lofty, ascetic standards, as in his poem written to Lampridius while in exile, or the one to Tonantius Ferreolus, who was in need of dinner-party entertainment. Each of these poems was like a stone lobbed into the stillness of Sidonius's secular literary career. They caused a ripple effect in the small pond of the Gallo-Roman nobility. Several admirers of Sidonius's poetry noticed the late poem to Ferreolus, and their attention triggered a brief relapse in the bishop's renunciation of verse writing. One friend Gelasius had heard or read the poem to Ferreolus and wrote the bishop asking for a poem for himself (apparently dismissive or unaware of the poet's request to be left alone). Sidonius complied. Soon another correspondent, Firminus, told the bishop that he had enjoyed the iambics written for Gelasius, and so he earned for himself a poem in Sapphic meter.<sup>140</sup> The last four epistles in the bishop's final book of published letters include poetry of some kind.

If these were missteps in Sidonius's literary ascetic program, they are not necessarily signs of total insincerity, as has been insinuated.<sup>141</sup> The poet-bishop consistently demonstrated a sharp sense of self-awareness in his writing, and a Lerinian penitential attitude about his literary past and related mistakes. "I can't recall how many things I wrote back then in the first heat of youth. If only the majority of it could be silenced and concealed!" he wrote to Firminus in his last surviving poem in his last surviving letter. "However much closer I get to my final days, the more it shames me to remember now if I have composed something trivial in my lifetime."<sup>142</sup> In verse Sidonius performed the kind of penitential review that Faustus had

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<sup>140</sup> *Ep.* 9.15.1 and 9.16.3.

<sup>141</sup> See n. 64 above for Stevens' view. The presence of Horace in these last prosimetic (and polymetric) letters demands further consideration, and more careful analysis. See M. Hanaghan, "Intertextuality and Allusion in the Epistles of Sidonius Apollinaris." PhD Thesis. University of Sydney (2014), pp. 206-257.

<sup>142</sup> *Ep.* 9.16, lines 41-48:  
Nec recordari queo, quanta quondam  
scripserim primo iuvenis calore;

prescribed. Unexpectedly (and even contradictorily), therefore, Sidonius used verse to cover past poetic missteps. As a result, his final poem implicitly demonstrated that he had the propriety and control to engage in the dangerous craft he had once abused; it suggested that the poet finally had the spiritual mastery to integrate poetry into his ascetic, clerical Christian life.

Aside from honest and open assessment, Sidonius responded to this conflict in his life between two cultural imperatives—the ascetic desire to renounce poetic writing, and the Roman literary impulse to keep alive his poetic fame—by experimenting creatively in search of other methods that could achieve compatibility between his Christian morals and secular literary habits. This was always a matter of trial and error, of compromise and negotiation, as we have seen. Sometimes he distanced himself from mythopoetic topoi in poems to layman and clerics alike. Elsewhere, he fashioned himself a secular poet under duress, forced into poetry out of the need to restore connections with old friends and courtiers. At several points he reasserted his renunciation and ascetic intentions within his own poems or right after brief forays into poetry. Sidonius took this route in his last poem, the Sapphic piece to Firminus. One stanza read: “At last, after this, I will not be carried off headfirst to some epigrammatic composition, nor henceforth will I be pushed into producing a poem in either slight or serious meter.”<sup>143</sup> The poet promised that he would no longer play the role of ‘poet by obligation’; principles would ultimately override peer pressure. But in typical fashion, he left open the door for more poetic writing. In his poem to Faustus, before his clerical renunciation, he attempted

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unde pars maior utinam taceri  
possit et abdi!

Nam senectutis propiore meta,  
quicquid extremis sociamur annis,  
plus pudet, si quid leve lusit aetas,  
nunc reminisci.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, lines 57-60, p. 604:

Denique ad quodvis epigramma posthac  
non ferar pronus, teneroque metro  
vel gravi nullum cito cogar exhinc  
promere Carmen

to marry classical verse form and ascetic Christian ideology. Now he imagined himself returning to that experiment in Christian Latin poetry to compose on the trials and tribulations of the martyrs.<sup>144</sup>

The reverberating influence of the Lerinian circle on Sidonius's self-conception as an author and ideas surrounding ideal literary activity could still be heard in the his last surviving words. Sponsored and encouraged by a select number of monk-bishops in positions of authority within the church of Gaul, Sidonius infused his life, and especially his literary life, with their ascetic ideas. He carved out for himself the role of the poet-convert: an author of verse who enacted the ascetic call to conversion, to spiritual and practical reform and restraint, partly by renouncing non-religious habits of writing and study, and partly by affirming ascetic commitments in and around his poetry.

*Avitus, Asceticism, and Lérins: a connection by way of Arles*

As we prepare to circle back to Avitus's poetic-ascetic conundrum, we still remain well within range of Sidonius and his ascetic-episcopal community. The extension of Lerinian ascetic ideas about proper literary and intellectual practice into Avitus's sixth-century Gallic world is most clearly visible in the work of Caesarius of Arles, the bishop of Vienne's most famous episcopal contemporary.<sup>145</sup> Caesarius came to Arles by way of the island monastery just before the turn of the century, and ascended rapidly through the ranks of the clergy there under the patronage of the city's bishop Aeonius. When Aeonius died, Caesarius was promoted to replace him in December of 502. Prior to his consecration, he had gained a reputation as a man of severe and ascetic temperament, radical even for his company at Lérins. His *vita* claims that, after having

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<sup>144</sup> *ibid.* lines 61-64. Sidonius had versified for the cult of saints before. He composed a metrical wall inscription for a structure built over the tomb of St. Martin at Tours. See *Ep.* 4.18.4.

<sup>145</sup> The classic biographical study is W. Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles: the Making of a Christian Community in Late Antique Gaul*. (Cambridge, 1994). For Caesarius's attacks on secular modes of entertainment, including poetry, see esp. pp. 196-199. For analysis of Caesarius's ascetic program, see Leyser, *Authority and Asceticism*, pp. 81-100. The bishoprics of Arles and Vienne were in tension in the early sixth century as each one contested the other's metropolitan rights. See Klingshirn, pp. 129-31. Nevertheless, Avitus was in epistolary correspondence with Caesarius, for which see *Ep.* 11, translated in Shanzer and Wood, *Avitus of Vienne*, pp. 357-359.

failed in the very social role of cellarer in the monastery (possibly due to community politics), Caesarius isolated himself and undertook a program of intense eremitic ascetic activity, weakening his body with continual prayer, reading, and sleepless vigils to the point of serious illness.<sup>146</sup>

Many of the bishop's more than 200 extant sermons reflect a hyper-ascetic mentality. Caesarius often stressed a kind of a rigorous Christian comportment set in contrast with 'worldly' life. His ideal world brooked no distinction between the practices of the laity, monks, and clergy. In his homilies, he continually announced a desire to establish these high behavioral standards for each member of his congregation. One memorable scene from the bishop's biography gives a clear picture of his black-and-white worldview. A deacon reported overhearing the man murmuring in his sleep: "There are two, there are two places. There is no middle place: either one ascends to heaven or descends to hell."<sup>147</sup>

Part of Caesarius's pastoral program included the inculcation of an "asceticism of pure speech;" for he ascribed to the ideas laid out above regarding the *lapsus oris*. For better or worse, what an individual said, sang, or read impacted upon the soul morally with consequences for salvation. "Indeed, just as wicked songs cast a man into the devil's darkness, so holy songs reveal Christ's light," he preached.<sup>148</sup> At church Caesarius attempted to instruct his audience in proper Christian speaking and to organize its practice. He defined proper Christian speech by outlining what it was not, contrasting it with a list of impious sins of the mouth—lies, boasts, flattery, insults, vulgarities, jokes, pagan songs. He had his lay people chant psalms and hymns lest they slip into idle story-telling at church, and encouraged them to form rigorous scriptural reading groups.

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<sup>146</sup> *Vita. S. Caesarii*, I.6. in *Sancti Caesarii Episcopi Arelatensis Opera Omnia*, G. Morin (ed.), II/II: *Opera Varia* (Maredsous, 1942). See Klingshirn's translation in *Caesarius of Arles: Life, Testament, Letters*. (Liverpool, 1994), p. 12.

<sup>147</sup> *Vita S. Caesarii*, II.6: "Duo sunt, duo sunt, non est quicquam medium: aut in infernum, aut in caelo itur." The translation is slightly modified from Klingshirn, p. 46. My profile of Caesarius owes much to Markus's vision of the bishop; see *The End of Ancient Christianity*, pp. 201-207.

<sup>148</sup> *Serm. 6.3*, in *Sancti Caesarii episcopi opera omnia*, G. Morin (ed.), I, CCL 103 (Turnhout, 1953): "Nam quomodo cantica turpia in tenebras diaboli mittunt, sic cantica sancta Christi lumen ostendunt."



“Who is able to sleep so much that he himself cannot either read or listen to others reading the scripture for even just three hours?” he asked incredulously.<sup>149</sup>

In addition, Caesarius believed that God had not sanctioned the literary and scholarly speech of the educated elites, but had purposefully chosen the unpolished and illiterate to preach and write his sacred texts.<sup>150</sup> The bishop’s *vita* tells this story about one traumatic experience related to an early attempt at attaining worldly wisdom through secular education:

One day when [Caesarius] had by chance grown weary during a vigil, he placed on his bed under his shoulder the book that his teacher of rhetoric had given him to read. When he had fallen asleep on it, he was soon struck with a terrible vision of divine inspiration. During his brief nap, he saw the shoulder on which he was lying and the arm with which he had been resting on the book being gnawed by a serpent winding itself around him. Terrified by what he had seen, he was shaken out of his sleep and he began to blame himself more severely for wanting to join the light of the rule of salvation to the foolish wisdom of the world. And so he at once condemned these preoccupations, for he knew that those endowed with spiritual understanding possessed the adornment of perfect eloquence.<sup>151</sup>

Consequently, Caesarius treated poetic and philosophical modes of speaking and writing with suspicion throughout his work. In one sermon, he drew an allegorical analogy between the ribbiting of frogs in the second plague of Egypt and the versifying of poets. “In the second plague, in which frogs are introduced, I think the poems of poets are figuratively signified. They infuse this world with fictitious stories of deception using a kind of vain and puffed up rhythmic measure like the sounds and songs of frogs.”<sup>152</sup> For Caesarius, as

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<sup>149</sup> *Serm.* 6.2: “qui tantum possit dormire, ut lectionem divinam vel tribus horis non possit aut ipse legere, aut alios legentes audire?”

<sup>150</sup> See Leyser, *Asceticism and Authority*, pp. 81 and 97 and Caesarius, *Serm.* 1.3. For further diatribes against secular conviviality, especially involving songs, see *Serm.* 1.12; 6.1, 3; 13.4, 19.3, 55.2.

<sup>151</sup> *Vita S. Caesarii*, I.9: “Librum itaque, quem ei legendum doctor, casu vigilia lassatus in lectulo sub scapula sua posuit: supra quem dum nihilominus obdormisset, mox divinitus terribili vision percussus; et in soporem aliquantulum resolutus videt quasi scapulam in qua iacebat, brachiumque quo innixus fuerat codici, dracone conligante conrodi. Excussus ergo e somno, territus ipse visu, terribilius se ex eodem facto coepit arguere, eo quod lumen regulae salutaris stultae mundi sapientiae voluerit copulare. Igitur contempsit haec protinus, sciens quia non deesset illis perfectae loquutionis ornatus, quibus spiritalis eminet intellectus.” Translation modified slightly from Klingshirn, p. 14.

<sup>152</sup> *Serm.* 99.3: “Secunda vero plaga, in qua inducuntur ranae, indicari figuraliter arbitror carmina poetarum, qui inani quadam et inflata modulatione velut ranarum sonis et cantibus mundo huic deceptionis fabulas intulerunt: ad nihil enim animal illud utile est, nisi quod sonum vocis improbis et inportunis clamoribus reddit.”

for his Lerinian brethren, deceitful language was a treacherous moral issue. To retain spiritual integrity required practicing cognitive and oratorical restraint, sincerity, and honesty: “For if we do not restrain our tongue, then our religious profession is not true, but false.”<sup>153</sup>

Avitus’s poetic program, involving the renunciation of fiction and even ambiguous language, sounded in harmony with ascetic arguments such as these, which circulated in southern Gaul during his episcopal tenure. But whereas Caesarius saw no use for poetry, going so far as to demonize it as a bane of human existence, and seeking to cancel it out in his community along with other secular discursive practices, Avitus saw another way. He strove to make his poetic practice an ascetic practice as Caesarius had not imagined possible, and did so with more clarity of purpose and consistency than Sidonius had ever managed.

#### *Burgundian Vienne and its bishop*

The city of Vienne is located approximately 155 miles north of Arles (Caesarius’s home) and just 20 miles south of Lyon (Sidonius’s birthplace), at the bend of the little river called La Gère where it branches off from the Rhone’s left bank. During the later Roman empire, Vienne served as the capital of the *provincia Viennensis*, a territory that had split from the ancient province *Gallia Narbonensis* sometime before the early fourth century. Under imperial control the city had witnessed memorable moments for the empire, both shining and bleak. At Vienne the emperor Julian celebrated his accession to the consulate in January of 356 AD, and the young Valentinian II held his satellite court there from 388 to 392—that is, until at age 21 he died in the city under mysterious circumstances, either from suicide or assassination.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Caes. *Serm.* 333.7: “Nam si linguam non refrenamus, non est vera sed falsa religio nostra.” Auerbach saw in Caesarius’s sermons the first signs of an ascetic aesthetic development in Christian Latin style tending toward “unadorned, utilitarian prose... [but] not a mere product of faulty education or incapacity for classical expression. The main point is that a new situation created a need for a new kind of expression”; see *Literary Language and its Public*, p. 87.

<sup>154</sup> For the sources, and a description of Vienne’s late antique and early medieval Christian sites, see *Topographie Chrétienne des cités de la Gaule des origines au milieu du VIIIe siècle*. N. Gauthier and J. Ch. Picard (eds.), III, (Paris, 1986), pp. 17-35.

By the second-third of the fifth century, the Burgundians had wrested Vienne from the empire. These barbarians were one of three major groups, along with the Visigoths in Aquitaine and the Alans in *Gallia Ulterior*, that were settled during that century by the Romans within the confines of Gaul.<sup>155</sup> The Burgundians had originally established themselves in a region called *Sapaudia* north of Geneva, but under two brothers, king Gundobad (r. 473-516) and Godegisel, they expanded their domain to include the area around the Rhone and the Saone.<sup>156</sup> The switch to barbarian overlords in these territories was not entirely peaceful. Accounts from the early 470s, probably around the time of the initial Burgundian occupation at Vienne, speak to manifold devastation. Not only had the barbarians moved their camp to the city's Roman ground, but terrifying prodigies of the strangest kinds were also said to have occurred. Earthquakes rumbled, fires spread, and skittish deer, driven by a lack of food, gathered bravely in the forum.<sup>157</sup> Around thirty years later the city experienced further tumult as the Burgundian royal family hashed out internal conflict in and around Vienne.<sup>158</sup> Eventually Gundobad prevailed and did away with Godegisel for good. Thereafter the city was securely part of the Burgundian kingdom, and functioned as one of the "cathedral cities" of its sovereigns.

From time to time, the violence and tricky political circumstances at Vienne seemed to inspire its Catholic bishops to act expertly impresarios of religious spectacle and performance. During the uproar of the 470s, for instance, the city gained a reputation for its ecclesiastical leadership with Bishop Mamertus at the helm, the brother of the aforementioned priest Claudianus, Sidonius's learned correspondent. Mamertus responded to the chaos with liturgical inventiveness by instituting a public prayer procession called 'Rogations' to rally his congregation during its time of trouble. News and imitation of the bishop's

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<sup>155</sup> I. Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450-751*. (London, 1994), pp. 8ff.

<sup>156</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, B. Krusch and W. Levison (eds.), *MGH SRM I.1*, Hanover (1951): II.32. Shanzer and Wood, *Avitus of Vienne*, pp. 13-27.

<sup>157</sup> Sidonius Apollinaris. *Ep.* 7.1.

<sup>158</sup> For one account, see Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, II.33.

entrepreneurship spread to other churches in Gaul. Rogations were established by Sidonius in his diocese of Clermont in 473.<sup>159</sup> They became a point of pride for the episcopacy there and were practiced into the sixth century at Vienne.<sup>160</sup>

For Avitus, who inherited the bishopric from his father sometime in the late fifth century, the primary difficulty in his relationship with the barbarians was a discrepancy of doctrine. The Burgundian monarch Gundobad was an Arian, not a Catholic. He kept Arian priests and bishops at his court, which must have caused some competition for influence among the religious elite. Avitus was put in the awkward position of having to evangelize to his sovereign overseer. However, no amount of awkwardness seems to have impinged on the performance of his political or religious duties. He eagerly debated in private with the king and his Arian theologians, published a pamphlet against the Arian heresy, and encouraged other Catholic, aristocratic talents to advocate for the faith as well.<sup>161</sup> Moreover, he kept the king's son Sigismund as his ally during these debates. Sigismund had converted to Catholicism around the turn of the sixth century on a visit to Rome, and eventually came into sole possession of the throne in 516.<sup>162</sup> Meanwhile, the Arian Gundobad respected Avitus's learning enough to solicit his exegetical insight on more than one occasion, and the bishop used these opportunities to champion Catholic positions, according to his own accounts.<sup>163</sup> Indeed, he applied a simple

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<sup>159</sup> See Sidonius Apollinaris, *Ep.* VII.1.2; Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, II.34. See G. Nathan, "The Rogation Ceremonies of Late Antique Gaul," *Classica et Medievalia* 51 (1998), pp. 276-303.

<sup>160</sup> Avitus of Vienne, Homily 6, in Peiper (ed.), *MGH AA VI.2*, pp. 108-112. For a translation, see Shanzer and Wood, *Avitus of Vienne*, pp. 381-388.

<sup>161</sup> Avitus of Vienne, *Ep.* 23 for private debate; the pamphlet *Contra Arianos* for his systematic deconstruction of the monarch's heretical position; for his encouragements, see *Ep.* 53 to Heraclius, a panegyricist who had defended the Catholic faith in the king's court, and *Ep.* 54 for Heraclius's response to the bishop's admiring exhortation. For theological-historical analysis of Avitus's relationship with Gundobad, see Nodes, *Doctrine and Exegesis*, pp. 57-61.

<sup>162</sup> For Burgundian Arianism, see Shanzer and Wood, *Avitus of Vienne*, pp. 18-21 and Gregory of Tours's account in *Decem Libri Historiarum* 2.32. For Sigismund's conversion, see Avitus, *Ep.* 8.

<sup>163</sup> See Avitus of Vienne, *Ep.* 4 and *Ep.* 30. For a treatment of Avitus's exegetical style, with special attention to the theology of his poetry, see D. Nodes, *Doctrine and Exegesis in Biblical Latin Poetry*. (Leeds, 1993), pp. 55-73; D. Nodes, "Avitus of Vienne's Spiritual History and the Semipelagian Controversy. The Doctrinal Implications of Books I-III," *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 (1984), pp. 185-195; and I.N. Wood, "Avitus of Vienne, The Augustinian Poet," in D. Shanzer and R. Mathisen (eds.), *Society and Culture in Late Antique Gaul*. (Burlington, 2001), pp. 263-277.

Gospel rule to guide his and his fellow Catholics' interactions with the throne: render unto Caesar what was Caesar's, but be unsparing when rendering unto God.<sup>164</sup>

This mantra reveals Avitus's directness in his approaches to the throne. In one letter to Gundobad, the bishop preached about the potential glory of the king's conversion to the Catholic faith: "If anyone should change the ancient custom of his ancestors or his sect by following the true belief, and is not held back by the special preference of custom...he renounces his relatives to his advantage," he wrote.<sup>165</sup> His exhortatory advice smacked of the difficult teaching from Luke 14:26: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple;" but Avitus also spoke from experience to some degree. Recall that conversion had fundamentally altered his family's history. The bishop's entire nuclear family, from his father Hesychius, to his mother Audentia, to his sisters Aspidia and Fuscina, had renounced their claims to secular privilege via an illustrious Roman line to lead lives of austerity or to join the clergy. "Although the world had endowed our descendants with ancient honors and may always vaunt their noble birth with titles, still it decorates more those who wear God's emblem," Avitus wrote in his poem *De virginitate*.<sup>166</sup> It is hard to overstate how radical it was for Avitus to suggest that a newly minted king could find greater power and glory outside of his political sovereignty and kinship through conversion. Still, his point of view was not entirely new. Such ideas evoked the social re-engineering practices proposed and enacted by the ascetic practitioners in fifth-century Gaul, like those

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<sup>164</sup> See *Ep.* 53.

<sup>165</sup> *Ep.* 6: "Si quis enim antiquam parentum consuetudinem sive sectam melius credendo commutet nec tenatur privilegio consuetudinis...utiliter hic parentes, fratres, sororesque dimittit." Translation adapted and slightly altered from Shanzer and Wood, *Avitus of Vienne*, p. 216.

<sup>166</sup> *De virginitate*, lines 651-653:

"Quos licet antique mundus donasset honore  
Et titulus monstret generoso semper ab ortu:  
Plus tamen ornavit divinum insigne gerentes."

expressed by Sidonius and Eucherius, who claimed that worldly rank paled in comparison to demonstrations of true Christian virtue.

According to Gregory of Tours, the bishop's constant and well-leveraged pressure eventually did dislodge Gundobad from his Arian convictions.<sup>167</sup> But when the king asked to be confirmed in the Catholic faith, Avitus approached the problem like an executive producer, as his predecessor Mamertus might have done. He demanded the king make a public show of his change of heart. He tried to convince him that the spectacle of his humbling conversion would be dignifying in the end, and bring him closer to the rank of saints and confessors. "There is yet another kind of holiness," he wrote to the ruler, "in which full confession can imitate martyrdom in a way."<sup>168</sup> This was an ascetic exhortation to be sure, an invitation to accept a redefinition of sanctity and a new vision of self-transformation. Avitus prompted the king to become a martyr of the heart and mind through a public performance of opposition to expectation, and to prevailing structures and ideologies of power. Gundobad refused to be martyred even metaphorically, and died in a stand-off with the bishop; but Avitus still stood to gain in public perception of his authority by remaining firm in his commitment to the Christian ascetic cultural position.

*In the shadow of Sidonius: Avitus's practice of poetship in the De spiritalis historiae gestis*

Avitus's efforts in "social re-engineering" based upon ascetic-Christian principles of virtue and authority did not keep him from maintaining ties with the old Roman nobility to which his family belonged. Numerous letters attest to his connections with the "illustrious men" of senatorial lineage in post-Roman Gaul. The compass of that circle contained the descendants of Sidonius Apollinaris, whom Avitus could count as relatives of his own. Sidonius's son Apollinaris was Avitus's cousin. Apollinaris had not entered the religious

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<sup>167</sup> *Decem Libri Historiarum*, 2.34.

<sup>168</sup> *Ep. 6*: "Est tamen et aliud sanctitatis genus, in quo...martyrium quoddam plena confessio queat imitari." Translation from Shanzer and Wood, *Avitus of Vienne*, p. 216.

life like his father. He was a military man. According to Gregory of Tours, he served as commander of an army of the people of the Auvergne, a unit he led in the famous Battle of Vouillé fought between the Visigoths and the Franks in 507.<sup>169</sup> But he also maintained his cultural inheritance. Sidonius's son was in frequent communication with the bishop of Vienne, both as a political correspondent and as a critical reader of poetry, though we only have the bishop's side of their letter exchange.

In his letters, Avitus grounded his relationship with Apollinaris in mutual affection for Sidonius. When Apollinaris was held in suspicion in Visigothic Aquitaine by the king Alaric for making contact with those outside the kingdom, Avitus revealed that he too had suffered the mistrust of the barbarian monarchy in Burgundy, and wrote that the whole situation reminded him of "the lot of our shared relatives." Sidonius was the bridge that joined these two men separated by the wide divide between secular and religious *professio*. He had experienced adversity in government office, and had later been exiled as a bishop under the Visigothic king Euric, making his experience relatable to both a bishop and a secular nobleman. Avitus looked to Sidonius as "an example of how much a cleric could endure," while Apollinaris could recall his father's experience for lessons on how to suffer hardship as a man of the world.<sup>170</sup>

Given Sidonius's prominence in both their lives, it makes sense that literature, and poetry in particular, would serve as common ground between them. Avitus was a keen admirer and imitator of Sidonius's poetry and prose. He respected Apollinaris's critical judgment and literary ability partly because they reminded him of Sidonius's skill and style.<sup>171</sup> He was the one person Avitus was most excited to have read his biblical epic, *De spiritalis historiae gestis*. When Eufrasius, bishop of Auvergne, sneakily stole away an

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<sup>169</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, 2.37.

<sup>170</sup> *Ep.* 51: "si vos a patre vestro hoc didicistis: virum saeculo militantem minus inter arma quam inter obloquia periclitari, exemplum a Sidonio meo, quem patrem vocare non audio, quantum clericus perpeti possit, adsumo."

<sup>171</sup> See *Ep.* 51 and 43 for praise of Sidonius's style. For Sidonius as an important model for comparison in late fifth-century literary networks, see Wood, "Continuity or calamity," and for analysis of Avitus's imitation of Sidonius, see Arweiler, *Die Imitation*, pp. 340-346.

unfinished copy of the poem without the poet's permission, Avitus wrote the man to see that his verses reached Apollinaris. "It is little short of sacrilegious that it was not offered to him first out of friendship," the bishop remarked, even as he worried, perhaps in slightly stilted humility, about the poem's reception. "He is a man who among the joys of his father's eloquence will be disgusted at [the mediocrity of] our times."<sup>172</sup> As it turned out, however, the respect for literary skill was mutual. Apollinaris warmly praised the poem even in its unpolished state.

In his reply to these compliments, Avitus disclosed his gratitude while assuming a meek authorial posture. He felt compelled to qualify his poetic writing as "play" amid his weightier episcopal duties, saying that he had composed the work "while occupied with the need to write serious and more urgent things."<sup>173</sup> The remark may be "pure self-deprecation," but it nevertheless reveals something about the bishop's poetship and the discursive context in which he practiced it.<sup>174</sup> Notably Avitus operated with the same rhetoric Sidonius had used as an ascetic poet-bishop when pitting the *levitas versuum* against the *gravitas actionum* demanded of his clerical role.<sup>175</sup> For both Avitus and Sidonius, the occupational concern to avoid poetry dovetailed with the contemporary ascetic discourse surrounding *professio*. Christian monks and clerics charged one another and some members of the laity to reject secular literary habits and to embrace a mode of serious Christian comportment as an expression of their religious convictions ("*professiones*"). A generation after Sidonius, that message still had spokesmen in Gallic episcopal circles with non-poets like Caesarius of Arles, but also with

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<sup>172</sup> *Ep.* 43: "[Apollinari] impium fuerat non primum iure caritatis offerri si non rursus fuisset absurdum me domni Sidonii filio inter facundiae paternae delicias meis temporibus nauseaturo movere etiam de praesumptione fastidium." Translation from Shanzer and Wood, *Avitus of Vienne*, pp. 342-343.

<sup>173</sup> *Ep.* 51: "scribebatis placuisse vobis libellos, quos inter occupationes seria et magis necessaria conscribendi nihilominus tamen de spiritalis historiae gestis etiam lege poematis lusi." *Ludere* ("to play") appears commonly throughout the history of the Latin language as a term denoting artistic activity, such as verse writing, or painting; see *TLL* 7.2.1774.27ff.

<sup>174</sup> See Wood, "Avitus of Vienne, the Augustinian Poet," pp. 274-275.

<sup>175</sup> See n. 65 above.



poets like Avitus. In the preface to *De virginitate*, published after *De spiritalis historiae gestis*, the ascetic concept of *professio* surfaced again, this time more overtly. Avitus wrote:

For a while it has suited our profession (*professionem*) and, now too, our age, if something needs writing, to spend our time and effort in a more serious literary mode, not wasting it on work that, in keeping a metrical pattern, sings for a few knowledgeable people, but rather writing something to serve the needs of a multitudinous readership with the measured instruction of faith.<sup>176</sup>

The preface to this poem reveals a more pessimistic attitude about poetry than at the initial circulation of Avitus's biblical epic and in the conversations surrounding its reception with Sidonius's son. For the bishop, bolstering relationships with men of upper-class, Roman heritage was no longer a sufficient excuse for writing verse. In fact, the small and elitist nature of his potential poetic readership caused him anxiety. Avitus expressed his unease about writing poems that would sing for the few—the same small number whom Sidonius had once propped up as literary defenders of Romanness under barbarian rule. It was an attitude reminiscent of Augustine's in a way. More than a century before, to arm his church ideologically against the Donatist heresy, the bishop of Hippo had composed a rhythmic abecedarian 'psalm' instead of a poem in classical, quantitative verse to reach minds of the unlettered class. "I did not want it to be composed like a poem, else metrical necessity compel me to use some less commonly used words," Augustine explained.<sup>177</sup> Avitus clearly felt some version of the same pressure.

In his final poetic, programmatic statement, reflecting on the *De virginitate*, Avitus articulated a clear, anti-poetic position: versification was an unsuitable practice for bishops. His statement had an edge, directed as it was to a fellow bishop, his brother Apollinaris, the instigator behind the release of the poem.

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<sup>176</sup> "Decet enim dudum professionem, nunc etiam aetatem nostram, si quid scriptitandum est, graviori potius stilo operam ac tempus insumere nec in eo inmorari, quod paucis intelligentibus mensuram syllabarum servando canat, sed quod legentibus multis mensurata fidei adstructione deserviat."

<sup>177</sup> Augustine, *Retractationum libri duo*, 1.20, PL 32: "Volens etiam causam Donatistarum ad ipsius humillimi vulgi et omnino imperitorum atque idiotarum notitiam pervenire, et eorum quantum fieri per nos posset inhaerere memoriae, Psalmum qui eis cantaretur per Latinas litteras feci, sed usque ad V litteram [...] Ideo autem non aliquo carminis genere id fieri volui, ne me necessitas metrica ad aliqua verba quae vulgo minus sunt usitata compelleret." For further discussion, see F.J.E. Raby, *A History of the Christian-Latin Poetry*, (Oxford, 1953), p. 20-22.

Nevertheless, he did not make an unqualified rejection of poetic composition. Avitus described his place on the precipice of literary conversion, not yet having taken the leap. He told Apollinaris that he would have given up poetry altogether: “had not by chance a clear and compelling reason insisted on the need for some epigram.”<sup>178</sup> The poet-bishop therefore pried open a small space through which to enter and explore what room was left for writing serious Christian poetry.

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Unlike many other contemporary Latin poets working within the confines of barbarian kingdoms, Avitus’s surviving poetry displays a uniformly Christian character. Moreover, the poet consistently took care to describe his verse in relation to his faith or episcopal vocation. Oftentimes he did so to mitigate or apologize for his poetic writing, which he framed as an activity in tension with his religious *professio*. Therefore, as with Sidonius, a kind of spiritual crisis or inner discord motivated and shaped the bishop’s poetship. The question was whether poetry could be integrated into a serious Christian life, and if so, how.

Avitus’s thoroughly Christian convictions did not compel him to withdraw from the literary scene, or consign himself to anonymity, or to diminish his visibility as an author in his poetry. In his biblical epic, for example, the bishop projects an authorial voice outward to his readership, rather than quietly paraphrasing the biblical narrative to fit a metrical pattern without interjection. His voice in the poem modulates between tones of moral exhortation, and exegesis.<sup>179</sup> In one instance, he emerges from his retelling of the story of Adam and Eve to offer an allegorical reading of the fig leaf garments that the biblical couple made to hide their nakedness. The poet points ahead in the grand salvation story to a time when a new Adam (Christ) will

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<sup>178</sup> “Sane a faciendis versibus pedibusque iungendis pedem de cetero relaturus, nisi forte evidentis causae ratio extorsit alicuius epigrammatis necessitatem.”

<sup>179</sup> For more on Avitus’s homiletic tone and his historical perspective, see the close readings and analysis in Shea, *The Poems of Avitus*, pp. 1-55. For a study of his authorial presence as a symptom of the genre of bible epic, see N. Hecquet-Noti, “Entre exégèse et épopée: présence auctoriale dans Juvencus, Sédulius et Avit de Vienne,” in H. Harich-Schwarzbauer and P. Schierl (eds.), *Lateinische Poesie der Spätantike*, (Basel, 2009) pp. 197-215.

use another tree (the cross) to heal the sin connected to the fig tree.<sup>180</sup> Elsewhere he departs from his narrative to rail against magic and pseudo-scientific quackery, deploying biblical examples to prove a moral principle that holds in the present.<sup>181</sup>

Avitus often presented his poetic writing as a pious work of prayer, and as a kind of spiritual discipline in itself. This habit manifested itself in his description of the origin and function of *De virginitate*, where he framed the poem for Fuscina as a product and prompt of meditative exercise.<sup>182</sup> Likewise, in the final book of his biblical epic, which treats the Crossing of the Red Sea, the poet cast his poetic efforts as votive activity: “[My aim] is not that the telling of such an awesome event should get the dignified delivery it deserves. One’s will is sufficient in praising God and it is enough for prayer to be revealed through one’s servantly duty.”<sup>183</sup> For Avitus, then, poetic writing functioned as an outlet for activating and exercising a prayerful state of mind. To versify was to practice an attitude. Communication with God was sometimes the whole point of Avitus’s poetic expression. At the end of the third book of his epic, for example, he turned from his account of the aftermath of Adam and Eve’s sin to address Christ in personal prayer.<sup>184</sup> For over sixty lines he pled on behalf of “us” (*nos*), not a royal-we, but the same “we” he employed in his extant homilies from time to time, a first-person plural that stylized himself, the author, as a priestly spokesperson for his readership.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Avitus, *De spiritalis historiae gestis*, 3.20-26.

<sup>181</sup> *ibid.* 2.277-407.

<sup>182</sup> See above n. 2.

<sup>183</sup> *De spiritalis historiae gestis*, 5.6-8:

“Sed non, ut dignum tanti praeconia facti  
Eloquium captent: divina in laude voluntas  
Sufficit et famulo monstrari munere votum.”

<sup>184</sup> *De spiritalis historiae gestis*, 3.362-425.

<sup>185</sup> E.g. Homily 2, Peiper (ed.), *MGH AA VI.2*, p. 106, lines 18-20; Homily 6, p. 111, lines 18-19.

As a Christian poet, Avitus exhibited an exceptional level of self-awareness about the ethical consequences of his aesthetic decisions and rhetorical strategies. He crafted for himself a complex poetic program that was underwritten by an unusually stringent set of rules for composition. The prose foreword to *De spiritalis historiae gestis*—a letter to his blood-brother Apollinaris—contains Avitus’s most explicit commentary on his role and obligations as a poet-bishop.<sup>186</sup> There, Avitus took umbrage at secular literary judgements for the wrongheaded and unethical preferences that underpinned them. “In the making of secular verse, a man is dubbed more skilled the more elegantly—no—rather, I should say, the more foolishly he weaves together falsehoods,” he scoffed.<sup>187</sup> He himself rejected this way of thinking, attributing his own poetic imperative to a desire to please God more than man: “Wherefore, having attempted a work more difficult than rewarding in the opinion of men of the world, who assign our avoidance of poetic license to a lack of skill or ignorance, I have made a firm distinction between divine appraisal and human evaluation.”<sup>188</sup>

One scholar has ungenerously termed Avitus’s rhetoric as representative of an “anti-aesthetic rigor.”<sup>189</sup> In truth, his rhetoric was fundamentally ascetic. It entailed a difficult performance of opposition to the prevailing norms of poetry in order to effect a spiritual transformation. Under the persuasion of the ethical principles of his faith, the poet put himself at a disadvantage in the court of critical opinion by swearing off several common secular poetic practices; he did so to bring himself in closer union with God. While he acknowledged that *licentia mentiendi*, “the freedom to tell falsehoods,” was granted to poets and painters alike

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<sup>186</sup> See M. Roberts, “The Prologue to Avitus’ *De spiritalis historiae gestis*: Christian Poetry and Poetic License,” *Traditio* 36 (1980), pp. 399-407; Shea, *The Poems*, pp. 11-14; Cullhed, *The Shadow of Creusa*, pp. 570-583.

<sup>187</sup> Prologue to *De spiritalis historiae gestis*: “In saeculari namque versuum opera condendo tanto quis peritior appellatur, quanto elegantius, immo, ut vere dicamus, ineptius falsa texuerit.”

<sup>188</sup> *ibid.*: “quocirca saecularium iudicio, qui aut inperitiae, aut ignaviae dabunt non uti nos licentia poetarum, plus arduum quam fructuosum opus adgressi divinam longe discrevimus ab humana existimatione censuram.”

<sup>189</sup> J. Fontaine, *Naissance de la poésie dans l'occident chrétien: esquisse d'une histoire de la poésie latine chrétienne du IIIe au VIe siècle*. (Paris, 1981), p. 257.

(following Horace's *Ars poetica*), he denied himself that creative power because of his work's "seriousness."<sup>190</sup> He underscored how hard it was to write poetry while abiding by these regulations. "However sharp and educated a man may be, if he preserves a style with a religious purpose in tune with the law of faith no less than the law of meter, he can hardly be fit for poetry."<sup>191</sup> Avitus was apparently willing to run the risk.

In fact, the rejection of *licentia mentiendi* instantiated a familiar and generic Christian anxiety over poetic fiction.<sup>192</sup> A long line of Christian Latin apologists from Lactantius to Augustine had cast pagan poetry and its mythological subjects as lies, and therefore as ethically incongruent with Christianity. More poignantly, Christian Latin bible epicists from Juvencus in the fourth century to Sedulius in the early fifth had responded to this concern by making open ideological commitments to the truth of the Gospel and Christian history in their poetry in their verse prefaces. They vowed to avoid versifying on fables of the Roman mythic tradition except to dismantle their truth value.<sup>193</sup> Avitus, however, took their generic program a step further. The poet increased the difficulty of his practice by adding to the list of literary dangers Christian poets faced. Alongside poetic fictions he included certain aspects of style: "words or names we are not allowed to dally in

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<sup>190</sup> "quippe cum licentia mentiendi, quae pictoribus ac poetis aequè conceditur, satis procul a causarum serietate pellenda sit."

<sup>191</sup> "quamquam quilibet acer ille doctusque sit, si religionis propositae stilum non minus fidei quam metri lege servaverit, vix aptus esse poemati queat." This statement invites comparison with Sidonius's remark to Claudianus upon being asked to critique a hymn; he replied that his newly adopted religious mode of writing was making him a "bad poet." See n. 89 above.

<sup>192</sup> It is interesting to consider how Avitus's poetic theory may reflect anti-Arian ideology. According to the Arian heresy, Christ was not of the same substance as God the Father; rather, he was perfect man. Thus, by insisting on a distinction between divine and human literary-critical judgement, and by privileging the former, as we saw above, Avitus reaffirms the Trinitarian position that God's/Christ's nature is essentially different from human nature. Moreover, his effort to cultivate a poetics of truth may be implicated in Catholic metaphysical absolutism, which, contrary to Arianism, viewed Christ as equivalent to the Word and Truth, and so as linguistically realizable. For a moment of comparison in the tradition of bible epic, see Juvencus, *Evangeliorum Libri Quattuor*, 4.803-805, in which the poet authorizes his versification of the Gospel by setting it in analogy with Christ's reincarnation:

"In tantum lucet mihi grati Christi,  
Versibus ut nostris divinae gloria legis  
Ornamenta libens caperet terrestria linguae."

<sup>193</sup> See the preface to Juvencus's epic in J. Huemer (ed.) *CSEL* 24, and Sedulius, *Carmen Paschale*, in *Sedulii Opera Omnia*, J. Huemer (ed.), *CSEL* 10, (Vienna, 1885); translated in C. Springer, *The Paschal Song and Hymns*. (Atlanta, 2013). For the literary history of this particular ethical tension in Christian Latin writing, see Cullhed, *The Shadow of Creusa*, and the bibliography in n. 16 above.

others' writing, never mind use in our own: often signifying one thing by another, they can serve as shorthand for poets."<sup>194</sup>

Ironically, Avitus's statement is not perfectly transparent. It is unclear at first to which illicit figures, "words or names" he refers. Avitus could not have meant to reject the use of allegory.<sup>195</sup> The poet scattered allegorical figurations liberally throughout his text. He did, however, avoid employing antonomasia and metonymy that might lead to "mythological contamination." The poem is free of references to the sea as "Neptune"; neither did the poet name God "the Thunderer" as Christian Latin poets before him had not hesitated to do. In his poetry, therefore, Avitus abided by the restrictive systematic statement he set out in his prose preface.<sup>196</sup> The rhetoric of renunciation and literary austerity there functions as a key for interpretation for the aesthetics of the poem. Poetic theory and technique were intertwined.

Importantly, Avitus did not fashion himself as a trailblazing rebel against the classical tradition or a radical innovator. Instead, he presented himself as a continuator of a profound biblical tradition. In the final section of his bible epic, the poet-bishop craftily authorized his poetic practice and ascetic-aesthetic program by linking it to the hymn writing of Moses, the most important biblical forebear of *De spiritalis historiae gestis*. Of course, Avitus knew Moses as the original narrator of the history he had versified, but he also knew him as a poet for, among other things, the song of triumph in Exodus 15, which the Israelites sang after the Red Sea closed in on the Egyptians. Avitus recounted how "the famous leader described the extraordinary event in a ceremonial poem, which is now hymned throughout the world."<sup>197</sup> The Latin here is revelatory: Moses

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<sup>194</sup> "Taceo iam verba illa vel nomina, quae nobis nec in alienis quidem operibus frequentare, ne dicam in nostris conscribere licet: quae ad compendia poetarum aliud ex alio significantia plurimum valent."

<sup>195</sup> See Roberts, "The Prologue."

<sup>196</sup> For yet another view, see Shea, *The Poems*, p. 13: "For [Avitus] an open text in which metaphor produced multiple meanings represented a clear threat to the authoritative discourse of the Christian intellectual tradition."

<sup>197</sup> *De spiritalis historiae gestis*, 704-705:

"Inclitus egregium sollemni carmine doctor  
Describit factum, toto quod psallitur orbe."

is said to have versified *factum*—cold fact—just as Avitus claimed to do in the present, having renounced poetic fiction and circumlocution. Avitus enhanced this image of himself as the poetic follower of Moses by calling the biblical figure *vates*, a polysemic word for both poet and prophet, and in the late antique world—bishop.<sup>198</sup> Moses’ Pentateuch functioned too as the exemplar for the bible epic’s structure: “The pious *vates* explained these things in five books. And so following the trumpet with the reed pipe, we keep that number.”<sup>199</sup> The line connecting Moses and Avitus as poets came to a close at the scene of Egyptian defeat, and created elegant ring composition within the poem. Avitus described the waters of the Red Sea allegorically as a sign of baptism, which would produce a new generation of men in the wake of “the old guilty men whom Eve bore.” Those same waters, he claimed, would also wipe away whatever error he as poet had committed in his “poor verse.”<sup>200</sup>

Avitus formed and followed an exceptionally disciplined mode of poetic writing based on Christian ethical principles. And he portrayed himself as the continuator of an evolving biblical poetic tradition extending from Moses. But these features do not explain by themselves *why* the poet-bishop set such hard rules for himself in his verse composition. What were his motivations? Or rather, what discourses shaped his poetic practice and his own conception of it? Avitus’s unusually high position in the church may be a factor. Of all the biblical Latin poets, he alone held episcopal rank. According to one late fifth or early sixth century

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<sup>198</sup> See, e.g., the epitaph for Bishops Leander and Isidore of Seville, in Vives (ed.), *ICERV 272* (Barcelona, 1942), p. 80.

<sup>199</sup> Lines 719-721:

“Quas pius explicuit per quinque volumina vates.  
Nosque tubam stipula sequimur numerumque tenentes  
Hoc tenui cumbae ponemus litore portum.”

<sup>200</sup> See Shea, *The Poems*, p. 56-57. *De Spiritalis historiae gestis*, lines 707-712:

“Emittitque novam parientis lympha lavacri  
Prolem post veteres, quos edidit Eva, reatus.  
De qua sermonem praemisso carmina sumpsit,  
Luctificos replicat tenuis dum pagina lapsus.  
Si quid triste fuit, dictum est quod paupere versu,  
Terserit hic sacri memorabilis unda triumpho.”

collection of regulations for clerics, bishops were forbidden from even reading pagan literature.<sup>201</sup> But the mere existence of a normative code against classical reading does not prove Avitus's compliance, nor does it help to explicate his practice of writing poetry. The bishop never once made reference to the statute in question; and furthermore, his letters and poetry speak to a deep familiarity with pagan texts, which contradict the rule in question.

A more compelling explanation emerges from the bishop's familiarity with and personal implication in ascetic practice and discourse. Pertinent concepts like Christian *professio*, for instance, which some of the poet's ascetic peers used to refer to a rigorous mode of Christian spiritual and intellectual living, linguistically infiltrated Avitus's thinking. The late antique Gallic asceticism with which Avitus was in contact emphasized total conversion to the Christian ethos, the inculcation of humility and restrained speech, and the renunciation of various aspects of secular life as a way to defend the soul against the moral hazards running through the world. Sin was inevitable; but there were practices that could mitigate one's vulnerability to them. Avitus's poetic program and practice reflects this line of thought. "If one must err in some way, it is better for a cleric when speaking to let ostentation go unsatisfied rather than [his] rule," he wrote. "One stumbles more safely in metrical feet than in the track of truth."<sup>202</sup> Put simply, there was moral peril in versifying. Sidonius had once written similarly that "among men of clerical rank...to tell lies is disgraceful, and to tell the truth is dangerous."<sup>203</sup> Likewise for Avitus, words had moral import. What he wrote impacted upon his chances of salvation and the successful stewardship of the community. While taking an ascetic approach to verse composition, therefore, Avitus developed practical methods, such as the disavowal of fictive writing and

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<sup>201</sup> See Roberts, "The Prologue," and Riche, *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West*, pp. 96-97. Both authors refer to the late ancient canon law collection *Statuta ecclesiae antiqua*, 5, in G. Morin (ed.), *S. Caesarii opera omnia*, 2:91: "Ut episcopus gentilium libros non legat, haereticum autem pro necessitate temporis."

<sup>202</sup> Prologue to *De spiritalis historiae gestis*: "si quacumque ex parte peccandum est, salubrius dicenti clerico non impletur pompa quam regula et tutius artis pede quam veritatis vestigio claudicatur."

<sup>203</sup> *Ep.* 4.22.5: "per homines clericalis officii...turpiter falsa periculose vera dicuntur."



elliptical language, to help Christian poets walk the narrow road of perfection in the perilous world of poetry. In his poetic writing, the bishop pursued “the other kind of holiness” he had preached to Gundobad.<sup>204</sup> When he renounced parts of the inheritance of classical poetry, he rejected the customs of his ancestors. He refused to participate wholly in a quintessential discourse for the expression of worldly superiority among upper-class Romans. In doing so, Avitus accepted a kind of textual martyrdom before his readership.

*The ascetic poetics of De virginitate*

Nowhere is the influence of asceticism on Avitus’s poetship more perceptible than in his final poem, *De virginitate*, written to encourage his sister, the nun Fuscina, in her virginal profession. To these verses the poet applies the same ascetic program he had undertaken to write his biblical epic, with its attendant rejections of *falsa* and mythological terminology. Here, though, he enacts it more poignantly to perform literarily as the disciple and supporter of his ascetic relative. For this performance Avitus desired an intimate setting. In the preface, he requests his poem stay in the family, and asks his brother to be mindful that “the little book, which deals very personally with the religion of our common relatives and the virgins of our family, be given only to those readers linked with us by the bond of close relations or religious purpose.”<sup>205</sup> Avitus’s insistence on the fellowship of likeminded readers parallels the poem’s ascetic purpose; for the *De virginitate* exemplifies the way late antique ascetic writers, mainly hagiographers, used texts to put their tightknit communities in contact with icons of religion, models for imitation, touchstones for group identity.<sup>206</sup> The poet’s brilliance, however, is in his multifarious and metaliterary experimentation with a textual ascetic mode. Not only does he provide Fuscina with saintly exemplars for imitation, nor simply describe her as a model of holiness in her

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<sup>204</sup> See Ep. 6, n. 166 above.

<sup>205</sup> Prologue to *De virginitate*: “Meminerit autem pietas tua hunc ipsum, quem sic vocas, libellum vel de religione parentum communium vel de virginibus nostrae familiae familiarius disputantem illis tantummodo legendum dare, quos revera nobis aut vinculum propinquitatis aut propositum religionis adnectit.”

<sup>206</sup> See G.G. Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*. (Chicago, 1987), p. 13.

own right, but rather he also inscribes himself as a model imitator of her saintliness. This is the key to his ascetic poetship—to make the act of writing poetry an ascetic act in itself.

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In an opening *recusatio* of mythical subjects, Avitus recited for Fuscina his commitment to poetic truth-telling. He specifically rejected stories involving fabulous figures like Pegasus or the Moirai, and affirmed instead the Christian character of his poem. “This lyre will not be wetted in the water of falsity,” he wrote. “True music gifts you a brotherly plectrum, and my pipe, sounding Christ, will be closed off to Phoebus.”<sup>207</sup> The texture of the poem’s ensuing section, with its blend of biographical detail, biblical exempla, and morally didactic flourishes, is representative of the entire work. It begins with an account of Fuscina’s birth, which marked the beginning of a new life for their mother Audentia. After bringing her fourth child into the world, Audentia adopted a life of poverty and chastity with her husband. Fuscina was the totem of her parents’ conversion, and she was offered to Christ to seal their vows to lead austere, ascetic lives.<sup>208</sup> In the oblation of a child’s secular life, Avitus saw the contours of an Old Testament moment. He used the rhetoric of epic simile—*sic quondam*—to tie Fuscina’s dedication to the episode in Genesis 4 where Abel auspiciously sacrifices a lamb to God. “Through the offering of one life, the whole flock found favor,” he wrote, insinuating for the first time in the poem that his sister’s life of self-sacrifice was for the good of the family.<sup>209</sup> As Avitus continued to narrate Fuscina’s Christian ascetic development—from baptism to virgin vows—family remained a keynote in the telling. Using their mother’s profile, he crafted a speech to remind

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<sup>207</sup> *De virginitate*, lines 11, 17-18:

Non hic fallaci tinguetur barbitus unda  
[...]  
Dat tibi germanum sed verax musica plectrum  
Et Christum resonans claudetur fistula Phoebos

<sup>208</sup> Lines 19-26.

<sup>209</sup> Line 32: “Et capite oblato placuit grex totus ab uno.”

Fuscina that there was no lack of ascetic models at home for her to imitate. Audentia rattled off a list of female relatives who had likewise committed themselves to leading celibate lives. “Their trail is hot,” she said. “You can climb to heaven following their path.”<sup>210</sup>

Avitus’s line connecting his sister’s ascetic spirituality to the family name was not unique. Across the Christian world, female ascetic movements had sprouted primarily in aristocratic domestic environments. From the late fourth century, the Roman West saw an influx of aristocratic women undertaking ascetic careers, many as “virginal daughters” who cohabited in social isolation with members of their kin, some ascetic, some not.<sup>211</sup> As Peter Brown has put it, “Women’s monasticism had begun very much as a branch of family piety. A pious household would be proud to have its virgin...The pious virgin was a human relic, encased in the midst of the city.”<sup>212</sup> Fuscina’s story, as the symbol and standard-bearer for a noble Roman family’s turn to religion, vividly shows how the end of the imperial bureaucracy in Western provinces dramatically affected family structures and planning.

Even if it was well-trodden, Avitus recognized that the route holy women took was precarious and bedeviled. He therefore made it his mission to offer Fuscina cautious wisdom on how to walk the straight and narrow, to encourage her “while diverse disasters assailed [her] amid many dangers; while [her] insecure life ran along an unstable path; while the trampled serpent struck at [her] steps.”<sup>213</sup> The poet’s strategy at this

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<sup>210</sup> Throughout the poem, Avitus filled out that list of examples for his sister with female figures from the Bible: from Machabaea (lines 104-108), to the Virgin Mary (lines 201-205), to Deboarah (lines 342-362), to Susanna in the Book of Daniel (lines 549-620). For Audentia’s speech, see lines 75-101: 81-83:

“...vestigia fervent,  
Per quae sectato conscendas tramite caelum.  
Nec desunt exempla domi.”

<sup>211</sup> Elm, *Virgins of God*, *passim*; see esp. pp. 374-385.

<sup>212</sup> Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*, 226-231. On this topic, see also K. Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*. (Cambridge, MA, 1996).

<sup>213</sup> *De virginitate*, 115-120:

“Nunc decet adtonitos cauta te voce monere  
Sollicitas tecum partiri ac volvere curas  
Atque iuvare tuos hortantia dicta labores,

junction was to emphasize once more that his sister was not alone. Many members of her family accompanied her on her difficult journey, and benefitted from her spiritual labor. This time, though, he did not point Fuscina to the past to consider her forebears, but to the present, indicating himself and his brother Apollinaris as her running partners. “Forgive the love of the one who encourages you, who advises the runner even though he himself barely follows along,” he wrote. “And if we follow, now maybe it will be reckoned unto us. But that we your brothers are following—that is your doing. Your brothers’ conversion is owed to your pious example.”<sup>214</sup>

As he pronounced himself a convert, Avitus put himself on the ascetic pathway to saintliness. He implicated himself in the system of emulation crucial to ascetic practice writ large, and which, more locally, Audentia had recommended to her daughter.<sup>215</sup> More than mere convention, the rhetoric of this moment reveals a mesmerizing and kaleidoscopic metaliterary dynamic operating within the poem. It makes clear that, from the preface, with its hints of renunciation and austerity toward verse, Avitus has been experimenting in the collision of poetry and conversion. This word of ascetic acknowledgement to his sister invites the poem’s readers, who include Fuscina as the direct addressee and an implicit audience of onlookers, to consider the extraordinary practical multidimensionality of asceticism in the work; to see both Avitus’s writing of *De virginitate* and subsequent readings of the poem as acts of ascetic spirituality.

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Dum pugnat varius per crebra pericula casus,  
 Lubrica dum fragili currit sub tramite vita,  
 Dum tua calcatus captat vestigia serpens.”

<sup>214</sup> *ibid*, p. 279, lines 141-142, 148-150.

”..da veniam, qui te exhortatur, amori  
 Currentem monens, cum vix tamen ipse sequatur.  
 [...]
 Et si consequimur, iam nostrum forte putetur:  
 Quod sequimur tamen, hoc tuum est: conversio fratrum  
 Exemplo debenda pio.”

<sup>215</sup> For thought-provoking discussion of the mechanics of ascetic imitation in Christian conversion, see Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative*, esp. pp. 41-42.

Avitus insisted to Fuscina that there was only one method for staying upright and oriented on the strict path: vigorous ascetic effort, a gritty and sweaty struggle. “If by chance the passion for saintly labor wanes, and otiose laziness breaks well-practiced observances, then the glory of a life now lost falls away head over heels,” he warned. “One must strain with full strength to maintain footing on the narrow way.”<sup>216</sup> One reason Avitus could march so closely with his sister was that his ascetic landscape brooked no divide between woman and man: “Virtue is common, danger is common to men and women alike. There is no difference at heart.”<sup>217</sup> They each knew the same anxious uncertainties that attended the pursuit of Christian perfection.

The poem is replete with other rhetorical ploys aimed at leveling traditional gender barriers and distinctions. Most strikingly, Avitus concluded the poem by assigning to Fuscina the masculine roles of patron and standard-bearer for her family.<sup>218</sup> Empowering his ascetic sister in this way authorized the poet to advocate for virtuous religious practices that were sometimes perceived as feminine among his late antique Gallic peers. The reading of devotional literature fell into this category. On visiting the estate of the former praetorian prefect Tonantius Ferreolus, for example, Sidonius had remarked that the library there contained separate sections for women and men, with the former holding books of a “religious style,” and the latter “marked by the grand style of Latin eloquence.”<sup>219</sup> Avitus, however, did not subscribe to such distinctions. His concern was only that he and Fuscina study “truthful authors,” and read actively in preparation for doing

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<sup>216</sup> See for example *De virginitate*, lines 284-285, 338-340, and here 132-134, 136-137:

“Nam stadium sancti laxet si forte laboris  
Pigraque consuetas dissolvent otia curas,  
Labitur in praeceps damnosae gloriae vitae.  
[...] nitendum est viribus amplis,  
Ut satis angustum servent vestigia callem.”

<sup>217</sup> Lines 282-283:

“Communis virtus igitur, commune periculum  
Matribus atque viris, nulla est distantia cordis.”

<sup>218</sup> Lines 648-649.

<sup>219</sup> Sidonius, Ep. 2.9.4: qui inter matronarum cathedras codices erant, stilus his religiosus inveniebatur, qui vero per subsellia patrumfamilias, hi coturno Latiaris eloquii nobilitabantur.

good works. He promoted devotional and scriptural reading as essential parts of a system of intellectual asceticism, as practices for sharpening discernment and discovering models of behavior, regardless of gender.

This program shines through most visibly at the midpoint of *De virginitate*, where Fuscina is imagined girding herself for the mental battle of ascetic life. She was fearless: reading had supplied confidence by giving her knowledge of Deborah from the Book of Judges, an exemplary militaristic matriarch.<sup>220</sup> Avitus portrayed his sister as the braver warrior, decked out with chastity and faith to war against the Devil. He encouraged her to wield faithful hope, modesty, justice, and intellect as her weapons of choice, to swing a “pointed word” as a sword.<sup>221</sup> The cultivation of these virtues, he suggested, was to happen through engagement with religious literature, and at the top of his proposed reading list he placed a Christian Latin poet. He directed Fuscina to the work of Prudentius who had poeticized the war of the soul in his moral allegorical epic, the *Psychomachia*. Virginitas is a character in that poem, a *bellatrix* who defeats *libido* in battle, and so allegorically models the power Avitus hoped his sister would enact.<sup>222</sup> Running through a list of biblical authors for Fuscina to read, including Moses, David (who wrote in song), Tobit, Esdras and the writers of the New Testament, he returned again in conclusion to recommend the Christian poetry she had been trained to study.<sup>223</sup>

The sum of the poem is a vision of the complex landscape of ascetic culture as a spiritual and intellectual world, as well as an act of participation in it. As poet, Avitus not only functions as an imitative observer of his sister’s holiness, but as her writer-guide, whose text exercises the ascetic’s mind and lays the

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<sup>220</sup> *De virginitate*, lines 338-362, see esp. lines 340-341:

“... Nam gloria dudum  
Sexus ista tui nota est tibi saepe legendo.”

<sup>221</sup> Lines 338-369, here 369:

“Pro gladio semper verbum teneatur acutum.”

<sup>222</sup> Lines 370-378.

<sup>223</sup> Lines 409-411:

“Nec, si quid sacrum nostri cecinere poetae,  
Te latet: agnoscis leges et commata servas  
Atque aliena tuo commendas carmina cantu.”

groundwork for honorable deeds. And then there was Fuscina, the ascetic reader, who had her own work to do. In offering advice on how to apply critical reading abilities and intellect to her ascetic life, Avitus set forth his clearest (or at least most concise) manifesto on Christian literary behavior:

Use your learned intellect, and with manly energy convert what you know and what you have reviewed in reading into a work of virtue. For if the faithful life is not married to learning, practices that are understood but unobserved will do more serious harm.

For this, he did not put forward any explicit *exemplum*. It was implied. Making his poetry part of his religious life, stripping away its excess worldliness, protecting it from contamination, treating it as a method of prayer and as an exercise in ascetic virtue—has Avitus the poet-convert been acting as an ascetic exemplar all along? He answers our question with a question: “Why should I unpack it all?”<sup>224</sup>

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From a literary-critical perspective, *De virginitate* succeeds as a poetic demonstration of the ascetic lessons it was written to teach. By writing verse according to an unusually rigid set of rules for content and style, seeking at once to promote the Christian faith and guard it from adulteration, Avitus modeled how a Christian Latin versifier could join his poetship to the *vita fidelis*. He played the role of poet-convert. His poetry was ascetic in character. The same ethical imperatives that caused him to renounce the poetic license to write fiction or use ambiguous terminology were active in Fuscina’s life. Both the ascetic poetic writer and his ascetic reader sought to avoid what was untrue, and therefore not Christ, at all costs. They accepted strict regulations for themselves and exercised strenuous vigilance to practice their respective modes of perfection. Yet under these restrictive rules, Avitus felt that they experienced a special kind of liberty, which freed their

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<sup>224</sup> Lines 412-416:

“Quid totum replicem? Tu sensibus utere doctis  
Et quae nota tibi vel quae percursa legendo  
Ad virtutis opus studio converte virili.  
Nam nisi doctrinae iungatur vita fidelis,  
Agnosci gravius non observanda nocebit.”

lives from “the wicked chains of the deceptive world.”<sup>225</sup> This helps to explain why Avitus did not radically dissociate himself from poetic writing altogether. He practiced what may be called a “coenobitic” or “integrative” type of literary asceticism, set out in the introductory chapter, not only in the sense that his poem was directed to a member of a monastic institution. Avitus’s coenobitic poetship was rooted in the fundamental acceptance and integration of “certain worldlinesses”—conforming to the classical laws of meter and syntax, embracing a majority of classical poetic diction, abiding by tried-and-true rhetorical routines—which he then endeavored to perfect.<sup>226</sup> In the process of assimilating verse composition to the Christian life, poetry became more than words; it became a Christian cultural practice, an act of faith. Verse merged with conversion, asceticism with authorship. For the bishop, there was no other way: “it would bring harm, if we should reckon ourselves Christians and saints, if actions did not follow words.”<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Lines 198-200:

At late longeque tuam discernere sortem  
Libertas cum lege potest, qua necteris, ut te  
Inpia fallentis non stringant vincula mundi.”

<sup>226</sup> For the distinction between eremitic and coenobitic ascetic approaches and principles, viewed through the lenses of philosophy and literary criticism, see Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative*, pp. 20-44: for the quote, p. 21.

<sup>227</sup> Lines 428-429:

“Nam si Christicolos nosmet sanctosque putemus,  
Adgravat hoc etiam, ni dictum facta sequantur.”



## CHAPTER THREE

### THE DEAD, POETS, AND SOCIETY (I): CHRISTIAN LATIN VERSE EPITAPHIC HABITS TO POST-ROMAN LATE ANTIQUITY

#### *The Epitaph of the Holy Bishop Avitus*

You who, when gazing on the mournful monument of the tomb,  
Will weep because Avitus is completely confined in the earth,  
Strip anxious worry from your sad heart.  
For abounding faith, the glory of a lofty intellect,  
Piety, a charitable hand, and fame make him everlasting.  
He has no relationship with death. In fact, consider the deeds  
Of the holy man: with what talent he flourished  
And yet spurned the magistracies handed down by his ancient line.  
All the while he projected a mature mind in his younger years  
And kept worldly privilege in check with the power of prayer.  
Without delay, he assumed the honorable emblems of the priesthood in such a way  
As to enhance the blessed beginnings of his work.  
Rank did not hinder his sweetness, nor prestige his discipline.  
The great man took on the role of a subject; the leader protected the ordinary.  
He gave as he was sparing, he provided food as he fasted,  
He terrified with love, and mixed great kindness with severity...  
He alone was at the peak in every kind of speech:  
There was no orator like him, and no poet was his equal,  
As his books scattered through many volumes declare.  
He who has lived, lives and will live through every age.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Epitaphium Sancti Aviti [episcopi]*, R. Peiper (ed.), *MGH AA VI.2*, Berlin (1883), pp. 185-186:

Quisquis maestificum tumuli dum cernis honorem  
Caespite concludi totum deflebis Avitum  
Exue sollicitas tristi de pectore curas.  
Nam quem plena fides, celsae quem gloria mentis,  
Quem pietas, quem prompta manus, quem fama perennat  
Nil socium cum morte tenet. Quin prospice sancti  
Gesta viri, primum floescens indole quanta  
Spreverit antiquo demissos stemmate fasces  
Maturum teneris animum dum praestat in annis  
Et licitum mundi voti virtute relegat.  
Nec mora, pontificis sic digna insignia sumsit  
Augeat ut soliti felicia coepta laboris.  
Culmen dulcidini, non obstat pompa rigori;  
Subicitur magnus, servat mediocria summus:  
Distribuit parcus, pascit ieiunus, amando  
Terret et austeris indulgentissima miscet...  
Unus in arce fuit quoquo libet ordine fandi:  
Orator nullus similis nullusque poeta;  
Clamant quod sparsi per crebra volumina libri.  
Quis vixit, vivit perque omnia saecula vivet.

This is the epitaph for Avitus of Vienne. It was raised probably near the time of his death in 518. Twenty-four lines in good dactylic hexameter—it is a majestic piece of Christian Latin funeral poetry. It is also a useful pivot point for this study. Looking back, it confirms the previous chapter’s reading of Avitus as a man with overlapping elements of identity. Tasked with creating a condensed and honorific image of his subject, the writer of this epitaph emphasizes the hybridity of the deceased—a cross between illustrious Roman noble, austere ascetic clergyman, and eloquent wordsmith. “And yet [he] spurned the magistracies handed down by his ancient line,” the tombstone reads. “[He] kept worldly privilege in check with the power of prayer.” And to punctuate the praise: “There was no orator like him, and no poet was his equal.” It is clear this poet was a reader of Avitus. The text points us to the bishop’s books, after all. Even more, it is tempting to conceive of the author as a disciple of his ascetic poetic subject. In that the poem harnesses classicizing verse to make a statement about ascetic Christian identity, constructed in direct opposition to secular Roman identity which had once rooted some of its power in poetry, it imitates the work that Avitus had performed in his poem for Fuscina. The epitaph is quintessentially Avitan.

Looking forward, this tombstone poem puts us in touch with a profoundly important form for the development of Christian Latin poetship in the post-Roman period. From the fourth century onward, the verse epitaph became a signature text of Christian communities in the West. Of the roughly 4,000 Latin metrical inscriptions that exist from the third century BC to the seventh century AD, around 1,200 are Christian epitaphs (a figure that represents 75% of all Christian tituli).<sup>2</sup> Such abundance alone signals their cultural significance. As the epitaph for Avitus shows as well, these texts functioned as spaces for the negotiation and reconfiguration of identity in a transitional world, and give insight into poetry’s role in the shifting game of memory among Latin Christians. In what follows, this chapter examines the Christian verse

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<sup>2</sup> W. Schetter, “Poesie epigraphique” in R. Herzog (ed.), *Nouvelle histoire de la littérature latine, Restauration et renouveau: la littérature latine de 284 à 374 après J.-C.* (Turnhout, 1993), pp. 258-271: 259; and G. Sanders, “Le dossier quantitatif de l’épigraphie latine versifiée.” *L’Antiquité classique* 50 (1981), pp. 707-720.

epitaphic habit from multiple angles. It considers the trend in light of large Roman epigraphic datasets, theories of monumentality, and concepts of Christian commemoration. All of these investigations prepare for a study of the peculiar presence and self-fashioning of poets within Christian epitaphic poetry. The focus here is on two authors—Pope Damasus of the late fourth century, and Sidonius Apollinaris—who offer extraordinary insight into the actual making of epitaphs, and whose epitaphic poetry blurs the lines between text and social reality in fascinating ways. Unlike the epitaph for Avitus, these poets insert themselves into commemorative poems to model euergetic piety and/or to open lines of prayerful communication with the special dead. Their authorial techniques invite reflection on the expanding social functions of Christian Latin verse makers. This chapter shows how the boom of verse epitaphs among late and post-Roman Christians entailed the creation of new spaces for authors to make political and religious interventions in their communities, spaces where poets could confirm, guide, and innovate reconfigurations of culture and identity in their changing Roman worlds.

*Laying the groundwork: interpreting epigraphic habits*

Latin epitaphs fall under the umbrella of Latin epigraphy, “the study of Latin texts inscribed on durable objects.”<sup>3</sup> Any social history that wishes to analyze Latin epigraphic data is likely to make reference to the so-called “epigraphic habit,” a term applied by Ramsay MacMullen to the study of the historical frequency of inscriptions in the Roman empire during the first three centuries AD. MacMullen showed that the rate at which inscriptions were made was not constant across these 300 years, and that new appreciation for the fluctuations in this rate of frequency would affect interpretations of Roman social history.<sup>4</sup> According

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<sup>3</sup> J. Reynolds, “epigraphy, Latin,” *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Online.

<sup>4</sup> R. MacMullen, “The Epigraphic Habit in the Roman empire,” *AJP* 103 (1982), pp. 233-246. For critical responses, see E.A. Meyer, “Explaining the Epigraphic Habit in the Roman empire: The Evidence of Epitaphs” *JRS* 80 (1990), pp. 74-96, and I. Morris, *Death-ritual and Social Structure in Antiquity*. (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 167-173.

to Stanislaw Mrozek's curve for the distribution of Roman inscriptions, epigraphic production increased somewhat steadily up to its peak around 250 AD, at which point it dropped off precipitously.<sup>5</sup> Scholars have since extended the graph through the later Roman empire and into the seventh century, revealing another conspicuous pattern. From roughly the fourth century to the middle of the sixth century the number of inscriptions rises steadily from its nadir, only to decrease rapidly again starting around the year 600.<sup>6</sup>

These trends within the epigraphic data have prompted ambitious inquiries into the motivations behind the construction of monumental texts in the Roman West. Scholars have basically sought to explain *why* certain periods yield more inscriptionary evidence than others, and especially to explicate major turning points. To find solutions ancient and medieval historians agree that one must appreciate epigraphic practices as socially contingent phenomena.<sup>7</sup> In the western Roman world, communities—and particularly the ruling aristocracy—used the act of inscription more than any other literary practice to broadcast political and legal messages, to highlight local interventions by the elite, and to preserve the memory of families and personages.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, many scholars have argued for a close relationship between epigraphic habits and the formation and assertion of status and identity.

Fundamental to this proposed correlation is the predominance of funerary writing within the western Roman epigraphic datasets. Brent Shaw has estimated that seventy-five percent or more of the 300,000 total surviving inscriptions from Latin antiquity are epitaphic in nature. Even more importantly, Shaw's analysis

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<sup>5</sup> See the graph replicated in Morris, *Death-ritual and Social Structure*, p. 167, fig. 38.

<sup>6</sup> J. Durliat, "Épigraphie et société: problèmes de méthode" in G. Cavallo and C. Mango (eds.), *Epigrafia medievale greca e latina: ideologia e funzione*. Atti del Seminario di Erice, 12-18 Settembre 1991, (Spoleto, 1995) pp. 169–96: 186-87; B. Shaw, "Latin Funerary Epigraphy and Family Life in the Later Roman empire," *Historia* 33 (1984), pp. 457-497; and M.A. Handley, *Death, Society, and Culture: Inscriptions and Epitaphs in Gaul and Spain, AD 300-750*. (Oxford, 2003), p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> See esp. Meyer, "Explaining the Epigraphic Habit in the Roman empire"; Shaw, "Latin Funerary Epigraphy"; G. Woolf, "Monumental Writing and the Expansion of Roman Society in the Early empire," *JRS* 86 (1996), pp. 22-39; Handley, *Death, Society, and Culture*, pp. 8-22; D. Trout, "Inscribing Identity: The Latin Epigraphic Habit in Late Antiquity," in P. Rousseau and J. Raithel (eds.) *A Companion to Late Antiquity*. (Malden, MA, 2009), pp. 170-86.

<sup>8</sup> G.C. Suisini, *The Roman Stonecutter: an Introduction to Latin epigraphy*. (Oxford, 1973), p. 52.

demonstrates that the importance of these tombstones goes beyond the fragments of biographical data they contain. Funerary inscriptions preserve mechanisms and measures of “social valuation.”<sup>9</sup> From the study of commemorative habits, it is often possible to get a sense of the value system or axiology of the society to which the memorialized deceased belong. Indeed, for Bakhtin, tombstones warranted literary-critical attention. He conceived of burial and the building of funerary memorials as key anthropological moments at which memory was consummated and the “aesthetization of personality” began.<sup>10</sup> Both Bakhtin and Shaw would agree, then, that ancient epitaphic writing offers insight into societal modes of evaluation. These are complex social texts that disclose the ethical qualities, biographical details, and symbols of status considered worthy of memory within a given culture.

Different theories about the social conditions and imperatives that prompt monuments and inscriptions undergird historical interpretations of local practices. Some historians hold that memorial monuments are instruments individuals may use in competitive communities to concretize their abstract ideals in reality. In this system, monuments function as heavy-duty mooring cables of a kind, tying down tendentious ideas about an event or individual that would otherwise drift into uncertainty and the immaterial, and consequently lose value and validity. As Greg Woolf has put it, “it is the capacity of monuments to resist time that makes them suitable as vehicles for representing the contingent as permanent and the contested as fixed.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, it may be that uncertainty in a social order gives members of a community both the space and the motivation to make status claims using monuments and inscriptions.

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<sup>9</sup> See Shaw, “Cultural Meaning,” p. 67 and Trout, “Inscribing Identity,” p. 172.

<sup>10</sup> Bakhtin glosses this enigmatic process as “the securing...of [a] personality in an aesthetically valid image” resulting not in a comprehensive, biographical account of an individual, but a selective image shaped by cultural attitudes towards death and attendant habits of character evaluation. See M. Bakhtin and V. Liapunov (trans.), “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” in M. Holquist and V. Liapunov (eds.), *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* (Austin, 1990), p. 106.

<sup>11</sup> G. Woolf, “Monumental Writing,” p. 30.

Others, however, maintain the opposite—that an uptick in the appearance of long-lasting monuments signals the relative stability of a society’s hierarchy. Take as an example one case study tangential to the eventual focal point of the following chapter. Guy Halsall has argued that a turn in northern Gaul around 600 AD from furnished burial (a ritual wherein grave goods were temporarily displayed outside the grave before being buried with the deceased) to entombment with permanent above-ground displays (including gravemarkers, walls, and sarcophagus lids) signals “an increasing rigidity of social hierarchy and thus a decrease in the need to make competitive, transient displays in the cemetery.”<sup>12</sup> Halsall relates this trend in sepulchral practice to an array of economic and legal evidence for the ossification of a local aristocracy. For him, investment in high-price structures that facilitate the continuous commemoration of the dead reflects the presence of entrenched aristocratic power and corresponding self-confidence in that power.

Whichever position one takes, the interpretation of local epigraphic practices requires some refinement of universal ideas about the purpose and function of monuments and inscriptions.<sup>13</sup> To put it another way, the social logic of monument building and of epigraphic habits changes depending on context and the level of “zoom” at which one examines the data. A study of three centuries of epigraphic practice after the imperial adoption of Christianity, for example, demands different social-historical sensitivities than one which tackles such habits during the early empire. Likewise, investigations into the practices of local communities within shorter time periods and using smaller sample sizes, such as those of seventh-century northern Gaul, require fine-tuned understanding of the society in which these practices develop. Moving toward post-Roman Late Antiquity, it will be worthwhile to zoom in to examine how the dynamics of Latin

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<sup>12</sup> G. Halsall, “Burial Writes: Graves, “Texts” And Time in Early Merovingian Northern Gaul” in *Cemeteries and Society in Merovingian Gaul: Selected Studies in History and Archaeology, 1992-2009* (Leiden, 2010), pp. 215-31: 230.

<sup>13</sup> I am inclined to take the former position: that permanent monuments are forms of competitive “sense-making” display, which attempt to bring social and narrative order to a situation of uncertainty.

epitaphic habits and memorial landscapes changed from the fourth century to the seventh, and to investigate why these shifts took place, before considering the role poets played in the process.

*Quantities and qualities of Latin funerary writing: toward an epitaphic habit*

Funerary epigraphy was at least as prevalent at the beginning of the fourth century as it had been during the Republic and early imperial period. Recall that Brent Shaw has estimated around seventy-five percent of the roughly 300,000 surviving inscriptions from the Roman West exist on funerary artifacts. That proportion is astounding, but the figure requires some qualification to make greater sense of it. Those numbers describe a dataset that spans 1000 years. Despite a sharp decrease in the rate of inscriptions as a whole from the early third century, the ratio of epitaphs to non-epitaphs is in fact higher among inscriptions of the fourth century than it is for the early imperial period. In some small areas, the remaining monumental landscape from the fourth through seventh centuries is solely epitaphic in character, without any non-funerary features. In short, Late Antiquity has an epigraphic signature that is significantly epitaphic in quality.<sup>14</sup> Importantly, the revived “epitaphic habit” of the fourth century was not a singular event. It marked a revitalization and revamping of western Roman commemorative practices and forms of eulogistic recollection that had been cultivated through the republican and imperial eras.

From the first century AD onward, a wide range of Roman social classes engaged in funerary epigraphic practice. An influential set of commemorative writing habits were originally established within funerary inscriptions even earlier for wealthy, public men of the Republic. For these epitaphs, Roman authors developed a consistent mode of patterned and concise writing that combined a clear, linear graphic layout in alternating lines of text with tight, conventional language and compressed biographical structures. Primed by the inscribing habits of elites, the market for epitaphic writing was further enhanced and buoyed in imperial

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<sup>14</sup> See C.R Galvao-Sobrinho “Funerary Epigraphy and the Spread of Christianity in the West,” *Athenaeum* 83.2 (1995), 431-462, and Trout, “Inscribing Identity,” 173.

Roman society by a legal discourse surrounding tomb inviolability. Into the fifth century, funerary inscriptions were considered sacrosanct artifacts to be valued for eternity. In Late Antiquity, statutes from the Theodosian Code levied heavy fines against tomb vandalizers, and some epitaphs themselves even warned against their own desecration using maledictive language.<sup>15</sup>

When Latin epitaphic writing began to make a comeback in the early fourth century, the medium already possessed established social capital owing to the long Roman tradition of its practice. However, the epitaph had also begun to take on new importance within the burgeoning culture of Christianity. The manifold ways in which the spread of Christianity affected local and regional cultures of death around the Mediterranean are too numerous and complex to discuss justly here.<sup>16</sup> However, it is possible to say confidently that, from the beginning of the fourth century to the end of the sixth, a Roman-Christian habit of commemoration evolved and rose to prominence in the West in conjunction with a rise in the rate of epitaphic production.

During this period, both the aesthetic and social character of Latin epitaphs show the strong influence of Christianity. Christian epitaphic authors and patrons constructed texts that (in general) captured the religion's paradigms of self-definition, its rejection of social stratification, and an ambivalence toward old Roman cults of the dead. Christian tomb-raisers coupled ideological innovations with experiments in script and iconography to form distinct graphic and discursive brands specific to the religion and particular patrons.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> A. Petrucci, *Writing the Dead: Death and Writing Strategies in the Western Tradition*. (Stanford, 1998), pp. 17-18. For fuller analysis of the civil and ecclesiastical protection of tombs in Roman society, see É. Rebillard. *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity*. (Ithaca, 2009) pp. 57-88. See the *Codex Theodosianus* 9.17 for statutes against tomb violation. For a fascinating example of imperial legislation which attempted to broker agreement between Roman legal and religious customs and Christian ideas about tomb inviolability, see Valentinian III's *novella* 23, dated to 447, discussed along with other late Roman legislation in J. Harries, "Death and the Dead in the Late Roman West," in S. Bassett (ed.), *Death in Towns: Urban Responses to the Dying and the Dead, 100-1600*. (Leicester, 1992), pp. 56-67: 62ff.

<sup>16</sup> In general, I have found the following studies especially helpful: Rebillard. *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity*; A.M. Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces in the Late Antique Mediterranean: Architecture, Cult, and Community* (Cambridge, 2009); and F. Paxton. *Christianizing Death: The Creation of a Ritual Process in Early Medieval Europe*. (Ithaca, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Petrucci, *Writing the Dead*, pp. 24-34. Consider, for example, the distinct Philocalian lettering connected with some of Damasus's surviving inscriptions. "They were intended to be read as the 'signatures' of the bishop of Rome," writes P. Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, p. 252. For the details of the Damasian program, see D. Trout, *Damasus of Rome: the Epigraphic Poetry*. (Oxford, 2015), pp. 47-52, and below.



Elaborate funerary inscriptions (especially poetic ones) favored what Richmond Lattimore has called a “voluminous style.” In contrast with the terseness of republican epitaphs, late ancient Christian tombstones sometimes became spaces for longwinded, laudatory biography, where both universal virtues (e.g. honesty) and Christian-specific behaviors (e.g. taking care of widows and orphans) featured prominently. Authors could stretch poetic epitaphs especially to fit almost every Roman or Christian item of praise suited to the subject. Some read as if commemorators were reluctant to let go of trusted, classical modes of lamentation and consolation in the way the texts feature aphoristic philosophies and rhetoric about the nature of death.<sup>18</sup> Yet an aesthetic of humility ultimately prevailed among most Christian funerary monuments. While a few wealthy aristocrats invested in intricately inscribed marble tombs or sarcophagi, a greater number of late antique Christians painted brief messages in cat-scratch graffiti in the catacombs, or wrote out simple dedications in scribbling script to their deceased loved ones, perhaps in a deliberate attempt to model their faith’s virtue of humility.<sup>19</sup>

Historians in various subfields have worked to measure the social and ideological impact of Christianity on the evolution of the Latin ‘epitaphic habit’ into Late Antiquity. Brent Shaw’s fascinating study of family relations in Christian Latin epigraphy has revealed what he calls “a most significant change of attitude” toward memorial practice captured in sepulchral inscriptions themselves. Surviving epitaphs show that Christian commemorators tended to sink into anonymity and no longer inscribed their secular personal relationships to the deceased on the tombstone. In addition, tombstone inscriptions for slaves almost

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<sup>18</sup> R. Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Roman Epitaphs*. (Urbana, 1962), esp. pp. 334-337.

<sup>19</sup> Handley, *Death, Culture, and Society*, p. 24, where he describes “the charade of a humble-looking text,” and argues that wealthy Christians “could afford to use ostentatiously-humble lettering because the words and the monument spoke volumes.” Likewise, Morris, *Death-Ritual and Social Structure*, p. 165: “[The] direct interpretation – sloppy engraving = poor burial – is not persuasive. When humility and anonymity within the community of God became the organizing principles of social structure... we cannot link display and secular standing in any straightforward way.”

completely disappeared while a vocabulary for religious servanthood emerged.<sup>20</sup> In Shaw's view, these shifts in commemorative practice show signs of "the impact of an ideology which no longer oriented personal relationships at death horizontally, to converge in writing on the tombstone upon commemoration of the deceased, but which oriented both the dead and the survivors related to them 'vertically,' *ad caelestem*."<sup>21</sup> (These remarks demand further consideration. We will return to them in later examinations of the first-person epitaphic interventions of Christian Latin poets like Venantius, whose personal involvement in their own commemorative productions would seem to run counter to the wider Christian trend of anonymity that Shaw describes.)

Shifting conceptions and uses of space altered the trajectory of Christian epitaphic writing as well. In Late Antiquity, church spaces came to incorporate tombs and to function as staging grounds for ritualized commemorations of the dead. Already during the early Roman imperial period, the tomb (mainly an extramural site) was established as an important cog in the machine of identity formation. Funeral monuments were the sites where family identity cohered through the cultivation of collective memory. Over time, churches began to host burials. Consequently, they evolved into places where Christian communities created and reinforced new, spiritually charged notions of collective identity. By the late fourth century, distinctly Christian funerals and commemorations developed. Sometimes these entailed honorific celebration of special, high-status members of their group, like saints, with elaborate processions, prayer ceremonies, and the erection of epitaphs. Together, these activities and artifacts helped shape the celebrated figures into avatars of holiness and patrons of the community. Participation in these commemorative acts was not limited to kin.

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<sup>20</sup> Shaw, "Latin Funerary Epigraphy," 467-473. Shaw specifically notes that "the epitaph becomes completely anonymous in most parts of the western empire by the mid-sixth century AD," p. 482.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* 481. His findings and interpretation correspond with separate analysis of the changes to Roman onomastic habits in Christian epitaphs, which have been elsewhere singled out as particularly drastic. From the fourth century onward, Christian epitaphs include family names at a much lower rate than in the pagan period. Instead, the cognomen is most often the only name provided in Christian inscriptions. See I. Kajanto, *Onomastic Studies in the Early Christian Inscriptions of Rome and Carthage*. *Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae*, II:1 (Helsinki, 1963), pp. 9-18.

Neighbors and Christian outsiders came together with the family in an “outpouring of collective energy” that forged bonds along religious lines.<sup>22</sup> Epitaph-making and -reading were fully integrated into these commemorative processes.

C.R. Galvao-Sobrinho has argued that a proliferation of belief in the Resurrection—and a correlated social pressure to define oneself as Christian—triggered the boom in Late Antiquity’s epitaphic culture. He states that Christians believed “it was necessary to state who you were and what you believed in in order to assure your place among the saved,” and that Christian epitaphs, which almost uniformly declare the deceased’s faith, were therefore raised as declarations of belief and as safeguards of salvation. In addition, Galvao-Sobrinho contends that regional rises in funerary inscriptions during Late Antiquity represent the spread of the Christian religion.<sup>23</sup> In short, he suggests that it is possible to trace the compass of late antique Christianity synchronically by looking at securely datable epitaphic data. From a cultural-historical perspective, however, Galvao-Sobrinho’s analysis falls short.<sup>24</sup> There is little direct scriptural or theological support for the idea that Christians felt it necessary to identify themselves as believers on their tombs in order to be saved.<sup>25</sup> His argument is also problematic for its ascription of primary agency in epitaphic commemoration to the deceased. The Christian belief in the soul’s sentient afterlife did not lend the dead power to manage the production of their epitaphs. Rather, we do better to understand the making of a funerary inscription as a ritual performance undertaken by commemorators, acting under social and legal

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<sup>22</sup> Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces*, 46-99.

<sup>23</sup> Galvao-Sobrinho, “Funerary Epigraphy,” pp. 453-458: 454 for the quote.

<sup>24</sup> This interpretation has met with resistance on other grounds elsewhere. Handley takes issue with the parameters of Galvao-Sobrinho’s dataset, which only includes tombstones with dating clauses. While this allows for chronological accuracy, it limits the sample severely and confuses trends in Christian epitaphic expression with trends in inscription-dating. See *Death, Society, and Culture*, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Augustine argued against the apparently pervasive idea that burial was necessary for salvation in *De civitate dei* 1.12-13, and the *De cura pro mortuis gerenda*, analyzed below. See Y. Duval, *Auprès des saints corps et âme: l'inhumation "ad sanctos" dans la chrétienté d'Orient et d'Occident du IIIe au VIIe siècle*. (Paris, 1988), p. 17-21.

normative pressures, guided (but not completely constricted) by various ideologies, and in accord with personal faith commitments. To put it as simply as one scholar has, “monuments are raised *for* the dead, not by the dead.”<sup>26</sup> Historical investigations into monumental motivations ought to concentrate on the living, whose behaviors, practices and material investments have allowed the dead to speak. The question to explore, then, is: why, in Christian Late Antiquity, did survivors of the deceased produce epitaphs at a proportionately higher rate than ever before in the Roman tradition?

Peter Brown has generated the most promising approach to this problem. Recently, he undertook to analyze a patchwork of late antique Christian writings surrounding death woven through catacomb graffiti, theological tractates, and epitaphs themselves. The results of his study reveal an active conversation among Christians across the Mediterranean about the purposes of funerary monuments and ways to interact with them. In Brown’s words, when we listen closely to this conversation, “What we hear above all is a tenacious work of memory.”<sup>27</sup> In what follows, retracing some of Brown’s footsteps, but doing some novel investigating of our own, we will try to locate the particular sound of Christian Latin memory, and eventually listen closely to some of its more poetic strains.

#### *Augustine and the mechanics of Christian commemoration*

In the early 420’s, Augustine composed two treatises that tackled the question of how Christian commemoration might (or might not) profit the dead: the *Enchiridion* addressed to a layman named Laurentius, possibly from Rome, and the *De cura pro mortuis gerenda* written in response to a letter from the famous ascetic poet, Paulinus of Nola.<sup>28</sup> In the *De cura*, Augustine argued that funerary rituals were non-essential to the deceased, that they did not impact on one’s chances of salvation, and that memorial prayers

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<sup>26</sup> Handley, *Death, Society, and Culture*, p. 45. See also, Morris, *Death-ritual and Social Structure*, p. 159.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, *Ransom of the Soul*, 38-46: 38.

<sup>28</sup> These texts are listed back to back in Augustine’s *Retractiones* and are datable to around 421 AD.

benefited only certain souls.<sup>29</sup> According to the North African bishop, commemorative practices mainly served the needs of grieving survivors. “Organizing the funeral, the situation of the grave, the pomp of funeral processions, console the living more than they help the dead,” he told Paulinus plainly.<sup>30</sup>

For Augustine, however, commemoration was not a completely one-sided affair. Some specific practices had effect in the afterlife. He allowed for the possibility that prayerful recollection of the dead could, by some metaphysical process, provide aid for those beyond the grave. “It cannot be denied that the souls of the deceased are alleviated by the reverence of their living, when the Eucharistic sacrifice is offered on their behalf or alms are given in the Church,” he wrote in the *Enchiridion*.<sup>31</sup> In other words, certain memorial activities performed within the ritual setting of the church could advance souls in the hereafter.

Outside of the liturgy, Augustine conceived of funerary monuments as instruments to stimulate memory and facilitate fruitful votive activity.<sup>32</sup> While discussing the utility of burial in proximity to memorials for saints and martyrs in the *De cura*, Augustine suggested that tombs near recognized saints (commonly known as *ad sanctos* burials) invited viewers to think of their remembered loved ones in a special light. They could, theoretically, prompt pious believers to petition those nearby special dead on behalf of their friends and relatives. In so doing, the praying person would “commend [the deceased] to those same saints, received

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<sup>29</sup> For nuanced interpretations, see Duval. *Auprès des saints corps et âme*, 3-21: Duval sees Augustine’s stance as firmly opposed to popular Christian burial practices, concerned with keeping the body intact for the Resurrection; Rebillard, *Care of the Dead*, 85-88, on the other hand, reads the *De cura* as a statement strongly in support of burial as a spiritually symbolic act of faith in the Resurrection; Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces*, 210-239, who disagrees with Duval and asserts that Augustine’s arguments in the *De cura* would have been deemed largely acceptable by the Mediterranean Christian community. Her reading parallels my own in its emphasis on the centrality of prayer in Augustine’s thought surrounding Christian commemoration, both for the living and the dead.

<sup>30</sup> Augustine, *De cura pro mortuis gerenda*, 4, in J. Zycha (ed.) (Vienna, 1900), p. 626: “Proinde ista omnia, id est curatio funeris, conditio sepulturae, pompa exequiarum, magis sunt vivorum solacia quam subsidia mortuorum.”

<sup>31</sup> Augustine *Enchiridion*, 29.110, in E. Evans (ed.) CCL 46, (1969): “Neque negandum est defunctorum animas pietate suorum viventium relevari, cum pro illis sacrificium Mediatoris offertur vel eleemosynae in Ecclesia fiunt.”

<sup>32</sup> See esp. *De cura*, 6 on funerary monuments and commemoration, and Yasin’s discussion cited above n. 46.

as though by patrons and offered help in the presence of the Lord.”<sup>33</sup> In Augustine’s system, petitionary recollection functioned as a cognitive mechanism by which the living brought the deceased into closer contact with heavenly higher-ups. By their intercession those saints could potentially help to realize full forgiveness in the afterlife—“or, at any rate, make damnation more tolerable.”<sup>34</sup>

Still, Augustine maintained an equivocal tenor in these discussions of funerary practice. He hesitated to assure his Christian audience of the efficacy of their commemorative habits in every situation, for every deceased individual. In his mind, the success of prayerful petition for the dead was dependent upon the predetermined worthiness of the deceased individual. His important caveat to commemorative practice sounds most clearly in the *Enchiridion*, where he asserted that petitionary recollection was only effective for those “who, while they were alive, earned these [actions] that could benefit them later.”<sup>35</sup> Put simply: prayerful remembrance could only advance the dead as far as they had already deserved.

Augustine’s ambivalence toward commemorative ritual did not and was not meant to dissuade Christians from the duties of memorial practice, but still he left Christian communities without a definitive answer about how to proceed. Over the ensuing centuries, theologians continued to search for and rehash explanations and assurances for their habits of commemoration. In the late sixth century, Gregory the Great affirmed that burial within a church and Eucharistic sacrifice were helpful to the dead, who could obtain absolution of their pardonable sins by such intercessory practices.<sup>36</sup> The influence of the hesitant Augustine is unmistakable in Gregory’s caution to his readers: “It must be understood [that] the holy sacrifice benefits

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*: “Non video quae sunt adiumenta mortuorum, nisi ad hoc ut dum recolunt ubi sint posita eorum quos diligunt corpora, eisdem sanctis illos tamquam patronis susceptos apud Dominum adiuvandos orando commendent.”

<sup>34</sup> Augustine *Enchiridion*, 29.110: “Quibus autem prosunt, aut ad hoc prosunt ut sit plena remissio, aut certe ut tolerabilior fiat ipsa damnatio.”

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* “Sed eis haec prosunt qui cum viverent haec ut sibi postea possent prodesse meruerunt.”

<sup>36</sup> See esp. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* 4.52 and 4.57. For the Latin text, see Grégoire le Grand and A. de Vogüé (ed.), *Dialogues*, Sources chrétiennes 251, t. 3, (Paris, 1980). For a useful English translation, see O.J. Zimmerman (trans.), *Dialogues*, Fathers of the Church 39, (New York, 1959).

those dead who by their lives have obtained that the good deeds others perform on their behalf should help them after death.”<sup>37</sup> Augustine and his ideological successors like Gregory left their readers at a crossroads and made no promises about prayer’s payoff. While commemorative practices were theoretically useful, they were not universally so. It remained for commemorating Christians to ascertain and verify who among the deceased had merited help.

There was no single, established method for determining the merits of the dead. The process was idiosyncratic, and often relied heavily on witness testimony and miracles. Some special dead could prove themselves with marvelous manifestations of their supernatural power; others hoped expensive marble or elegant inscriptions would do the proving. But more importantly, the deep uncertainty about the landscape of the afterlife created within earthly society a space for intervention on behalf of individual souls. The dead relied upon survivors to negotiate, advocate, and disseminate their status and identity—to secure their memory for posterity. In Late Antiquity, these interventions on behalf of the dead increasingly happened under the aegis of the Church.

The late antique ‘epitaphic habit’ fits nicely within this framework of commemorative ideology and practice. With Christianity came new ideas about the rules of the game of memory, and about its stakes. Epitaphs served the needs of Latin Christians engaged in the ‘tenacious work’ of keeping the dead alive through prayers that could advance their heavenly status, or even save souls from torment.

Eustatius, lowly sinner, presbyter, devotee of the blessed martyr Marcellinus. But you, whoever read this, pray for me...<sup>38</sup>

Here rests well deserving Heliades. We ask this of you, Christ, that you would deign to help your [...]. Rescue her from the hands of the devil.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Dialogues* 4.59.6, “Sed sciendum est quia illis sacrae victimae mortuis prosunt, qui hic vivendo obtinuerunt, ut eos etiam post mortem bona adiuvent, quae hic pro ipsis ab aliis fiunt.”; see also 4.41.6.

<sup>38</sup> *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres (ILCV)*, E. Diehl (ed). (Berlin, 1951), 2364a: “Eustatius, humilis peccator, pbr, servitor beati Marcellini martyris. sed tu, quis legis, ora pro me...”

<sup>39</sup> *ILCV* 2359: “Hic requies(cit?) b. m. Heliades. Hoc te petimus, Xpe, ut auxiliare digneris tuae voca[...]io. Eripe eam d[e] manibus diaboli.”

At the same time, many late antique epitaphs capture a widespread Christian conviction in the dead's capacity to affect life on earth, which, for Augustine and Gregory, almost went without acknowledging in their discussions about whether the living could bring aid to the deceased. Both men were strong proponents of the cult of saints, which promoted specific sites and artifacts related to sacred men and women as loci of divine power. In Late Antiquity, the living did not just pray for the dead, they prayed to the dead.<sup>40</sup>

Faithful Gentianus at peace, you who lived 21 years, 8 months and 16 days...pray for us. For we know you are with Christ.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, while the late antique 'epitaphic habit' corresponds with the articulation of changing relations between men on earth and the souls of the dead, Christian epitaphic writing also functioned as a discursive practice for clarifying and advertising new value theories and identity constructs among the living. As Michael Roberts has pointed out, epitaphic subjects typically "conform to and confirm the expectations and ideology of the society in which they have lived and for which the texts are composed."<sup>42</sup> But there is an important caveat here: societal values, expectations and ideology are moving targets, continually redefined and processed even as they are reproduced by agents acting and reacting within their own conceptual worlds. Late antique epitaphs, therefore, may be said to contain the symbols and language Christians used to parley with their communities over constantly shifting principles of evaluation.

To conclude, Christian tombstones and epitaphs were thought theoretically capable of fostering effective communication between the living and the dead. Ideally, funerary texts were meant to attract postulants and stimulate petitionary recollection of the deceased, a practice thought able to bring aid to souls in the afterlife. Many inscriptions evoke the Christian hope that cultivating a dead saint's memory would pay

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<sup>40</sup> See Brown, *Ransom of the Soul*, p. 38.

<sup>41</sup> *ILCV* 2350: "Gentianus fidelis in pace, qui vixit annis XXI, menss. VIII, dies XVI...roges pro nobis, quia scimus te in  $\text{R}$ ."

<sup>42</sup> M. Roberts, *The Humblest Sparrow: the Poetry of Venantius Fortunatus*. (Ann Arbor, 2009), p. 10.



dividends on earth. The special dead could act as intercessors or miracle workers on behalf of the prayerful devotee. Above all, tombs and their inscriptions functioned as instruments for establishing memory and identity. Roman-Christians of the late antique period rewrote and reconstructed conceptions of social order stone by stone. Funerary sites and artifacts became spaces of intervention. The construction of the epitaph was linked to designs to structure in space and in biographical narrative the remembrance and evaluation of deceased members of their local religious communities.

In what follows, I want to shift focus and examine even more closely one corner of the epitaphic landscape where a specific type of authorial figure thrived as a leader of imaginative interventions in the afterlife. I wish to demonstrate how two late antique Christian Latin poets, Damasus and Sidonius, carved out public roles for themselves as eulogistic guides for their communities through epitaphic writing. I will explore the strategies they implemented in their poems to coordinate commemorative practice, advertise authority, and model pious recollection of the dead. Their poetic practices, I argue, are crucial to clarifying the evolution of late antique epitaphic habits through to the sixth and seventh centuries, as well as the development of ascetic poetship within their own distinct cultural and social environments.

*Poeticizing the epitaphic habit: Damasus and Sidonius*

In the late antique Latin West, poetry came up for debate among Christians time and again. Nevertheless, Christian Latin authors did not hesitate to employ classicizing Latin verse to memorialize the dead. In fact, from the fourth century onward, the verse epitaph became a signature form of religious expression among Christians. Why?

In search of answers to this question, the following section examines the funerary verse of two influential Latin poets of the late and post-Roman periods: Pope Damasus (366-384), and Sidonius Apollinaris. The focus on these authors is not arbitrary. Their epitaphic experiments vividly display the social

complexities of Christian commemorative writing.<sup>43</sup> Contrary to the general trend toward authorial anonymity in Christian epitaphs noted by Shaw, both of these verse writers publicized themselves as commemorators in their funerary inscriptional work, alongside the patrons and partners involved in their epitaphic compositions.<sup>44</sup> Each crafted a range of strategies to coordinate targeted types of interaction between themselves, readers, and the deceased through their commemorative poetic texts. In so doing, Damasus and Sidonius self-consciously crafted authorial identities and articulated social roles for themselves as elite eulogists of slightly different kinds, unique to context.<sup>45</sup> Both poets composed poems that evince the evolution of Christian epitaphic rhetoric and poetics, but also provide ephemeral data about how epitaphs were made, by whom, for what purposes, and at what cost. Since one of the grander goals of this dissertation is to understand the social functions of Christian Latin poets in post-Roman Late Antiquity, it will be useful to locate and explore such places where the lines between the poet's literary posture and his social or functional life are blurred. The verse epitaphs of Damasus and Sidonius are exemplary spaces of this type.

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Epigraphic poems, or *carmina epigraphica*, were widespread in the Latin West through much of antiquity. Verses from more than 4,000 poems datable to before 700 AD have survived engraved or painted on stone, or recorded in manuscript form. The total number of Christian Latin metrical inscriptions sits between 1,370 and 1,700, a figure that accounts for a variety of texts, from decorative *tituli* for churches and

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<sup>43</sup> For a study of poetic epitaphs complementary to this one, see C. Clarke, *Writing and Power in Anglo-Saxon England*. (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 44-79.

<sup>44</sup> The teams and individual actors who produced these poems (patrons, sculptors, and poets, all of whom we may call 'authors') are invaluable to the social history of the manufacture of inscriptions. For an ecumenical view of the *auteur* in epigraphic production, see R. Favreau, *Epigraphie Médiévale*. (Turnhout, 1997), pp. 113-140.

<sup>45</sup> For a sociologically theoretical discussion of social roles, see P. Berger and T. Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York, 1967), p. 73-79: "We can properly begin to speak of roles when [typification] occurs in the context of an objectified stock of knowledge common to a collectivity of actors. Roles are types of actors in such a context [...] By playing roles, the individual participates in a social world. By internalizing these roles, the same world becomes subjectively real to him.

saints' shrines, to verses meant to adorn everyday objects.<sup>46</sup> From a wide-angle view, the large amount of verse inscriptions suggests that poetry continued to occupy a place of cultural and material relevance in Late Antiquity. It is fascinating to consider the potential relationship between the preponderance of metrical inscriptional material surviving from this period and the rising popularity of the epigrammatic style practiced so commonly by late antique poets in an array of genres.<sup>47</sup> But this data is particularly meaningful within a study of epitaphic writing and sepulchral culture, since roughly three quarters of those poems (1,000 to 1,250 in total) are funerary in nature. Epitaphs dominate the Christian Latin corpus of verse inscriptions.<sup>48</sup>

Like all funerary writers, late antique makers of Latin epitaphic verse participated in a long Roman literary tradition dating back at least to the third century BC. An inscription in Saturnian meter on the tomb of Cornelius Lucius Scipio Barbatus, consul in 298 BC, marks the first known verse epitaph in the Latin language.<sup>49</sup> The terse inscription relates information about Scipio's family, virtuous character, public career, and military achievements. It is representative of the relatively stable aesthetic pattern of Latin funerary writing that emerged during the republican and early imperial periods, as described above. Soon after, Latin verse writers began innovating metrically and rhetorically within the epitaphic genre.<sup>50</sup> Third- and second-century BC poets like Naevius and Plautus composed epitaphs for themselves (a strategy that will be explored in the work of Eugenius II of Toledo in chapter six), as did Ennius, who was the first to appropriate elegiac meter from the Greek funerary tradition for Latin sepulchral poetry (where previously iambic *senarii* had been

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<sup>46</sup> See n. 2.

<sup>47</sup> E.g. Ausonius, Sedulius, Luxorius, and Ennodius. See esp. G. Bernt, *Das lateinische Epigramm im Übergang von der Spätantike zum frühen Mittelalter*. (München 1968), and A.M. Wasyl, *Genres Rediscovered: Studies in Latin Miniature Epic, Love Elegy, and Epigram of the Romano-barbaric Age*. (Kraków, 2011), pp. 165-252.

<sup>48</sup> See n. 45 above.

<sup>49</sup> *CIL* VI.1285. See Petrucci, *Writing the Dead*, p. 15

<sup>50</sup> For good discussion of the generic difficulties of epitaphic verse, and a history of the tradition in Latin poetry, see C. Henriksen, "Martial's Modes of Mourning. Sepulchral epitaphs in the *Epigrams*," in R.R. Nauta, H-J. Dam, and J.J.L. Smolenaars (eds.) *Flavian Poetry*. (Leiden, 2006), pp. 349-368.

the norm). The experiments of these and other republican poets influenced the epigraphic dabbling of subsequent imperial verse writers like Propertius, Virgil, Ovid, and later Martial, tags from whose poetry often resonated within metrical epitaphs of the early imperial period.<sup>51</sup>

The poetic inventiveness of Latin writers of epitaphic verse has posed some formidable problems for literary historians. Notably, it is sometimes difficult to decipher whether or not a sepulchral epigram was intended for inscription or represents a purely literary experiment. One recent convincing model points to the following defining characteristics of funerary epigraphic (i.e. “functional”) poetry: “deixis, name and status of the deceased, age at death, biographical information, and the use of various formulas and conventional motifs (e.g. apostrophe to the reader or “passer-by”).”<sup>52</sup> This diagnostic is not foolproof, of course, but it does provide useful criteria for this exploration of the evolution of epitaphic verse, which confronts problems of inscriptional intent among Christian Latin poets.

The ensuing analyses, however, will focus on the self-styling of the funerary verse writer in the context of each individual author’s distinctive culture; i.e. it will study Christian epitaphic poetship. It will scrutinize the self-fashioned image and voice that Damasus and Sidonius project through their epitaphic compositions, and ask why they issued these literary self-images to their audience, and how they may have been received. It argues for the funerary poems of these authors as vivid scenes of Christian poetic performance, where Christian poets formed and enacted active roles for themselves in the cultural sphere of commemoration. In addition, the epitaphs of Damasus and Sidonius open windows onto the different social contexts in which the verse epitaphic habit was ‘poeticized’ in Late Antiquity, whether through public, institutional organization of commemorative writing, or more private forms of intervention, via close family or peer relationships.

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<sup>51</sup> See, e.g. E. Lissberger, *Das Fortleben der römischen Elegiker in den Carmina Epigraphica*. (Tübingen, 1934).

<sup>52</sup> Henriksén, “Martial’s Modes of Mourning,” p. 354.

*Damasus, choreographer of commemoration*

Born around 305 to a career clergyman, Pope Damasus (366–384) belonged to the first generation of Christians to come of age under the emperor Constantine.<sup>53</sup> Growing up in Rome, he would have witnessed an explosion of religious pride in the city, evinced by the monumental efforts of imperial and super-wealthy Christians to memorialize themselves and their euergetism within the Church at Rome. But Damasus and his peers were also either old enough to remember Christian persecution, or had elders to remind them of its gruesome history. “When I was a boy an executioner told me, Damasus, about your tomb, Marcellinus, and also Peter’s,” the pope later wrote in a eulogistic verse inscription for the two named martyrs’ graves. According to the executioner’s account, which Damasus monumentalized, after Peter and Marcellinus had been sentenced to death, they dug their own graves with cheerful exuberance.<sup>54</sup> These were the kinds of macabre stories the pontiff and his peers grew up on and retold nostalgically in old age. As Peter Brown has it, “[Their] heroes were the martyrs of Rome and not its nobles.”<sup>55</sup>

But over the course of the first half of the fourth century, that black-and-white distinction between Christian hero and Christian elite steadily grayed. Images of the martyrs became imprinted on the designs for self-promotion drawn up by the Christian nobility. During this period, creative participation in the cult of saints by the Roman-Christian aristocratic class intensified. Efforts by the nobility to entwine themselves in cults of devotion for holy people centered on the construction of church buildings and tombs. Imperial, ecclesiastical, and private Christian patrons could contribute to the expansion of church funerary

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<sup>53</sup> For biographical treatments of Damasus, see Trout, *Damasus of Rome*, pp. 1-10, and U. Reutter, *Damasus, Bischof von Rom (366-384)*. (Tübingen, 2009), pp. 5-56.

<sup>54</sup> *Epigrammata damasiana (ED)* 28, in Trout (ed.), *Damasus of Rome*, p. 132:  
“Marcelline tuum pariter Petri(ue) sepulcrum  
percussor retulit Damaso mihi cum puer essem.”

<sup>55</sup> Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, p. 252.

infrastructure with something as small as an epitaph. On a grander scale, this movement stimulated an extension of the web of catacombs under Rome, as well as dedications of new basilicas built to celebrate martyred saints in the city and its vicinity.

In several recent studies Dennis Trout has revisited the history of epigraphic poetry's infiltration into Rome's devotional landscape.<sup>56</sup> At the turn of the fourth century metrical epitaphs were on the rise in the city, but mainly a fad to be found among the tombs of the "sub-elite" or "lesser aristocracy."<sup>57</sup> By the midpoint of the century, however, the prestige of the *carmen epigraphicum* had increased considerably among the Christian population. At the same time, in the literary domain, Roman Christian poets were effectively Christianizing classical poetic phraseology. In his biblical epic poem *Evangeliorum libri IV* written c. 330 under Constantine, the Spanish poet-priest Juvencus harnessed Virgilian vocabulary and syntax to retell the Gospel story in sophisticated, metrical code.<sup>58</sup> A generation later, the Christian poetess Faltonia Betitia Proba used blunter strokes to do a similar job. She composed a Christian cento, patchworking a biblical salvation narrative out of Virgilian tags and half-lines to "change Virgil for the better," as one near-contemporary respondent put it.<sup>59</sup> There is no surviving secular Latin hexameter epic from these same decades with which to compare the Christian poems.

The Christianization of Roman epic diction makes for an interesting parallel to the phenomenon of Christian monumentalization in the city of Rome during the early-to-mid fourth century. With new

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<sup>56</sup> For a summary attempt, see D. Trout, "Poetry on Stone: Epigram and Audience in Rome," in J. Pucci and S. McGill (eds.), *Classics Renewed: Reception and Innovation in the Latin poetry of Late antiquity*. (Heidelberg, 2016), pp. 77-95, with extensive bibliography at nn. 2 and 3.

<sup>57</sup> Schetter, "Poesie epigraphique," p. 259.

<sup>58</sup> 92% of the vocabulary in book 1 is Virgilian, and only two lines lack words that appear in the same place as they do in Virgil's poetry. See E. Borrell Vidal, *Las palabras de Vergilio en Juvenco* (Barcelona, 1991), 20-22. For a summary overview of scholarship on Juvencus, and a unique reading of his Christian poetic effort, see S. McGill, "Arms and Amen: Virgil in Juvencus's *Evangeliorum libri IV*," in J. Pucci and S. McGill (eds.), *Classics Renewed*, pp. 47-75. Fundamental is Green, *Latin Epics of the New Testament*.

<sup>59</sup> Proba, *Cento*, praef. 3-5, in C. Schenkl (ed.), *CSEL 16.1* (Vienna, 1888), p. 568.

ideologies and faith commitments, Christian poets and builders experimented simultaneously with the reuse and reconfiguration of the classical Roman symbolic landscape.<sup>60</sup> These creative impulses sometimes stimulated monumental projects that combined the material and the verbal—especially among those undertaken by members of the Constantinian imperial circle. In the 340s, the emperor Constantine’s oldest daughter Constantina arranged for the construction of a basilica for the virgin saint Agnes, situated near the suburban cemetery of the same martyr, and announced her involvement in verse. She produced a fourteen-line hexameter inscription, written in her own voice, to celebrate the dedication of her basilica. Her techniques of authorial self-fashioning are fascinating. Immediately, in the first verse, Constantina identifies herself as a reverent Christian, and in the subsequent three lines she declares her pious intent: “I, Constantina, worshipping God and dedicated to Christ, having devoutly arranged for all expenses, with the Holy Spirit and Christ offering considerable support, consecrated the temple of the virginal victor Agnes.”<sup>61</sup> Her votive purpose was amplified further by the poem’s loud acrostic: *CONSTANTINADEO*.<sup>62</sup> Similarly and around the same time, two imperial metrical pieces were inscribed at the basilica of St. Peter—the first time members of the imperial family had broadcast their achievements through public verse inscriptions at Rome.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> The similarities may even pervade Late Latin poetics. See Roberts, *The Jeweled Style*, p. 58: “Words are viewed as possessing a physical presence of their own, distinct from any considerations of sense or syntax. They may be moved like building blocks or pieces in a puzzle to create ever new formal constructs.” See further, J. Elsner and J. Hernández Lobato (eds.), *The Poetics of Late Latin Literature*. (Oxford, 2017), p. 8.

<sup>61</sup> *ILCV* 1768:  
 “Constantina deum venerans Christoque dicata  
 Omnibus impensis devota mente paratis  
 Numine divino multum Christoque iuvante  
 Sacravi templum victricis virginis Agnes.”

<sup>62</sup> See D. Trout, “Vergil and Ovid at the Tomb of Agnes: Constantina, Epigraphy, and the Genesis of Christian Poetry,” in J. Bodel and N. Dimitrova (eds.), *Ancient Documents and their Contexts*. (Leiden, 2015), pp. 263-282; and “Poetry on Stone,” pp. 82-84.

<sup>63</sup> See Trout, *Damasus of Rome*, pp. 39-41 and “Poetry on Stone” for further examples and discussion. See Reutter, *Damasus, Bischof von Rom*, pp. 109-110 for some similarities between the pope’s epigrams and the Constantinian ones.

No fourth-century figure latched onto the verse epigraphic trend more tightly, or advanced it farther for the Christian cause than the poet-pope Damasus. More than fifty epigrams attributable to the pontiff survive. Their topics include the foundations of buildings, celebrations of martyr cults, and burials of kin and congregants. Forty-three have been at least partially preserved on stone, making the literary critical diagnosis of his epigrams' physical reality and "functionality" rather cut-and-dry. Many of the remaining fragments display the pope's signature "Philocalian script"—a distinctly beautiful, uniform and precise inscriptional font attached to Furius Dionysius Filocalus, whose name appears in the margins of one Damasian *elogium* for the martyr Eusebius.<sup>64</sup> Damasus's metrical work made such an impression that Jerome, who had worked in his youth as the pontiff's secretary, remembered him primarily as a poet in his biographical catalogue *De viris illustribus*: "Damasus, bishop of Rome, was an elegant and talented verse maker and producer of brief works in heroic meter."<sup>65</sup> Scholars have followed Jerome in underscoring the pope's poetic interventionism as the most important aspect of his career. In his verses and their dissemination, critics have observed the purposeful invigoration of Rome's funerary landscape, but also signs of an authority-making and church-unifying "program," the manipulation of memory and collective identity, and a political interest in developing solidarity with the "lesser" Christian aristocracy—the same demographic that had already shown a predilection for metrical inscriptions.<sup>66</sup>

The largest portion of Damasus's inscriptional pieces qualify as *elogia* for martyrs and holy men, brief praise poems conveying the relationship between saint and place that probably served as fancy, informational

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<sup>64</sup> ED 18: "Furius Dionysius Filocalus scribsit"; see Trout, *Damasus of Rome*, pp. 47-52 for biographical treatment of Filocalus and paleographical scrutiny of the script.

<sup>65</sup> Jerome, *De vir. ill.* 103, *PL*, 23: "Damasus, Romanae Urbis episcopus, elegans in versibus componendis ingenium habuit et brevia opuscula heroico metro edidit."

<sup>66</sup> Along with discussions in Trout, Reutter, and Brown, see S. Diefenbach (2007), *Römische Erinnerungsräume: Heiligenmemoria und kollektive Identitäten im Rom des 3. bis 5. Jahrhunderts n. Chr.* (Berlin, 2007), pp. 289-324.



plaques for devotees.<sup>67</sup> Like a poetic impresario, he facilitated and stimulated engagement with holy relics by establishing verse inscriptional monuments at or near their sites. Sometimes, he even divined the locations of new special relics and tombs, like that of the martyr Eutychius:

Dreams disturb the mind during sleepy night,  
Pointing out what hiding place keeps the innocent man's limbs.  
Sought, found, worshipped, he shows favor and supplies all things.  
Damasus has articulated his merit. Venerate the tomb.<sup>68</sup>

Through the installation of these kinds of poems in Roman cemeteries, placed alongside epitaphs for the pope's personal relatives and select members of the church community, Damasus brought attention to particular tombs and encouraged readers in pious interaction with deceased souls. Undoubtedly, these texts also advanced the poet-pontiff's power, status, and authority, for he poetically promoted his own merit as holy archaeologist and friend to the saints as much he exalted his saintly subjects.

In the context of this investigation into post-Roman poets of Latin verse epitaphs, the most intriguing aspect of the Damasian collection, besides its graveyard atmosphere, is the poet's "ubiquitous presence" in his epigrams.<sup>69</sup> Most prominently, the poet-pontiff used his texts to posture as a suppliant before martyrial graves, to fashion his poetry as a payment of vows, and as we have seen, to relate his personal discoveries of new hotspots of sepulchral power. Through poetic writing, Damasus introduced the image of his own exemplary, euergetic piety into the growing cult of saints and the intimate family world of commemoration. Through this mode of self-presentation, he styled himself an associate of famous ascetics and martyrs. Writing verse became an expression of appreciation toward the power of the saints, with ascetic images of their own.

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<sup>67</sup> See *ED* 7, 8, 15, 16, 20, 21, 28, 31, 33, 35, 37, 39, 40, 42, 44, 46, 47, 48, 50 and 59.

<sup>68</sup> *ED* 21, in Trout (ed.) *Damasus of Rome*, p. 123:

“NOCTE SOPORIFERA TURBANT INSOMNIA MENTEM  
OSTENDIT LATEBRA INSONTIS QUAE MEMBRA TENERET,  
QUAERITUR, INVENTUS COLITUR, FOVET, OMNIA PRAESTAT  
EXPRESSIT DAMASUS MERITUM VENERARE SEPULCHRUM.”

<sup>69</sup> For the quote, see Trout, *Damasus of Rome*, p. 54, who counts thirty-seven appearances of Damasus's name in the epigrams. For discussion of Damasus's role in his martyr epigrams, see Reutter, *Damasus, Bischof von Rom*, pp. 113-126.

By his public display of his prayerful poetic practice, the pope edged himself into the saintly limelight. Reading closely just two additional poems, we can comprehend more fully these techniques of poetic self-representation. And in the process, we will prepare to appreciate parallels between Damasus's poetship and those practiced by Sidonius and as epitaphic writers in late antique Rome and post-imperial Gaul.

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The first example to consider is an *elogium* for the tomb of the confessor St. Felix of Nola, whose cult's fame was amplified in the late fourth century under the stewardship of the ascetic poet Paulinus of Nola. Damasus's epigraphic poem offers insight into his own poetic self-representation as it places him in an intimate conversation with a soul in the afterlife:

Felicitous in body, mind, spirit, and likewise name, Felix,  
Associated with the triumphs of Christ among the number of saints,  
You who furnish all things for those worried persons coming to you,  
And do not allow any traveler to go away in disappointment;  
Because I broke the chains of death, preserved with you as my leader,  
And the enemies who had spoken falsely were destroyed,  
With these verses I, suppliant Damasus, repay my vows to you.<sup>70</sup>

The poem itself functions as a relational anchor, set by the devotee who wishes to establish close rapport between himself and the saint. Respect for the saint's virtue is primary. The first four lines of the poem contain a description of Felix's power. In the semi-detached, admiring tone of a museum curator, Damasus describes the holy figure's goodwill to all those who approach the tomb in prayer. Next, the poet makes the

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<sup>70</sup> ED 59, in Trout (ed.) *Damasus of Rome*, pp. 192-193:  
"corpore mente animo pariterq(ue) et nomine felix,  
sanctorum in numero christi sociate triumphis,  
qui ad te sollicitis venientibus omnia prestas,  
nec quemquam pateris tristem repedare viantem;  
te duce servatus mortis quod vincula rupi,  
hostibus extinctis fuerant qui falsa locuti,  
versib(us) his damasus supplex tibi vota rependo."

For additional commentary on the context of this poem, which may be implicated in accusations of slander made against Damasus by members of a rival who had supported a different candidate for the papacy during his election, see Reutter, *Damasus, Bischof von Rom*, 165-170.

poem personal by narrating (albeit vaguely) positive results from his own past pious interaction with Felix. It was not uncommon for late antique Christians to make recourse to a saint's shrine or altar in search of justice, but here only the fuzziest details of the pope's resolved dispute have been memorialized in the epigram—the threat of death, the suspicion of a false accusation, nameless enemies. To be sure, Damasus's two-line description of his experience with the saint is not a scrupulous, historical record concerning his prayer's success. Rather, the poem acts as a kind of personal guarantee from the pope regarding the tomb's efficacious holiness. In other epigrams, the pope used his poetic expression to style himself directly as an authoritative witness to and mediator of holy power: "Believe through Damasus what Christ's glory can do."<sup>71</sup>

In the last section of the Felix epigram, the poet brings the reader to the present where he is writing *supplex*—kneeling, in a prayerful posture. In this position, he explicitly imbues his verses with holy value, good for vow repayment in return for the saint's beneficial protection. "With these verses I, suppliant Damasus, repay my vows to you"—poetry is made currency in the cult of saints. The intimate language of the poem's conclusion seduces readers into forgetting that it does not record a private conversation between poet and saint. In fact, Damasus invites eavesdroppers. He has already implicated passersby in the third and fourth lines of the poem—the *venientibus* and *viantem*, who have or can expect to interface propitiously with the saint. At the end of the poem, Damasus fulfills his personal vow to Felix publicly in order to model and promote veneration of the saints to the tomb's future visitors. Elsewhere, as in the *elogium* for Eutychius already cited, the pope directed readers with a balder imperative: "Venerate the tomb."<sup>72</sup>

The second poem for consideration involves the memorialization of a lay member of the church community. Only one such poetic epitaph by Damasus survives intact, written for a teenage girl named

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<sup>71</sup> ED 8: "CREDITE per damasum possit quid GLORIA CHRISTI."

<sup>72</sup> See Trout, *Damasus of Rome*, for further discussion of self-fashioning, and ED 33, 39, 44, and 46 for examples of the poet's *supplex* stylization.

Proiecta, probably the daughter of an imperial servant, though the pope did compose other epitaphs for himself, his sister, and his mother.<sup>73</sup> Here the poet-pontiff adopts a distinctly consolatory posture:

What should I say? Or should I stay silent? Grief itself prohibits me from giving testimony.  
Understand: this tomb keeps the tears of the parents  
Of Proiecta, who had been married to an exceptional husband,  
Beautiful in her own elegance, content with modesty alone,  
Alas, so greatly cherished by a distraught mother's love.  
Understand—simply put—that at the outset of her marriage,  
Snatched from the sight of her father Florus, she departed,  
Longing to ascend to the otherworldly light of heaven.  
This consolation for weeping Damasus offers to all.<sup>74</sup>

The prose ascription to this epitaph indicates that Proiecta was buried on the eve of the poet-pope's last year of life, December 30, 383. Alan Cameron has lambasted Damasus's poetic inscription as "characteristically lame and frigid" and "a tissue of tags and clichés shakily strung together."<sup>75</sup> Yet while the language of the short poem may ring conventional and uninspired to some, there can be no doubt that the inscription once constituted a prestige artifact. It survives today inscribed on six broken marble pieces in the pope's signature "Philocalian" script. The original single marble slab stretched more than six feet wide.<sup>76</sup>

Thanks to the work of Cameron and others we can now safely speculate that Proiecta belonged to an elite Spanish family with imperial connections. Her father Florus, named in the epitaph, may well have been

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<sup>73</sup> *ED* 10-12.

<sup>74</sup> Damasus, *ED* 51. Translation modified from Trout (ed. and trans.), *Damasus of Rome*, pp. 180-181:

“QUID LOQUAR AUT SILEAM PROHIBET DOLOR IPSE FATERI  
HIC TUMULUS LACRIMAS RETINET COGNOSCE PARENTU(m)  
PROIECTAE FUERAT PRIMO QUAE IUNCTA MARITO  
PULCRA DECORE SUO SOLO CONTENTA PUDORE  
HEU DILECTA SATIS MISERAE GENETRICIS AMORE  
ACCIPE QUID MULTIS THALAMI POST FOEDERA PRIMA  
EREPTA EX OCULIS FLORI GENITORIS ABIIT  
AETHERIAM CUPiens CAELI CONSCENDERE LUCEM  
HAEC DAMASUS PRESTAT CUNCTIS SOLACIA FLETUS”

<sup>75</sup> A. Cameron, “The Date and Owners of the Esquiline Treasure,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 89:1 (1985), pp. 135-145: see esp. 135-139.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*

praetorian prefect in the East from 381-383.<sup>77</sup> That her husband is not mentioned by name has caused some confusion among scholars, who have expected the headstone for a young wife to mention the spouse directly. But the commemorative tic looks less strange in light of wider trends. We know from Shaw's study that parent-to-child commemorations were three times more common among Christian tombstones than those of the pagan period, and so Proiecta's mourners may merely have abided by social convention in this instance.<sup>78</sup> We may be able to triangulate the identity of her partner if, as Cameron suggests, the same Proiecta is found on the marriage casket of the British Museum's silver Esquiline treasure which bears the inscription: "Secundus and Proiecta may you live in Christ." If so, she would have had connections to the Turcii, an established noble Roman family.<sup>79</sup> The inclination to search for this Proiecta among the Roman aristocracy is corroborated not only by the richness of the engraved marble gravestone, but also by what is known of Damasus's sustained interactions with the city of Rome's Christian upper-middle class, and his efforts to implicate them in the activity of his church. It was precisely in the "world of family piety focused on the dead" where Damasus found ground to claim for himself and his clergy.<sup>80</sup>

In view of these politics, the pontiff's personal, poetic intervention in his epitaph for Proiecta makes the text more compelling than Cameron concedes. Damasus used such poetry to carve out concisely a fascinating niche role for himself in aristocratic funerary culture, separate from his position in the cult of saints. In the first and last verses, he deploys expressions of grief to frame and bind the poem together. The perplexed rhetorical question at the outset—"What should I say? Or should I stay silent?"—portrays the poet at a loss for words, elegantly modeling psychological bewilderment resulting from grief. The brief eulogy for Proiecta and the acknowledgement of her loved ones' sorrow properly receive the most attention in the

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<sup>77</sup> *PLRE* 1.367-368.

<sup>78</sup> Shaw, "Latin Funerary Epigraphy," p. 473.

<sup>79</sup> See *PLRE* 1.817 for the hypothesized father-in-law.

<sup>80</sup> Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 248-254:252.

poem, without being overwrought. In the final line, avoiding melodrama, the poet succinctly makes a consoling gesture not only to the parents, but to the entire community, implicitly extending the impact of Proiecta's passing to a wider audience. Damasus's first-person poetic self-representation, such a common feature among his martyrial *elogia*, may have been charged with enough of the energy of the saintly dead to endow the lay woman Proiecta's epitaph with special status. But in this poem, I would suggest an additional, idiosyncratic, structural function to the poet's presence. Appearing in the first and last lines, in a kind of textual performance, Damasus's literary persona embraces the heart of the funerary poem—Proiecta, her husband (consigned to silence), and her parents—as an outsider.

From the *elogium* to Felix and the epitaph for Proiecta we can begin to appreciate some of the most important forms and features of Damasus's Christian Latin poetic self-representation. First, it was malleable. Damasus did not take the same stance towards the saints as he did toward a deceased lay member of his community. Towards the former he postured as a suppliant; towards the latter he engaged primarily as a eulogist and a supportive outsider for the grieving family. The poet-pontiff was an opportunistic and versatile verse writer, able to adapt and expand his poetic reach to a multiplicity of contexts.

But there were some more stable parameters to the pope's poetship. Namely, it was inextricably linked to memorial settings like the cemetery. The impact of this connection on future Roman Christian poetic endeavors cannot be understated. A generation or two after Damasus, one of the most prolific and polymetric Christian poets, Prudentius, looked to tombs and saints' shrines to find fruitful space for poetic innovation. And as we have seen, and shall see more of soon, that habit remained a steady part of Christian Latin poetic repertoire into the post-Roman period. Pope Damasus laid important groundwork, and offered an authoritative model for fifth- and sixth-century verse epitaphic writing. Most significantly, he endowed sepulchral poetry with a religious richness, and transformed poetic composition into a kind of currency of practice within the cult of saints. The pontiff's poetship was also strikingly public and ritualized. Damasus used sepulchral verse writing to cultivate his role as a spokesperson for the collective self-representation of

his community. In other words, he shaped poetic writing into a mode of “identification.”<sup>81</sup> The pope was among the first Christian Latin poets to harness public poetry in order to typify, model, and coordinate pious practices. Through ritualized poetic performances, he developed and demonstrated a repeated sequence of gestures and words around the tomb—steps to the Damasian dance of Christian commemoration. Among other effects, the pontiff’s epigrams molded and reinforced his Roman-Christian audience’s sense of collective identity around his authoritative presence, the authority of the memorialized subjects, a relatively stable set of biographical criteria used for assessment, and a patterned performance of suppliant commemoration.

Damasus’s poetry therefore contributed much to the broader evolution of verse writing as a powerful spiritual practice among Christians. As we move on to consider how Sidonius (and later Venantius) practiced poetic sepulchral verse writing, and how they personally interposed in such poems, it will be important to keep the poet-pope in mind as we orient our investigation within the context of post-imperial Gaul. After Damasus, sustained first-person poetic intervention became a more common practice among Christian Latin poets writing funerary verse.

#### *Sidonius and sepulchral social strategy*

In the first chapter, we explored the history of Sidonius Apollinaris’s disavowal of verse writing after taking on an episcopal role in the Gallic church. According to a contemporary ascetic ideology prevalent in the Christian community of late fifth-century Gaul, the bishop’s office was a position of *gravitas*, requiring an attitude of seriousness from its holders. Concomitantly, ascetic ecclesiarchs encouraged their peers and the educated class writ large to convert their intellectual (and specifically literary) practices to more rigorous,

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<sup>81</sup> See W. Pohl, “Introduction—Strategies of Identification: A Methodological Profile,” in G. Heydemann and W. Pohl (eds.), *Strategies of Identification: Ethnicity and Religion in Early Medieval Europe*. (2013), pp. 1-64.

Christian modes. As a result, some Christian poets like Sidonius distanced themselves from aspects of verse writing to avoid indulging in a perceived act of leisure.

Nevertheless, in an age of societal and cultural reconfiguration associated with the dissolution of Roman imperial power in the West, literary know-how retained the power to confer prestige. Sidonius espoused his vision of a Gallo-Roman nobility graded not according to the rubric of the Roman *cursus*, but one's level of education and literary ability. "Now that the old ranks of office have been disbanded, through which the highest used to be discerned from the lowest, the only marker of nobility from here on out will be knowledge of literature," he wrote to one Gallo-Roman friend.<sup>82</sup> Literary practices were to become the sole special and marked behaviors of the elite.

Sidonius's learned, aristocratic class amplified and consolidated their power in part through a literary mechanism for the circulation of praise. Small groups of *littérateurs* wrote for each other and reviewed each other's work, and often confirmed one another's literary skill in responsive performances of their own literary ability. We have seen this operation at work in Sidonius's poetic missive to Lampridius, where he expressed affection for his friend's verse ability (in a probable attempt to gain political help), and in Avitus's and Apollinaris's round-robin praise of each other's eloquence. Within networks of late antique Gallic elites, Roman literary practice functioned as a mode of "identification"—a way to personally express allegiance to a social group within a tight "circuit of communication."<sup>83</sup>

Sidonius's epitaphic poetry functioned in the same machine of identification. It was the only form of verse he continued to publish from his see at Clermont without qualification. The poet-bishop's corpus contains four sepulchral poems—one for a monk, one for a priest, one for a Christian noblewoman, and one

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<sup>82</sup> Ep 8.2.2, Harries has called it "the most significant single remark made by any contemporary western author on the end of Roman rule"; see *Sidonius Apollinaris and the Fall of Rome*, pp. 16-17, and 239 for discussion.

<sup>83</sup> Pohl, "Introduction," p. 3.



for the poet's grandfather—inlaid in separate prose letters. The epistolary paratexts stand among antiquity's best literary sources of information about the making of Latin epitaphs.<sup>84</sup>

That the bishop felt authorized to write or disseminate epitaphic poetry without extra justification to his Christian readership, sometimes in the episcopal setting of late antique Gaul, warrants critical attention. It suggests that these texts were perhaps immune to the restrictions of Lerinian literary asceticism, and points to the implicit sanctioning of Christian eulogistic verse under the ascetic paradigm for proper intellectual practice.<sup>85</sup> This may be explained by the ostensibly religiously ritualistic function of funerary verse, which we saw demonstrated in Damasus's epigrams. As we shall soon discover, much like the epitaphs in prose and verse already examined, Sidonius placed his sepulchral writing among the ritual settings and practices of Christian commemoration. Like Damasus, he could frame the very making of epitaphic poetry as a spiritual exercise in reverent remembrance of the deceased.

While Damasus's sepulchral verse was oriented towards the living, the pope sometimes used it to make prayerful contact with the deceased. The poet deployed that strategy in his poem for the martyr Marcellinus, for instance, where he engaged the saint in a conversation about his history. Elsewhere, in a hexameter epitaph for his sister Irene, the pope specifically asked his deceased relative to pray for him in heaven: "Now remember us, virgin, when God comes, so that through the Lord your torch may offer me light."<sup>86</sup> Sidonius, however, remained rather skeptical of the possibility of communication and exchange between survivors and the deceased. His work qualifies as commemoration by the living and for the living.

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<sup>84</sup> These are all treated in brief by Handley, *Death, Society, and Culture*, pp. 24-26, and in Suisini, *The Roman Stonecutter*, pp. 13-14. See Sidonius, *Ep.* 7.17 (for Abbot Abraham), 4. 11 (for Claudianus Mamertus of Vienne), 2.8 (for Philomathia), and 3.12 (for his grandfather). I do not offer in-depth analysis on the last of these, in which Sidonius narrates finding graverobbers in the act of looting and vandalizing his relative's tomb, and provides directions for constructing a new monument. See Heinzelmann, *Bischofsherrschaft*, pp. 51-53.

<sup>85</sup> i.e. from the monastery on the isle of Lérins, for which see chapter one.

<sup>86</sup> *ED* 11, lines 14-15:

"Nunc veniente deo nostri reminiscere virgo  
Ut tua per dominum prestet mihi facula lumen."

He focused his funerary texts on elevating both the memory of his subjects and the status of his patrons through poetic praise of heritage, virtue, intellect, and piety, but did not interject petitionary rhetoric within his epitaphic poetry. For these reasons, it is intriguing to read the poet-bishop's sepulchral poems in light of his comments on the restructuring of the nobility, and to consider why Gallo-Romans chose the verse medium and poets to mediate memory and negotiate redefinitions of identity.

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On two occasions Sidonius detailed his commissioning as an epitaphic poet. The first in order of appearance occurs at the sudden death of a noblewoman, conspicuously named Philomathia ('lover of learning') sometime before 470—and so *before* his ordination.<sup>87</sup> Sidonius dispatched a letter with the epitaph inscribed in it to a man named Desideratus, otherwise unknown. At the outset, he conveyed his personal grief at the mournful circumstances surrounding Philomathia's passing. He explained that his subject had been survived by five children, a disabled husband, and broken-hearted father, none of whom he called by name. When describing the funeral services, Sidonius echoed Augustine's ambivalence regarding the benefits of commemoration for the dead, wondering aloud whether "any respect is fruitfully paid to corpses."<sup>88</sup> But still he reported happily that she had not been buried with the "ominous services of a cheap undertaker or a pauper's bier;" rather, neighbors, family members, and priests had laid her to rest. After the burial ceremony, Sidonius claimed that the distraught father had approached him to request the composition of a sepulchral

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<sup>87</sup> Sidonius, *Ep.* 2.8. In my view, it is possible to read Philomathia's epitaph as a pure literary experiment, rather than as evidence of an engraved inscription. Did Philomathia actually exist? The *PLRE* lists no other Philomathia from the fifth century to the mid-seventh, but instead tendentiously connects the woman to a Gallo-Roman named Philomathius (Filimathius in the manuscript tradition) mentioned in two of Sidonius's letters (1.3.2, 5.17.9-10), and a recipient of some of Sidonius's poetry (*PLRE* 1.877). Yet the relationship between Philomathius and Philomathia is speculative. Her name—Latinized Greek, with a meaning suggestive of an intellectual disposition—is perhaps too good to be true, and prompts consideration of the potentially fictitious nature of this letter. It makes the perfect pseudonym to encapsulate Sidonius's desired audience—the learned elite. Literate Gallo-Romans flipping through Sidonius's epigrams might have seen themselves or their literarily-inclined relatives in the epitaph for a fellow 'lover of learning'.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.* 2: 'si quis haud incassum honor cadaveribus impenditur.'

poem for inscription on marble. He described the father's petition as a "prayerful entreaty."<sup>89</sup> Implicitly, Sidonius's composition therefore served as an act of prayer-answering piety, interwoven into a scene of dignified, high-quality church burial.<sup>90</sup>

Some specifics within the poem, however, make it difficult to see it within the field of religious activity. The hendecasyllabic poem makes no reference to its subject's Christianity. Neither does it mention the promise of heaven, a very common feature among Christian verse sepulchral inscriptions. Most Christian funerary epigraphy of Late Antiquity at least describes hope in the Resurrection or the afterlife. While the laudatory poem demonstrates the 'voluminous style' typical of Christian verse epitaphs, the enumeration of Philomathia's virtues could very well describe a non-Christian woman. The spiritual ambiguity of the epitaph carries on to its last line, where the poet closes with a punning, secular euphemism for death: "last rites (*iusta*) were performed for you unjustly (*iniuste*) soon in the prime of life."

Snatched by sudden and violent misfortune  
From five children, father, and spouse,  
The hands of a weeping country  
Have placed the matron Philomathia in this tomb.  
Star of your line, a husband's glory,  
Thoughtful, chaste, upright, austere, sweet;  
By your accommodating nature you joined what are usually considered opposites.  
For the companions of your good life were  
Stern forthrightness and clever modesty.  
Hence we grieve the scarce thirty years  
You lived in health,  
And that last rites were performed for you  
Unjustly soon in the prime of life.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*: "precatu parentis orbatu nemiam funebrem non per elegos sed per hendecasyllabos marmori incisam planctu prope calente dictavi." The poem may also have been written before his entry into the clergy.

<sup>90</sup> The social dynamics of Philomathia's commemoration, including the commissioning of her tombstone inscription, share fascinating points of connection with what we have learned so far about the Christian epitaphic habit. Neither the poem nor the contextual letter name the memorial's patron(s). The family's anonymity directly parallels the tendency that Shaw observed for Christian epitaphic commemorators to remain nameless. Similarly noteworthy is the fact that the woman's father, not her surviving husband or children, shoulders the responsibility of providing for his daughter's sepulchral inscription. As we observed in our analysis of Damasus's epitaph for Proiecta, parent-to-child commemorations were three times more common among Christian grave markers than those of the pagan period, and so Philomathia's mourners conformed with that convention as well. See Shaw, "Latin Funerary Epigraphy," p. 473.

<sup>91</sup> Sidonius, *Ep.* 2.8.3:

The avoidance of explicitly Christian material is fairly typical of Sidonius's versification technique from the period before his consecration during his stint as a public poet. But this tombstone poem stands out when viewed alongside his three other epitaphic compositions, all of which stress their subjects' faith.<sup>92</sup> In the letter in which this poem appears, the poet's peacocking also matches his manifest, pre-clerical concern with poetic reputation. He made sure to point out to Desideratus how metrically exceptional the "funeral jingle" for Philomathia was, written in hendecasyllables rather than the more common elegiac mode of funerary verse.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, while he took care to encourage Desideratus to mourn Philomathia dutifully, he also prompted him to deliver the poem to his bookseller, who would add it to his collection of epigrams.<sup>94</sup> Even though Sidonius insisted that his verses had been engraved, he was still interested in having his piece read outside its stone as a literary experiment in epitaphic writing, perhaps to be purchased and copied by other admiring commemorators down the road.<sup>95</sup> His work may have circulated in sylloges of verse inscriptions,

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Occasu celeri feroque raptam  
 Gnatis quinque patrique coniugique  
 Hoc flentis patriae manus locarunt  
 Matronam Philomathiam sepulchro.  
 O splendor generis, decus mariti,  
 Prudens, casta, decens, seuera, dulcis,  
 Atque ipsis senioribus sequenda,  
 Discordantia quae solent putari  
 Morum commoditate copulasti:  
 Nam uitae comites bonae fuerunt  
 Libertas grauis et pudor facetus.  
 Hinc est quod decimam tuae saluti  
 Vix actam trieteridem dolemus  
 Atque in temporibus uigentis aeui  
 Iniuste tibi iusta persoluta.

<sup>92</sup> See *Ep.* 3.12, lines 15-20; 4.11, lines 4-21; 7.17, lines 1-8.

<sup>93</sup> The epitaphic poems written for his grandfather (*Ep.* 3.12), and Claudianus (*Ep.* 4.11) are also hendecasyllabic.

<sup>94</sup> *Ep.* 2.8.2: "quam si non satis improbas, ceteris epigrammatum meorum voluminibus applicandam mercennarius bybliopola suscipiet."

<sup>95</sup> See Handley, *Death, Society and Culture*, pp. 167-179 for discussion of inscriptions as literary texts.

which were like poetic anthologies presumably for engravers that were fairly popular in the early medieval period.

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The second recorded instance of Sidonius's epitaphic commissioning appears in a letter written around 477—and so during his tenure as bishop—to a landed aristocrat named Volusianus, a future bishop of Tours and owner of the property which held the monastery of St. Cirques in Clermont. When the monastery's cherished abbot Abraham died, Volusianus asked the bishop to write verses—or as the out-of-practice poet phrased it, “to bring [his] long unworked fingers to the anvils of the old shop”—for the monk's sepulchral inscription.<sup>96</sup> Abraham was a refugee from Sassanid territory where he had escaped persecution for his Christianity, and Sidonius's thirty-line, extravagant elegiac epitaph treated him as one of those precious late Roman outsiders, a man who had gifted his Gallic nook with the legitimating touch of a foreigner's approval. According to the sepulchral poem, the pilgrim-monk had not just chosen to live there, he had rejected the banner cities of the world to do so: “You turned from Roman and Byzantine hubbub, and the walls of Jerusalem battered by Titus with his archers. Neither Alexandria nor Antioch held you. You shunned the Carthaginian houses, the home of Dido. And you spurned bogged-down Ravenna's crowded country... This corner brought you happiness, and the poor cell and little home, its dense roof thatched with hay.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Sidonius, *Ep.* 7.17. For more on Volusianus, see Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* X, 10.31 and M. Heinzlmann. *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century*. (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 24-25.

<sup>97</sup> *Ep.* 7.17, lines 15-19, 21-22:

“Romuleos refugis Byzantinosque fragores  
atque sagittifero moenia fracta Tito.  
Murus Alexandri te non tenet Antiochique;  
spernis Elisseae Byrsica tecta domus.  
Rura paludicolae temnis populosa Ravennae  
[...]  
Angulus iste placet paupertinusque recessus  
et casa, cui culmo culmina pressa forent.”

The logistics of the epitaph's production were enmeshed in the kind of close-knit, hierarchical relationships typical of the insular Gallo-Roman aristocratic network. Volusianus had framed his request to Sidonius as a favor among close friends. But the poet, alert to local politics, did not play coy in his response. Rather, he respectfully acknowledged his correspondent's authority while insisting that his principal motivation in writing would be to honor the mournful devotion of Volusianus's superior, the *comes* Victorius, who had been present at Abraham's death and was grieving the monk's passing especially hard. Victorius was one of those local Roman magnates of Sidonius's generation who had taken a role in the administration of post-Roman Gaul under barbarian overlords. He was wealthy enough to foot the bill alone for Abraham's elaborate funeral services and burial.<sup>98</sup> Meanwhile Volusianus held the ambiguous *auctoritas* of middle management. Consequently, the bishop politely sidestepped his friend to exalt the poem's material sponsor directly. "I honor him as a patron by worldly law, as a son by ecclesiastical law; as a client, as a father, I love him," he wrote of the higher-ranking Victorius.<sup>99</sup>

Sidonius's statement is rich with evidence of the ideological and social conditions in which he composed. It encapsulates the poet-bishop's complexity as a creative figure engaged in efforts to leverage his traditional Roman poetic skills within an office of Christian leadership that demanded revised literary practices. These twin cultural forces shaped the social dynamics of the funerary project as Sidonius described them. On the one hand, the epitaph was the product of a secular patron-client relationship, which the poet-bishop was eager to emphasize, perhaps with a view to future commissioning. On the other hand, its composition was pitched as an act of reverence meant to honor both Abraham, a holy man, and Victorius, a congregant making an admirable public demonstration of faith. Rather than inducing anxious tension in Sidonius's life, the construction of Abraham's tomb and the writing of his poetic epitaph appeared to him as

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<sup>98</sup> *PLRE* 2:1162-63.

<sup>99</sup> Sidonius, *Ep.* 7.17.1: "quem iure saeculari patronum, iure ecclesiastico filium excholo ut cliens, ut pater diligo."

a special opportunity to achieve harmony between the imperatives of faith and some of the established traditions of Roman verse composition. Sidonius found a rare spot to write poetry, cultivate communal piety, and bolster an important political friendship.

Although Sidonius did not shy away from discussing the financial side of the tomb's construction and Count Victorious's impressive outlay, he avoided talk of personal financial gain around his funeral poetry. On the contrary, he downplayed the value of his own poetic contribution, nodding only faintly toward the economics of the act by describing the "cheapness" (*vilitate*) of his words in view of Abraham's lofty stature and, implicitly, Victorious's expenditure.<sup>100</sup> The poet's posture of humility may seem conventional, but it nevertheless reflects an important aspect of Sidonius's personal mode of self-fashioning. The poet-bishop represented himself as the site of confluence for multiple social pressures. He pitched his poetic writing as a compelled reaction to these catalyzing forces. Thus, Sidonius became 'poet-by-obligation'—a social pawn, whose role as versifier was thrust upon him not only by his own insistent grief, but by various social responsibilities to a range of individuals—to a pious patron, a close friend, a special monk, and in the case of Philomathia, a grieving father.

The rhetoric of the poet's compelled social intervention functions, I argue, as a self-promoting networking strategy nested within a broader scheme of 'identification' among local nobilities. In his study of social mobility in Late Antique Gaul, Allen Jones has argued persuasively for the idea that Gallo-Roman *littérateurs* like Sidonius used their literary talents to help consolidate power in the few hands of their aristocratic circles.<sup>101</sup> By composing inscriptions in Roman verse forms and making the deceased subject match the expectations and ideology of his Christian social group(s), Sidonius assumed the role of pious evaluator of his peers among the nobility. His epitaphic work reinforced and endorsed the piety and cultural status of his

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<sup>100</sup> *ibid.* 2: "viri mores gesta virtutes indignissime meorum vilitate dictorum ponderabuntur."

<sup>101</sup> A. Jones. *Social Mobility in Late Antique Gaul: Strategies and Opportunities for the Non-Elite*. (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 23-73.

patrons and subjects, and Sidonius stood to gain from acting as expert of identity, and authoritative evaluator as he outlined and praised the character of those he commemorated. In return, the poet may have acquired not only material wealth (we may imagine) from his projects, but social visibility, and so future opportunities for increasing his social capital.<sup>102</sup>

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The poetic epitaph in which Sidonius lavishes the most Christian literary praise on his deceased subject is that written in hendecasyllables for Claudianus Mamertus of Vienne, whom we encountered in the first chapter as a philosopher and priest, and the brother of Avitus's episcopal predecessor Bishop Mamertus of Vienne. Sidonius included the piece in a consolatory letter to his subject's nephew, Petreius. He claimed to have inscribed the poem (again composed with difficulty owing to his poetic inactivity as bishop) over the man's bones after his funeral. The poem's penultimate line states that the words were engraved in marble, and the deixis in the third verse of the poem—"in this mound Claudianus gives over his body"—further indicates its physical reality.<sup>103</sup>

As in Philomathia's epitaph, Sidonius prefaced the work by expressing a Roman ambivalence about his ability to benefit the deceased subject. He made recourse to Virgil to do so: "I have composed a sad and mournful funeral song for this, as Virgil puts it, 'ungrateful ash'; that is, for one unable to return thanks."<sup>104</sup> The Virgilian reference works to frame Sidonius's poetic act in the context of a poignantly Roman funerary ceremony. The poet-bishop drew the epic tag *cineri ingrato* from the sixth book of the *Aeneid* (line 213), where Aeneas's Trojan company bury their drowned comrade Misenus to satisfy obligations of piety before the hero

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<sup>102</sup> *ibid*, p. 8.

<sup>103</sup> Sidonius, *Ep.* 4.11, line 3:  
"hoc dat caespitē membra Claudianus."

<sup>104</sup> *Ep.* 4.11.6: "huic iam, ut est illud Maronianum, cineri ingrato id est gratiam non relaturō neniā condidimus tristem luctuosamque."



enters the Underworld. Using Virgil to anchor his skepticism in the sentience of the dead may appear surprising given both the bishop's Christian subject and the economy of prayerful exchange inherent to Christian commemorative practices around the tomb.<sup>105</sup> But the force and rhetoric of the statement become clear when scrutinized alongside the evaluative techniques applied in the epitaph, and viewed in light of the poet's avowed social-networking program in the poem-letter combination.

For Sidonius, Claudianus was most worthy of memory for his mastery of the *triplex bybliotheca*—fluency in Roman, Greek, and Christian learning.<sup>106</sup> Notably, Sidonius thought it worthy to note that he had acquired his well-rounded education as a monk before entering the pastoral world. Yet whatever Claudianus's ascetic ethic may have been, Sidonius did not harp on it. Rather than underscoring his subject's monastic vigor or even his moral virtues, a strategy that operated in Proiecta and Philomathia's epitaphs, the poet asyndetically listed Claudianus's multifarious intellectual roles—"rhetorician, philosopher, poet, exegete, mathematician, musician"—before describing his priestly managerial positions in the church at Vienne.<sup>107</sup> He concluded the inscription with an address to a "friendly reader" (*amice lector*), which, though conventional, suited the tomb of a literary man like Claudianus. The poet attempted to soothe the viewer's grief without recourse to Christian tropes about the Resurrection. Instead, he insisted on the intellectual immortality of the deceased. Claudianus's "mind and glory" were depicted as everlasting rather than his soul.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> See again Clarke, *Writing and Power in Anglo-Saxon England*, 44-79.

<sup>106</sup> *Ep.* 4.11, lines 4-5.

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*, lines 8-9:

“orator, dialecticus, poeta,  
Tractator, geometra, musicusque.”

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.* lines 22-25:

“at tu, quisque doles, amice lector,  
de tanto quasi nil viro supersit,  
udis parce genis rigare marmor:  
mens et gloria non queunt humari.”

Sidonius closed the accompanying letter to Petreius by narrating his intense emotional outpouring during the act of writing the poem: “While I was in contemplation, with my soul swelling up, I released the reins to my tears, and I acted before the epitaph as others acted before the tomb.”<sup>109</sup> Thus, the bishop transmuted the text into a totem for the grave itself. By weeping, he practically disobeyed his own command to the epitaph’s readers, whom he had asked to refrain from crying over the tomb.<sup>110</sup> While he pitched the reenactment of his grief as a demonstration of his close companionship with a deceased friend, he also implied that it went toward strengthening friendships on earth: “I have written you these things, in case you think I only maintain solidarity with the living, and lest I should become guilty in your eyes for not always remembering those who have lost life as much as those alive.”<sup>111</sup> The bishop insisted, therefore, that the recollection of the dead was as important as preserving active friendships, and that commemoration was itself an important mode of relational preservation. Epitaphic writing could function as an expression of loyalty, which social virtue’s value was heightened by its perceived rarity.<sup>112</sup> In Sidonius’s late fifth-century Gallic world, sepulchral verse became a kind of textual currency, not to circulate within the cult of saints as in Damasus’s epigrams, but to change hands above ground within the friendship networks of lettered Gallo-Roman aristocrats.

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Sidonius’s poetic epitaphs for Claudianus, Abraham, and Philomathia all reveal the way sepulchral poetry could transform the dead into symbols for the agreed-upon value and virtue systems around which

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<sup>109</sup> *ibid.* 7: “Nam dum forte meditarer, lacrimis habenas anima parturiente laxavi fecique ad epitaphium, quod alii fecerunt ad sepulcrum.”

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.* line 24: “udis parce genis rigare marmor.”

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*: “Haec ergo scripsimus tibi, ne forsitan arbitrare solam nos colere vivorum sodalitem reique tuo iudicio essemus, nisi amicorum vita carentum semper aequae ut incolumium reminisceremur.”

<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*: “namque et ex hoc, quod vix reservatur imaginaria fides vel superstitibus, non praeter aequum opinabere, si perpaucos esse conicias, qui mortuos ament.”

collectivities congealed. Epitaphs were texts woven with the very ideological threads that knitted together Christian Gallo-Roman social webs. The variety of social positions that the poet-bishop's subjects occupied—ranging from monk to priest to prefect to matron—and the different textures of their epitaphs speak to the flexibility of Sidonius's poetic craft. Like Damasus, he was able to mold his evaluative mode to fit the specific deceased person under scrutiny. As a self-stylizer he also proved as versatile as the poet-pope, though he used paratextual epistles rather than the poems himself to craft his literary self-image as a eulogist. More than Damasus, however, Sidonius provided readers with insight into his adroit social maneuverings surrounding the making of sepulchral poems, and leveraged extra-poetic commentary to disseminate his poems to a wider audience outside the cemetery. At the same time, he validated his poetic writing through his paratexts by connecting the making of epitaphs to dignified church burial, and by exposing the complex social obligations that pressured him heavily enough to work around his episcopal renunciation of verse making.

In the next chapter, I wish to examine the Christian and funerary poems of Venantius Fortunatus, the most prolific poet of Merovingian Gaul, through the lens of the Christian Latin verse epitaphic habit we have so far constructed. As an Italian epitaphic poet writing from within sixth-century Gaul, Fortunatus makes for a potentially intriguing point of convergence for the influence of Roman Damasus and Gallic Sidonius. After first setting Fortunatus within his proper Merovingian historical and cultural context, I will show how his epitaphic poetship merged a Damasian tendency to intervene personally in sepulchral poetry with a Sidonian social-networking instinct to create a unique brand of funerary verse. Moreover, I will show how his practice of poetic authorship in this setting suited the special needs and character of his patrons and audience, an environment of cultural negotiations toward the transformation of the Roman world.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE DEAD, POETS, AND SOCIETY (II): VENANTIUS FORTUNATUS

*A eulogy for a eulogist*

Midway through the second book of the *Historia Langobardorum*, its author Paul the Deacon (c.720–799 AD) takes a narrative detour. He turns from his limpid prose history of the reign of the Lombard king Alboin (d. 572) to commemorate a Latin writer roughly contemporary with his subject, separated from the story by only one degree: Venantius Honorius Clementianus Fortunatus, (530/40–c.610) bishop of Poitiers, a prose hagiographer, and the most significant and prolific author of Latin verse of the Merovingian world.<sup>1</sup> Almost two centuries had passed since Fortunatus's death, yet still the poet retained something of a cult following in Paul's late eighth-century Francia, especially among Latin intellectuals connected to the Carolingian court.<sup>2</sup> It was hardly surprising, therefore, that the historian Paul took time to explain his visit to the grave of one his generation's literary idols while touring through Gaul in the 780s.

The poet's tomb was located near the Monastery of St. Hilary in Poitiers, the city where Venantius had spent most of his recorded years and held episcopal office during the last stage of his life. Two of his most important patrons, the nuns Radegund and Agnes, had resided at Poitiers. There Radegund, a Merovingian queen turned holy woman, *la reine moniale*, had founded the Convent of the Holy Cross in 544.<sup>3</sup> More than

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<sup>1</sup> Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, 2.13, in L. Bethmann and G. Waitz (eds.), *MGH SSRL* (Hanover, 1878), pp. 79-81. For good biographical introductions to Fortunatus, with deft, synthetic analysis of previous scholarship, see B. Brennan, "The Career of Venantius Fortunatus," *Traditio* 41 (1985), pp. 49-78 and M. Reydellet (ed. and trans.), "Introduction," in *Venance Fortunat, Poèmes*. I (Paris, 1994), esp. pp. vii-xxviii. For the potential significance of the poet's *tria nomina*, see p. viii. The classic studies of Fortunatus's life include W. Meyer, *Der Gelegenheitsdichter Venantius Fortunatus*. (Berlin, 1901); R. Koebner, *Venantius Fortunatus: seine Persönlichkeit und seine Stellung in der geistigen Kultur des Merowinger-Reiches*, (Leipzig, 1915); and D. Tardi, *Fortunat: Étude sur un dernier représentant de la poésie latine dans la Gaule mérovingienne*. (Paris, 1927).

<sup>2</sup> R. Van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles*, (Princeton, 1993), p. 40. See also Alcuin's epitaph for Fortunatus, *Carm.* 99.17, in E. Duemmler (ed.), *MGH PLAC I* (Berlin, 1881), p. 326; and B. de Gaiffier, "S. Venance Fortunat, évêque de Poitiers. Les témoignages de son culte." *Analecta Bollandiana* 70 (1952), pp. 262-284.

<sup>3</sup> For Radegund, the classic biography is R. Aigrain, *Sainte Radegonde* (Poitiers, 1952). For her relationship to Fortunatus, see especially, J. George, *Venantius Fortunatus: a Latin poet in Merovingian Gaul*. (Oxford, 1992), pp. 161-178 and M. Roberts, *The Humblest Sparrow: The Poetry of Venantius Fortunatus*. (Ann Arbor, 2009), pp. 283ff.

twenty years later, and over the course of several decades, Fortunatus wrote more than fifty poetic letters to the nuns, some of which treat as mundane a subject as gifting a piece of fruit. But these ascetics also sponsored more serious poetic efforts to promote and intellectually enhance their monastic center. Two of the poet's most influential pieces, the hymns *Pange lingua* and *Vexilla regis*, were ostensibly written for the foundress to celebrate her convent's reception of a relic of the True Cross from the Byzantine emperor Justin II and his wife Sophia.<sup>4</sup>

Like Paul, Fortunatus was not from Gaul, but rather a native of Italy. He had been schooled at Ravenna. Having left his homeland for reasons unclear, the poet emerged on the Merovingian literary scene around 566. His first datable appearance was more than 300 miles northwest of Poitiers in Metz at the court of the Austrasian King Sigibert. There he composed (and probably recited) two epithalamia for the monarch's marriage to the princess Brunhild, daughter of the Visigothic monarch Athanagild.<sup>5</sup> In view of the "international" aspect of the marriage alliance, the foreign Fortunatus made a fitting choice to play poetic master of ceremonies.<sup>6</sup> From 566 to 576, the poet remained active in the Frankish court circles of the sons of Clothar. Those four brothers had divided the Gallic territory among themselves upon their father's death in 561: Sigibert received Austrasia with capitals at Reims and Metz, Chilperic I ruled Neustria, Guntram held

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<sup>4</sup> See Fortunatus, *Carm.* 2.2, 6, in F. Leo (ed.), *MGH AA* 4.1 (Berlin, 1881), pp. 27-28, 34-35.

<sup>5</sup> See Fortunatus, *Carm.* 6.1 and 6.1a. For historical interpretations of Fortunatus's departure from Italy, see Brennan, "The Career of Venantius Fortunatus," 54, and n.26 for additional bibliography; and M. Reydellet, *Venance Fortunat*, pp. xiv-xix, who supports an image of Fortunatus as cultural agent for the Byzantines, keen to advance the interests of the Eastern Roman Empire upon entry into Gaul. Koebner, *Venantius Fortunatus*, p. 125, suggests the poet left Italy so as to avoid the fate of his patron Bishop Vitalis, the addressee of his first poem, and an exile under Narses during the Byzantine reconquest of Italy; George, *Venantius Fortunatus*, pp. 25-26, argues for compatibility between the author's religious and secular self-representation, but claims (without solid support for the connection) "a precedent for his journey as an adventurer in search of patronage and preferment [in] the wanderings of the scholar-poets of Byzantine Egypt." Fortunatus was no wandering troubadour.

<sup>6</sup> Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity*, 88-89.

Burgundy from Orléans, while Charibert governed western Frankish territories from Paris.<sup>7</sup> The partitioning of the kingdom was not peaceful. Rivalries bubbled over into internecine hostilities among the brothers.<sup>8</sup>

Yet even in these somewhat turbulent conditions Fortunatus thrived. A self-described “exile from Italy,” he seems to have mastered what Peter Brown once called “that most profitable late Roman art of being an outsider.”<sup>9</sup> Through the dissemination of epistolary and panegyric poetry he developed and maintained a heterogeneous patronage network, knit into a patchwork of ostensibly intimate relationships. Fortunatus corresponded with men across the borderlines, crafting his image into that of an unbiased and unaffected admirer, a man undivided by political division. In the process, he became something of a ubiquitous presence among the disparate aristocratic class, a lodestone for those in post-imperial Gaul eager to practice and cultivate classical Roman literary discourse. To his wide-ranging audience, comprising barbarian monarchs and magnates, palace administrators, and church leaders from all around Merovingian kingdoms, his arrival would have seemed, as Reydellet has put it, a kind of miracle.<sup>10</sup>

In Gaul’s “segmentary state,” where peripheral cities and settlements operated outside direct royal control in relative autonomy, competitions for power and authority thrived among local landed aristocrats and administrators—dukes, counts, bishops, and ascetic holy men.<sup>11</sup> Such persons stood to gain in legitimacy

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<sup>7</sup> Clothar was Radegund’s former husband. For the tortured family politics of this period, see Wood, *Merovingian Kingdoms*, pp. 89ff. A good introductory review to modern historical scholarship on barbarian Gaul, with a special focus on the sixth-century, may be found in A. Jones, *Social Mobility in Late Antique Gaul: Strategies and Opportunities for the Non-Elite*. (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 1-22.

<sup>8</sup> Scholars dispute the cultural impact of this spirit of civil conflict among the leading families of Gaul, but it seems unlikely to have either resulted from or contributed to the development of discrete cultural zones in the territory as some have speculated. Pierre Riche famously argued for different intellectual zones in Gaul, and set a predominately Roman south against a supposedly Barbarian north. Chris Wickham, *Framing the Middle Ages*, (Oxford, 2005), pp. 43-44, deemphasizes regional political division and disparity in Gaul. See Jones, *Social Mobility*, 7 n. 28 for further relevant bibliography.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, (Chicago, 1981), p. 64.

<sup>10</sup> Reydellet, *Venance Fortunat*, pp. xi. See also pp. xlv-xlix, where he points out that Fortunatus’s correspondence, though diffuse, did cluster geographically and socially, both around Merovingian bishops and southern Gallic elites connected to the Austrasian court (e.g. Dynamius, Lupus, Jovinus) where he made his first public poetic appearance.

<sup>11</sup> See R. Van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul*. (Berkeley, 1985), p. 185.

from favorable appraisals by an outsider like Fortunatus, and from exposure through incorporation into his wide and diverse literary network. The poet welcomed many of his Frankish and Roman contacts into a kind of adopted family: “What a father and mother, brother, sister, a line of descendants, what a country could do, you do with affectionate love,” he wrote to his Gallo-Roman friend, Duke Lupus.<sup>12</sup> In this family, Radegund often featured as the pious poet’s *mater*, while he fashioned another important patron, the ecclesiastical potentate Gregory of Tours, as his *pater*.<sup>13</sup>

For Paul the Deacon, however, none of these figures—not Radegund, not Gregory, not a king, queen, duke or duchess—were essential to Fortunatus’s biography. He did not view the poet as a figure of political significance at all. Rather, Paul remembered his subject purely as a sacred spokesperson for the cult of saints, and as one of its convalescents, miraculously healed at an altar dedicated to St. Martin of Tours in Ravenna:

Fortunatus was born in a place called Duplavis, which is not far from the stronghold at Ceneda or the city of Treviso. Yet he was raised and educated at Ravenna, and excelled with great renown in grammar, rhetoric, and metrics. Since he was suffering from a very vexing eye ailment, and the aforementioned Felix, this man’s friend, was similarly hurting in his eyes, they both went to the basilica of the blessed Paul and John, which was located within that city. There the altar constructed in honor of blessed Martin the Confessor has a window, in which a lamp has been placed to provide light. Fortunatus and Felix soon touched their eyes with its oil. The pain was immediately driven off, and they found the healing for which they were praying. For this reason, Fortunatus revered blessed Martin so much that, having left his country a little before the Lombards invaded Italy, he hastened for Tours to the tomb of that same blessed man. [...] After he arrived at Tours according to his avowed purpose, he moved to Poitiers and resided there, and in that place he composed on the deeds of many saints partly in prose, partly in a metrical mode. Finally, in that same city he was ordained

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<sup>12</sup> For Lupus, see *PLRE* 3B:798-9 (Lupus 1), and Fortunatus, *Carm.* 7.7-9. Here, *Carm.* 7.9.11-12:

“Quod pater ac genetrix, frater, soror, ordo nepotum,  
quod poterat regio, solvis amore pio.”

<sup>13</sup> See Roberts, *The Humblest Sparrow*, p. 299, and 270, n. 70 for parental depictions of Radegund and Gregory, respectively. Gregory is addressed as *pater* in all but two of Fortunatus’s 26 verse letters to the bishop. While the title is a rather conventional form of address for bishops, Fortunatus reserved the special *beate pater* and *pater patriae* for Gregory and Ragnemod, Bishop of Paris—see Roberts, “Venantius Fortunatus and Gregory of Tours: Poetry and Patronage” in A.C. Murray (ed.), *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*. (Leiden, 2016), pp. 35-59: 41. Fortunatus’s creative strategies call to mind those of what some modern anthropologists have labeled “cultural brokers,” i.e. those figures who function diplomatically at the synapses between disparate social groups or communication networks, and who perform creatively to mediate differences in social standing or identity. For discussion within the context of Merovingian history, see H. Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity*, pp. 18-19.

first as a presbyter and then as a bishop, and he rests buried in that same honorable place. He composed a life of the blessed Martin in four books of heroic verse, and many other things, chiefly hymns for particular festivals, and especially little verses for individual friends. Second to none of the poets, he wrote in charming and eloquent speech.<sup>14</sup>

The account exposes its author as a careful reader of Fortunatus's poetry, for Paul follows closely the autobiographical narrative that the poet himself had provided in the final book of his versified *Vita Sancti Martini* (*VSM*). The *VSM* was Fortunatus's hagiographical epic masterpiece, written sometime between September 573 and April 576 for a predominately episcopal and ascetic readership, in honor of the confessor and bishop who had partially inspired Paulinus of Nola's conversion in the late fourth century.<sup>15</sup> Near the end of his poem, Fortunatus modeled ascetic devotion to Martin's cult, and detailed his wondrous personal experience as a beneficiary of the saint's healing presence. In a moment of tender remembrance, the poet recalled his recovery from blindness at Martin's altar. He swore "That healer was there," that he had *really* experienced the saint's presence. He then portrayed his subsequent departure from Italy as a pilgrimage to Tours, made in gratitude for Martin's miracle. The poet depicted his very ability to see along the way as a

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<sup>14</sup> Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, 2.13: "Fortunatus natus quidem in loco qui Duplabilis dicitur fuit; qui locus haut longe a Cenitense castro vel Tarvisiana distat civitate. Sed tamen Ravennae nutritus et doctus, in arte gramatica sive rethorica seu etiam metrica clarissimus extitit. Hic cum oculorum dolorem vehementissimum pateretur, et nihilominus Felix iste ipsius socius pari modo oculos doleret, utrique ad basilicam beatorum Pauli atque Iohannis, quae intra eadem urbem sita est, perrexere. In qua etiam altarium in honore beati Martini confessoris constructum propinquam habet fenestram, in qua lucerna ad exhibendum lumen est constituta. De cuius oleo mox sibi isti, Fortunatus scilicet et Felix, dolentia lumina tetigerunt. Illico dolore fugato sanitatem, quam obtabant, adepti sunt. Qua de causa Fortunatus in tantum beatum Martinum veneratus est, ut, relicta patria, paulo antequam Langobardi Italiam invaderent, Turonis ad eiusdem beati viri sepulchrum properaret [...] Qui postquam Turonos iuxta votum proprium advenit, Pictavis pertransiens, illuc habitavit, et multorum ibidem sanctorum gesta partim prosa, partim metrali ratione conscripsit; novissimeque in eadem civitate primum presbiter, deinde episcopus ordinatus est, atque in eodem loco digno tumulatus honore quiescit. Hic beati Martini vitam quattuor in libris heroico versu contexit, et multa alia maximeque ymnos singularum festivitatum et praecipue ad singulos amicos versiculos, nulli poetarum secundus, suavi et diserto sermone composuit."

<sup>15</sup> Reydellet, *Venance Fortunat*, xxiv-xxv, places the poem more precisely to 574/575, with the first seven-book recension of occasional poetry following in 576. In two prefatory pieces attached to the poem, the poet singled out three individuals in his audience: Gregory and the nuns Radegund and Agnes, the abbess of Convent of the Holy Cross. Outside their roles as patrons of the *VSM*, each one had demonstrated interest in advancing ascetic culture in their Merovingian communities, with a focus on Martin as a symbol of that movement. For Gregory's imitative relationship with the saint, see B. Brennan, "'Being Martin': Saint and Successor in Sixth-Century Tours," *Journal of Religious History*, 21:2 (1997), pp.121-135. For the genre of the *VSM*, see M. Roberts, "The Last Epic of Antiquity: Generic Continuity and Innovation in the 'Vita Sancti Martini' of Venantius Fortunatus." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 131 (2001), pp. 257-85. For further discussion, see section VII below.



testimony to the saint's healing power, and promised "[he] would remember that while he remained in body and the light."<sup>16</sup>

Critics have quibbled over the documentary truth of Fortunatus's story, and questioned his supposed motivations behind the journey into Gaul. Some have argued that he consciously designed this pious image of himself to suit the needs and expectations of his episcopal and ascetic patrons, Gregory and Radegund.<sup>17</sup> Fortunatus's multiple experiments with non-religious modes of writerly self-definition complicate matters further. Some of them would seem to clash with his self-portrait in the *VSM*—a problem that will be treated at length later in this chapter.<sup>18</sup> Paul, however, did not hesitate to take the poet at his word. He recapitulated Fortunatus's miraculous recuperation and the fulfilment of his ascetic vow. In fact, his biographical impulse was not satisfied by a prose paraphrase of his subject's ascetic autobiography. The historian's visit to the tomb entailed a poetic imperative. Paul wrote that, when he went to the poet's grave to pray, he was approached by the abbot of the monastery, a man named Aper, who asked him to compose a metrical epitaph for the author entombed. Paul complied by offering the following twelve lines of elegiac verse:

Brilliantly talented, quick-witted, sweet of speech,  
Whose charming strain many a page sings,  
Fortunatus, the pinnacle of poets, reverent in his action,  
Born in Ausonia, lies buried here in this earth.  
From his mouth we learn the deeds of the saints of old.  
These deeds show how to take the journey of light.  
Fortunate are you, Gaul, graced with such jewels

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<sup>16</sup> For the full account, see Fortunatus, *Vita Sancti Martini*, 4.665-667, and 686-712. Here 4.698-99, 701:

“et praesens medicus blando fugat unguine morbos.  
non oblita mihi mea lumina munere sancti [...]”  
et memor illud ero dum luce et corpore consto.”

M.A. Handley, *Death, Society, and Culture: inscriptions and epitaphs in Gaul and Spain, AD 300-750*. (Oxford, 2003), pp. 141-42 collects the epigraphic evidence for St. Martin's cult in Ravenna.

<sup>17</sup> See Brennan's review of several skeptics' arguments in “The Career,” pp. 55-56, and n.6 above for additional bibliography. Fortunatus's self-narrated voyage into Gaul overshoots Tours to the north, leaving Brennan especially suspicious of his pilgrimage claim.

<sup>18</sup> On Fortunatus's self-representation, see esp. P. Godman, *Poets and Emperors*, (Oxford, 1986), pp. 1-37 and M. Roberts, *The Humblest Sparrow*, p. 316.

From whose light foul night takes flight away from you.  
 I have produced these modest lines in an unrefined poem  
 So your honor, holy one, would not be hidden among the people.  
 Do a poor man a good turn, blessed man: ask according to your outstanding merits  
 That I not be condemned by the just judge, I pray.<sup>19</sup>

With this poetic epitaph, as in his brief, prefatory prose biography, Paul commemorated Fortunatus as a poet, holy man, and hagiographer above all. His depiction is of a declaimer of saintly acts and biography, who, by virtue of his written work, has joined the company of the saints as a guide to heaven. Again Paul's eulogistic portrayal reveals him to be an especially reverent and responsive reader of Fortunatus, for by detailing in epitaphic verse his votive encounter with the deceased literary-spiritual guide, Paul bestowed praise upon the poet by imitation. In an ascetic act of literary emulation, he mirrored the man he set out to memorialize. He did so firstly by writing in both prose and verse. His prosimetric eulogy encapsulated stylistically Fortunatus's authorial mastery of those two forms, which he had called attention to in his prose summary of the poet's life. Second, Paul's prayerful visit to the grave imitated his subject's spiritual practice. Readers of the *Historia Langobardorum* have just learned how Fortunatus gained sight while praying at a saint's shrine; now they look on as the author asks poetically for heavenly help from the poet at his tomb. Finally, in the act of composing a poetic eulogy, prayerfully versifying Fortunatus's life in an evaluative epitaph, Paul assumed the role of Fortunatus's poetic imitator and successor. Indeed, Fortunatus's corpus contains over 30 poetic epitaphs for members of his Merovingian community. It is possible that Paul's tour through Gallic

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<sup>19</sup> Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, 2.13:

Ingenio clarus, sensu celer, ore suavis  
 Cuius dulce melos pagina multa canit  
 Fortunatus, apex vatium, venerabilis actu  
 Ausonia gentius, hac tumulatur humo.  
 Cuius ab ore sacro sanctorum gesta priorum  
 Discimus: haec monstrant carpere lucis iter.  
 Felix, quae tantis decoraris, Gallia, gemmis,  
 Lumine de quarum nox tibi tetra fugit.  
 Hos modicos promsi plebeio carmine versus  
 Ne tuus in populis, sancte, lateret honor.  
 Redde vicem misero: ne iudice spernar ab aequo,  
 Eximiis meritis posce, beate! precor.

graveyards brought him into contact with some of the poet's old funerary compositions. By poetically posturing as a suppliant at the tomb of the deceased, and making his act of devotion part of the poetic epitaph, Paul therefore reminds knowing readers specifically of Fortunatus's own eulogistic performances centuries earlier. At least one critic has observed the same kind of personal involvement in Fortunatus's sepulchral poetry, including the marked use of the first-person in several of his verse epitaphs—not just to speak as the dead person, but to express his own emotional involvement, and to interact with a community of readers.<sup>20</sup> Paul not only walked the humble walk of his poet-guide, but talked his talk in order to consummate the virtual embodiment of his subject. There was something ascetic to this recital of piety, a performative imitation of religious icon and religious text put toward spiritual ends. Indeed, Paul the Deacon's poetic response to Fortunatus's tomb evinces the continued existence and evolution of an ascetic-poetic mode and identity in the eighth century. It connects the dotted line of Christian Latin poets that runs through Fortunatus and his predecessors, Damasus, Paulinus, Sidonius, Avitus, through to the Carolingian period.

To use another metaphor, this moment provides a bird's-eye view over one of the most active spaces where post-Roman Christian Latin poets practiced their craft: the grave. In the ensuing chapter, I will continue to investigate experiments surrounding death and the deceased that poets performed in the laboratory-communities of post-Roman Late Antiquity. Following on the exploration of larger questions about the function of verse epitaphic writing in Christian society, this study will home in on the practice of Christian funerary poetship in Merovingian Gaul, with a focus on the poetry of Venantius Fortunatus. Like Paul's sepulchral inscription, Fortunatus's verse epitaphs preserve delicate moments of negotiation between form, genre, emotion, biography, patronage and the axiological commitments of a community. His poetic choreography in the act of commemoration—how he speaks and operates within the “webs of duties and

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<sup>20</sup> M. Roberts, *The Humblest Sparrow*, p. 18 and n. 39.

feelings concerning the dead”—makes for an alluring object of study in this history of the practice of Christian Latin poetic authorship.<sup>21</sup>

In what follows, we will take a winding road to Fortunatus’s funerary poetry, located in his fourth book of poems, in order to appreciate the context in which the poet and these verse epitaphs functioned. The study will follow a course through the graveyards of Merovingian Gaul signposted for sanctity by Gregory of Tours, to the courts of Merovingian kings where the poet creatively combined a taste for imperial Roman eloquence with a Christianizing message, to the convent of Radegund and Agnes where Fortunatus cultivated an ascetic rhetoric and methods of self-representation. The goal will be to understand the multiplicity of poetry’s functions in these post-Roman environments, and the richness and versatility of Fortunatus’s poetship. Viewed within this nexus of literary, cultural, and social contexts, Fortunatus’s commemorative compositions appear as events that illuminate post-Roman poetic identity, the dynamics of literary production and consumption, and the cultural expression and meaning of death in Merovingian society. By scrutinizing these specimens closely, we will discover not only something about the dead, but about the afterlife of the ascetic-poetic identity cultivated in sixth-century Gaul.

*A Merovingian world of tombs: remembering Criscentia, mapping holiness*

During the winter and spring of 587-588, Bishop Gregory of Tours wrote the majority of what would be his eighth and final miracle book, *Glory of the Confessors*.<sup>22</sup> As often, Gregory framed his work as a contribution to the production of communal memory and the edification of the Church. *Glory of the Confessors* was a literary manifestation of his conviction that commemorations of holiness could “bolster the belief of the

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<sup>21</sup> See B. Shaw. “The Cultural Meaning of Death: Age and Gender in the Roman Family” in D.I. Kertzer and R.P. Saller (eds.) *The Family in Italy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven, 1991), pp. 66-90:67.

<sup>22</sup> See Van Dam (trans.), *Glory of the Confessors*, pp. ix-xxi for a historical introduction to the text.

faithful;” to let these miracles go forgotten was, for the bishop, tantamount to disaster.<sup>23</sup> And so, he sought through writing yet another history of sacred power and its saintly avatars to construct Christian social memory and protect against its future erosion. It was regularly Gregory’s instinct to turn to the cemetery for vignettes of devoted commemorators interacting with the holy dead to encapsulate his vision of Christian society—a collectivity that would thrive on symbiosis between the living and the dead, and in which clerical mediators would maintain such connections. In this section, I plan to scrutinize this instinct and its cultural history by examining one story from the last of his miracle books, which revolves around a grave of surprising gravity. The grave and its story will provide orientation in the Merovingian world of tombs, that cultural space where Gregory’s writerly efforts—and those of his client-friend and poet Fortunatus—were often actualized.

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In a village on the outskirts of Paris, sometime in the mid-sixth century AD, an unnamed cleric stumbled upon an unsheltered tomb in the vicinity of a church. There he read a simple prose epitaph inscribed for a young girl: “Here rests Criscentia, a girl consecrated to God.”<sup>24</sup> That was all. There was no saying who this Criscentia was exactly, how long she had lived, or what she had done—all things epitaphs were supposed to display.<sup>25</sup> No one in the vicinity could recall her *merita*, the currency of social status and holiness for the dead in early medieval Gaul. Criscentia’s tomb had, up to that point, failed her memory.

Elsewhere in Gaul, opulent tombs belonging to wealthy aristocrats stood as sure signs of their occupants’ high character and social position. They overshadowed the more humble monuments to the dead

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<sup>23</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria confessorum*, praef., in B. Krusch (ed.), *MGH SRM* 1.2, (Hanover, 1885), p. 298: “Igitur in primo libello inseruimus. quae Deus ad corroborandam fidelium fidem cotidie dignatur augere; quia valde molestum erat, ut traderentur oblivioni.”

<sup>24</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria confessorum*, 103: “Hic requiescit Criscentia sacrata deo puella.”

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Isidore, *Etymologies*, 1.39.20: “Epitaphium Graece, Latine supra tumulum. Est enim titulus mortuorum, qui in dormitione eorum fit, qui iam defuncti sunt. Scribitur enim ibi vita, mores et aetas eorum.”

like Criscentia's. Gallo-Roman men such as Helarius of Dijon, proud descendant of a senatorial family, used Parian marble to project to the community from the hereafter "what sort of man he was and what his status was according to the ranking of this world."<sup>26</sup> By such symbols Helarius' commemorators had ensured that his *merita* would remain in circulation, and their investments soon paid dividends in the market of memory. It was no surprise to the community when, a year later, while his wife was being buried in the same tomb, Helarius' corpse reached over and embraced her body in what was easily interpreted as a sign of their pious love and chastity.

Of course, there were multiple ways to preserve the memory of one's *merita*. Voluble epitaphs, for example, painted or engraved on tombs, remained an essential feature of the Christian memorial landscape in post-Roman Late Antiquity.<sup>27</sup> The whole operation of inscribing a sepulchral stone was hardly new in sixth-century Gaul, as we have learned. Roman forebears had been inscribing tombstones for hundreds of years. At the turn of the fourth century, Christian Latin authors like Damasus began to reinvigorate the practice of epitaphic writing in verse. They developed an idiom for tombstones specific to Christianity while continuing to idealize the dead in many of the old Roman modes, describing the virtues and lives of the deceased in an elevated register and in quantitative meter. In post-imperial Gaul these epitaphs were rich with social meaning. Implicitly, by virtue of the complexity of the texts themselves, poetic and other literary epitaphs suggested the deceased's high level of education and sophisticated taste to a collective that put a premium on literary ability. And like badges of prestige, the inscribed lines might have had symbolic capital even in their appearance. Those who could not read or appreciate the literary depth of an epitaph might understand the

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<sup>26</sup> *Liber in gloria confessorum*, 41: "Qui qualis quantusque fuerit iuxta saeculi dignitatem, sepulchrum eius hodie patefecit, quod marmore Phario sculptum retinet." Translation from R. Van Dam (trans.), *Glory of the Confessors*. (Liverpool, 1988), p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> For evidence and discussion of painted epitaphs, see J. Durliat, "Epigraphie et societe: problèmes de method," in G. Cavallo and C. Mango (eds.), *Epigrafia Medievale Greca e Latina: Ideologia e Funzione: Atti del Seminario di Erice, 12-18 Settembre 1991*, (Spoleto, 1995), pp. 189-191; A. Petrucci, *Writing the Dead: Death and Writing Strategies in the Western Tradition*. (Stanford, 1998), pp. 24-25; B. Effros, *Caring for Body and Soul: Burial and the Afterlife in the Merovingian World*. (University Park, 2002), p. 98.

proud status of the interred just by looking at the engraved verses.<sup>28</sup> More generally, written on stone, an epitaph's material permanence projected confidence in the lasting reputation of the dead, for this life and the next. Status could be made to appear as sure and lasting as the rock on which the claim to it had been made.

We have also observed that among late antique Christians a grave close to sacred spaces could signify something important about the status of the deceased. This at least was on Criscentia's side, since she was buried near a church. As clerical authority waxed in many Merovingian communities, *ad sanctos* burials and graves in churchyards appear to have become more desirable. It was partly for the idea that holy power was both physically situated and contagious—you only had to be close enough to a source. At the very least, according to thinkers like Augustine and Gregory the Great, well-positioned tombs could stimulate the kind of memorial interaction that might win the dead benefits through intercession. Privileged proximity to a buried saint, martyr, or an important ecclesiastical figure signaled access to power and marked an opportunity for patronage in the afterlife.<sup>29</sup>

But Criscentia's sixth-century Gallic world was not just culturally Roman and Christian, and neither were its graveyards. The complete excavation of one cemetery at a site 120 miles east of Paris in Lower Normandy, for example, has revealed marked shifts in the organization and practice of interment in the transition from the Late Roman to the Merovingian period. Around the late fifth century, burials there began to gather around and adopt the funerary customs of a new "privileged" Frankish core. Patrick Périn has suggested that the arrival into the area of a new Merovingian leadership associated with the Frankish king Clovis galvanized changes in local funerary customs. A reconstituted elite could have promoted new models

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<sup>28</sup> For further discussion of Latin literacy as a multi-tiered phenomenon, with "grades of exclusiveness" (especially with regard to poetry), see J. Nelson, "Literacy in Carolingian Government," in R. McKitterick (ed.) *The Uses of Literacy in Early Mediaeval Europe*, (New York, 1990), p. 271 and, in general, McKitterick's introduction to the same volume, pp. 1-10.

<sup>29</sup> See P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, *passim*; for discussion of the practice in sixth-century Gaul in particular, see, for example, Effros, *Caring for the Body and Soul*, pp. 75-78, 171-173.

for social behavioral imitation and new systems of identification within the community, realized in part through burial practice.<sup>30</sup>

In Gaul, up until about the seventh century and especially in the north, furnished inhumation was not an uncommon ritual. Interring the deceased with elaborate stockpiles of grave goods was another way to join the competitive fray by announcing status through material symbols. Furnished burial declared in a kind of performative metaphor how an individual had embodied the sustaining provisions that his or her community required. Mourners did not just grieve the person going to the grave, but “their food, their clothing” being buried as well.<sup>31</sup> This ritual eventually faded into disuse, however, a fact said to reflect the stabilization of the Gallic social hierarchy after centuries of post-Roman political uncertainty. Where there was little possibility for movement up the social ladder, ostentatious displays of grave goods, visible only to those present at burial, might have been deemed impractical. Investments in above-ground tombs and monuments, similar to Helarius of Dijon’s, became more prevalent throughout Gaul at this time, perhaps a sign of the crystallization of society’s system of rank.<sup>32</sup>

Situated in this world, then, there would seem to have been little reason to notice the maiden Criscentia’s humble grave, never mind to suspect that it was sacred or of special importance. Yet, according to Gregory of Tours, who recorded her posthumous history alongside Helarius of Dijon’s and that of other Gallic Christians in the *Glory of the Confessors*, the surrounding community did suspect it. Special and sacred is exactly what Criscentia’s tomb turned out to be. “Stimulated by faith, men speculated that the maiden could

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<sup>30</sup> For the archaeological findings for excavations of cemetery at Frénoeuville, see C. Pilet, *La nécropole de Frénoeuville*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1980). For succinct discussion of this report and complementary evidence, see P. Périn, “Settlements and Cemeteries in Merovingian Gaul,” in K. Mitchell and I. Wood (eds.) *The World of Gregory of Tours* (Leiden, 2002), pp. 67-98:84-85.

<sup>31</sup> From the epitaph for Queen Theudechild by Venantius Fortunatus, *Carm.* 4.25.12: “escam, tegmen hic sepelisse dolent”; as far as I am aware, there is no direct evidence for a furnished burial for the queen, but the metaphor is suggestive of one.

<sup>32</sup> G. Halsall, “Burial Writes.”



obtain some influence with the divine majesty,” Gregory wrote.<sup>33</sup> On faith a desperate, tremulous man with fever swallowed dust from the site and was healed. Another invalid had a vision in which he felt called to build an oratory over the tomb, and found relief immediately after doing so. A third man with an insufferable toothache placed his toothpick on the tomb, which then gained the ability to numb his pain. Improbable miracles proved Criscentia’s unrecorded and forgotten *merita*.

The twist in Criscentia’s story leads ultimately to a message about the power of faith and the hidden possibilities of supernatural power in Merovingian Gaul. But Gregory’s goal in relating such a story was not simply to confirm the reality of heavenly influence on earth. There was something more to gain. As Ray Van Dam has put it, “holiness was power” in post-imperial Gallic society.<sup>34</sup> This equation put holiness in a state of constant arbitration, a process complicated by sanctity’s arcane elusiveness. Unlimited by the traditional shapes, images, places and people of authority, holiness could and often did transcend the borders between kingdoms, and the distinctions between barbarian and Roman. It could defy the rules and expectations of social hierarchy to find a place at the shabby tomb of a young and otherwise forgotten girl.

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Within the world of Gregory of Tours, where society comprised the living and the dead, where heavenly power was as real and valuable as many other forms, written miracle stories like Criscentia’s functioned alongside Parian marble and epitaphic epigrams as signposts of status and memory within the sphere of Christian holiness. These signposts showed people what and whom to look for (and whom to consult) to find holy hotspots among the tombs. Fortunatus put it simply to graveyard investigators in his

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<sup>33</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria confessorum*, c. 103: “Instigante vero fide, suspecti sunt habiti homines, quod aliquid cum divina maiestate virgo poterit obtinere.” Translation reworked from Van Dam (trans.), *Glory of the Confessors*, p. 77.

<sup>34</sup> Van Dam, *Leadership and Community*, p. 194.

epitaph for Gregory's maternal great-grandfather, bishop Gregory of Langres (506/7—539/40): "If you are interested in merit, real miracles reveal it."<sup>35</sup>

Holy power found one expert sign-poster in Gregory of Tours, who capitalized on the elusiveness of holiness by representing himself as a specialist in locating and proving divine power, and as a keeper of the miracle tales for his community's collective memory.<sup>36</sup> He and other church leaders who worked to revamp and reroute the Merovingian sacred landscape often made connections in the process between themselves and wonder-working saints, relics, and sites in order to establish the sanctity and legitimacy of their own ecclesiastical authority. Their strategies were of a kind with the one Pope Damasus had deployed in his poetic inscriptions two centuries earlier in the city of Rome. Gregory recognized that to remap routes of access to holiness among the special dead was to reorganize the dynamics of power among the living—he could direct traffic and commerce in his direction.

Ray Van Dam has offered a sophisticated analysis of this ideological backdrop to post-Roman Gaul's church politics and religious practices:

Beliefs about holiness attempted to seize a unity underlying apparent diversity or a regularity underlying apparent disorder. They allowed men to increase the range of their own understanding and to make casual connections between disparate events and ideas; they also encouraged a sense of intrinsic obligation and thus influenced people's behavior.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Fortunatus, *Carm.* 4.2.11: "Si quaeras meritum, prodrunt miracula rerum." Gregory of Langres (506/507-539/40) was the maternal great-grandfather of Gregory of Tours; see n. 138 above for Gregory of Tours' hagiographical biography of his ancestor.

<sup>36</sup> Gregory's historical projects were written in the language of *merita* and miracles to present his readership with a world structured and unified around a system of Christian holiness. Helmut Reimitz has lately condensed the consensus critical reading of the bishop's theory of history within his most famous historiographical work, the *Historia Francorum*, once interpreted as a semi-secular, ethnographic treatment of the Merovingian people: "the brilliant beginnings of Merovingian historiography were not written as a History of the Franks. The vision of community that Gregory formulated for his society in the *Histories* was much more inspired by a design to establish a Christian 'order of things' in the history of Gaul." See Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity*, p. 12, and esp. 74-123. See also, Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*, pp. 3-6. For Gregory's own words, see the preface to his history, ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison, *MGH SRM I*, 1, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Van Dam, *Leadership and Community*, p. 198.

If holiness had power, it was in its ability to orient a group around its totems. In his writings, the Bishop of Tours positioned holy persons of the past as forces for order and signposts for virtue that helped bring Christian culture to coherence and worked to unite Christian society together in petition and imitation of such agents of miracle. The saints' holy power was especially useful for the legitimatization and stabilization of authority.<sup>38</sup> For Gregory, saints and the special dead clarified what was good and who was good in Merovingian society, otherwise depicted in a state of violent confusion, as in the *Historia Francorum*. Unsurprisingly, Gregory's own special status was often illuminated as a result: blood relatives were made fixtures in the hagiographical record to stand alongside figures such as the aforementioned Abbot Abraham, subject of a Sidonian epitaph, the convent foundress Radegund, Fortunatus's most prominent patron and correspondent, and Criscentia.<sup>39</sup> Saints like Julian of Clermont, a martyr from his home region the Auvergne and the object of his paternal family's special cult attention for multiple generations, were claimed as personal friends and patrons.<sup>40</sup> By way of these subtle manipulations and declarations of intimacy, the bishop campaigned to become his community's proxy for sanctity.

Returning to the story of Criscentia and her memory, we can see how, in the context of contemporary and competing strategies for commemoration, the anecdote fits within Merovingian Gaul's bustling cultural laboratory for the testing of tools and practices to establish connections between the living

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<sup>38</sup> See M. Roberts, *The Humblest Sparrow*, p. 165.

<sup>39</sup> For Gregory's hagiographical treatment of family members, see, for instance, the entries on his uncle Gallus and maternal great-grandfather Gregory in *Liber Vitae Patrum (VP)*, 6-7, in B. Krusch (ed.), *MGH SRM 1.2*; for Abraham, *VP* 3; for Radegund, *Glory of the Confessors*, 104.

<sup>40</sup> For Gregory's family and attachment to Julian, see Van Dam, *Leadership and Community*, pp. 205ff. As bishop, Gregory also contributed at least indirectly to the reshaping of the image of Gaul's apostolic patron, St. Martin of Tours, who Fortunatus, writing under the bishop's patronage, transformed from a middle-class soldier into a senatorial saint, and from an ascetic renegade to a model bishop in his *VSM*. The alteration to Martin's mythology made the saint more relatable to his successor Gregory, who came from an aristocratic Gallo-Roman senatorial family without an eremitic ascetic pedigree. See R. Van Dam, "Images of Saint Martin in Late Roman and Early Merovingian Gaul," *Viator* 19 (1988), pp. 1-27; and for the political use of a saintly model, B. Brennan, "'Being Martin': Saint and Successor in Sixth-Century Tours," *Journal of Religious History*, 21:2 (1997), pp.121-135.

and the dead, and to assert holy status to future generations. There was something more than a toothache at stake in the scramble for access to her holiness. During the sixth century, Christians, especially wealthy Christians, invested heavily in a “virtual arms race of pious practices,” including commemorative procedures, through which they could protect, foster, and reinforce claims to status and salvation, memory and holy power, both for themselves and for their dead.<sup>41</sup> Myriad investigations into the divine power of tombs, or the efficacy of intercessory prayer, deathbed penance, funeral rites and masses took place across the whole post-Roman Mediterranean. From a macroscopic perspective, it was this late antique fascination with spiritual experimentation surrounding the dead that inspired Criscentia’s rescue from obscurity.

Yet the banal backdrop to the story of Criscentia’s miracles, the discovery of the forgettable tomb of a forgotten girl, may be used to take a more nuanced view of the landscape of the particular society to which she (and her memory) belonged. From this vista one can see how a leading figure expected Christian men and women to navigate and interact with the sepulchral world of Merovingian Gaul as a social space. It is no accident, for example, that Gregory portrayed an unnamed cleric as the trailblazing graveyard investigator. Using such a stock figure corresponds with the bishop’s interest in what one scholar has called the “clericalization of society”; namely, a detectable emphasis in Gregory’s work on promoting the clergy as a collective of models for moral behavior and as gatekeepers to ‘spiritual merits’.<sup>42</sup> Another eye-catching detail is the way the literate cleric first tries to decipher the code of the tomb and epitaph in order to learn Criscentia’s identity and the power of her *merita*. When an initial reading of her funerary monument fails to yield any information, the implication is that Criscentia *should* be lost to oblivion. Two primary methods then—certainly two methods of the bishop’s ideally educated, clerical class—for supporting remembrance

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<sup>41</sup> P. Brown, *Ransom of the Soul*, p. 20.

<sup>42</sup> Heinzelmänn, *Gregory of Tours*, pp. 175-176.

of the dead were the construction of a tomb and the inscription of an epitaph. These artifacts, material symbol and script, served as Gregory's cornerstones of social memory.

But the building metaphor soon crumbles when we acknowledge that the meaning of these objects was not fixed. Rather, monument and text were to be elaborated and built upon. The social memory constituted by these artifacts was malleable. Refiring and reshaping memory and its symbols were potentially profitable endeavors, well demonstrated by the case of Criscentia. The process of rehabilitating her identity, status, and memory included improvements both to her tomb and the written record, to the benefit not only of the deceased girl but her commemorators. One convalescent constructed an oratory over her grave and was healed, while Gregory himself preserved her story in his book of miracles to enhance his reputation for piety. Criscentia's tomb may have failed her memory for a time, but the surviving members of her community—the broken, the sick, the anxious man of letters—would not let her tomb fail them.

### *Glorifying the Glory of the Confessors*

Gregory worried about the possibility of a poor reception for his final book of miracles due to its supposedly rough prose. He fretted that either readerly distaste or disinterest would mean his collection of miraculous testimonies would be effaced or forgotten. The bishop expressed his nervousness in the preface to the work, apologizing to his future audience, whom he imagined as learned critics, for his lack of grammatical and rhetorical ability. He envisioned those educated readers scoffing at his silly attempt to write without the necessary training or skill: “You ignorant bumpkin, do you suppose your name should be placed among the writers? Do you think this work will be accepted by skilled readers? You do not have the benefit of skillful talent or any knowledge of literature to help you.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria confessorum*, pref. in ed. B. Krusch, *MGH SRM I*, 2, pp. 297-298: “O rustice et idiota, ut quid nomen tuum inter scriptores indi aestimas? Ut opus hoc a peritis accipi putatis, cui ingenium artis non subpediat, nec ulla litterarum scientia subministrat” One hundred years after Sidonius's death, Gregory continued the tradition of outspoken worry over Latin literary decline in post-Roman Gaul; see, e.g. the preface to Gregory's *Historia Francorum*, ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison, *MGH SRM I*, 1, p. 1.

Gregory made his strawmen longwinded *and* incredulous, and so their mock, scornful speech continues overlong. But this exercise was not mere masochistic self-deprecation on the author's part. Rather, the articulate mock-invective artfully exposes the bishop's show of modesty for its paradoxical sophistication, and functions as a subtle, rhetorical defense for his own literary ability and authorship. For by ably aping his intelligent critics, the bishop showed that he too could engage in high-wire rhetorical acrobatics, even while bowing out of competition. So Gregory maintained the upper hand in the critical arena, orchestrating the roles of performer, judge, and audience to his advantage.<sup>44</sup>

Yet the bishop's main defense for his "uncouth" literary endeavor involved a claim of pious motivation. He explained that he had knowingly undertaken a project that he could not properly execute to avoid a kind of sin of omission. In his mind, it would have been wrong to let the "powers of the blessed" that he had personally seen at work, or for which he had reliable reports (as in Criscentia's case), go untold.<sup>45</sup> He cinched his preemptive defense by asking his out-of-breath, hypothetical detractors neither to ignore his humble miracle book nor to delete its content.

And then he made an extraordinary suggestion. He said he did not want the *Glory of the Confessors* to be the final destination for Criscentia's story. Rather, he voiced the hope that his readers would find the content of his work suitable for their own magisterial elaborations—and not just of any kind. He wanted his work versified. He wanted a poem: "I am doing your work, and by my literary incompetence I will engage

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<sup>44</sup> The rhetoric here belongs to a set of conventional tactics deployed by many Christian late antique authors for the purpose of cultivating humble authorial personas, a strategy rooted theoretically in the ethics of Christianity. In the sixth century Gregory was among the vanguard of this troop of self-humbling Christian authors. His use of *sermo humilis*, a deliberately simple and biblically oriented prose style, has long been read as another intentional literary technique aimed at developing an unassuming authorial image. For a discussion of this phenomenon in the context of Gregory's prefaces, see Auerbach, *Literary Language and its Public*, pp. 103-111.

<sup>45</sup> *Liber in gloria confessorum*, pref.: "Sed quid faciam, quod oculi patior, quae de beatorum virtutibus vel ipse saepius inspexi, vel per relationem bonorum virorum et certae fidei evidenter gesta cognovi?"

your wisdom. I think that these writings will offer you one benefit: what I describe unskillfully and briefly in an obscure style, you will amplify in verse standing clearly and sumptuously on more abundant pages.”<sup>46</sup>

This was not the only time the bishop issued a poetic call to arms. Near the very end of the *Historia Francorum*, finished after the *Glory of the Confessors*, the historian also forbade future writers from altering his work, with one exception. Some unnamed priest of the future, ideally educated in the seven liberal arts, could use the coarsely styled anecdotes as raw material for poetic refinement. “I beg you, do not destroy what I have written,” the bishop wrote. “But if something in these books interests you, I do not mind if you compose it in verse, provided my work is kept intact.”<sup>47</sup>

Gregory’s literary provocations in the *Glory of the Confessors* prompt us to wonder: why poetry? What did poets do such that the bishop would invite them to rewrite his miracle books? Michael Roberts has offered matter-of-fact analysis: “Gregory apparently felt that verse was a sufficiently different compositional mode from prose and had sufficiently distinctive, yet valuable qualities that a verse rewriting of his work...was acceptable in the way a prose version was not.”<sup>48</sup> It is hard to refute Roberts’s theory, but it may be possible to define Gregory’s attraction to verse more exactly, and to say something more about the social or extra-literary rationale behind the bishop’s plea for poetry. His interest was not purely formalist in concern. Rather, in the *Glory of the Confessors*, he pitched poetic rewriting as a spiritual literary practice parallel to his own, one that would engage vicious literary snobs creatively in the historical work he valued, and so transform their

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*: “Opus vestrum facio et per meam rusticitatem vestram prudentiam exercebo. Nam, ut opinor, unum beneficium vobis haec scripta praebebunt, scilicet ut, quod nos inculce et breviter stilo nigrante describimus, vos lucide ac splendide stante versu in paginis prolixioribus dilatetis.” Translation modified from Van Dam (trans.), *Glory of the Confessors*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>47</sup> *Historia Francorum* X, 10.37: “Quod si te, o sacerdos Dei, quicumque es, Martianus noster septem disciplinis erudiit, id est, si te in grammaticis docuit legere, in dialecticis altercationum propositiones advertere, in rethoricis genera metrorum agnoscere, in geometricis terrarum linearumque mensuras colligere, in astrologiis cursus siderum contemplare, in arithmetiis numerorum partes colligere, in armoniis sonorum modulationes suavium accentuum carminibus concrepare; si in his omnibus ita fueris exercitatus, ut tibi stilus noster sit rusticus, nec sic quoque, deprecor, ut avellas quae scripsi. Sed si tibi in his quiddam placuerit, salvo opere nostro, te scribere versu non abnuo.”

<sup>48</sup> M. Roberts, “Venantius Fortunatus and Gregory of Tours: Poetry and Patronage,” in A. C. Murray (ed.), *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*. (Leiden, 2016), pp. 35-59:49-50.

malignant disparagement into reconstructive criticism. The bishop's invitation to versify his work arranged for a process of textual rehabilitation that would protect the *Glory of the Confessors* against the same fall into obscurity that Criscentia's story had almost taken once already. Gregory imagined poets integrating themselves in the religious-historical process of restoring Christian communal memory.

This inquiry into Gregory's vision for poets profits from extended investigation into the potentially analogous relationship between the bishop's "rhetorically impoverished" *Glory of the Confessors* and Criscentia's poor tombstone inscription. First of all, Gregory implies an intriguing similarity between the epitaph and his miracle book by highlighting the low quality of each. Both texts fail to measure up to the standards for eloquence and expression in their respective literary spheres. And in each case, the historian-bishop affirms the value of "bad writing" by arguing for its divine purpose towards ecumenicity. In another miracle book, Gregory justified his humble prose in the same way Caesarius of Arles had, by pointing out how God had ordained fishermen rather than philosophers to proclaim the Gospel.<sup>49</sup> God could make do with simple speech. The story of the boon of Criscentia's cult underscores the same message. Her modest epitaph did enough to stimulate some initial pious investigations into her sanctity and spiritual merit, and ensure that she received due credit for her miracles. The memory of Criscentia's holiness survived because faith outdid oratory every time.

Yet, for Gregory, that rule did not cancel the benefits that could come from increasingly complex revisions and compounding literary treatments of saintly history. His textualization of low-grade oral miracle accounts added yet another link to the chain of narrative improvement to Criscentia's story, and consequently extended the reach of her history to a wider and more educated readership. For the bishop, writing miracle testimonies was a personal response to moral imperative to act in gratitude for the good works God had

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<sup>49</sup> *De virtutibus sancti Martini*, pref.: "Why should I be ashamed of my rustic speech, when the Lord Redeemer and our God, to destroy the arrogance of secular wisdom, showed preference not for orators, but fishermen, not for philosophers but yokels?"



bestowed, but it was also an essential didactic practice. Gregory maintained that such literature—even in poor, rustic style—could unite and ethically edify his Christian community (and future generations). Christian literature inculcated the pious behaviors and attitudes through which holiness manifested. “I must write and say the things that build up God’s Church and make poor minds rich with saintly instruction for the understanding of perfect faith,” he wrote in the preface to his book on the *Glory of the Martyrs*.<sup>50</sup> Recording Criscentia’s miracles and others like them, even in “substandard” form, became a matter of duty analogous to the raising of a simple epitaph. Each helped to establish communal memory in the sacred Christian landscape, and galvanized interactions with figures and sites of reputed holiness.

Having charged his own hagiographical literary activity with a moral valence, and having described his writing practice as for the Church’s edification, Gregory invited Christian verse makers to improve and embellish his humble history as he had done to Criscentia’s miracle stories. Like the girl’s epitaph, the bishop saw his miracle book as one small and ultimately insufficient step towards the preservation and advancement of the written record of saintly *merita*. A versification of the *Glory of the Confessors* could perhaps be the culminating literary improvement to the history of the saints, to which he had contributed in his own humble way.

The bishop, then, conceived of Christian versifiers as potential historians. And he anchored his conviction in their reliability by citing church poets of the past as trustworthy witnesses to holiness. In the *Glory of the Martyrs*, in particular, Gregory used “the bishop Damasus” and “our Prudentius” as historical authorities to reconstruct several martyr stories, quoting from them “lest the report seem unbelievable to

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<sup>50</sup> In *Gloria Martyrum*, praef., in B. Krusch (ed.) *MGH SRM* 1.2, p. 37: “Nos oportet [...] scribere atque loqui, quae ecclesiam Dei aedificent et quae mentes inopes ad notitiam perfectae fidei instructione sancta faecundent.” See also his preface to the *Historia Francorum* for a separate take on the purpose of the pursuit of letters, where he emphasizes the perceived decline of literary skill and the desire to educate future generations as his key motivations for writing.

anyone.”<sup>51</sup> Within the bishop’s conceptual world, therefore, poets were positioned as supremely educated and historically reliable literary agents qualified to amplify and to formally dignify more basic versions of the Christian historical record.

*Fortunatus and the functions of verse: spiritual practice and cultural mediation*

Though the Bishop of Tours was plugged in to a vast and diverse network of writers around Gaul, his prompting failed to move anyone to versify the *Glory of the Confessors* exactly as he seems to have imagined. Nevertheless, throughout his episcopal career he maintained a conviction in the prestige of poetry. His conviction in its importance expressed itself mainly through a sustained and productive patronage relationship with his community’s most prolific poet, Venantius Fortunatus. We examined some of Fortunatus’s biography, hagiographical poetry, and posthumous literary influence briefly in the opening section of this chapter, seen through the lens of Paul the Deacon’s commemorative poem for him from near the end of the eighth century. Though Paul did not mention Gregory, there is little doubt as to the bishop’s significance in the poet’s career. As a verse writer, Fortunatus promoted some of Gregory’s building projects, endorsed his intellectual endeavors for the Church’s edification, and touted allies and special saintly friends, occasionally in and around active cult sites like the graveyards of Merovingian Gaul. Still, the poet was not Gregory’s proprietary versifier. Indeed, the bishop’s interest in Fortunatus, and his vocal desire to find poets like Fortunatus to versify his work, reflects widespread appreciation of verse in Merovingian Gaul, as well as the special cultural status that verse makers enjoyed in neighboring literary circles.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> For Damasus, see *Glory of the Martyrs*, 37, which relays the story of Chrysanthus and Daria, relying on *ED* 45, discussed by Trout in *Damasus of Rome*, pp. 165-166. For Prudentius (and the quote) see the 54 lines from the poet’s *Apotheosis* appended to *Glory of the Martyrs*, 40: “relatio ne cui fortassis videatur incredula, paucos ex his subiciam versos.”

<sup>52</sup> For the poetry of this period see M. Manitius. *Geschichte der christlich-lateinischen Poesie bis zur Mitte des 8. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 1891), pp. 470-73 and Riche, *Education and Culture*, pp. 186-87, 201-2, and 218-230. Poetic practice during Fortunatus’s period was not uncommon, although relatively few specimens remain outside of Fortunatus’s corpus. The poet mentions poetry by secular and clerical figures alike: Dynamius of Marseilles (*Carm.* 6.10.57–62), Bertram of Bordeaux (*Carm.* 3.18), Jovinus (*Carm.* 7.12.111), Felix of Nantes (*Carm.* 3.4), Gregory of Tours (*Carm.* 5.8b.1–2 and 8.19.1–4) and perhaps Radegund (*App.* 31). King

Taking what we know about Gregory's vision for Christian poetry, in this section I wish to compare Fortunatus's reflections on the purpose of poetry, and to view both alongside modern theories about the social functions and ideological character of verse in his Merovingian community. Previous analyses have tended to emphasize the secular and Romanizing aspects of his verse, albeit in different ways. Critics at least concur that in terms of style and content Fortunatus's classicizing poetry, and particularly the ornate style of his composition, enhanced the power and cultural status of his Gallic addressees, for whom the Roman past and its practices still had serious cachet. However, I break from the scholarly consensus on Fortunatus to some degree by attempting to refocus attention on the religious and spiritual qualities of his verse correspondence. I argue that the poet conceived of his verse writing as a way to both shape and confirm his identity as a *Christian* poet.

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In his recent study of Fortunatus's poetry, Michael Roberts has argued that literature, and especially verse, possessed a kind of symbolic power in sixth-century Gaul.<sup>53</sup> The particular aesthetic qualities of the high-register, poetic texts that appeared in this context are essential to Roberts's interpretation. In opposition to Gregory's rustic prose, but similar to Avitus's convoluted epistolary style, the poetry that pervaded Merovingian literary circles often possessed an "ornate" (what Auerbach would have called "mannered") quality. Merovingian poetry, like Fortunatus's, was characterized by predilections toward esoteric classicizing references, verbosity, and dense figurative language including the use of extended simile and metaphor. Writing in reply to one Bishop Bertram on the quality of some verses he had sent for the poet's inspection, Fortunatus provides a kind of demonstrative description of this ornate poetic style:

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Chilperic (r. 561-584 AD) famously wrote a hymn as well, for which see D. Norberg, *An Introduction to the Study of Medieval Latin Versification*. J. Ziolkowski (ed.), (Washington, 2004), 87. The *Anthologia Latina* also contains poems written by sixth-century Gallo-Romans, such as Dynamius' wife Eucheria (390) and grandson, also named Dynamius (786a).

<sup>53</sup> See Roberts, *Humblest Sparrow*, pp.6-7, who makes recourse to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital.

Perusing your poetry foaming with swells of verse  
 I believed I was setting sail on the roiled sea.  
 The smooth page erupted stormy waves  
 And spewed forth almost oceanic waters from your spring.  
 These days venerable Rome from Trajan's Forum  
 Scarcely hears imposing poetry of such brilliant splendor.  
 What if you had recited such a beauty before the senate?  
 They would have strewn their golden robes at your feet.  
 [...]
   
 And still in your work I heard speak  
 Certain innovative borrowings from ancient poetry.<sup>54</sup>

Here Fortunatus applies the ornate style's characteristic verbal excess to his poetic critique, which itself describes the style he employs. The poet uses four lines to elaborate a metaphorical image of spewing seawater that fittingly describes the verbosity of Bertram's work—a point of praise. He then speaks in a classically Roman allusive idiom to express further admiration, imagining his correspondent as a successful literary performer on Rome's grandest stage, Trajan's Forum.<sup>55</sup> Finally, Fortunatus notices that Bertram has been drawing from ancient texts to construct his verse, an observation that establishes common ground between them as readers and recyclers of the classical canon.

The amplified, classicizing aesthetic of this kind of verse may appear overwrought and perhaps out of touch in its antiquarian and figurative aspects.<sup>56</sup> After all, such poetry seems to treat reality obliquely rather

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<sup>54</sup> Fortunatus, *Carm.* 3.18.3-10, 13-14:

“Percurrens tumido spumantia carmina versu,  
 credidi in undoso me dare vela freto.  
 “Plana procellosos ructavit pagina fluctus  
 et velut oceanas fonte refudit aquas.  
 Vix modo tam nitido pomposa poemata cultu  
 audit Traiano Roma verenda foro.  
 Quid si tale decus recitasses in aure senatus?  
 Stravissent plantis aurea fila tuis.  
 [...]
   
 Sed tamen in vestro quaedam sermone notavi  
 carmine de veteri furta novella loqui.”

<sup>55</sup> For further reference to Trajan's Forum as a site for poetic recital, see Fortunatus, *Carm.* 7.8.26.

<sup>56</sup> Auerbach lumped the poet together with other near-contemporary versifiers whom he accused of being “mannered to the point of absurdity.” He condemned their Latin as out of touch with the realist aesthetic he prized, and deemed it ‘simply incapable of expressing the life of the times.’ Roger Wright, on the other hand, has gone so far as cast the entirety of early Medieval Latin metrical production as “a recherché pursuit of the learned, an esoteric accomplishment of antiquarians.” See E. Auerbach, *Literary*

than mimetically, coming at the world through metaphor, and with allusions to an ever-receding Roman imperial past, which was growing less and less familiar to contemporary readers. But Roberts provides an intriguing argument for the purpose of the style's learned extravagance. He describes an extra-utilitarian function behind the production of classicizing verse. Reading the ornate style from a theoretical and sociological perspective, he sees its "apparently nonproductive expenditure of verbal resources" as part of "an essential strategy for conferring cultural capital."<sup>57</sup> Under this interpretation, the rich texture of Fortunatus's verse becomes an aesthetic reflection of poetry's symbolic value in the post-Roman Gallic literary market. By virtue of its dense, literary richness, ornately styled poetry conveyed prestige to its producers and recipients in both public and private spheres.

Looping back momentarily to Gregory's vision for poetry, it is clear that he wished to have this symbolic capital invested in his Christian historical projects. As a patron of Fortunatus's poetry the Bishop of Tours sometimes encouraged the production of ornate verse seemingly for its own sake. Fortunatus's poem in Sapphic meter (*Carm.* 9.7), composed at Gregory's request and with the help of a metrical treatise he as patron had sent, makes for a good example.<sup>58</sup> Both the poem's metrical scheme and its content speak plainly to the bishop's interest in cultivating extravagant literary commodities. In one lengthy segment of the poem, the poet complains of the difficulty of the task set to him: "The one who wants to learn this [metrical skill] would come close to counting the grains of Libyan sand along the shore before he corralled everything in a poem with painstaking regard for meter."<sup>59</sup> Although the poet complains hyperbolically, almost poking fun

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*Language*, pp. 87, 123, and 152; Wright, *Late Latin and Early Romance in Spain and Carolingian France*. (Liverpool, 1982), p. 67; for a thorough rebuttal of these and other interpretations in the same vein, see P. Godman, *Poets and Emperors*, pp. 7-9.

<sup>57</sup> Roberts, *Humblest Sparrow*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>58</sup> See Fortunatus, *Carm.* 9.7. He first makes reference to the request at *Carm.* 9.6.9.

<sup>59</sup> *Carm.* 9.7.53-56:

“Scire qui vult haec Libycas harenas  
Ante per litus numerare tendat,  
Cuncta quam metris ratione cauta  
Carmine cingat.”

at the grandiosity of the bishop's commissioning, his exaggerations do his patron a good turn. They endow the completed poem with value by indicating in exotic terms the high opportunity cost of writing it. The composition's implied "value" is equivalent to whatever the poet could have accrued had he completed different tasks in the vast amount of time spent writing Sapphics.

Fortunatus doted on his patron-bishop with other applications of an affected, classicizing idiom. At one point, he dubbed his friend and patron a "Sophoclean" elocutionist. Elsewhere he compared him to the *musa Maronis*, Virgil's muse.<sup>60</sup> This indulgently classicizing strategy was hardly limited to his poems for Gregory, though. It was fairly typical of Fortunatus to flatter correspondents with classical and mythological epithets and comparisons in his encomiastic portraits. Moreover, the poet demonstrated a habit of painting himself with the same brush into these laudatory depictions. At his first appearance on the Merovingian literary scene, the wedding between Sigibert and Brunhild, he maneuvered to establish himself as the man to fill the Virgil-and-Homer-sized hole he saw in the society he was entering. "If Virgil were here now, or maybe Homer, a work about your fame would already be being read"—that the old bards were not around meant a poet like Fortunatus was necessary.<sup>61</sup> To fill out the proverbial canvas, Fortunatus circumscribed himself within a ring of "second Ciceros" at Sigibert's court. He fashioned the king's counselor Gogo, a learned barbarian who also served as tutor to the prince Charibert II, "Cicero returned."<sup>62</sup> Sigibert was made "a second Achilles"; Brunhild "another Venus."<sup>63</sup> Part of the poet's work, therefore, entailed transforming the Merovingian kingdom into a world of revived classical figures.

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<sup>60</sup> Fortunatus, *Carm.* 8.18.6 and 8.21.1-2.

<sup>61</sup> *Carm.* 6.1a.5-6:  
"Si nunc Vergilius, si forsitan esset Homerus,  
Nomine de vestro iam legeretur opus."

<sup>62</sup> *Carm.* 7.2.3: "Tu refluus Cicero, tu noster Apicius extas."

<sup>63</sup> *Carm.* 6.1.50 and 6.1.104.

In addition to Roberts, there has been good critical debate about the social and ideological functions of Fortunatus's recourse to the classicizing idiom, especially in his early political praise poems. Focusing primarily on his secular verse, Peter Godman has argued that the poet's classicizing habits emerged in direct response to the social and political needs of his aristocratic audience. The poet's allusive gestures helped readers and subjects create discursive and ideological continuity between their post-Roman, barbarian world and the Roman imperial past. In his view, Fortunatus's verse reminded Merovingian patrons—cultivated clerics, ascetics, regional magnates, and monarchs—that poetry was an established instrument of authority, a textual tool useful for linking their present post-imperial influence to ancient Roman traditions of power. His poetry became “the very commodity which made it plain that they were not barbarians” but rather the legitimate rulers of their own little Romes.<sup>64</sup> So the poet wrote for one local overseer: “Let ancient noblemen and all the proud names of old yield, outdone by the service of duke Lupus [...] Roman power shined while they were consuls, but here with you as our leader, Rome now makes its return.”<sup>65</sup>

In the aftermath of “Central Romanness,” when features of classical Roman identity were wont to combine more volatily into localized civic and cultural forms, Fortunatus offered his community one fairly stable compound of *romanitas* through his poetry. He stimulated the process of social identification among his readers, inviting them to participate *together with him* in a particular mode of collective self-representation.

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p. 21. Godman's analysis of the poet's role has much in common with Tardi's, who described Fortunatus as “l'éducateur des barbares et en assurant, pour les générations suivantes, la liaison avec le monde latin”; for which see *Fortunat*, p. 215.

<sup>65</sup> *Carm.* 7.7.1-2, 5-6:

“Antiqui proceres et nomina celsa priorum  
cedant cuncta, Lupi munere victa ducis.  
[...]  
Illis consulibus Romana potentia fulsit,  
te duce sed nobis hic modo Roma redit.”

See also, e.g. *Carm.* 3.8.19-21, to bishop Felix of Nantes:

“cuius in ingenium hic nova Roma venit.  
Illic quod poterat per plures illa docere,  
te contenta suo Gallia cive placet.”

Helmut Reimitz, who has offered some of the most recent analysis of Fortunatus's political panegyrics, similarly casts the poet as a champion of "the literary and cultural ideals of *romanitas* as one of the most important resources for the social integration of the Merovingian kingdoms."<sup>66</sup> Reimitz, however, makes an important complementary claim that clashes with this study's view of Fortunatus's poetship. He argues that Fortunatus personally avoids playing the role of Christianizing intermediary in his poetry; that Christianity does not function as a binding cultural force in the way it does for his bishop-patron Gregory. In fact, Reimitz specifically contrasts Fortunatus's poetic practice in the political sphere with contemporary strategies toward social unification through Christianity, like the one enacted by Gregory of Tours.

Reimitz's thesis derives from a reading of the poet's panegyric poems for Merovingian kings. He argues that the poet prefers to nominate his royal addressees (rather than himself) to negotiate the social and cultural pluralities of their kingdoms, while simultaneously promoting the integrating potential of Roman eloquence and education. Thus, in a panegyric poem written soon after his arrival in Gaul for Sibigert's brother Charibert, king at Paris until 567, the poet praised his subject for his ability to bridge the linguistic divides of the community: "On this side barbarians, on that side Romans give him applause. Uniform praise for the man sounds forth in diverse tongues."<sup>67</sup> The monarch's ability to rule was ascribed partially to his mastery of both languages: "Although you sprang from the famous Sicambrian clan, the Latin language blossoms in your speech. How learned is your speech in your own language, seeing as you outstrip us Romans in eloquence?"<sup>68</sup> Likewise in a praise poem for king Chilperic performed in 580, Fortunatus spent time

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<sup>66</sup> See Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity*, 88-97:89.

<sup>67</sup> *Carm.* 6.2.7-8:

"hinc cui barbaries, illinc Romania plaudit:  
diversis linguis laus sonat una viri."

<sup>68</sup> *Carm.* 6.2.97-100:

"Cum sis progenitus clara de gente Sigamber,  
florete in eloquio lingua Latina tuo.  
Qualis es in propria docto sermone loquella,  
qui nos Romanos vincis in eloquio?"



appreciating the monarch's multi-lingual erudition. The poet lauded the monarch for being more learned, talented, and eloquent than his subjects and predecessors. The king needed no help from an interpreter to understand various languages—he alone could speak in many national languages. Known as a hymn-writer, Fortunatus acknowledged Chilperic as “equal to kings, but recognized as their superior in poetry—without an ancestor of equivalent learning.”<sup>69</sup> Fighting skill made him like his forebears, but knowledge of letters made him special. Within the poet's royal panegyric rhetoric, kings became the cultural brokers par excellence.

Reimitz's insightful analysis, however, does not comment on the essential performative aspects of Fortunatus's speech. The poet's praise of the Merovingian royalty's diplomatic eloquence is in fact designed to reflect back on him, the poet, as he models the eloquent diplomacy he sets out to acclaim. As Godman has argued, by styling himself in the same garb he uses to dress addressees, Fortunatus enriches his poetics with “marked personal reference,” and educes the dynamics of reciprocity inherent to patron-author relationships.<sup>70</sup> The result of the poet's modesty and deference to his super-articulate, monarchical subjects is therefore not the forfeiture of his role as cultural intermediary. Rather, Fortunatus plays the part of mediator by manipulating the cultural perspectives, self-conceptions, and critical expectations of his readers. The poet draws attention to a mutual attraction between himself and his subjects on the grounds of their literariness, and demonstrates the benefits of his evaluations of character.

Fortunatus therefore functioned as an important cultural intermediary between Roman and barbarian culture—but was he a Christian intermediary?

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<sup>69</sup> *Carm.* 9.1.91-107:105-106:

“Regibus aequalis, de carmine maior haberis,  
dogmate vel qualis non fuit ante parens.”

<sup>70</sup> Godman, *Poets and Emperors*, p.18.

Classicism was undoubtedly a crucial device in Fortunatus's toolkit, but Reimitz and others have perhaps undersold the powerful ideological influence of Christianity on the poet's techniques of self-representation and identification. Yes, Fortunatus sketched a portion of his small social circle of recipients in classical contours with the instruments and imagery of traditional Roman rhetoric. But he was also highly conscious of that circle's place within the cultural sphere of Christianity, much as Gregory imagined it.

For Fortunatus, the politics of identity were not a zero-sum game. As a classicizing poet, he could still operate in spiritual terms. In fact, he implemented an array of Christian models of identification in his poetry. When it came to comparing his addressees to estimable figures of the past, Fortunatus often deployed biblical exemplars alongside classical ones. In his political verse for Charibert, the poet created a hybrid image of his subject. He invoked David and Solomon to suggest the king's gentleness and judiciousness, and then Trajan to describe his *pietas*.<sup>71</sup> Elsewhere he remembered King Childebert (d. 558), who had ruled at Paris, as the Merovingian Melchisedech, while portraying the bishop in that same city as "another Aaron," the second coming of Moses' priestly brother.<sup>72</sup> Finally, those panegyrics reviewed above for Charibert and Chilperic both conclude with public prayers to sustain the kings in their roles as champions of the faith. As the final notes of each poem ring spiritual, we are reminded that the praise poet was not only mediating between barbarian and Roman culture, but Christian culture as well:

May the Almighty protect you, king [Charibert], with his abundance,  
And keep you as lord, whom he gifted with the role of father.<sup>73</sup>

May you tame the vicious, look after the faithful with love,  
And be the pinnacle of piety for Catholics.  
Most exalted king [Chilperic], through whom honors are meted out,

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<sup>71</sup> *Carm.* 6.2.77-82.

<sup>72</sup> *Carm.* 2.10.21-22; 2.9.31.

<sup>73</sup> *Carm.* 6.2.111-112:

"Protegat omnipotens pietatis munere regem  
et dominum servet quem dedit esse patrem."

Let long life and a nourishing faith abide in you.<sup>74</sup>

At the very least, therefore, we may say that Fortunatus was ideologically inclusive and flexible in his poetic practice. He trumpeted the achievements and characters of even his noble recipients within a “symbolic universe” that incorporated ideas and typologies from barbarian, classical, and Christian-biblical traditions.

Yet it is possible to be firmer in asserting the Christian character of Fortunatus’s poetsip. I argue that the poet’s ideological preferences and own ethical commitments as an artist were more Christian than classical. That bent is particularly (and predictably) pronounced in poems written for church leaders, which comprise no small portion of Fortunatus’s corpus. Four books (1-3, 5) from his original poetic collection contain poems addressed to ecclesiastical figures versus just two (6-7) to non-religious figures. Moreover, the poet’s most frequently addressed correspondents were not government administrators, or even high-ranking bishops, but Agnes and Radegund, leaders of the Convent of the Holy Cross. Fifty-five poems in his collected works incorporate the ascetic nuns. His work for them reads very much as that of an intermediary, for he functioned for them almost as a poetic ambassador to the world outside their monastic haven by penning verse to others on their behalf and sometimes (albeit rarely) in their assumed voice.<sup>75</sup>

In one diplomatic poem, a plea for gifts of poetry written on behalf of Radegund to neighboring writers, Fortunatus prompted his highly literate network to identify with him and his patron and one another on the basis of their shared classicizing literary practices *and* Christian spiritual commitments.<sup>76</sup> He delivered

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<sup>74</sup> *Carm.* 9.1.143-146:

“Edomites saevos, tuearis amore fideles,  
sis quoque catholicis religionis apex.  
Summus honor regis, per quem donantur honores,  
cui longaeva dies constet et alma fides.”

<sup>75</sup> Cf. pp. 1-2. For the place of the nuns in Fortunatus’s poetry, see Roberts, *Humblest Sparrow*, p. 283ff. For Fortunatus as their poetic ambassador, see, e.g., *Carm.* 5.1, 8.1, 9.1, and App. 1 in the voice of Radegund. At 11.4.3 Fortunatus even calls himself the nuns’ *agens*, or “overseer,” though the seriousness of the title as been rightly questioned (as it is used to pun with Agnes’ name); see Brennan, “The Career of Venantius Fortunatus,” pp. 68ff.

<sup>76</sup> To give an idea of how even fairly recent readings of Fortunatus’s poetry have privileged their political dimensions, see Judith George’s, *Venantius Fortunatus*, esp. p. 162. She chooses not to consider this important poem because: “these writings are very different from his occasional poetry, and the context which illuminates them is not that of Merovingian politics and Roman

his opening address as though from the head of the table at an imagined literary symposium: “You who lap up the Boetian Muses with eager mouth, through whose ears Castalian water is drunk,” he wrote, before nodding to his company’s assured taste for the provisions of Demosthenes, Homer, Cicero, and Virgil. He presented the latter two authors as waiters serving up the food and drink of poetry and prose.<sup>77</sup> But at this dinner party, Fortunatus did not skip saying grace. More important sustenance was on offer at their shared table: “food that would never perish,” i.e. the Gospel. The poet identified his writerly addressees not only as those who took nourishment from the classics, but “whom Christ feeds with heavenly produce.”<sup>78</sup>

Within this poetic letter, we can easily observe Fortunatus assuming a role as Christian cultural intermediary. Through his dispatch, the poet sought to form and manage a kind of literary club composed of authors and readers identifying as classically-minded Christians. That Christian criterion of identification made all the difference, for in a later part of the letter the poet asked his addressees not to send along their spare copies of Demosthenes, Homer, Cicero, and Virgil, but personally penned spiritual literature: “May every holy poet who is able send his poetry as generous bounty in slender volumes.”<sup>79</sup>

Like Gregory’s poetic provocations analyzed above, Fortunatus’s urging prompts us to ask: why poetry? Of course, verse suited his patron nun’s literary taste; but Fortunatus’s letter also entailed a more

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secular literature, but that of the traditions and development of the Church, its institutions and literature.” Though obviously written before 589, the date of Radegund’s death, the poem does belong to a later collection, possibly published in 590-591; for the date, see Reydellet, *Venance Fortunat*, lxx.

<sup>77</sup> *Carm.* 8.1.1-6:

“Aonias avido qui lambitis ore Camenas  
 Castaliusque quibus sumitur aure liquor,  
 quos bene fruge sua Demosthenis horrea ditant,  
 largus et irriguis implet Homerus aquis;  
 fercula sive quibus fert dives uterque minister,  
 Tullius ore cibum, pocula fonte Maro.”

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.* 7-8:

“Vos quoque qui numquam morituras carpitis escas,  
 quos paradisiaco germine Christus alit.”

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.* 65-66:

“Cui sua quisque potest sanctorum carmina vatam  
 mittat in exiguis munera larga libris.”

profound conceptual argument. Writing on behalf of a renunciant ascetic, the poet endeavored to dislocate the practice of poetic writing from the sphere of secular activity in order to relocate it within the zone of spiritual and religious behavior. Those who participated by channeling their writings through him and to Radegund were offered a potentially advantageous networking opportunity, and also invited to view their literary activity as a spiritually beneficial Christian practice: “May whoever conveys sacred literature to [Radegund] as she prays believe themselves to have endowed God’s abiding temples.”<sup>80</sup>

It is clear to see that Fortunatus shape-shifted to some degree in his poetry. He adopted specific postures to fit the space allotted by a given context, and enacted variable sequences of classicizing and Christianizing gestures suitable for kings or nuns in his poetry. But the Christian metapoetic position that he articulates in this letter on behalf of Radegund—the idea that poetic composition constituted devotional work and spiritual practice—pervades his verse. Throughout his career, Fortunatus articulated his conception of poetry in terms of spiritual duty and Christian piety, and presented versification as a viable practice for activating Christian belief.

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Even with secular figures, Fortunatus espoused the idea that classicizing verse for its own sake was, to use his words, “pride, smoke and shadow”—a haunting description perhaps inspired by Horace.<sup>81</sup> Writing as a “client” to Jovinus, a patrician aristocrat and governor of the Provence region under Sigibert, and ostensibly a classics buff, the poet delivered this message within a pessimistic poem on the theme of life’s temporality.<sup>82</sup> In this important piece, Fortunatus articulated an argument for verse composition as

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<sup>80</sup> *ibid.* 67-68:

“Se putet inde Dei dotare manentia templa  
quisquis ei votis scripta beata ferat.”

<sup>81</sup> *Carm.* 7.12.60: “nam tumor hic totus, fumus et umbra sumus.” See Horace, *Odes*, 4.7.16.

<sup>82</sup> Jovinus was apparently removed from this office in 573 by Sigibert, see Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum*, 4.43.

subordinate to (though not mutually exclusive from) the real spiritual work of devotedly enacting Christian belief. A close reading of it will elucidate some of the poet's methods of enacting this mode of Christian, ascetically-informed poetic practice before a non-ascetic audience.

Mortality was weighing on Fortunatus as he wrote to Jovinus. He saw transience everywhere in his post-Roman world. History showed that "the imperial seat, sovereignty, and the senate" were all susceptible to the crushing wheel of time.<sup>83</sup> Feeling life's ephemerality prompted him to consider existential questions, framed in classicizing terms. "What good are arms to men?" he asked Jovinus. With a lightning bolt of an allusion to the opening line of Virgil's *Aeneid*, the poet oriented his anxieties toward the classical tradition.<sup>84</sup> Fortunatus wastes no time turning his rhetorical question into an explicit confrontation by poking holes in the power and glory of classical figures from all walks. Hector and Achilles' deaths prove that skill in fighting does no good. Astur and Adonis' fates show what small claim beauty has to immortality. And as Fortunatus takes aim at the heroes of classical intellectualism, the scope of his rhetoric begins to veer toward deeply personal habits and predilections. In the very act of writing verse, he asks "why poetry?"—and consequently casts his own literary practice in a shade of doubt.

What function, I ask, does song perform? Charming Orpheus  
With his poignant melodies and the spirited voice of his lyre now lie buried.  
What good was a learned tongue for the wise destined to die,  
Who were able to wax eloquent on the sky's curved rotunda?  
Archytas, Pythagoras, Aratus, Cato, Plato, Chrysippus,  
The mob of the Cleantheses rests as dumb ash.  
And what can a poem do, Virgil, Lysa, Menander, and Homer,  
Whose naked bodies in decay are entombed?  
When the end comes, poetry does not benefit the Muses,  
Nor does it do any good to have extended a melody eloquently.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *ibid.* 9: "Imperiale caput, regnum trahit, aequae senatum."

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.* 11: "Quid sunt arma viris?"

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.* 21-30:  
"Quid, rogo, cantus agit? modulis blanditus acutis  
Orpheus et citharae vox animata iacet.  
Docta recessuris quid prodest lingua sophistis,  
qui valere loqui curva rotunda poli?"

Fortunatus presents his reader with a riddling paradox in regard to poetic writing. At first glance, he seems to be using poetry to make an argument that would (self-defeatingly) strip the verse medium of ultimate value. He compels his audience to question the purpose and essential good of the present poem even as they read it. To quote one of Fortunatus's biographers, Judith George, "The mood here is certainly bleak."<sup>86</sup> But the poet does not leave his puzzled reader hanging anxiously in the lurch for long. In the poem's subsequent section he offers a solution to the philosophical conundrum:

There is, however, one ultimate, holy, sweet and exalted salvation:  
To be capable of pleasing the everlasting threefold God.  
This has power and might. This endures and will not perish in the end.  
After burial, sustaining honor is also born of it.<sup>87</sup>

According to Fortunatus, Christian devotional practice, not classicizing intellectual practice, imbues the world with lasting meaning. George has interpreted these lines as damning for the poet and Jovinus. She sees Fortunatus identifying himself and his addressee with the unsaved pagans versifying pointlessly. "Only those who please God have any assured and substantial existence after death. This category would not seem to include poets," she argues.<sup>88</sup>

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Archyta, Pythagoras, Aratus, Cato, Plato, Chrysippus,  
turba Cleantharum stulta favilla cubat.  
quidve poema potest, Maro, Lysa, Menander, Homerus,  
quorum nuda tabo membra sepulchra tegunt?  
Cum venit extremum, neque Musis carmina prosunt  
nec iuvat eloquio detinuisse melos."

<sup>86</sup> See George, *Venantius Fortunatus*, p. 146-150: 149 for analysis of this poem. For another reading, see Roberts, *Humblest Sparrow*, pp. 264-269.

<sup>87</sup> *Carm.* 7.12. 33-36:

"Est tamen una salus, pia, maxima, dulcis et ampla,  
Perpetuo trino posse placere Deo.  
Hoc valet atque viget, manet et neque fine peribit,  
hinc quoque post tumulum nascitur almus honor."

<sup>88</sup> George, *Venantius Fortunatus*, p. 149.

But a completely different scheme undergirds these verses. The calculated disparagement of figures from Pythagoras to Virgil turns out to be a muted act of renunciation, a strategy influenced by ascetic practice and ideology whereby the poet identifies himself and his own commitments through differentiation. Fortunatus carves out a kind of negative image to his own Christian literary practice, clarifying what he and his poetry are not and cannot be, before asserting what they are. He does not want to act as another Orpheus or Plato, nor does he want Jovinus to follow their footsteps, but rather to participate with him in a mutually edifying exchange of verse as two men in Christian fellowship.

The ascetic undertones of his message are amplified in an ensuing argument. If asceticism is “the science of imitation,” Fortunatus performs as its theoretician in the poem, meditating on the true principles and models for action.<sup>89</sup> He points to the saints as the legitimate and reliable beacons of behavior. To follow them, the poet acknowledges, is to embrace separation from the secular world (depicted in classical pagan tones) even at the risk of alienation. “The one living in sacred moderation for love of God is made a pilgrim on earth, but by sojourning, becomes citizen of heaven.”<sup>90</sup> The ancient heroes and intellectual titans fail to guide to Christian on the journey of life. Their light is washed out by saintly stars:

What a multitude of saints scattered throughout world shines bright,  
How much power in the widespread grace of those columns!  
Their stars leads the way throughout all the places, all the people in the world,  
Whatever is encircled by ocean waters.  
The North, South, East, and West show reverence  
To these lights brightened by their service.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> For the quote, see Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative*, p. 13. Reydellet, *Venance Fortunat*, lvii, n. 19, also observes that the poet is writing in a speculative mode. He refers to a later section of this poem as “a veritable theory of friendship.” It may be possible to compromise between my reading and Reydellet’s by describing Fortunatus’s interest as in a Christian theory of self-relational activity.

<sup>90</sup> *Carm.* 7.12.49-50:

“Qui sub amore Dei sacro moderamine vivens  
fit peregrinus humi, civis eundo poli.”

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.* 53-58:

“quis numerus radiat sanctorum sparsus in orbe,  
quanta columnarum gratia fusa viget!  
Per loca, per populos mundo sua sidera praesunt,  
Quidquid ab oceanis circulus ambit aquis.



In a mode that evokes the arguments of Gregory of Tours, Fortunatus's rhetoric remaps the Merovingian social landscape by establishing holy men and ascetics as the new landmarks of practice and totems of power. To Jovinus, he demonstrates the capacity of Christianized poetry to amplify—to use Gregory's word for one of poetry's functions—the light of the saints so that it may reach wider audiences and distant generations. Poets, he shows, can redeem themselves by performing as mediating torch-passers to Christian readers on their own spiritual and intellectual journeys. The light of this ideology and attendant metaphorical imagery reached Paul the Deacon centuries later as he read Fortunatus and eventually commemorated him:

From his mouth we learn the deeds of the saints of old.  
These deeds show how to take the journey of light.  
Fortunate are you, Gaul, graced with such jewels  
From whose light foul night takes flight away from you.<sup>92</sup>

Paul firmly grasped the complicated (and fundamentally ascetic) metapoetic dynamics of Fortunatus's practice. As Fortunatus composed poetry to reconfigure the principles and icons of imitation, he inscribed himself as an authorial model to be imitated by future writers.

This logic is essential to decoding the next moment in the poet's letter to Jovinus. As it turns out, the whole point of the letter has been to drum up activity on a line of communication gone cold after a warm face-to-face visit.<sup>93</sup> Fortunatus asks: "Why therefore is the gift of life dragged out in a muted whisper, and why do you not send Fortunatus a few words?"<sup>94</sup> At first glance, the shift in the poet's rhetoric is abrupt.

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Arctos, meridies, oriens, occasus honorat  
lumina muneribus clarificata suis."

<sup>92</sup> See above n. 19.

<sup>93</sup> See lines 65-66.

<sup>94</sup> *Carm.* 7.12.61-62:

Cur igitur muto trahitur data vita susurro,  
nec Fortunato pauca, Iovine, refers?

Fortunatus turns from praise of the saints as exemplars of behavior to a request for correspondence in something of a non-sequitur, only tying the plea to the beginning of his letter with a repeated reference to the passing of time.<sup>95</sup> But if we read Fortunatus here enacting a series of behaviors in the presence of his reader as a kind of performative shibboleth, we may unlock the rationale. With a rhetorical demonstration of his ideological commitments to Christianity, the classicizing Christian poet asserts his imitability and trustworthiness to Jovinus, presumably a Christian, and persuades him to follow his lead. He religiously authorizes his own literary practice and his correspondent's hoped-for reply by placing their conversation and writerly activity within a discourse of holiness. This explains why the poet urges Jovinus to send him in return the same kind of edifying Christian verse he has just produced:

When your mind is free, write. Send deep poetry in verse.  
And cultivate me like a field in the countryside with your voice, your melody.  
May you drive through my heart, I pray, the plow of eloquence,  
So that my seeded field is the furrow of your tongue,  
And so the harvest of my heart may be brought to life with heavy crops.<sup>96</sup>

Poetry is neither dead nor damning by necessity. Poets have potentially edifying work to do, Fortunatus argues. Versification may be spiritually fruitful and productive of eternal life, if only one cultivates such writing as a spiritual practice.

Fascinatingly, Fortunatus makes the cemetery a rallying point in the world he presents to Jovinus. The saint's tomb becomes a site for the excavation of evidence that can corroborate holy power and legitimate the Christian worldview. To describe such places, he conjures the sweet fragrance of the righteous wafting from their tombs, defying the laws of nature, clashing with the image of the rotting corpses of famous poets

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<sup>95</sup> *ibid.* 63-64.

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*

“Scribe vacans animo, refer alta poemata versu,  
et quasi ruris agrum me cole voce, melo.  
Per thoraca meum ducas, precor, oris aratrum,  
ut linguae sulcus sint sata nostra tuus,  
pectoris unde seges gravidis animetur aristis.”

past.<sup>97</sup> The clean scent is a sign of the saints' clout. "Power is generated more greatly in them by death, and while the grave holds them, they nurse sickly limbs. Their holy sites of burial strengthen the lives of many on the brink, and men return from the tomb invigorated."<sup>98</sup> Fortunatus's riff on the real magic of the graveyard shares strong ideological affinity with the *Weltanschauung* of Gregory of Tours, outlined in earlier sections of this chapter. For Gregory, "the reward a person has in heaven is revealed at his tomb; the power emanating from the grave reveals that he dwells in heaven."<sup>99</sup> The same conviction undergirds some of the rhetoric in Fortunatus's poem to Jovinus where, rather than versifying the *Glory of the Confessors*, he evangelizes with its spirit and message, disseminating the Gregorian discourse of holiness through his poetic network as he performs in the role of classicizing Christian intermediary.

This moment with Jovinus stands as one exemplary instance of Fortunatus's habit of orienting himself and his poetship within the realm of Christianity, and specifically among saints, holy people, and confessors. The following section extends the examination of Fortunatus's poetic practice into religious contexts. It treats his self-representational habits, as well as his tactics for promoting the sanctity of his clerical and ascetic patrons. One important goal of this investigation is to understand his poetship as both reflective of and contributive to the Christian social-ideological programs of his most important benefactors, Gregory and Radegund, who themselves were invested heavily in the growth of Merovingian Christian culture. I argue that Fortunatus implicated himself in their agendas most creatively through sophisticated autobiographical strategies and flexible self-fashioning. The poet contorted himself to the shape of an ascetic by association, a

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<sup>97</sup> *ibid.* 38.

<sup>98</sup> *ibid.* 43-46:

"Quid quod morte magis virtus generatur in illis  
dumque sepulchra tenent, languida membra fovent?  
Multorum dubiam solidant pia funera vitam  
et redit ex tumulo vivificatus homo."

<sup>99</sup> See *Glory of the Confessors*, 32: 'cuius quae sit mercis in caelo, ad eius tumulum; eumque inhabitare paradiso, prodit virtus egrediens de sepulchro.'

writer who claimed his very career had been launched by an intimate experience with the holy power that Gregory and Radegund championed. Transfiguring himself into a witness to holy power and its proxies made Fortunatus attractive in the Merovingian world of tombs, where authorities of saintliness were in high demand, especially those who could wield their expertise in classical verse.

*Ascetic patrons and poetic self-fashioning*

Fortunatus had two stories about the course of his life as a Christian poet. He told the first in the *Vita sancti Martini (VSM)*, his hagiographical epic. This was the story Paul the Deacon relayed in his eulogy for Fortunatus.<sup>100</sup> In *VSM*, the poet rehashed for his monastic patrons Radegund and Agnes a sequence of ascetic decisions and acts that had led him to Gaul. Before the nuns, he styled himself a cult pilgrim who had experienced the healing power of St. Martin of Tours, and sought his tomb out of devotion. In the process, the poet became intertwined in a specific line of ascetic verse writers of the late and post-Roman period. Fortunatus developed his second autobiographical tableau in prose. In a letter written to Gregory of Tours and attached as a preface to his initial seven-book collection of poems published c. 576, he described his journey from Italy over the Alps through barbarian drinking halls into Gaul. Once he encountered the bishop, he explained, everything changed. He credited his status as a public poet to Gregory's encouragement and St. Martin's intercessory influence. Both self-portraits, therefore, depicted transformation. In each case, Fortunatus sketched his story in the shades of a conversion experience, linked in one instance to Merovingian ascetic devotional culture in its hero St. Martin, and in the other, to Martin's earthly delegates Gregory and Radegund.

Here I wish to examine these autobiographical exploits as acts of participation in ascetic culture, and to consider how Fortunatus leveraged an ascetic poetship to advance the Christianization of post-imperial Gallic society. While the poet was neither an eremite nor a cenobite who lived according to the conventional

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<sup>100</sup> See n. 14 above.

strictures of a monastic rule—later sources give him the title *presbyter*—he did involve himself through poetic writing in the preservation of an ascetic ecosystem. He functioned as a kind of intermediary for the nuns Agnes and Radegund and for St. Martin to the literary world. In what follows, I explore some ascetic-Christian elements within Fortunatus's authorial practice, with particular attention to the descriptions of his patrons and himself as participants in ascetic culture. I show how the poet carefully "Martinized" his patrons and himself to shape them into convincing avatars for the saint's active holiness; and I consider how his own conversion narratives reveal the texture of Christian culture in Merovingian Gaul. Analysis of these strategies, I argue, is fundamental to understanding the ideological import of his poetic work, and the function of some of his other verse projects, including his epitaphs.

#### *Making St. Martins*

While Fortunatus never responded directly (though perhaps obliquely) to Gregory of Tours' invitation to versify the *Glory of the Confessors*, his surviving work contains more than 30 poems for or about the bishop. His writing for the prelate from Clermont began with his patron's ascension to the episcopacy at Tours in 573.<sup>101</sup> The poet played poetic master of ceremonies at that celebration where, with the animated attitude of a choir conductor, he urged the church at Tours to clap their hands for the man favored by the saints, gifted to them in an act of heavenly diplomacy. "He piously and rightly obtained the power of the

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<sup>101</sup> See Fortunatus, *Carm.* 5.3 for his poem celebrating Gregory's ascension. For other instances where the bishop is clearly implicated in Fortunatus's poetry, see Fortunatus, 5.5.1, in reply to a request for a poem on the conversion of Jews at Clermont, and *VSM*, prol. = *Epistula ad Gregorium 2*, ed F. Leo, *MGH*, AA 4.1 (1881), pp. 293-4. There are very few details regarding the economic aspects of the pair's relationship. *Carm.* 8.19, 8.20, 9.6, and 9.7 make reference to a villa along the Vienne River that Gregory had either ceded to the poet or allowed him to manage. For the relationship between Fortunatus and the bishop, see esp. Brennan, "The Career of Venantius Fortunatus," pp. 70ff., and Roberts, *Humblest Sparrow*, pp. 269-283. For other poets in Gregory's circle, see the *Historia Francorum* 6.39 where he praises the poetry of Sulpicius of Bourges; for reference to the bishop's own poetry, see Fortunatus, *Carm.* 5.8b.1-2 and 8.19.1-4.

bishopric,” Fortunatus averred. “His name is Gregory, a pastor for the congregation in the city. Julian sends his protégé to Martin.”<sup>102</sup>

As bishop, Gregory’s familial allegiance to Julian, a distinguished martyr from the Auvergne, did not impinge on his duties as main impresario for the cult of St. Martin at Tours, where that holy man had held the bishop’s office himself in the late fourth century. In the two centuries between his tenure and Gregory’s, the city of Tours had earned recognition for its resident cult surrounding the ascetic-bishop Martin. Attendant *littérateurs* had promoted the cult for decades in textual treatments of its patron saint. In the late fourth century, Sulpicius Severus composed a prose *vita*, dialogues, and letters all concerning the life and thought of the renowned eremite-turned-bishop. Several decades later, in the mid-fifth century, Perpetuus, Bishop of Tours, commissioned roughly a dozen poetic epigrams for the church of St. Martin at Tours, ostensibly to accompany murals depicting scenes from the saint’s life. He was able to convince two of Gaul’s most accomplished poets at the time to contribute to the project: Sidonius Apollinaris penned verses for the apse of the church, while Paulinus of Périgueux wrote a short poem for the nave.<sup>103</sup> Paulinus also composed the first versified life of St. Martin in six books, and dedicated it to Perpetuus around the year 460.

A century later, Gregory carried on the cult’s literary tradition by writing assiduously in prose on Martin’s wonder-working and, like his predecessors, assuming the role of literary patron. He wrote an anthological history of the saint’s posthumous miracles in which he demonstrated readerly expertise in all texts Martinian, culling from the dense literary history attached to his cult. In the preface to the book, with rhetoric similar to that deployed in the *Glory of the Confessors*, the bishop expressed anxiety over his literary

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<sup>102</sup> *Carm.* 5.3.9-11:

“Iura sacerdoti merito reventer adeptus,  
Nomine Gregorius, pastor in urbe gregis,  
Martino proprium mittit Iulianus alumnum.”

<sup>103</sup> R. Van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul*. (Princeton, 1993), pp. 308-317; F. J. Gilardi, "The Sylloge epigraphica Turonensis de S. Martino." PhD Dissertation., Catholic University of America, (Washington DC, 1983).

capability and invited Fortunatus specifically to versify his miracle account: “If only Fortunatus were here to describe these things. For if I should try to transcribe them, I incur a black mark for being inept at it.”<sup>104</sup>

Again, the poet did not overtly accede to composing a verse paraphrase of Gregory’s miracle book, but neither did he disappoint. Fortunatus produced a four-book hagiographical epic on the saint’s life within the first three years of Gregory’s ascension—a work he dedicated to the bishop in a prefatory prose letter, and to the nuns Radegund and Agnes, equally interested in advocating for the cult of Martin, in a prefatory poem. The poet showed Martin further affection through the very organization of his initial seven-book collection of occasional verse. Michael Roberts has pointed out that his first book of poetry lends structural weight to Martin—four of the first seven poems discuss churches dedicated to the saint.<sup>105</sup>

During his career, Fortunatus continually responded to Gregory’s interest in advertising Martin’s image. He contributed ornamental verse to one of the bishop’s building restoration projects linked to the saint’s cult. The poet delivered two series of *tituli* covering various scenes from Martin’s life, gathered into a single poem in his tenth book of verse.<sup>106</sup> These epigrams, probably meant to accompany some paintings or mosaics installed by the bishop in the Cathedral at Tours, were far from stone-cold descriptive ekphrases. Fortunatus brought the lapidary material to life with a striking ideological electricity generated by a range of creative poetic and rhetorical strategies that connected Gregory’s image with Martin’s. With the help of the poet’s captions, the bishop was transformed into a living lightning rod for Martin’s virtues in the church where he conducted liturgical performances before the saint’s image. Fortunatus made the result plain:

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<sup>104</sup> See Gregory of Tours, *De virtutibus sancti Martini*, in B. Krusch (ed.), SRM 1, 2: p. 136: “Utinam Severus aut Paulinus viverent, aut certe Fortunatus adesset, qui ista describerent! Nam ego ad haec iners notam incurro, si haec adnotare temptavero.”

<sup>105</sup> See *Carm.* 1.4-7 and Roberts, *Humblest Sparrow*, 165ff.

<sup>106</sup> *Carm.* 10.6.

“Working on the church building with Martin’s assistance, that new man Gregory has brought back what the older man was.”<sup>107</sup>

That Martin’s identity, history, and cult could be channeled for the elevation of authority and the subtle manipulation of identity was not lost on Fortunatus—nor was it limited to the promotion of his episcopal patron. He capitalized on the power of the saint’s image in efforts to shape Radegund’s profile as well.<sup>108</sup> In his previously discussed letter to the Christian poetic community abroad to solicit verse compositions for the foundress, Fortunatus openly declared his attachment to his ascetic patron through her patron saint: “Desirous for Martin, I have cleaved to the devotion of Radegund.”<sup>109</sup> Gregory and the collective of Gallic bishops openly admired the nun’s special relationship to Martin. Upon the founding of her convent, neighboring prelates wrote Radegund and compared her to the holy man. Like the saint, she had arrived in Gaul from the East, from Thuringia as a captive prize for King Clothar. In this point of similarity, the bishops saw a sign: “Since you have come from almost the same exact region from where we have learned blessed Martin came, it is no wonder if you seem to imitate him in action, whom we think has been the guide of your journey.”<sup>110</sup> In his later prose *vita* for Radegund, Fortunatus built upon the connection, assimilating his subject to the saint by molding wondrous events in her life to match miracle stories told in the Martinian tradition.<sup>111</sup>

By effectively linking his patrons to the saint, Fortunatus also established himself in his community as an authoritative witness to Martinian holiness. He became a talent evaluator *qua* Martin, an authorial figure

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<sup>107</sup> *ibid.* lines 17-18:

“Martini auxiliis operando Gregorius aedem  
reddidit iste novus quod fuit ille vetus.”

<sup>108</sup> For Radegund and Martin, see n. 15 above.

<sup>109</sup> *Carm.* 8.1.21: “Martinum cupiens voto Radegundis adhaesi.”

<sup>110</sup> See Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum*, 9.39: “Sed cum paene eadem veneritis ex parte, qua beatum Martinum huc didicimus accessisse, non est mirum, si illum videaris in opere, quem tibi ducem credimus itineris exstitisse.”

<sup>111</sup> See *Vita sancti Radegundis* 37, in B. Krusch (ed.) *MGH AA* 4.2 (Berlin, 1885) p. 48.



like Gregory able to diagnose and appreciate where and with whom the saint's holiness resided in the present. Moreover, as an outsider from the not-very-distant East come to Gaul for Martin, the poet aligned his story with Radegund's, whom others esteemed as a Martinesque figure for her move into Gaul from an eastern region. Fortunatus fashioned himself as a recipient of the saint's munificence by telling an anecdote about being healed from blindness at an altar to Martin inside a Ravennate church, and described his subsequent arrival in Gaul as the result of the pilgrimage vow to the saint—carefully called “the bishop.”<sup>112</sup> Whether or not the miracle story was true, publishing it marked a tactical ploy to establish his authenticity before an audience attached to the cult. Having experienced the saint's power directly, the poet could speak as a true authority on the saint's holiness alongside Radegund and Gregory.

Presenting himself as Martin's patient was just one move Fortunatus enacted as part of a holistic strategy of Christian self-representation in his poetry, most visible in the *VSM* and in the prefatory prose letter to his seven-book collection of occasional verse published at Gregory's urging. In what follows, we will examine in greater detail the poet's self-representational scheme in these texts, beginning with his hagiographical poem. I will show how, through a series of maneuvers at the beginning and end of the epic, Fortunatus postured as a participant in ascetic culture through his devotion to Martin, and also as a kind of Christian Latin poet sensitive to the practice of ascetic poetship propagated by the generations of ascetic poets that had preceded him.

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<sup>112</sup> Here I mean to suggest that this is an instance where Fortunatus chose to emphasize the episcopal side of Martin's career. For other examples and arguments along these lines, see the bibliography cited in n. 146 above. See *VSM*, 1.42-44:

“convenienter enim ratio quia plena poposcit  
Huius pontificis solvi praeconia verbis  
cuius causa fuit hac me regione venire.”

Fortunatus openly clarified the influence of asceticism and Christian poetry on his poetic practice both in the *VSM*'s forty-two line verse preface addressed to Radegund and Agnes, and in the first book's opening movement—forty-four verses outlining the Christian poetic literary history into which he was endeavoring to enter.

In the first of these sections, the poet describes his literary enterprise for his two patron nuns using the image of a sailor in danger of shipwreck. Fortunatus compares himself to a seafarer caught in a storm and tossed on his little boat, who stands “astonished, shaking, dumbstruck, unmoored, anxious.”<sup>113</sup> In tangled wording perhaps meant to signal his hapless state, he explains to Agnes and Radegund that he is compelled to attempt a poem in honor of Martin despite his lack of wherewithal. The asyndetic list of uncomplimentary descriptors, and the comparison to a feckless sailor, certainly owe much to the trope of authorial humility common among Christian writers. But the poet's self-styling here is particularly attentive to his ascetic patrons' station and worldview. It evokes a familiar mood and set of images attached to ascetics on the perilous narrow way, discussed in Chapter Two in the context of Avitus' poem for his sister Fuscina. Indeed, Fortunatus even switches in his preface from the nautical metaphor to describe his work as a feat of foot. No longer a sailor, the poet is “forced to take the promised step up the steep heights.”<sup>114</sup> Anxious as he is about the dangers of an artistic and perhaps spiritual failure from his poetic act, the self-effacing author takes on the pallor of the nervous ascetic, matching his complexion to that of his monastic patrons.

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<sup>113</sup> *VSM*, pref., lines 23-24, 27-30:

“attonitus trepidus hebetans vagus anxius anceps  
Confuse ingenio mox ope nauta caret.  
sic ego de modicis minimus, venerabilis Agnes  
cum Radegunde sacra, quas colo sorte pia,  
tendere pollicitum quia cogor ad ardua gressum,  
imperiiis tantis viribus impar agor.”

<sup>114</sup> See above n. 113, lines 27-30.

Rhetorical pieces from Fortunatus's otherwise longest poem, *Carm.* 8.3 "On Virginity," written in praise of Radegund and as encouragement for Agnes upon her confirmation as abbess, corroborate this interpretation. In the company of the same readers, the poet employs startlingly similar imagery to champion the spiritual challenge of avowed virginity. Radegund is portrayed as a walking guide for those on the ascent (perhaps like Fortunatus heading *ad ardua*)—she "happily opens the narrow way to the stars (*ad astra*)."<sup>115</sup> Later in the poem, the poet imagines an extravagant marriage between an unnamed virgin and Christ at heaven's summit. Christ praises his virgin bride for keeping her "promised chastity" (*pollicitum pudorem*) along the treacherous path overgrown with the brambles of sin.<sup>116</sup> The poet writes in God's voice, "Tracing the steps of her groom with a worried mind and seeking out what I desire, she has arrived unviolated [...] Walking through the briars, she avoided the prick of the thorn-bush."<sup>117</sup> In the *VSM*, Fortunatus similarly claims to be satisfying a vow through his poetic work, taking the "promised step" (*pollicitum gressum*) of writing verse on Martin. His preface to the epic therefore, written in the language of votive dedication and with an awareness of the perils of worldliness, positions his literary activity in parallel with his patrons' ascetic activity.

At the end of "On Virginity" the poet knots his life and practice together with Agnes and Radegund's even more tightly through a prayer spoken in nautical metaphor. In it, Fortunatus identifies with the struggle of asceticism and asks for protection from attendant dangers:

I pray that you, Christ, would pilot our souls through these waves,  
           The trunk and the yardarm of the cross working as a sail,  
 So that your right hand may set us in the harbor of life  
           After sailing the vast swells of the worldly deep.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> *Carm.* 8.3.54: "felix angustam pandit ad astra viam."

<sup>116</sup> *ibid.* line 189: "Haec mihi pollicitum servavit virgo pudorem."

<sup>117</sup> *ibid.* lines 191-193:  
       "Sollicitis animis sponsi vestigia sectans  
           et mea vota petens inviolata venit  
 Per tribulos gradiens spinae cavefecit acumen."

<sup>118</sup> *ibid.* lines 397-400:  
       "Opto per hos fluctus animas tu, Christe, gubernes  
           Arbore et antemna velificante crucis,

Shifting focus back to the *VSM*, we observe Fortunatus operating with an understanding of his ascetic patrons as proverbial shipmates. To ensure his own spiritual and artistic safety and prosperity as a verse writer of Martin’s life, the poet requests the prayerful assistance of the patron-nuns for Martin’s intercession: “You must ask for my shipwrecked prow not to struggle, that the saint would aid my sails with his winds. Then I can be sure that my sails will be brought to port.”<sup>119</sup> Fortunatus therefore enmeshes his poetic success in Christian ascetic devotional activity through a shared metaphorical vision of their enterprise, and by encouraging mutually edifying prayer to support the respective challenges facing poet and ascetic.

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Portraying himself in the *VSM* as an artist pushed along by the breath of the nun’s prayerful voices and gusts of Martin’s power, Fortunatus also creatively insists on his status as “poet-by-obligation,” a familiar mode of self-representation. “Compelled” (*cogor*) and “driven on” (*agor*), the poet becomes a vessel set into motion by the winds of social responsibility, religious activity, and holy power. His will, agency, and poetic ability are transformed into instruments of Christian duty, respondent to the commands of his ascetic patrons. Thus, the poet again advances the concept of writing poetry as a spiritual obligation. To cite yet another example of this in Fortunatus’s poetry, consider his response to the clergy of Paris, upon their invitation to compose for their community:

You force me to dust off the old lyre.  
 Look how you urge me to strum the chords with dull fingers  
 Though my hand does not move with practiced skill.  
 [...]
   
 But hence I obey because your love compels me,  
 As if refired in a furnace, to the duty of my art.<sup>120</sup>

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Ut post emensos mundani gurgitis aestus  
 In portum vitae nos tua dextra locet.”

<sup>119</sup> *VSM*, pref., lines 35-37:

“poscendum est vobis, ne naufraga prora laboret,

<sup>120</sup> *Carm.* 2.9.4-6, 15-16:

Within the *VSM* Fortunatus makes it quite clear that he learned some of these authorial gestures from reading ascetic Christian poets and their predecessors. He explicitly sets himself in their literary lineage. After the poetic preface to Martin's verse *vita*, in the programmatic opening to the first, the poet briefly reviews the highpoints of Christian Latin poetry by author:

Indeed, Juvencus first arranged a poem in comprehensible order,  
Singing a magisterial work with metrical skill.  
Then the tongue of famous Sedulius also beamed,  
And Orientius bound a few things tightly together in flowering speech,  
And sending these sacred votive offerings to the holy martyrs,  
Prudent Prudentius prudently made a sacrifice of their deeds.  
Paulinus, of powerful lineage, heart, faith, and artistic skill  
Set forth in verse the doctrine of the master Martin.  
What are known as the acts and deeds of apostolic rank  
The poet Arator plowed through with articulate eloquence.  
What the genealogist Moses once unfolded in a sacred sequence  
The bishop Alcimius Avitus arranged with outstanding acuity.<sup>121</sup>

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“cogitis antiquam me renovare lyram.  
En stupidis digitis stimulat is tangere cordas,  
cum mihi non solito currat in arte manus.  
[...]  
obsequor hinc, quia me veluti fornace recoctum  
artis ad officium vester adegit amor.”

See also *Carm.* 4.10.25-26, 4.27.20-22.

<sup>121</sup> *VSM*, 1.14-25:

“Primus enim docili distinguens ordine carmen  
Maiestatis opus metri canit arte Iuencus.  
Hinc quoque conspicui radiavit lingua Seduli  
Paucaque perstrinxit florente Orientius ore,  
Martyribusque piis sacra haec donaria mittens  
Prudens prudenter Prudentius immolat actus.  
Stemmata corde fide pollens Paulinus et arte  
Versibus explicuit Martini dogma magistri.  
Sortis apostolicae quae gesta vocantur et actus  
Facundo eloquio sulcavit vates Arator.  
Quod sacra explicuit serie genealogus olim  
Alcimius egregio digessit acumine praesul.”

Critics have noted fascinating similarities between the poetics and content of Fortunatus's *VSM* and the texts composed by his acknowledged poetic forebears.<sup>122</sup> All of the poets named are authors of hexameter narrative, a genre whose characteristics are underscored by Fortunatus with reference to the *actus* (lines 19 and 22), and *gesta* (22) that they treat, and the ordered structure they follow (*docili ordine*, 14; *serie* 24).<sup>123</sup> The poet's own epic narrative possesses the epigrammatic and episodic texture familiar to readers of Sedulius's bible epic, the *Carmen paschale*. His imitation of this particular poet may be more than coincidence, for Radegund had a special preference for "sweet Sedulius." In the verse epistle written on behalf of the *la reine moniale* to solicit poetry from the wider Christian community, Fortunatus indicated his patron's favorite authors—Sedulius was the only poet listed.<sup>124</sup>

Here I wish to explore the relationship between Fortunatus's vision of Christian Latin literary history, his metapoetics, and working self-definition as a verse maker. Unsurprisingly, he uses his celebrated forebears as part of a humility tactic. Standing in the shadow of these towering figures—Juvencus, Sedulius, Orientius, Prudentius, Paulinus, Arator, and Avitus—he shrinks himself down to small size. "Among the lofty heights of sacred bards, the thunderbolts of learned men, the budding meadows of orators" the poet is found "lapping up a little backwash of grammatical dew," unsure as to how he will ever find a place in such a landscape.<sup>125</sup> As with Gregory's preambling self-deprecations, Fortunatus performs a humble opening to disavow competition with literary idols on artistic grounds and manage critical expectations. But his acknowledgment of these poets' influence also makes readers aware of the poet's ideological commitments and self-image.

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<sup>122</sup> See Roberts, "Last Epic," and *Humblest Sparrow*, pp. 200-204. Consult A.L. Taylor, *Epic Lives and Monasticism in the Middle Ages, 800–1050*. (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 41-44 for a synopsis of other critical readings.

<sup>123</sup> Roberts, *Humblest Sparrow*, p. 201.

<sup>124</sup> *Carm.* 8.1.59. For literary analysis of the relationship between Fortunatus and Sedulius' techniques, see Roberts, *Humblest Sparrow*, pp. 183ff.

<sup>125</sup> *VSM*, 1.36-37: "scilicet inter tot sanctorum culmina vatam,  
Fulmina doctorum et gemmantia prata loquentum";  
and 1.29: "parvula grammaticae lambens refluamina guttae."

The mention of Avitus is intriguing. In Chapter Two, we analyzed that poet's meditations on the renunciation of poetic writing, and his sophisticated methods of writing ascetic verse. Avitus had explained that he was close to giving up composing poetry. His rationale for continuing to write verse was linked to the need to encourage his sister Fuscina, a nun, in her ascetic duty. The rhetorical, ideological, and contextual parallels between Avitus's established framework and Fortunatus's poetic program as laid out in opening movement of the *VSM* are striking. Fortunatus expresses his own doubts about poetry, though his uncertainties concern talent perhaps more than the ethical validity of the craft. Faced with the daunting poetic task of writing up to the high standards of those sacred bards like Avitus who preceded him, he hesitates to compose. But again "a weighty reason" (*ratio plena*) forces the poet's hand.<sup>126</sup> In this case, it is a vow to Martin he must fulfill. Once more *ratio* becomes a code word for the imperatives of the Christian poet's spiritual practice and devotional commitment. As with Avitus, *ratio* persuades the poet to overcome his doubts and produce an edifying poem for ascetic nuns.<sup>127</sup>

Fortunatus therefore creatively uses a unique Christian Latin literary history to aid readers in understanding both his own practice of poetic authorship and the epic that ensues. The strategy tunes his audience in to the type of program he wishes to enact, and so adjusts their expectations accordingly. In addition, the appeal to a specific tradition justifies the whole poetic enterprise. Fortunatus aligns his efforts with the work that previous Christian poets, established authorities like Juvenecus, Sedulius, and Prudentius, had successfully undertaken. Coupling this strategy with a mode of self-definition ascetic in its metaphorical language, a self-portrait as a humble devotee rather than an ambitious man of letters, Fortunatus emerges from the prefatory pieces of the *Vita Sancti Martini* looking conspicuously as an ascetic poet.

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<sup>126</sup> *VSM*, 1.42.

<sup>127</sup> Cf. Ch. 2, p. 102.

Fittingly, the contours of this self-image are drawn to a close in a moment of ring composition at the end of the *VSM*. Addressing the poem as it makes its journey to readers in Italy—ostensibly reversing the course the poet had taken when he left his homeland for Gaul—he asks the little book to pay homage to the “pious bishop Paul” in Aquileia, a figure otherwise unmentioned in his corpus, but apparently influential in the poet’s youth. Fortunatus fondly remembers Paul “praying that [he] would convert (*converti*) from [his] earliest years.”<sup>128</sup> It is unlikely that the bishop was hoping for the young man to turn to Christianity from a non-Christian system of belief, or even from heresy to orthodoxy. Rather, Paul probably wished for a committed change of behavior from Fortunatus, an adoption of a rigorous Christian ethos, like Augustine’s famous conversion, or Avitus’s, perhaps entailing a turn to the clergy or monastic life.<sup>129</sup> The poet, we may infer, was eager to show Paul how he had finally answered his prayers. By the mid sixth century, engaging in an ascetic mode of Christian poetic writing was good for communicating conversion.

*Orpheus moved by Martin*

Devotion to Martin featured not only in the *VSM*, but at the forefront of Fortunatus’s initial seven-book collection of occasional verse, made public in 576. In a prose letter addressed to Gregory of Tours that serves as the preface to the corpus, the poet praised his patron for convincing him to overcome his humility and fear of critical judgement in order to become a public literary figure. Gregory had worked on his poetic client with persuasive reminders about the miracles of St. Martin. Fortunatus recalled to the bishop:

But though I fiercely resisted in humility when pressed intensely, you [Gregory] encouraged me diligently, swearing by the witness of the divine mystery and the glory of blessed Martin’s power, that, over and against my feelings of modesty, I should be introduced to the public.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> *VSM*, 4.661-662:

“Pontificemque pium Paulum cupienter adora,  
Qui me primaevs converti optabat ab annis.”

<sup>129</sup> See discussion by Reydellet, *Venance Fortunat*, p. viii.

<sup>130</sup> Pref. 6: “Sed quoniam humilem impulsulm alacriter, acrius renitentem, sub testificatione divini mysterii et splendore virtutum beatissimi Martini coniurans hortaris sedulo ut contra pudorem meum deducar in publicum.”



Just as Fortunatus had positioned himself at the community's vanguard to welcome the new Bishop Gregory as the second-coming of Martin at Tours, so he presented Gregory and Martin leading his own procession into the public realm.

The poet also used the letter as a space to reminisce on how he had arrived at this important transitional moment as a writer, on the brink of becoming more widely known. He explained to Gregory his early motivations for verse making, and described how the context for his performances of poetry had changed drastically over the course of his career. As in the *VSM*, the poet recounted the journey he had made from Northern Italy to Gaul, so essential to his autobiographical narrative.<sup>131</sup> Yet he retold his story to Gregory in startlingly different terms than he had in the saint's life. Besides using greater geographical detail, he fashioned his former self a "new lyric Orpheus" in his wanderings through barbarian territories.<sup>132</sup> This was no humble pilgrim on a Martinian mission. He recalled giving recitals at festive winter banquets, "compelled by a muse who may have been colder than she was drunk."<sup>133</sup> Fortunatus depicts himself reciting elegant poetry not to the woods and its beasts as the old Orpheus had done, but to a forest of "maple wood cups" in the hands of inebriated barbarians, men who had neither the wherewithal nor the critical chops to discern his poetic talents or flaws.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> See n. 6 above for competing readings of Fortunatus's self-described motivations for his entry into Gaul. A handful of scholars question the compatibility of the poet's self-representations here and in the *VSM*, and particularly challenge the religious rationale of his verse writing and departure from Italy. For the discrepancies between the route described in this letter versus the probable itinerary for a contemporary pilgrim to Tours, see Brennan, "The Career of Venantius Fortunatus," p. 56.

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.* 4.: "novus Orpheus lyricus silvae voces dabam, silva reddebat."

<sup>133</sup> *ibid.*: "Musa hortante nescio gelida magis an ebria."

<sup>134</sup> *ibid.* 5: "inter illos egomet non musicus poeta sed muricus deroso flore carminis poema non canerem sed garrirem, quo residentes auditores inter acernea pocula salute bibentes insana Baccho iudice debaccharent."

Critics have latched on to the image of Fortunatus as the Merovingian Orpheus, and used the poet's provocative analogy to decode his position or social role among the barbarians. Godman especially has championed the image of Orpheus as the key to historical understanding of Fortunatus's career:

The modern Orpheus' self-portrayal reveals significant changes in the nature and circumstances of the poet's craft, changes which were to be faced by the 8th and 9th century authors who imitated Venantius assiduously: a consciousness of the ambiguity of his own position, a Latin poet among the Franks, the ambitious exponent of an ancient culture; the affected condescension in his appeal to the apparently obsolescent standards of antiquity coupled with a shrewd awareness of their persistent attraction and power; and, above all, a lively apprehension of contemporary sources of patronage.<sup>135</sup>

Indeed, there is much in Godman's interpretation to recommend, most of which has been discussed already in the section on Fortunatus's ornate style and his purveyance of Romanness. Still it remains to consider here (and in treatments of Fortunatus going forward) the important implications of this letter for Fortunatus's practice of Christian Latin poetship.

While Fortunatus's clever, self-deprecating humor balances the mood in the letter, his former status and activity as Orpheus to the barbarians is clearly remembered in regretful terms. This fact escapes the notice of Godman, who evades this complication by asserting that Fortunatus is impossible to pin down—the poet's self-portrayals are always "highly contrived."<sup>136</sup> Certainly it is easy to question the self-effacing rhetoric used to construct this picture of the past, but that the poet delivered this memory with a tone of regret is not so easy to explain away. "Among the barbarians I was not a musical poet but mouse-like, gnawing on the petal of a song, jabbering rather than singing poetry," reads almost penitential in its self-criticism.<sup>137</sup> Similarly, the poet confesses, albeit implicitly through the use of rhetorical question, that he had not been immune to the revelry of his company:

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<sup>135</sup> Godman, *Poets and Emperors*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>136</sup> *ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>137</sup> *ibid.*: "inter illos egomet non musicus poeta sed muricus deroso flore carminis poema non canerem sed garrirem."

What may be said skillfully where one is scarcely considered sane if he does not go insane like the rest, where there is more to celebrate if is still alive after drinking, from where the thyrsus-bearing partier may depart not a prophet, but a fathead?<sup>138</sup>

Orpheus is therefore not an epithet that Fortunatus applies to his former self with pride. Rather, it is a term of embarrassment.<sup>139</sup>

Importantly, the poetry Fortunatus produced as a second Orpheus is humiliating precisely because it emerged outside of the ideal Christian literary society he now wishes to enter as a public poet. Turning from Gregory, Fortunatus addresses his wider audience in the concluding section of the prefatory letter. He begs for his readers' leniency toward his misgivings on the grounds of context, and enhances his petition with a confessional tone. "Critic, determine for yourself what could be advisedly articulated on this extended journey," he writes. "Fear of judgment did not spur me on. I was neither examined according to customary rules, nor encouraged by the support of a friend, nor edited by a knowledgeable reader."<sup>140</sup> Fortunatus must apologize for playing the role of drunken Orpheus, which resulted in inadequate verse. Sober literary society, he suggests, is essential to fostering good poetry.

To be sure, Fortunatus's self-deprecation is partly prompted by a concern to control critical responses and subdue cynical disparagement. We have seen similar rhetorical maneuverings at work before, enacted by Gregory in his preface to the *Glory of the Confessors*. But the poet's argument is not in perfect alignment with the bishop's, who had tried to engage critics in rewriting his prose texts as a way to mollify their deconstructive impulses. As a writer of poetry, practiced in the premier literary mode, Fortunatus had

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<sup>138</sup> Pref. 5: "Quid ibi fabre dictum sit ubi quis sanus vix creditur, nisi secum pariter insanitur, quo gratulari magis est si vivere licet post bibere, de quo convivam thyrsicum non fatidicum licet exire, sed fatuum? Cum quantum ad mei sensus intellegentiam pertinet, quia se pigra non explicat, brutae animae ipsa ieiuna sunt ebria?"

<sup>139</sup> This reading corresponds too with his subversive reference to the ancient poet in his poetic letter to Jovinus, where Orpheus features as a figure of futility. *Carm.* 7.12.21-22: "What function, I ask, does song perform? Charming Orpheus with his poignant melodies and the spirited voice of his lyre now lie buried."

<sup>140</sup> Pref. 5.: "Quid inter haec extensa viatica consulte dici potuerit censor ipse mensura, ubi me non urgebat vel metus ex iudice vel probabat usus ex lege nec invitabat favor ex comite nec emendabat lector ex arte."

no such recourse. He needed to find another way. And he did. He shielded his publication from criticism by appealing to piety, shaping his literary profession into a practice of Christian virtue once more, this time as a show of preferential obedience to his ecclesiarch Gregory, and by proxy, to Martin: “Confessing the ignorance of my rough work and its frivolity, in obedience to your virtue I give over what I delayed making public when others demanded it.”<sup>141</sup>

As Fortunatus frames his publication as an act of obedience to Gregory’s authority and aesthetic judgment, he convincingly eschews celebrity, while simultaneously backing into the limelight shining on his esteemed patron and holy friends. As a result of mutual investments, a share of whatever fame may come to Fortunatus now goes to Gregory and Martin, who are made collectively responsible for his poetry’s publication. Yet still the poet stands to gain from his decision to channel future dividends of social capital to his highly esteemed patrons. His investors become as shields for their poet-client, protecting him from the direct hits of criticism on both literary and moral grounds. Their insistence allows Fortunatus to preserve his virtuous humility, and avoid chastisement. Those who would condemn the poet’s skill or ambition must go through Gregory and Martin first. While critics are hamstrung by the poet’s clever social strategy, they are left one move in response that may bring benefit to everyone. Fortunatus’s readers are afforded an opportunity to identify themselves with the patron-pair, the powerful bishop and his holy man, when they show the poet goodwill. Fortunatus presents the option of confirming Gregory’s (and by proxy, Martin’s) critical instincts.

In sum, Fortunatus’s preface may be read as a charter of literary conversion of sorts. The poet recognizes his failings as a second Orpheus, but does not despair. New holy leadership and ideals motivate him to introduce his poetry to an ideal society of morally sound and literarily astute reviewers. His report of

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<sup>141</sup> *ibid.* 6: “Me meis frivolis † arbitrem † scabrosi operis ignorantiam confitente, quod aliis poscentibus patefacere distuli, oboediendo cedo virtuti.”

Gregory's provocations transform the publication of his collection from an embarrassing dispersion of Orphic babblings into a Christian act of obedience before an ecclesiastical superior and a show of confidence in Martin. The magic of this transformation, the conversion of poet and text, implicates Fortunatus's poetic activity in the bishop's grand social-ideological program geared toward the total Christianization of Merovingian Gaul.

*Peer review: Fortunatus's epitaphs*

In the prefatory letter to Gregory just reviewed, before his autobiographical digression, Fortunatus waxed eloquent on the power of poetry. He indicated a relationship between the Christian promise of eternal life and the traditional Roman idea that verse could confer immortality through renown. His take on poetry and the everlasting rang almost Horatian: "With burial, greedy death cannot take away the sight of the dead passing through the lips of the living, in poetry if not on foot."<sup>142</sup> On the surface, such a remark seems to hit upon the power of writers to live vicariously through their texts—"while words remain, death has left behind something of the dead for living memory."<sup>143</sup> But as a poet who buttered his bread as a writer of praise, Fortunatus's expression of optimism about the afterlives of *littérateurs* prompts us to ponder more deeply the dynamics between poetry and immortality.

As we continue to probe the purpose of poetry in Christian Merovingian Gaul, and Fortunatus's role as a cultural intermediary, I propose to dig into his epitaphic poetry. This long chapter has in fact been building towards a study of Fortunatus as a Christian poetic eulogist above all, a literary figure whose poetic practice involved both announcing his subjects' afterlives and crafting impressions of their "lived lives" that could carry on as texts. The previous chapter examined funerary poetry as a prominent trend in Christian Latin writing

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<sup>142</sup> Praef. 2: "Hoc nesciens avara mors auferre cum funere quod per ora viventium defunctos videt currere si non pede, poemate." Cf. Horace *Odes* 3.30.

<sup>143</sup> *ibid.*: "Cum dicta permanent vivaci memoriae de mortuis aliquid mors reliquit."

of Late Antiquity. In particular, it showed some of the methods by which Damasus and Sidonius had made themselves known as epitaphic authors: there was the Damasian tendency toward authorial intrusion and his performance of piety, and the Sidonian social-networking strategy instantiated mainly in paratextual letters made to frame his funerary verse and control its interpretation. Both eulogistic poets constructed collective Christian identities within literary communities centered on their authoritative presences. Here I wish similarly to investigate the methods by which Fortunatus constructed relationships between himself as poet, his subject(s), and his readerly community within his fourth book of poems, a collection of twenty-eight verse epitaphs written for both clerics and lay people. The investigation will draw on our explorations of Fortunatus's efforts in ascetic self-fashioning, patron-promotion, and communal Christianization as it pays close attention to his autobiographical posturing and character evaluation in his role as Christian verse biographer.<sup>144</sup> My aim is to analyze the tactics of authorship the poet deploys as an epitaphic writer, and to show how these strategies both shape and constitute his role as Christian peer reviewer for his community. Such a role, as I interpret it, fits seamlessly within the ascetic, Christianizing culture propagated by his patrons Gregory and Radegund.<sup>145</sup> The idiosyncrasies of Fortunatus's poetship at the tomb include emphasis on

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<sup>144</sup> The question of whether Fortunatus's epitaphs were ever inscribed is vexed—see esp. G. Bernt, *Das lateinische Epigramm im Übergang von der Spätantike zum frühen Mittelalter*, pp. 125-127. To date, no material evidence exists to confirm that any of the epitaphs from Book 4 were meant for stone (but see *ILCV* 1073, and Bernt, p. 125 n. 27 for at least one piece of inscriptionary evidence attributed to Fortunatus outside this collection). Edmond Le Blant included the epitaphs in *Inscriptions chrétiennes de la Gaule antérieures au VIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. (Paris, 1865), but he was challenged by Meyer, who thought they may have been performed as speeches at the grave. At least one poem, the one-hundred-and-sixty-line *Carm.* 4.26 on Vilihuta, would appear too long to have been feasibly engraved. Yet the poems are all titled *epitaphia* in the manuscripts, and 17 of 28 include deictic language, i.e. marked reference to the presence of the tomb itself (e.g. *Carm.* 4.22.1: “Hoc iacet in tumulo non flenda infantia fratrum”; see further: 4.1.5; 4.5.5-6; 4.7.9; 4.9.3; 4.10.5; 4.11.2; 4.12.7; 4.13.3; 4.14.5-6; 4.16.5; 4.18.5; 4.19.3; 4.20.1-2; 4.23.15; 4.24.5; 4.28.6). Reydellet, *Venance Fortunat*, xxxi, remarks on the fact that several of the poems were composed for subjects long dead, but this was not unusual among epitaphs of the late antique and early medieval periods. Consider, for instance, Paul the Deacon's late epitaph for Fortunatus, or Monica's semi-metrical inscription recovered at Ostia, datable to the sixth century (for which, see D. Boin, “Late Antique Ostia and a Campaign for Pious Tourism: Epitaphs for Bishop Cyriacus and Monica, Mother of Augustine.” *JRS* 100 (2010), pp. 195-209). The rise in the number of painted inscriptions at the end of the sixth century may also provide a reason for why engraved evidence has not come down to us; see n. 135 above for bibliography. Roberts, *Humblest Sparrow*, p. 10, n. 21, argues that “[t]he balance of the evidence suggests that the poems were not intended for gravestones,” but I see the final analysis as truly inconclusive. There are good arguments for both sides. Cf. n. 71 above for more general discussion.

<sup>145</sup> For a classic discussion of the relationship between asceticism and literary aristocracy in late antique Gaul within the framework of epitaphic inscriptions, but without an emphasis on authorship, see Heinzlmann, *Bischofsherrschaft*, esp. pp. 73-98.

eloquence, conversion, and a concern for exiles in some of his subjects' lives, which correspond with important features of his own self-promoted biographical narrative. In the course of the following sections, therefore, I will explore how and why the poet leverages his own Christian literary identity to create bonds of identification between himself and the deceased, with the result that author and subject become assimilated through the process of epitaphic evaluation.

### *The 'clericalization' of character*

The twenty-eight verse epitaphs gathered in the fourth book of Fortunatus's collection are conspicuously organized. The first fifteen poems treat religious leaders, arranged in descending order of rank—from bishop, to abbot, to priest, to deacon. The remaining pieces eulogize lay people.<sup>146</sup> The preferential weight given to monks and clerics is explicable in light of the Christian character of Fortunatus's poetic practice (not to mention the poet's own priestly status). The arrangement of the book of epitaphs would also seem to make a statement about the poet's Christianized conception of the Merovingian social hierarchy; that is, it stylistically acknowledges the high(er) status of church leaders among their non-ecclesiastical peers.

For readers perusing the whole book of epitaphs, however, the structural effect is more dynamic. As within the sequence of clerical epitaphs, as Michael Roberts has shown, Fortunatus maintains a remarkable poetic and rhetorical consistency—to take nothing away from his creative brilliance and flexibility within the epitaphic genre. It is not only that the poet demonstrates a healthy respect for the rules, forms, and tropes of Roman-Christian epitaphic convention; he also applies his own personal poetic techniques steadfastly in each

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<sup>146</sup> The original collection is arranged according to the status of the subjects or their addressees: books 1-3, and 5 are to clerics, and treat Christian topics, while books 6-7 are directed to secular figures. Book 4 then “represents in the range and status of its subjects a microcosm of the collection as a whole.” First noted by Meyer; see Roberts, *Humblest Sparrow*, pp. 9-10. The two most recent English-language monographs on Fortunatus devote chapters to his epitaphs. See George, *Venantius Fortunatus*, pp. 85ff; Roberts, *Humblest Sparrow*, pp. 5-37.

poem, with emphasis on playful antithesis, paradox, metaphor, and enumeration.<sup>147</sup> On the whole, Fortunatus's epitaphs tend to begin and end with the same tropes. Exordia typically reference cruel, greedy death, or the brevity of life, whereas conclusions remark on aspects of immortality and the reward of heaven.<sup>148</sup> Within this stable frame the poet does not set expansive, linear narrative accounts of his subjects' lives, but rather lists and celebrates the admirable qualities of the individual and their manifold contributions to society from a Christian perspective.<sup>149</sup>

The eulogistic epitaph for Chaetricus, bishop of Chartes, is exemplary for its brief description of his whole being, body and mind, followed by a staccato enumeration of his virtues in metaphorical epithets:

His figure was beautiful, graceful, his mind always benevolent.  
 His sweet voice rehearsed the law of God.  
 Hope of the clergy, warden of widows, bread for the poor,  
 Caretaker for his relatives, all for everything good.<sup>150</sup>

By the time readers reach Chaetricus' epitaph, the seventh poem in the book, it is evident that the bishop's model elegance, eloquence, and charity towards the needy are not unique to his personality. His character is a mosaic of familiar traits drawn from a quarry of ideal, Christian qualities, which Fortunatus repeatedly mines for material to fashion his clerical subjects.<sup>151</sup> As Book Four progresses the poet's scheme becomes more

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<sup>147</sup> Roberts, *Humblest Sparrow*, pp. 5-37:11: "Despite their conventional structure and subject matter, they illustrate Fortunatus's development of epigraphic format and lexicon into a flexible idiom capable of accommodating greater technical and expressive aspirations and a higher degree of stylistic virtuosity than is common in anonymous verse inscriptions." For Fortunatus's deep knowledge of and engagement with a wide body of Christian metrical inscriptions, see S. Blomgren, "Fortunatus cum elogiis collatus. De cognatione, quae est inter carmina Venantii Fortunati et poesin epigraphicam Christianam." *Eranos* 71 (1973), pp. 95-111.

<sup>148</sup> For the poet's epitaphic exordia and conclusions, see Roberts, *Humblest Sparrow*, 12 and 15, respectively.

<sup>149</sup> Roberts, *Humblest Sparrow*, p. 10 and p. 35: "In the [epitaphic] passages from Fortunatus there is no attempt to describe a visible reality; instead the cultural system represented is purely conceptual."

<sup>150</sup> *Carm.* 4.7.10-14:

"forma venusta, decens, animus sine fine benignus,  
 vox suavis, legem promeditata Dei,  
 spes cleri, tutor viduarum, panis egentum,  
 cura propinquorum, totus ad omne bonum."

<sup>151</sup> See the epitaph for Eumerius, 4.1, for another typical celebration of episcopal character; discussed by Roberts, *Humblest Sparrow*, p. 17. To this common stock of traits we might add noble and/or priestly heritage, concern for exiles and the sick,



predictable. With each successive epitaph, the reader's horizon of expectations shrinks. Fortunatus's particular evaluative mode, defined both in terms of its poetics and stable Christian criteria, continues past his priestly subjects into those poems for monks and lay persons. As a result of the collection's rhetorical consistency, readers who consume the book in order are conditioned to expect each epitaphic subject to sound a certain Christian way—even as they encounter epitaphs for lay people. Almost all of Fortunatus's epitaphic subjects exemplify a specific set of virtues established by the poet in his commemorations of clerics. Each consecutive poem echoes and contributes to a building refrain about the Christian life well lived.

Fortunatus's epitaph for Queen Theudechild late in the book, for example, contains several of the same markers of praise as the poem remembering Bishop Chaetricus. The poet highlights her euergistic piety. He names her "the hope of many," and casts her as a symbol for the "joys of the poor."<sup>152</sup> To espouse her societally impactful virtue, Fortunatus turns again to one of his favorite techniques: enumeration. Instead of listing the queen's qualities in the abstract, however, he lists the types of people she has helped and who now mourn her passing: "the orphan, the exile, and widows lying clotheless grieve that their mother, their food, their clothing has been buried here."<sup>153</sup> (Notice how, like Chaetricus, Theudechild is made to metaphorically embody the sustenance of the needy.) Theudechild's epitaph illustrates the way in which Fortunatus could assemble his amalgamated image of a lay person with traits drawn from the same store of qualities he had repeatedly accessed for his clerical epitaphs.

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instantiations of ascetic renunciation, church-building initiative, and images of shepherding and fatherhood. Heinzelmann, *Bischofsherrschaft*, p. 57, has already argued more broadly for a stable mold for character-shaping in Gallic episcopal epitaphs.

<sup>152</sup> *Carm.* 4.25.2, 5.

<sup>153</sup> *ibid.* 11-12:

"Orphanus, exul, egens, viduae nudaque iacentes  
matrem, escam, tegmen hic sepelisse dolent."

See *Carm.* 4.21 for Avolus and 4.23 for the merchant Julian for other good texts in which the poet measures and describes lay subjects using the same techniques and a similar stock of character traits as in clerical epitaphs.

The poet occasionally employs another biographical tactic to charge his epitaphs for lay people with clericalizing energy. Within several poems for both episcopal and lay people, he harps on a pattern of conversion—the adoption of a more rigorous Christian ethos—as a mark of distinction for his subjects. Some of the dead are remembered for how they became Christianized in the course of their lives, and came to embody clerical virtues. So Bishop Gregory of Langres is commemorated as “a harsh overseer before, thereafter an affectionate bishop. Those whom he lorded over as a judge, he now nurtures with the love of a father.”<sup>154</sup> Surprisingly, Michael Roberts argues that these lines do not entail an evaluative comparison. He suggests instead that Fortunatus praises equally the subject’s able performance of both roles as secular disciplinarian and loving Christian pastor.<sup>155</sup> Nevertheless, the rhetorical effect draws attention to Gregory’s mesmerizing change of station and character. The lines capture the transformation of his conversion.

Fortunatus tends to celebrate the phenomenon of ascetic self-transformation elsewhere. In his epitaph for bishop Leontius the elder, for example, he describes the prelate’s noble lineage as being “second to none” before going on to laud his practice of “a novel piety” whereby he “wished to be lesser than all.” By virtue of his new humble holiness, set in contrast to his secular status, Leontius’s very presence gained the power to drive out discord—“madness had been banished, and love was binding hearts together.”<sup>156</sup> The same components of Fortunatus’s antithetical description of the two parts of Gregory of Langres’ life are present

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<sup>154</sup> *Carm.* 4.2.7-8: “Arbiter ante ferox, dehinc pius ipse sacerdos,  
quos domuit iudex fovit amore patris.”  
Gregory was *comes* of Autun, for which see Gregory of Tours, *VP* 7.

<sup>155</sup> *Humblest Sparrow*, p. 19.

<sup>156</sup> *Carm.* 4.9.11-16:  
“Egregius, nulli de nobilitate secundus,  
moribus excellens, culmine primus erat.  
Hic pietate nova cunctis minor esse volebat,  
sed magis his meritis et sibi maior erat.  
Quo praesente viro meruit discordia pacem,  
expulsa rabie corda ligabat amor.”

in his account of Leontius's practice of "novel piety." When both figures embrace the charitable disposition expected of bishops, they expel arrogant ferocity from their communities and their own personalities.

Lay people are also remembered for their conversions. A former merchant named Julian is praised for having absconded from the secular world to live a charitable life according to a Christian scheme:

Once a merchant, in a happy ending he converted,  
Taken from this world as a man free of criminal guilt.  
He hoarded excessively, but distributed gold to the poor.<sup>157</sup>

As we saw near the end of the *VSM*, the poet conceived of himself as among the "converted." Therefore his recognition of similar dramatic spiritual transformations in his subjects' lives reflects something of his own experience and self-image. Was Fortunatus interested in galvanizing readers to see parallels between himself and the special dead he commemorated? Whatever the case may be, he took proverbial wisdom from their pattern of changed behavior: "Happy are those who have traded short-lived nobility in exchange for senatorial privilege in heaven."<sup>158</sup>

In his book of epitaphs, Fortunatus lays considerable emphasis on patterns and processes of repetition. As a result of consistent rhetoric and reference to the predictable schemes of conversion and piety in each subject's life, the poems blur together over the course of the book. Non-clerical figures are depicted in the contours of the exemplary clerics that preceded them in a stylistic reenactment of lay emulation of their religious exemplars. The individuality of the deceased is lost to a specific unity.<sup>159</sup> Fortunatus's collection of epitaphs therefore realizes the ideological consistency that is the goal of the social projects championed by a

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<sup>157</sup> *Carm.* 4.23.3-5:

"Mercator quondam, conversus fine beato,  
raptus ab hoc mundo crimine liber homo.  
Collegit nimium, sed sparsit egentibus aurum."

For other examples of the turn from secular to religious practices, see *Carm.* 4.4.7-10; 4.5.7-10, 21-22; 4.24.13.15.

<sup>158</sup> *Carm.* 4.5.21-22:

"Felices qui sic de nobilitate fugaci  
mercatorum in caelis iura senatus habent."

<sup>159</sup> For the concept of Gregory of Tours' "clericalization of society," see n. 150 above.

patron as important as Gregory of Tours. Fortunatus does not necessarily celebrate the deceased's unique personality. Rather their lived conformity to a specific (and considerably ascetic) system of Christian society, and their virtual embodiment of an ideological framework, become the privileged and commemorated subject of each epitaph.

### *Mediating merita*

While Fortunatus celebrates and stylistically demonstrates the conformity of his subjects to Christian ideals through the 'clericalization' of character, he does not abandon completely the notion of individuality in his epitaphic compositions. His collection is not full of simple, stock figures. The poet sometimes provides specific biographical details of a person's life that individualize the subject, such as the duration of a bishop's tenure, or details of a man's marriage, or one's age at death.<sup>160</sup> In addition, he often endeavors to highlight his subjects' (and/or their family's) holy status and rank in relation to the rest of the Christian community. This process of social ordering adds further dimension and gradations to the world he presents in his epitaphic poetry.

A concern with holy status is not limited to the poet's epitaphic project. The first verse of the first poem of the first book of Fortunatus's original collection contains what may be called the keyword to the poet's conceptual system of Christian evaluation, *merita*.<sup>161</sup> Earlier in this chapter, I described *merita* as the currency of status and holiness circulating within the Christian social economy of Merovingian Gaul. Together tombs, epitaphs, and the retelling of miraculous events that took place at shrines and cemeteries made known *merita* of the dead. Here I want to examine the term in relation to the poet's practice of authorship in his

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<sup>160</sup> e.g., 4.3.5, 4.18.21-22.

<sup>161</sup> See *Carm.* 1.1.1: "Antistes Domini, meritis in saecula vivens." For references to *merita* in the epitaphs, see *Carm.* 4.2.11-12; 4.5.4; 4.6.6; 4.7.5; 4.8.11-12; 4.9.13-14; 4.10.10; 4.11.6; 4.13.4; 4.14.5-6; 4.21.1-2; 4.22.8-9; 4.24.4; 4.25.20; 4.26.139-140; 4.27.1-2.

epitaphic poems. I argue that, as a eulogistic writer, Fortunatus functioned as a mediator of *merita*, refereeing and confirming the holy power and saved status of his subjects.

Gregory of Tours was heavily invested in the concept of *merita*, and believed that the richest veins of it were located in the cemetery. “The reward (*quae mercis*) a person has in heaven is revealed at his tomb,” he wrote. “The power emanating from the grave reveals that he dwells in heaven.”<sup>162</sup> Tasked with announcing the *merita* of the dead understood in these terms, Fortunatus’s verse epitaphic activity became a high-stakes operation. Helping to preserve the memory of the dead and stimulate interactions with their tombs, his poetic evaluations worked within an important social mechanism of memory. For a man like Gregory of Tours, controlling this mechanism was essential to the structure, support, and utilization of the holy power he could channel.

In his epitaphs, Fortunatus bolstered and preserved a specific discourse of Christian commemoration for the world of tombs centered on the concept of *merita*. He did so by claiming for himself the role of authoritative speaker among the dead. “If the work of piety will never ever die, you, holy woman, live on according to your merit,” was the grand, confident guarantee the poet gave in his epitaph for Eufrasia, wife of Namatius, former bishop of Vienne.<sup>163</sup> Such rhetoric had a consoling effect on the mourners, Fortunatus recognized: “Do not weep over Avolus entombed, a man who by his own merits enjoys the joy of the light.”<sup>164</sup> Often, however, his job was pitched as simply presenting the facts; so, in his epitaph for Gregory of Tour’s maternal great-grandfather, bishop Gregory of Langres: “If you are interested in merit, real miracles reveal it.”<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> *Glory of the Confessors*, 32: ‘cuius quae sit mercis in caelo, ad eius tumulum; eumque inhabitare paradiso, prodit virtus egrediens de sepulchro.’

<sup>163</sup> 4.27.1-2: “Si pietatis opus numquam morietur in aevo,  
vivi pro merito, femina sancta, tuo.”

<sup>164</sup> *Carm.* 4.21.1-2: “Inriguis Avolum lacrimis ne flete sepultum,  
qui propriis meritis gaudia lucis habet.”

<sup>165</sup> Fortunatus, *Carm.* 4.2.11: “Si quaeras meritum, produnt miracula rerum.”

Within the Merovingian world of tombs, understanding the location and distribution of *merita* was invaluable for those interested in accessing holy power. Such a world was constructed by commemorators for whom the family nobility, office, and perceived Romanness of the deceased still mattered heavily. Without deconstructing the significance his community had invested in nobility and station, Fortunatus nevertheless crafted careful statements of praise to show a preference for holiness and assert *merita*'s superiority to other forms of social capital. In his epitaph for Cronopius, bishop of the city of Périgueux, a man like Gregory who had inherited his episcopal post by virtue of family ties, Fortunatus paid homage to his descent while prioritizing his *merita*. He called him “a man noble in his ancient stock of ancestors, but more noble by merit in Christ.”<sup>166</sup> Similarly, Leontius the elder of Bordeaux was lauded for having enhanced the prestige of his honorable senatorial lineage by procuring holy *merita*.<sup>167</sup>

Although Fortunatus praises a large portion of his epitaphic subjects for having some claim to *merita*, his poetry still exudes the competitive spirit that suffused the funerary landscape. *Merita* were not distributed equally; not every tomb or entombed person promised the same access to holy power. Commemorative monuments may preserve the fingerprints of competitive survivors clambering to ensure a specific impression of their deceased loved ones in the world above, but in Fortunatus's epitaphs, the air of competition sometimes drifts over into imaginations of the afterlife as well. It is detectable in the joint epitaph that the poet composed for Ruricius and Ruricius II, grandfather and grandson (or great nephew), bishops of Limoges:

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<sup>166</sup> *Carm.* 4.8.11-12: “Nobilis antiquo veniens de germine patrum  
sed magis in Christo nobilior merito.”

See *Carm.* 4.13.4 for a simpler formulation of the same antithesis: “Nobilis et merito nobiliore potens.” At *Carm.* 4.2.5-6 Bishop Gregory of Langres is similarly fashioned as noble by line, but more noble in his actions (*gestis*). See Roberts, *Humblest Sparrow*, 18: “Antithesis here has an evaluative role, marking one of the two opposed ideas as of higher value in the Christian scheme of things.”

<sup>167</sup> *Carm.* 4.10.10. Through comments such as these within epitaphic poetry for bishops, Fortunatus imputed the episcopal rank with an active form of holy power, and perhaps trained readers to look for signs of future *merita* among living bishops. See also *Carm.* 4.7.5 where Chaletricus is dubbed “worthy of being bishop” for his *merita*.

The twin flowers Ruricii, to whom Rome was joined  
 Through the familial renown of the Anicii [...]
 Each one in his own time founding holy churches for a patron;  
 This one for Augustine, that one for Peter.  
 This man honest, that one reverent, this man serious, that one cheerful,  
 Vying with each other over who would be greater than whom.<sup>168</sup>

While the competition among the Ruricii ended in a stalemate, its depiction reveals Fortunatus at work as an arbiter mediating a contest over memory and *merita*. His role was necessary because of a basic fact: one never claimed *merita* for oneself. Like renown, it was always bestowed. As a eulogistic mediator, Fortunatus's duty was to allot *merita*; to announce what status his subject had earned in heaven, and therefore to describe a still-present power in the deceased to be cultivated and venerated.

Fortunatus prompts readers to consider and interact with the *merita* of his subjects by a number of strategies. Once in the collection, in the epitaph for Basil, he takes a tried-and-true approach of Roman epitaphic rhetoric, addressing the reader to involve the audience directly in the poetic commemoration: "You, reader, who want to know who is buried in this tomb—the sad sepulcher houses famous Basil."<sup>169</sup> Elsewhere, he exhorts unacknowledged readers subtly, by speaking obliquely about things "worthy" of esteem. The aforementioned bishop Cronopius and Tetricus, bishop of the city of Langres, for example, are addressed as persons "who must be venerated."<sup>170</sup> Finally, but most powerfully, Fortunatus occasionally modeled

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<sup>168</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, *Carm.* 4.5.7-8, 11-16:

"Ruricii gemini flores, quibus Aniciorum  
 iuncta parentali culmine Roma fuit.  
 [...]  
 Tempore quisque suo fundans pia templa patroni  
 iste Augustini, condidit ille Petri.  
 Hic probus, ille pius, hic serius, ille serenus,  
 certantes pariter quis cui maior erit."

<sup>169</sup> *Carm.* 4.18.5-6: "Qui cupis hoc tumulo cognoscere, lector, humatum,  
 Basilium illustrem maesta sepulchra tegunt."

<sup>170</sup> *Carm.* 4.8.5: "venerande Cronopi" and 4.3.1: "venerando Tetrice cultu." In each case the use of the gerundive, even of a deponent verb, seems to me to be evaluative in force. The descriptors suggest to readers an obligation to show reverence to the subject.

petitionary piety by prayerfully seeking assistance from his meritorious commemorated subject. *Merita* could manifest physically through salubrious miracles, often received by votive suppliants who had appealed to the special dead. Through witness testimony to these events, which a eulogistic arbiter like Fortunatus or a historian like Gregory might promulgate and confirm, an individual's *merita* attained a level of irrefutability. It was possible to settle disputes over holy status this way. In an epitaph for twins, Patrick and John, who died in infancy, Fortunatus deigned to differentiate even between the babies' levels of holiness, calling Patrick "the more gifted one" because of the many miracles that had already given evidence of his special merit.<sup>171</sup>

By announcing the *merita* of his subjects in a language of praise, by commending holy capital over secular status, and sometimes by clarifying the hierarchy of the special Christian dead, Fortunatus assumed the role of authoritative mediator in the cemetery, which was among the most ideologically charged and combated spaces in Merovingian Gaul. His evaluative descriptions of the dead and his proclamations of their holy virtue calls to mind Gregory of Tours' work in the *Glory of the Confessors* and other miracle books, geared toward the production of Christian communal memory and the edification of the Church. Setting these literary projects side by side, and accounting for Gregory's desire to have poets join in his writerly efforts, prompts us to contemplate whether Fortunatus was, if not responding to the bishop at the level of the letter, at least on the same page as the bishop while working as a Christianizing epitaphic writer.

### *The "I" in epitaphs*

The clericalization of epitaphic subjects and the mediation of their *merita* represent functions of Fortunatus's poetship that do not rely on his obvious self-fashioning, even if they do hinge on certain elements of the poet's biography. The patterns of conversion and Christianization highlighted in the deceased are some of the same patterns around which Fortunatus molds his own narrative. Similarly, he confirms manifestations

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<sup>171</sup> *Carm.* 4.22.8-9: "Patricius, munere maior erat,  
de cuius merito se plurima signa dederunt."



of their supernatural influence in ways that recall his intimate experience with holy power articulated elsewhere. Fortunatus's image and biography are not consistently opaque in his epitaphs, however. Like Sidonius and Damasus, the poet intervenes personally in some of his tombstone poems. In what follows, I want to explore the intricacies of these moments of self-representation. The goal of the investigation is to understand the social and stylistic effects of the poet's overt presence in eulogistic texts, and to appreciate the relationships that obtain between the aesthetic and ideological functions of his verse epitaphs. To do so, this section will explore Fortunatus's epitaphic writing as performances or practices of an amalgamated literary, social, and religious role, one developed to function within his specific Merovingian community, but which also combined aspects of the ascetic poetship he inherited as a reader of Christian Latin verse.

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The pronounced moments of self-fashioning analyzed previously showed Fortunatus's sensitivity to the importance of critical judgment and the threat of damaging literary critique.<sup>172</sup> In his prefatory letter to Gregory, he expressed anxiety about the potentially poor reception of his poetry, which had been produced in an environment without proper intellectual support. Upon reflection, Fortunatus recognized both his need and fear of peer review. This dreaded imperative led him at last to present the publication of his collection as an act of obedience to Gregory, a man of higher rank in the Christian literary community into which he was endeavoring to enter. He was able to lean on Gregory's authoritative approval to justify broadcasting his verse widely, and to use the bishop as an anchor for the claims to authority he himself had made as a praise poet. From the outset, therefore, Fortunatus grounded his poetic practice in the recognition of social and religious authority and adjudication (what I am calling "peer review").

By necessity, composing an epitaph required Fortunatus to make assertions of authority. His eulogistic role had an evaluative function. Uninhibited by blood ties to his subjects, Fortunatus judged

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<sup>172</sup> For an illuminating discussion of judgment as a social mechanism to which another set of early medieval poets were highly attuned, see E. Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet in Anglo-Saxon England*. (Cambridge, 2015), esp. pp. 98-110.

individuals as a pure critic of the spirit. His obligation in performing well was to his Christian community. On occasion, the weight of this obligation and its consequences triggered a reflex for self-inscription within an epitaph itself.

In six poems, the poet makes himself known to the audience by writing in the first person, often in potentially detachable couplets that ring the poem.<sup>173</sup> In these moments Fortunatus tends to orient himself in relation to the deceased and define his authorial activity right as he engages in it, usually by speaking of his deep emotional attachment to his subject and/or patron. The first instance in which Fortunatus enacts this strategy occurs in his poem for the aforementioned Chaetricus, wherein the poet intervenes at the beginning and end of the poem:

My eyes fill up with tears, my insides are shaken by weeping  
And my trembling fingers are unable to write the difficult words,  
Seeing as now I will now make a speech for you entombed, who I wished was alive,  
Compelled to say bitter things in a sweet poem.  
[...]  
Pray for your Fortunatus, holy father,  
I who whisper things that are trifling in view of your great virtues.<sup>174</sup>

Here the poet's affection for the deceased is depicted as the source of the creative and inspirational energy behind his writing. His poignant acknowledgement of emotional ties to his subject has the effect of uniting the author with mournful viewers, but also signals his intimate closeness to the virtuous man whose holiness

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<sup>173</sup> See *Carm.* 4.7.1-4, 25-26; 4.8.1-2; 4.10.3-4; 4.17.9; 4.18.1-4; 4.27.3-4, 19-22. The first-person coda at 4.6.20-21 is bracketed by Leo, who notes that the couplet is repeated at the end of *Carm.* 4.27. In 4.3.2, 15 Fortunatus uses the first person plural to associate with the community of mourners.

<sup>174</sup> *Carm.* 4.7.1-2, 25-26.

“Illacrimant oculi, quatiuntur viscera fletu  
nec tremuli digiti scribere dura valent,  
dum modo, qui volui vivo, dabo verba sepulto  
carmine vel dulci cogor amara loqui.  
[...]  
Haec qui, sancte pater, pro magnis parva susurro,  
pro Fortunato, quaeso, precare tuo.”

he is about to celebrate. At the end, Fortunatus models devotional piety for his audience, announcing his conviction in Chaletricus' saintly power by making a public prayer to him.

Surveying Diehl's catalogue of Gallic episcopal epitaphs, Michael Roberts has called this technique of emotional authorial intrusion "alien to the manner of Christian sepulchral inscriptions written for church or monastic figures."<sup>175</sup> But fascinatingly, we *have* seen this kind of poetic procedure before, only outside of Gaul, in Damasus' *elogia* for the saints, martyrs, and privileged Christian citizens of Rome. Fortunatus's utterance of personal grief, the inclusion of his own name, and his structural embrace of the poem all recall aspects of Damasus' poetic commemorative strategies. It is not only that Fortunatus broadcasts his close connection to his special subject, however. Like Damasus, he also demonstrates for readers how they might achieve intimacy with the holy dead through petitionary recollection. Further inspection of Diehl's catalogue reveals that these first-person strategies were occasionally implemented by epitaphic poets writing for bishops of the city of Rome in the sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>176</sup> This combined social and stylistic strategy suggests that Fortunatus's epitaphic poetship did not always follow the standard procedures of his Gallic funeral surroundings. Coming from Italy as an exile, the poet may have rather sought to translate into Gaul the prestigious choreography of commemoration developed, practiced, and fossilized within the metrical epitaphs of Christian Rome.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> *Humblest Sparrow*, p. 16 and n.39.

<sup>176</sup> For first-person expressions of emotion by poets in epitaphs for bishops of Rome, see Diehl, *ILCV* 984, an epitaph for Pope Hormisdas (d. 523), lines 11-12: "haec ego Silverius quamvis mihi dura notavi | ut possent tumulis fixa manere diu"; and *ILCV* 992 for Pope Boniface III (d. 607), lines 11-12: "flete ergo mecum pastoris funera, cuncti, | quos taedet citius his caruisse bonis." *ILCV* 1644, a long metrical epitaph for one Abbot Florentinus at a monastery near Arles (perhaps that of the Apostles founded by St. Aurelianus) is a fascinating sixth-century Gallic specimen containing authorial intrusions. Notably, the poem operates with a capacious concept of authorship, for both the poet (Januarius) and the engraver (Tantillus), presumably monks, make themselves known and ask for prayers. (See also the elaborate thirty-seven-letter-long acrostic stretching the entirety of the poem: "FLORENTINUS ABBAS HIC IN PACE QUIESCIT AMEN.") It dates to c. 588. The epitaph could suggest the impact and continued evolution of the epitaphic strategy of authorial intrusion within Gaul among ascetic writers.

<sup>177</sup> See n.51 above for evidence of Gregory of Tours' awareness of Damasian material. Fortunatus has been shown to have drawn from inscriptions from the city of Rome elsewhere in his poetry. See Blomgren, "Fortunatus cum elogiis collatus," p. 95.

Fortunatus's self-depiction as a "poet-by-obligation" in the poem for Chaetricus—where he is "compelled" (*cogor*) by grief—rings familiar as well. It is a staple of Fortunatus's poetship; and we observed that Sidonius deployed this tactic several times as well. On the one hand, shaping one's authorial practice as a compelled response would appear to function as a self-fashioning technique by which Christian poets could protect their aura of humility and preemptively defend themselves against the accusations of presumptuousness that highly literate composition could elicit. On the other hand, it allowed one to portray one's poetic practice as an enactment of duty both to God and to fellow Christians. It therefore contributed to an image of virtuosity and social connectedness.<sup>178</sup> This method of self-representation features consistently in Fortunatus's first-person epitaphic appearances. In his poem for Bishop Leontius the younger of Bordeaux, the poet laments: "My wish upturned, I am called (*vocor*) to weep over the tomb of the man to whom I would have rather sent a poem of well-wishes."<sup>179</sup> Elsewhere, in his commemoration of the lay elite person Basil, Fortunatus points to his subject's wife as the instigating agent moving him to compose:

I am prevented by tears from crying out the lover's name,  
 And my hand is barely able to write the words to be grieved.  
 But I am compelled by a spouse's affection to give a few words for the buried man:  
 If I speak, I am pained; if I refuse, I will be hard-hearted.<sup>180</sup>

As here, Fortunatus often depicts himself caught between a rock and a hard place in his role as a poet, trapped between an imperative to humble self-effacement and the duties that call for his authorial presence.

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<sup>178</sup> So Fortunatus, in *Carm.* 3.9, a meditation on Easter written to Bishop Felix, imagined himself as one small piece of creation testifying to God's creative energy: "If the bushes now resound to you with the warbling of birds, I the humblest sparrow among them, sing out of love." See also, e.g., *Carm.* 1.15.93; 6.1a.3-4; 9.7.32; 11.23.14.

<sup>179</sup> *Carm.* 4.10.3-4:

"Malueram potius cui carmina ferre salutis,  
 perverso voto flere sepulchra vocor."

<sup>180</sup> Basil's wife, Baudegund, is named in line 21. Here, *Carm.* 4.18.1-4:

"Impedior lacrimis prorumpere nomen amantis  
 vixque dolenda potest scribere verba manus.  
 Coniugis affectu cogor dare pauca sepulto:  
 si loquor, adfligor; si nego, durus ero."

He remains stuck until some valid emotion or an opportunity for the exercise of humility frees him from his predicament. By virtue of this kind of self-fashioning, his authority as an author is relegated to the passive; his poetic practice is made the natural response to an objective good—feeling (e.g. love), idea (e.g. *merita*), or individual. In his epitaph for the talented young boy Arcadius, “Beauty” is the force that pushes him past his comfort zone to compose admiringly on the buried: “Where are you taking me, Beauty, to sing the praise of the dead? Each detail you recall means more tears must be shed.”<sup>181</sup> Elsewhere, Fortunatus describes a complex of pious emotion and relational ties, encapsulated in the word *amor*, exerting a compulsive force on his writing practice. “Love pulls,” he wrote.<sup>182</sup> The gravity of such emotion functioned as a motivating force. It pushed Fortunatus past humility to practice his art. In his epitaph for the aristocrat Basil, the bonds of patronage and the social obligations of authorship are encased in this language of *amor*. The poet relegates Basil’s identity simply to “the lover” (*amantis*). His wife Baudegund’s affection (*affectu*) for her spouse compels the poet to compose.<sup>183</sup> In this maneuver, Fortunatus moves behind the scenes to allow the presumed patron to take center stage, which in turn transforms the poem into a reflection of another’s pious and amorous grief. The poet’s “I” gives way to the patron’s name and emotional outpouring.<sup>184</sup> So in his epitaph for Bishop Leontius the elder, a figure named Theodosius with unknown connections to the deceased is credited for the poem and depicted as a loving commemorator: “Although you deserve the very best, your Theodosius offers you these all too meager verses out of love.”<sup>185</sup> Again, it is *amor* that catalyzes the production of the epitaph.

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<sup>181</sup> *Carm.* 4.17.9-10 (with an allusion to Horace, *Odes* 3.25):

“Quo me, forma, rapis laudes memorare sepulti?  
singula si memores, plus lacrimanda mones.

For interpretation of the Horatian intertext, see Roberts, *Humblest Sparrow*, p. 30, whose translation I have used here.

<sup>182</sup> *Carm.* 11.23.14: “haec dubitante manu scribere traxit amor.”

<sup>183</sup> For other epitaphs in which Fortunatus records the spouse’s name and motivating love, see *Carm.* 4.10.25-26 (Placidina for Bishop Leontius the elder); 4.20.5-6 (Frigia for the envoy Brumachius); 4.24.13-15 (Nicasia for the royal counselor Orientius).

<sup>184</sup> For references to an apparent patron within an epitaph, see: *Carm.* 4.9.37-38; 4.10.25-26; 4.12.17-18; 4.20.5-6; 4.23.15; 4.24.13-15. Several invoke the patron’s *amor* and relate it to the construction of the epitaph or the performance of the funeral duty.

<sup>185</sup> *Carm.* 4.9.37-38:

While Fortunatus inserts himself conspicuously into several epitaphs, and boldly incorporates self-representational tactics first implemented by poets behind epitaphs for the Christian elite of Rome, he nevertheless minimizes his authority and agency within the texts by making himself the obliged respondent to the virtue of the deceased and the pious affection of their survivors. As a result, his epitaphic verse appears less self-aggrandizing than that of Damasus or Sidonius, less overtly interested in finding a foothold by which to climb the social ladder. As an epitaphic author, Fortunatus dons an attitude of servitude. His authority is translated into expressions of emotional adamancy, and the stated belief in the goodness of the dead that lends a touch of genuineness to each epitaph. This interpretation does not make a claim about the poet's sincerity, or his lack of it. Sincerity is historically unrecoverable. Rather our investigation into Fortunatus's epitaphic writing practice unveils one series of shifts in the patterns, behaviors, structures, and ideologies of Christian Latin verse epitaphic poetship enacted over time by a set of self-reflecting commemorators.

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Brilliantly talented, quick-witted, sweet of speech,  
 Whose charming strain many a page sings,  
 Fortunatus, the pinnacle of poets, reverent in his action,  
 Born in Ausonia, lies buried here in this earth.  
 From his mouth we learn the deeds of the saints of old.  
 These deeds show how to take the journey of light.  
 Fortunate are you, Gaul, graced with such jewels  
 From whose light foul night takes flight away from you.  
 I have produced these modest lines in an unrefined poem  
 So your honor, holy one, would not be hidden among the people.  
 Do a poor man a good turn, blessed man: ask according to your outstanding merits  
 That I not be condemned by the just judge, I pray.

This study has come a long way from Paul the Deacon's epitaph for Fortunatus presented in the now distant introduction. Indeed, recognizing that his commemorative poem may have better served as an epilogue to the chapter, I include it here once more in an attempt to conclude this study. Paul's poem shows that he was

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"Haec tibi parva nimis, cum tu merearis opima,  
 carmina Theodosius praebet amore tuus."

perhaps the most delicate and attentive reader of Fortunatus's poetry for which we have evidence. His eulogistic epitaph contains a convincing impression of his literary idol, and offers in twelve crisp lines a dazzling interpretation of his subject's poetic practice, which took some seventy-five pages to describe. See how the poem opens with enumeration of the old poet's virtue—one of Fortunatus's favorite techniques—and closes with acknowledgement of his all-important *merita*. See how Paul inscribes himself in the poem as Fortunatus might have, adopting a humble and suppliant persona to petition a man he recognizes as a true Christian intermediary.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CLARIFYING THE ECLIPSE: SISEBUT, ISIDORE, AND THE POETICS OF POWER IN POST-ROMAN IBERIA

*Introduction: explaining eclipses*

On August 29, 611 AD, the Iberian Peninsula witnessed a dramatic total eclipse of the moon. It was the year's second full lunar eclipse. As the earth moved between its satellite and the sun, and cast its shadow on the lunar surface, the moon would have appeared red to observers below. Over the next twelve months two more partial eclipses of the moon and a total eclipse of the sun adorned the Iberian sky. This anomalous string of eclipses begged explanation; perhaps all the more in the Visigothic Kingdom because of its overlap with yet another change of regime. In 612, following the death of King Gundemar, Sisebut claimed the throne to become the fourth king in eleven years.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not the coincidence of these events triggered tension in the region is difficult to say. Although the Book of Revelation describes eclipses as signs of the end times, no one in Spain is known to have advanced an overtly apocalyptic interpretation.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, evidence indicates that these astronomical events may have provoked superstitious reactions. They certainly prompted the curiosity of the newly minted monarch. Within a year of Sisebut's ascension, Bishop Isidore of Seville had fulfilled a request from the king for a scientific treatise on such phenomena as the lunar eclipse. Isidore called his work *De natura rerum* (DNR) and prefaced it with praise for the learned monarch's inquiry, as well as a statement of his own scholarly intent.<sup>3</sup>

Although I am well aware that you are distinguished for the gift of eloquence and the flowering variety of your learning, nevertheless you are making an even more wide-ranging study, and you demand that I aid you in certain matters concerning the nature and causes of things [...] I have addressed all these matters in a brief document, presenting them just as they were formulated by the scholars of antiquity and especially in the works of catholic authors. For to know the nature of these things is not

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<sup>1</sup> Liuva II (601-603), Witteric (603-610), Gundemar (610-612), Sisebut (612-621). For discussion, see Y. Hen, *Roman Barbarians: the Royal Court and Culture in the Early Medieval West*. (London, 2007), pp. 128-129.

<sup>2</sup> Rev 6:12, and see Caesarius of Arles, *Expositio in Apocalypsim*, in G. Morin (ed.), *S. Caesarii opera omnia*, vol. ii (1942), pp. 210-277: 227.

<sup>3</sup> The best modern edition is J. Fontaine (ed. and trans.), *Isidore de Séville: Traité de la nature*. (Paris, 1960); for the astronomical circumstances surrounding the text's production, see pp. 3-6. For a recent English translation of Isidore's manual, see C. Kendall and F. Wallis, *On the Nature of Things*. (Liverpool, 2016).



superstitious knowledge, as long as they are investigated in accordance with sound and sensible teaching.<sup>4</sup>

Most obviously, Isidore's careful explication of his purpose discloses the specific interests and methodology with which he worked for much of his prolific career. The compilation of ancient scholarship, with an emphasis on Catholic (i.e. patristic, and non-Arian doctrinal works) learning, aimed at a holistic and faithful understanding of the world is quintessential to the "Isidorian project."<sup>5</sup> The same combination of theory and practice undergirds his later *magnum opus*, the encyclopedic *Etymologies* (also dedicated to Sisebut in draft form), one of the basic books of the Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup> But while Isidore's rational approach to the mysteries of the world in the *DNR* fits well within the contours of his intellectual image, and may seem an obvious course of action to those with a scientific worldview, it would be misguided to discount the novelty and significance of Sisebut's request and the bishop's response within the context of the wider late antique world.

Elsewhere around the post-Roman Mediterranean such spectacular astronomical events exposed and exacerbated communal anxiety. In reaction to inexplicable natural phenomena, the collective performance of non-Christian ritual was not uncommon, to the dismay of Christian authorities.<sup>7</sup> In one sixth-century

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<sup>4</sup> *De natura rerum*, pref. 1-2: "Dum te praestantem ingenio facundiaque ac uario flore litterarum non nesciam, inpendis tamen amplius curam, et quaedam ex rerum natura uel causis a me tibi efflagitas suffraganda [...] Quae omnia, secundum quod a ueteribus uiris ac maxime sicut in litteris catholicorum uirorum scripta sunt, proferentes, breui tabella notamus. Neque enim earum rerum naturam noscere superstitiosae scientiae est, si tantum sana sobriaque doctrina considerentur." The translation here is taken from Kendall and Wallis, p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> The standard analysis of Isidore's work remains J. Fontaine, *Isidore de Séville et la culture classique dans L'Espagne wisigothique*, 2 vols, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1983). While Fontaine speaks of an "Isidorian Renaissance" when describing the prolific intellectual activity of Isidore and his protégés, some scholars have abandoned the term for the "Isidorian Project," which focuses more attention on aspects of strategy and design in Isidore's scholarly work; see J. Wood and J. Martínez Jiménez, "New Directions in the Study of Visigothic Spain." *History Compass* 14, no. 1 (2016): 29-38. For a recent, collective investigation into Isidore's influence, see A. Fear and J. Wood (eds.), *Isidore of Seville and his Reception in the Early Middle Ages: Transmitting and Transforming Knowledge* (Amsterdam, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> For the dedication, see Isidore, *Ep. XIV* in G. Ford (trans.) *The Letters of St. Isidore of Seville*. (Amsterdam, 1970), p. 69.

<sup>7</sup> See Valerie Flint's illuminating study, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*. (Princeton, 1991).

sermon, Caesarius of Arles, the austere monk-bishop from Lérins, expressed disappointed astonishment as he described pagan ceremonies enacted on the very occasion of a lunar eclipse.

How is it that foolish men think they should, as it were, help the moon in its eclipse? When its shining orb is covered at certain times by a natural condition of the air or is suffused with the nearby heat of the setting sun, they think that there is some conflict of incantations against heaven. This they imagine they can overcome by the sound of a trumpet or the ridiculous tinkling of bells that are violently shaken.<sup>8</sup>

This was not Caesarius shadowboxing with extinct pagan practices. Earlier homilies by bishop Maximus of Turin (c. 350–415) and the later Carolingian *Indiculus superstitionum* corroborate his report of the superstition.<sup>9</sup> Maximus himself describes a personal encounter with a similar ritual on the evening of a lunar eclipse. When he inquired into the meaning of a sudden uproar in his community, he learned that people were shouting *carmina* at the moon, incantations they believed could aid the overshadowed body in a cosmic struggle.

Both Maximus and Caesarius treated the manifestation of superstitious belief with immediate correction. For Maximus, this entailed an ethical appeal. His moral argument involved a comparison between the darkening moon and the dwindling light of his congregation's faith: "You are changed like the moon, as one who was just shining with faithful devotion thereafter wanes with the weakness of faithlessness," he preached in warning. "Your transformation is more concerning than the moon's, for the moon suffers a loss of light, but you lose salvation."<sup>10</sup> Caesarius, on the other hand, attempted to undermine superstitious practice with a simple theological rationale: God has nature under control. It is therefore sacrilegious to act as though heavenly bodies need human help.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Sermo* 52.3, G. Morin (ed.), *CCSL* 103 (1953): "Et illud quale est, quando stulti homines quasi lunae laboranti putant se debere succurrere, qui eius ignitum globum naturali aeris ratione certis temporibus obductum aut vicino solis occidui ardore suffusum, quasi aliquem contra caelum carminum credunt esse conflictum, quem bucinæ sonitu vel ridiculo concussis tintinabulis putant se superare posse tinnitu." For the translation, see M. Mueller, *Saints Caesarius of Arles: Sermons*. (New York, 1956), p. 206.

<sup>9</sup> Maximus of Turin, *Sermones* 30-31, in A. Mutzenbecher (ed.), *CCSL* 23 (1962); and for the *Indiculus*, see A. Boretius (ed.) *MGH Capit.* I (Hanover, 1893), pp. 222-223.

<sup>10</sup> Maximus of Turin, *Serm.* 30: "Mutaris ergo sicut luna, ut qui paulo ante fidei deuotione fulgebas, postea perfidiae infirmitate deficias [...] Grauior ergo tua quam lunae mutatio est; luna defectum luminis patitur tu salutis."

<sup>11</sup> See Caesarius of Arles, *Serm.* 52.3.

In light of these pastoral reactions, Isidore's sober authorization of Sisebut's inquiry into the natural world stands out. Whereas Maximus had only described a moral allegory in the eclipse, and Caesarius had implied the irreverence of questioning divine design, Isidore insisted on offering piously derived rational explanations alongside figurative interpretations. So in the *DNR*'s chapter on lunar eclipses, he correctly outlined the mechanics of the phenomenon, then argued that the loss and renewal of the moon's brightness signified the reinvigoration of the church after a period of persecution.<sup>12</sup>

The collaborative nature of Isidore's project also sets it apart. Cooperation was the keynote in the bishop's prefatory statement to the *DNR*, where he framed the text as one composed in concert with royal leadership. Importantly, the rhetoric of a coordinated call-and-response between the bishop and the king was not one-sided; for the round of intellectual exchange did not end with Isidore. Soon after dispatching his treatise, the bishop received a special reply from the king. It came in the form of a sixty-one-line hexameter poem on the lunar eclipse.<sup>13</sup> Sisebut's verse experiment—*De eclipsi lunae*—is decidedly literary, replete with allusions to Virgil and a Lucretian lexicon.<sup>14</sup> It begins with bucolic scene-setting as Sisebut imagines Isidore lazily waxing poetic “amid babbling brooks and songful breezes.”<sup>15</sup> Putting astronomical processes into classicizing verse was no frivolous exercise for the poet-king, however, who presents himself as beset by myriad concerns. His poem functions not as a distraction, therefore, but as an argument. Sisebut declares a desire to replace superstitious explanations of the phenomenon, specifically the idea that a witch was to blame

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<sup>12</sup> See Isidore, *De natura rerum*, 21.

<sup>13</sup> For an edition, translation and commentary of the poem, see Fontaine, *Traité de la nature*, pp. 151-161, 328-335, 362-364.

<sup>14</sup> See R. Green, “Sisebuti Ecloga?” *Vigiliae Christianae* 32.2 (1978), pp. 113-117, and Fontaine, *Traité de la nature*, pp. 156-157.

<sup>15</sup> *De eclipsi lunae*, 1-3:       “Tu forte in lucis lentus vaga carmina gignis  
  Argutosque inter latices et musica flabra  
  Pierio liquidam perfundis nectare mentem.”

for the moon's transformation.<sup>16</sup> Though fairly abstruse in its language, the king's verses go on to clarify the mechanics of the eclipse, albeit with some false assumptions about the mobility of the sun.

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Manifold lines of inquiry radiate out from this intriguing moment of scholarly collaboration and poetic experimentation centered on an obscure astronomical event. Early medieval historians have most persistently pursued questions surrounding the tone of the exchange, as well as its political function. On the whole, arguments have been for the collective ideological significance of the *DNR* and *De eclipsi lunae*. Critics agree that, as leaders of ecclesiastical and secular regimes, the authors' mutual acknowledgement of each other imbues their texts with a political charge.<sup>17</sup> In fact, Isidore and Sisebut's erudite works appear at a pivotal moment in the organization of Visigothic authority, specifically amid the negotiation of a balance of rule between the church and state.<sup>18</sup> The timing suggests that their responses to astronomical anomalies may reflect more than shared scholarly interest in the natural world. Debate continues, however, over the exact meaning of their discourse, and over the particular political implications of their swap of texts. Posed simply, the most pressing question is whether Sisebut affirmed the bishop's intellectual efforts and authority with his

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<sup>16</sup> *De eclipsi lunae*, 16, 18-20: Dicam quor fesso livescat circulus orbe...  
Non illam, ut populi credunt, nigrantibus antris  
Infernas ululans mulier praedira sub umbras  
Detrahit."

<sup>17</sup> See L.J. van der Lof, "Der Mäzen König Sisebutus und sein *De eclipsi lunae*," *Revue d'études augustiniennes et patristiques* 18.1, (1972), pp. 145-151; J. Fontaine, "King Sisebut's *Vita Desiderii* and the Political Function of Visigothic Hagiography," in E. James (ed.) *Visigothic Spain: New Approaches* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 93-129:97-98; S. McCulskey, *Astronomies and Cultures in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 124; Hen, *Roman Barbarians*, pp. 124-152, and "A Visigothic King in Search of an Identity – *Sisebutus Gothorum gloriosissimus princeps*" in R. Corradini, M. Gillis, R. McKitterick, and I. van Renswoude (eds.), *Ego Trouble. Authors and their Identities in the Early Middle Ages* (Wien, 2010), pp. 89-99.

<sup>18</sup> For compelling analyses of the dynamics of power within Visigothic Spain, see R. Stocking, *Bishops, Councils, and Consensus in the Visigothic Kingdom, 589-633*. (Ann Arbor, 2000); and S. Koon and J. Wood, "Unity from Disunity: Law, Rhetoric and Power in the Visigothic Kingdom," *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'histoire* 16.6 (2009), pp. 793-808.

poetry, or somehow challenged them. The *De eclipsi lunae* prompts questions not just of esoteric literary enterprise, therefore, but of the formation and presentation of power within post-Roman Iberia.<sup>19</sup>

In what follows, I wish to examine this piece of poetry as a literary event shaped by (and involved in) multiple pressures of cultural and political negotiation in the Visigothic world. The ensuing investigation builds on important work by Jacques Fontaine, and more recently Yitzhak Hen, who have situated the king's poem within the "Isidorian Renaissance."<sup>20</sup> Led by the eponymous bishop, this movement of the early seventh century entailed the production of sophisticated scholarly and religious texts, which repurposed ancient and patristic learning toward the creation of a uniform civic and Christian culture within the Visigothic Kingdom.<sup>21</sup> Fontaine has described Sisebut as a complementary collaborator in this cultural enterprise, one whose poetry gave "moral support" to Isidore's mission by combatting superstition while also "provid[ing] a royal example of the return to the refinements of ancient culture."<sup>22</sup> Hen, on the other hand, has interpreted the interaction between the bishop and his poet-king as part of a competition—what he calls a "literary duel"—over leadership roles and ideals in Iberia's intellectual culture.<sup>23</sup>

Here I wish to postpone the question of cooperation or competition between bishop and king in order to set up a more rigorous exploration of the complex context of their negotiation. To answer requires first a more complete history of Isidore and Sisebut's working relationship, and an understanding of the political setting in which it took shape. One part of the subsequent investigation will examine this literary exchange

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<sup>19</sup> This phenomenon has drawn significant scholarly attention of late. For stimulating scholarship, see J. Wood, *The Politics of Identity in Visigothic Spain: Religion and Power in the Histories of Isidore of Seville* (Leiden, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> See Fontaine, *Isidore de Séville et la culture classique*, pp. 454-456; Hen, *Roman Barbarians*, pp. 149-152. For discussion of the use of the term "renaissance", see n. 5 above.

<sup>21</sup> Discussions of this movement are ubiquitous in scholarship on the Visigothic world. For balanced and concise discussion, see Stocking, *Bishops, Councils, and Consensus*, p. 13 and J. Fontaine, "Educating and Learning," in P. Fouracre (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. I (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 735-759: 750.

<sup>22</sup> Fontaine, "King Sisebut's *Vita Desiderii*," pp. 97-98.

<sup>23</sup> Hen, "A Visigothic King in Search of an Identity," p. 95.

in view of other moments of contact between Isidore and Sisebut, and in the wake of interactions between their predecessors in the episcopacy and the court.

In addition, if we are to hear the *De eclipsi lunae* in resonance with the “Isidorian project,” it will be necessary to reconstruct the discursive context in which the poem originally sounded. Fundamentally, Isidore’s intellectual program was underpinned by the belief that proper understandings of both language and the history of ideas were crucial to the construction of a moral political body.<sup>24</sup> This platform was not entirely of his own invention. It built on late ancient patristic learning, but also took from a burgeoning, contemporary culture of asceticism. As elsewhere in the post-Roman Mediterranean, by the seventh century, asceticism had become a prominent source of social power and an important mode of Christian self-formation within Iberia.<sup>25</sup> Iberian ascetics abided by the belief that what one said and thought was constitutive of personhood and relevant to salvation. To cultivate a mode of subjectivity whereby one could transcend the world, these ascetics established regulations not only for the body, but for reading, writing, and thinking. As monasteries flourished in the peninsula, these intellectual practices and the number of practitioners multiplied. Moreover, from the late sixth century, Iberian clerics reared at monastic institutions frequently occupied positions of political influence in the episcopacy, thereby transmitting ascetic ideals to the administrative field. At Seville, Isidore succeeded one such monk-bishop: his brother Leander.<sup>26</sup> In fact, much of Isidore’s literary work, meant for clerical and monastic instruction, took its shape from and contributed to this movement of ascetic

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<sup>24</sup> Wood and Martínez Jiménez, “New Directions,” p. 34.

<sup>25</sup> For enlightening background discussion, see P. Riché, *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West from the Sixth through Eighth Century* (Columbia, 1976), pp. 293-297, and 352-360; P. Maldonado, “*Angelorum Participes*: The Cult of the Saints in Late Antique Spain,” in K. Bowes and M. Kulikowski (eds.) *Hispania in Late Antiquity: Current Perspectives* (Leiden, 2005) pp. 151-188; and N. Allies, “The Monastic Rules of Visigothic Iberia: A Study of Their Text and Language,” PhD Thesis, (University of Birmingham, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> See Isidore, *De viris illustribus*, 41, PL 83, 1103B.

education and empowerment. Put simply, if Sisebut's poem dialogues with the Isidorian agenda, it dialogues with asceticism.

Finally, given the foundational importance of ascetic writing and reading practices within Isidore's vision for Christian culture, Sisebut's literary choices in the *De eclipsi lunae* take on special significance. In the first place, we may ask: why poetry? Here at the outset we must address an obvious possibility. It is true that the very title of Isidore's work (*De natura rerum*) evokes Lucretius's *De rerum natura*, a poem that attempts to dismantle religious superstition and to champion a scientific view of the world. In his reply, the poet-king certainly took inspiration from that ancient work—*De eclipsi lunae* has been called a Lucretian “pastiche” for its distinct and sometimes archaic poetic vocabulary.<sup>27</sup> Most clearly like Lucretius, the king installed Epicurean injunctions against slack-jawed awe in his poem.<sup>28</sup> But Sisebut's decision to respond to Isidore in this way is complicated by the bishop's ascetically-informed stance against Lucretius's project and poetry more generally. Recent criticism has demonstrated that Isidore's *DNR* may in fact represent a direct challenge to Lucretius's scientism, which rejected belief in the supernatural altogether.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to Lucretius, Isidore sought to explain natural processes on their own terms and as they relate to the divine. Moreover, the bishop's confrontational approach to Lucretius accords with his stated ambivalence toward pagan poetry, announced in several texts produced during Sisebut's reign. Isidore's theory of poetry and practical advice surrounding its consumption exposes a deep wariness toward the art.<sup>30</sup> Why then did the king choose to reply in mannered verse to the bishop's lapidary scholarship?

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<sup>27</sup> Fontaine, *Traité de la nature*, p. 156 and *Isidore de Séville et la culture classique*, pp. 454-455.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. “Sed quia mira putas cur” (line 30); “Nil vero mirum est” (line 46).

<sup>29</sup> A. Fear, “Putting the Pieces Back Together: Isidore and *De Natura Rerum*,” in Fear and Wood (eds). *Isidore of Seville and his Reception*, pp. 75-92.

<sup>30</sup> This issue receives extensive treatment below. For relevant texts, see, e.g., *Differentiae*, praef.; *Sententiae*, II.29.13 and III.13.1; *Etymologies*, VIII.vii; *Regula monachorum*, c. 8.

I argue that the king's poetic production represents a sophisticated response to the bishop's persistent concern to shape Christian discourse. The Isidorian project was designed to manage the set of ideas and symbols through which Christian power was proclaimed, the forms in which it was expressed, and the types of persons to express it. The role of poets and poetry in Christian intellectual society was one prominent area of concern. For Isidore, poetry posed particular linguistic, scientific, and ethical problems. Ancient poets had taken liberties with the meanings of words, offered unorthodox explanations of natural and supernatural reality, and indulged in the description of licentious behaviors, all of which threatened to undermine the ideal intellectual and ethical systems of the Visigothic church and state. In composing *De eclipsi lunae*, Sisebut remained sensitive to some of these anxieties surrounding poetry. Forced to navigate them, the poet-king deployed subtle tactics of cultural negotiation as part of his literary effort. He stayed attuned to the dangers of poetry, wrote a poem in accord with scientific truth, and in doing so played the role of expert Christian verse writer, master of poetic propriety. In other words, he wrote as a kind of ascetically-informed poet. As he performed in opposition to superstitious culture, Sisebut also supplied a model for the redeployment of poetic discourse by a secular power. As a result, the king created a hybrid literary identity that Isidore had not envisioned.

Cooperation or competition? The answer is both. In this chapter, I show how Sisebut's composition entailed a creative, strategic, poetic attempt to bolster his ideological alliance with Isidore, leader of the Visigothic church, and to strengthen his position within that relationship; to affirm the Isidorian project, and to put his distinctive stamp on the kingdom's developing Christian culture as well.

*Sisebut and Isidore (I): a history of negotiation*

The *DNR* and *De eclipsi lunae* belong to a collection of works by the church leader and sovereign king that illuminate a shared vision for the kingdom as a Christianized state with the monarch at the helm, supported by educated clerics reared on literature like the *DNR*. Throughout Sisebut's tenure, Isidore



authored an array of texts dealing with theories of Christian governance and religious education. Dedications to the king allow us to firmly date the *DNR* and a draft of the *Etymologies* to his reign, while the *Differentiae*, *Synonyma*, *De ecclesiastic officiis*, *De haeresibus*, and *Sententiae* all likely circulated before the monarch's death.<sup>31</sup> Although these texts individually attend to a miscellany of spiritual and intellectual problems, from the grammar of sin to the confusion caused by homophones, they all contribute to the construction of a learned Christian culture.<sup>32</sup> For the scholar-bishop, the point of learning and knowledge was fundamentally theological: "It is of no use to possess all wisdom, but to be ignorant of God; while ignorance of the world is no obstacle to those with knowledge of God."<sup>33</sup>

Often Isidore's work entailed attempts to control discourse at the level of the word.<sup>34</sup> The bishop's interest, however, was not just in empirical linguistic scholarship. Motivating his work on etymology, for example, was a basic desire to recover "*vis verbi*," the force of a word—not just its meaning, but its power.<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, Isidore wished to channel the power of discourse to meet Christian ends. "The speech of a just man should be solely in service of salvation," he wrote in the *Sententiae*, a handbook of moral precepts.<sup>36</sup> Isidore himself modeled how to wield verbal force with Christian authority. Contemporaries saw in him "an

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<sup>31</sup> For an annotated list of Isidore's works, see the introduction to Fear and Wood (eds.), *Isidore of Seville and his Reception*, pp.14-16; and J.C. Martín, "Sisebut de Toledo," in M. Adelaida Andrés Sanz and C. Codoñer Merino (eds.), *La Hispania visigótica y mozárabe: dos épocas en su literatura* pp. 191-196:192. Our knowledge of Isidore's life and career is heavily indebted to the *Renotatio librorum Isidori*, a contemporary biographical note produced by Braulio of Zaragoza around 637 AD.

<sup>32</sup> For compelling discussion of Isidore's cultural program, see M. Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture: 'Grammatica' and Literary Theory, 350-1100* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 209-243.

<sup>33</sup> *Sententiae* II.1.13, P. Cazier (ed.), *CCSL* 111 (1998): "Nihil prodesse omnem scire prudentiam cum ignorantia Dei, et nihil obesse scientibus Deum ignorantiam mundi. Perfecte autem scit qui Deum prius et ista non pro se, sed pro Deo scit."

<sup>34</sup> For treatment of Isidore's attempt to create a form of authorized Christian speech, see P. Cazier, *Isidore De Séville et la naissance de l'Espagne catholique* (Paris, 1994), pp. 175-181.

<sup>35</sup> *Etymologies* I.xxix.1-2, W. M. Lindsay (ed.), *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum Libri XX*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1911): "Etymologia est origo vocabulorum, cum vis verbi vel nominis per interpretationem colligitur [...] Nam dum videris unde ortum est nomen, citius vim eius intellegis."

<sup>36</sup> *Sententiae* III.55.7: "Sermo enim iusti hominis tantum ad ministerium debet esse salutis."

image of antiquity;” “a man well trained in every kind of locution, so that the quality of his words made him adaptable to one who was learned and to one who had no knowledge, famous both for suiting his words to his subject and for his incomparable eloquence.”<sup>37</sup> At Toledo IV, a council headed by Isidore on grounds of seniority in 633, the episcopal coterie ordered the clergy to follow the Isidorian pattern of learning. One canon insisted: “Priests should study sacred scripture and church law so that all their work is firm in learning and preaching, and so that they are building up everybody as much with a knowledge of faith as with a discipline of action.”<sup>38</sup> Under Isidore, knowledgeable clerics were to function integrally in the process of cultural construction.

Isidore’s efforts did not, therefore, result simply in an academic framework for his agenda. He developed a coherent theory, and also helped to implement a complementary policy of Christian culture, one with significant implications for the structure and exercise of religious power on the ground. Importantly, the bishop did not limit his vision to the clerical sphere. For Isidore, secular and religious worlds were intertwined. The king was to operate as the lead agent for the maintenance and edification of Christian culture. “Let the leaders of the world recognize that they owe God an account of the Church, whose custody they receive from Christ,” he pronounced.<sup>39</sup> The arch-authority of the monarch did not come with a license to wield power within the church as he wished, of course. “Secular powers are subject to religious discipline,” the bishop wrote. “Even though they have been given chief reign over the kingdom, they are still tied and

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<sup>37</sup> Braulio of Zaragoza, *Renotatio Isidori*, praef; translation from C. Barlow, *Iberian Fathers: Braulio of Saragossa and Fructuosus of Braga*, The Fathers of the Church 63 (Washington, 1969), p. 140; see Martín’s edition in CCSL 113B (Turnhout 2006).

<sup>38</sup> Toledo IV, c. 25, *Concilios Visigoticos e Hispano-Romanos*, J. Vives (ed.) (Barcelona, 1963), p.202: “Igitur sacerdotes scripturas sanctas et canones meditentur, ut omne opus eorum in praedicatione et doctrina consistat, atque aedificent cunctos tam fidei scientia quam operum disciplina.”

<sup>39</sup> *Sententiae* III.51.6: “Cognoscant principes saeculi Deo debere se rationem propter ecclesiam, quam a Christo tuendam suscipiunt.” See J. Crouch, “Isidore of Seville and the Evolution of Kingship in Visigothic Spain,” *Mediterranean Studies* 4 (1994), pp. 9-26.

held by a bond of faith.”<sup>40</sup> As with his priests, Isidore insisted that kings uphold the country’s faith by reason rather than by discipline and force: “One does not extract faith with violence. Rather, one recommends it using reason and examples.”<sup>41</sup>

Early medieval respondents described Sisebut as an exemplary executor of this program. The seventh-century historian Fredegar sketched the king as a “wise man . . . overflowing with piety,” and weary of bloodshed.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, one anonymous chronicler described him as a *vir sapiens* “committed wholeheartedly to literary study.”<sup>43</sup> Sisebut, in other words, developed a reputation near to the embodiment of Isidore’s agenda, as a hero of learned Christian culture and pious rule. He achieved this image in part through real and renowned erudition. Aside from his poetry, the king’s corpus reveals a skilled prose writer capable of epistolary and hagiographical composition, and an author guided by a certain Christian idealism. So for instance, the monarch authored a religious *vita* of the martyred bishop Desiderius of Vienne (d. 607). He opened the work by professing a desire to furnish a model “for imitation by the present, for the edification of men in the future, and for the exercise of holy study in times to come.”<sup>44</sup> Such rhetoric certainly qualified as a performance of conventional Christian authorship, and tapped into an ascetic system of literary emulation, rare for kings; but it also jibed with Isidore’s plans to inculcate faith through learning and example.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Sententiae* III.51.3: “Sub religionis disciplinae saeculi potestates subiectae sunt; et quamvis culmine regni sint praediti, uinculo tamen fidei tenentur adstricti.”

<sup>41</sup> *Sententiae* II.2.4: “Fides nequaquam ui extorquetur, sed ratione atque exemplis suadetur.”

<sup>42</sup> Fredegar, *Chronicle*, IV.33, B. Krusch (ed.), *MGH, SRM 2*, (Berlin, 1888), p. 133: “Sisebodus Spanie successit in regno, vir sapiens et in totam Spaniam laudabilis valde, pietate plenissimus.”

<sup>43</sup> See the *Chronicle of 754*, 15 in *Continuatio Hispana*, ed. T. Mommsen, *MGH AA 11, Chronica Minora II*, (Berlin, 1894), p. 340: “vir sapiens nimium litterature deditus.”

<sup>44</sup> Sisebut, *Vita Desiderii*, B. Krusch (ed.), *MGH SRM 3*, Hanover (1896), p. 630: “Pro imitatione praesentium, pro aedificatione hominum futurorum, pro sanctis exercendis studiis succedentium temporum vitam sancti martyris scribere Desiderii disposui.”

<sup>45</sup> In fact, the political charge of this work is well known. Sisebut’s narrative made enemies of the Merovingian regime responsible for the saint’s death; so Fontaine, “King Sisebut’s *Vita Desiderii*,” p. 128: “the *Vita* served as a means whereby the king of Toledo could intervene ideologically in the internal politics of Merovingian Gaul.”

A similar discourse suffused even some of the king's official diplomatic correspondence. To bishops and foreign rulers alike, Sisebut presented himself not only as an earthly political actor, but as a champion of the faith "favored by God," one advising the "knife of experience for amputating foul errors," committed "to carrying out a life of holy devotion with a chaste mind."<sup>46</sup> In a famous letter to the Lombard king Adaloald, for example, he took it upon himself to cure his Germanic relative of the "Arian infection."<sup>47</sup> The Visigothic monarch deployed artful explications of scripture, and put forward living, breathing examples of sanctity to make his point. Of course, by performing as a missionary for Catholic Christianity, Sisebut's literary gesture itself functioned as a model of behavior for Adaloald. His letter not only demonstrated what the Catholic faith entailed, but how kings should brandish it.

Sisebut's efforts to spread Catholic doctrine in the wider Mediterranean through literary discourse accord with the apparent ambitions of Isidore's project. The king's learning even earned posthumous praise from Isidore, who acknowledged him as "outstanding in eloquence, learned in his way of thinking, and partially instructed in literary studies."<sup>48</sup> And yet, the relationship between bishop and king was not entirely copacetic. At one point in particular, Isidore and Sisebut locked horns over the religious administration of the region—that was during the king's persecution of the kingdom's Jewish population sometime before 616. In his *Historia Gothorum*, where the historian-bishop also remarked on Sisebut's education, Isidore scolded the king for "acting with zeal, but not according to knowledge, when he compelled by force those who should have been called to the faith through reason."<sup>49</sup> The laws for the forcible conversion of the Jews are not extant,

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<sup>46</sup> For the letters of Sisebut, see the edition in J. Gil (ed.), *Miscellanea Wisigotica* (Sevilla, 1972), pp. 3-27. For these quotations see *Ep.* III (to the Byzantine governor of Spania, Caesarius), p. 9: "Profiteor coram Deo ipso propitiante promissionem meam in omnibus conservare et sacre devotionis propositum intemerata mente tenere;" *Ep.* VIII, p. 22: "errores putridos cultro [experientiae]...resecando absciderit."

<sup>47</sup> *Sisebut*, *Ep.* VIII, pp. 19-27; here, p. 20: "cognoscentes affinitatem sanguinis nostri Arriana contagione nunc pollui."

<sup>48</sup> *Historia Gothorum, Vandalorum et Suevorum*, 60, T. Mommsen (ed.), *MGH AA XI, Chronica Minora II*, (Berlin, 1894), p. 291: "fuit autem eloquio nitidus, sententia doctus, scientia litterarum ex parte inbutus."

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*: "in initio regni Iudaeos ad fidem Christianam aemulationem quidem habit, non secundum scientiam, potestate enim compulit, quos provocare fidei ratione oportuit." Translation adapted from K. Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval*

but Iberian bishops at Isidore's Toledo IV condemned and repealed the practice "as it was done in the time of the most religious King Sisebut."<sup>50</sup> Their line was clear. The arguments of Christianity, not fear of the state's power, were supposed to draw the convert's eye. The coercive king had therefore critically failed to follow Isidore's blueprint for the construction of the kingdom's Christian culture.<sup>51</sup>

If palpable tension developed between bishop and king over religious administration, we are still left to wonder: how may that tension relate to the composition and circulation of the *De eclipsi lunae*? The muddled chronology—we do not know when Sisebut's Jewish persecutions took place—makes it nearly impossible to establish any type of cause-and-effect relationship. Yitzhak Hen has argued that "the literary ping-pong" between Isidore and Sisebut became agonistic only after the bishop's criticism of the monarch's anti-Semitic policy, and so after their exchange of scholarly and poetic texts.<sup>52</sup> But Hen's claim warrants further deliberation. Consider the heart of the most obvious disagreement between the two figures. The issue centers on the king's failure to abide by a program of "faith by reason." In the *De eclipsi lunae*, Sisebut makes no overt argument to advance the Christian faith, but he does position his work as a rational refutation of non-Christian belief. Recall that the poet-king declares his desire to overturn the superstitious idea that witches are responsible for the moon's eclipse.<sup>53</sup> Although the poem does not contain religious language, it does therefore

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*Spain* (Liverpool, 1990), p. 87. For discussion of Sisebut's Jewish policy, see Stocking, *Bishops, Councils, and Consensus*, pp. 123-135.

<sup>50</sup> Toledo IV, c. 57: "qui autem iam pridem ad christianitatem venire coacti sunt, sicut factum est temporibus religiosissimi principis Sisebuti..."

<sup>51</sup> As a historian, Isidore redacted some of his acclaim for his patron-king. In 626, five years after the monarch's death, the bishop produced a new edition of the *Historia Gothorum*. In this version, Isidore removed the superlative *gloriosissimus* from his portrayal of Sisebut. Admittedly, this change may not amount to an assassination of character. It could mark a propagandistic gesture, i.e. a shift of allegiance to the new regime. See Hen, "A Visigothic King in Search of an Identity," p. 98, n. 75. As Stocking shows, some scholars who are more optimistic about Isidore's admiration for Sisebut have mistakenly relied on interpolated passages, which only appear late in the transmission of the *Historia Gothorum* and paint the king in a better light; see *Bishops, Councils, and Consensus*, p. 133, n.64 for fuller discussion.

<sup>52</sup> Hen, "A Visigothic King in Search of an Identity," p. 95.

<sup>53</sup> *De eclipsi lunae*, lines 18-22.

do the work that Isidore advised—it replaces unauthorized, non-Christian knowledge with rational truth. To recapitulate an argument forwarded in the introduction: one may read the *De eclipsi lunae* as a poem in conversation with one of the principal tenets (i.e. faith by reason) of the Isidorian project. The point here, however, is that the poem does not touch on just any neutral component of the bishop's program; rather it hits on a principle that Sisebut and Isidore quarreled over publicly. Viewed in this light, the *De eclipsi lunae* appears implicated in a *negotiation* between bishop and king over the role of learned discourse in the exercise of religious authority.

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Now I want to shift focus to another point of contention between the monarch and his prelate, which offers a different (and underexplored) angle from which to examine the dynamics of this same negotiation. Although signs of friction between Isidore and Sisebut affected modern interpretations of their literary interactions, no critic has yet commented on any disputes outside of the one surrounding the king's Jewish persecution. Most intriguing and complex are the indications that these two figures disagreed about the place of ascetic practice in the kingdom's culture. Sisebut flexed his power over the episcopacy on this issue when a bishop named Cicilius abandoned his post to join a monastery. In a caustic letter to the ex-bishop, the king vehemently criticized his decision. He compared Cicilius to a negligent shepherd sending his sheep into the jaws of wolves, and accused him of indulging his lack of energy by retiring to the ascetic life.<sup>54</sup> At Toledo, Sisebut also acted with a lack of respect for the contemplative way. He chose a former courtier-turned-abbot to be the capital city's bishop, despite the monk's supposed preference to remain withdrawn as an ascetic.<sup>55</sup> Once again, at Toledo IV more than a decade after the king's passing, Isidore's episcopal coalition wrote an

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<sup>54</sup> Sisebut, *Ep.* I, pp. 3-5.

<sup>55</sup> See the entry on Helladius in Ildefonsus of Toledo, *De viris illustribus*, 6, C. Codoñer Merino (ed.), CCSL 114A (Turnhout, 2007).

opinion that contradicted Sisebut's policy. They declared that clerics should be free to become monks if they wished, seeing as they desired "to pursue the better life."<sup>56</sup>

Sisebut's vocal stance against entry into the monastic life carries a serious subtext. It suggests a willingness to relegate ascetic practice, revered within the church as the ideal mode of being, to secondary status. Such a policy contrasts with the drastic exhortations of leading figures within Visigothic asceticism, such as Leander of Seville, to "flee the Sirens' songs" of worldly life, to "climb the naked cross to die to the world."<sup>57</sup> A separate and extraordinary letter in the king's dossier, however, complicates his position. Sisebut presents a contradictorily high opinion of monasticism, and details an investment of flesh and blood into its culture. In the missive, Sisebut wrote his son Theudila to congratulate him on his conversion to monkhood. There he echoed the pro-ascetic sentiments of church leaders as he told Theudila to "avoid the arguments of this world like waves, that may you rejoice to have arrived at the port of victory."<sup>58</sup> The king also offered advice on how to live virtuously as a monk, implying personal expertise in the matter of pious, ascetic living. Curiously, the letter is sealed with a short poem in elegiac couplets, the only other verses we may surely ascribe to the monarch.

What are we to make of this letter? Some scholars have speculated that Theudila's conversion (and his father's approval of it) masks a political ploy to stow away a potential rival to the throne.<sup>59</sup> But while that would nicely corroborate Sisebut's apparent cynicism about the ascetic life as expressed in his letter to

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<sup>56</sup> Toledo IV, c. 50: "Clerici qui monachorum propositum appetunt, quia meliorem vitam sequi cupiunt, liberos eis ab episcopo in monasteriis largiri oportet ingressus, nec interdicti propositum eorum, qui ad contemPlationis desiderium transire nituntur."

<sup>57</sup> See Leander of Seville, *De institutione virginum et contemptu mundi*, c. 1, *PL* 72 882A: "Fuge Sirenum cantus, mi soror: ne...prurientibus auribus oblectamenta delectaris audire terrena"; and Fructuosus of Braga, *Regula communis monastica*, c. 1, *PL* 87, 1112A: "Christi servus...nudam crucem ascendat nudus, ut mortuus sit saeculo."

<sup>58</sup> Sisebut, *Ep.* VII, p. 16: "sententiis huius seculi fluctibus evitantes ad portum gaudeatis pervenisse vitorie."

<sup>59</sup> See A. Fear (trans.), *Lives of the Visigothic Fathers*, (Liverpool, 1997), p. xxiii, n. 54: "It could be suggested cynically that Theudila's decision to become a monk would solve a potential problem of royal succession for Sisebut and that was the reason for the king's enthusiasm." There is, however, no hard, contemporary evidence to suggest that was the case. Nevertheless, for an argument along these lines, using a hodgepodge of circumstantial evidence, and questionable readings of Sisebut's letter to Theudila, see G. Kampers, "Theudila. Königsson, Usurpator und Mönch," *Millennium* 12.1 (2015), pp. 179-202.

Cicilius, the evidence is all circumstantial. We are once again left to appreciate only Sisebut's interest in asceticism, channeled through his son's monasticism, and the sense of an ongoing negotiation between the king and the ecclesiastical regime over its proper cultural place and function.

Again we wish to ask: how may the *De eclipsi lunae* relate to this cultural conversation? What points of connection, if any, are there among the production of a poem and an apparent negotiation over the role of asceticism in Visigothic Iberia? The answer is rooted, I argue, in a simple fact that can only be abstractly expressed: asceticism entailed a specific, but pervasive practice of discourse. Iberian theoreticians contended again and again that austere Christian life, set in opposition to the secular mainstream, involved not just bodily disciplines of self-restraint, but regimens of particular intellectual and discursive activity. So Leander of Seville advised his sister, the nun Florentina, that her work was to alternate constantly between reading and prayer, so as never to be at leisure from them.<sup>60</sup> Speech and behavior, writing style and reading practice, were reciprocally related to and within ascetic formation. Even Sisebut acknowledged the primacy of these components of ascetic practice in his letter to Theudila. Upon reaching the topic of monastic virtue, he instructed the prince-turned-monk in *oratio* and *lectio* first of all: "Let your speech be proper, frank, and unhesitating, and let your reading be assiduous."<sup>61</sup> Given that asceticism widely disseminated rules for Christian speech and reading, it is worth investigating the degree to which the king's poem abides by or disregards those rules. The fact that Isidore was the recipient of the *De eclipsi lunae* makes such an investigation all the more compelling.

If asceticism entailed specific discursive practices, hardly anyone within Iberia was more involved in outlining them than Isidore. Quite clearly, the bishop's program—the Isidorian project—treated oral and

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<sup>60</sup> *De institutione virginum et contemptu mundi*, c. 14 (6), *PL* 72, 883D (I was not able to access the edition by J. Velázquez (ed.), (Madrid, 1979)): "Lectio tibi sit assidua, iugisque oratio. Dividuntur tibi tempora et officia, ut postquam legeris ores, postquam oraveris legas. Sic alternes perpetim haec duo bona, ut ab iisdem nullo sis tempore otiosa."

<sup>61</sup> *Ep.* VII, p. 17: "Sit enim competens sinceraque sine intermissione oratio, assidua lectio."



written communication as both indicative and constitutive of one's inner being, their relationship to God, and their status within the church. "Vain speech is the sign of a hollow conscience," he averred in his *Synonyma*, a two-book manual for moral reflection. "The tongue discloses a man's ways."<sup>62</sup> These proverbial statements came with more prescriptive advice on how to speak, how to read, and how to preach and teach. Both forms of discourse-shaping declarations litter Isidore's scholarship and moral theology.<sup>63</sup> "When you teach do not use obscure phrasing. Speak so as to be understood;" and elsewhere, "Wisdom bristles at excessive verbal ostentation and at the dissimulation of worldly eloquence, decked out in puffed-up speech."<sup>64</sup> To rephrase a point made earlier in the section, these sententious prescriptions were not, for Isidore, stale relics compiled from a patristic past for an antiquarian collection. Even those precepts drawn from Jerome and Augustine the bishop deployed strategically (as one team of historians has phrased it) "to reinforce the social and political order...seeking to 'fix' knowledge in place and to lay down guidelines and ground rules for the proper functioning of society, church and individual spirituality."<sup>65</sup> Through his scholarship and religious writing, in other words, the bishop worked to define the moral valences of language, and then to harness its positive power to animate his ideal Christian culture.

To achieve this end, Isidore not only had to set up moral scaffolding for ascetic discursive practice, but also to make room for that framework within a literary and cultural environment where non-ascetics participated. For both jobs, the bishop used the same tool; the pen, Fontaine once wrote, functioned as an "instrument of action on his disciples, on the clerics and the monks whose charge he assumed directly or

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<sup>62</sup> *Synonyma*, II.45, J. Elfassi (ed.), CCSL 111B (Turnhout, 2009): "Sermo uanus uanae conscientiae index est. Mores hominis lingua pandit."

<sup>63</sup> See, e.g., *Etymologies* II.xvi-xvii, on style and on the three registers of speech, where Isidore first calls for integrity between speech and action, and then pairs types of speech with appropriate types of activity; *Sententiae* II.29-30 ('*De sermone*' and '*De mendacio*'); III.13, and 41 ('*De libris gentilium*' and '*De superbis doctoribus*'); *Synonyma* II.45-59, on the morality of speech.

<sup>64</sup> *Synonyma*, II.68: "Cum autem doces, noli uerborum obscuritate uti. Ita dic ut intellegaris" *Sententiae* II.29.12: "Horret enim sapientia spumeum uerborum ambitum, ac fucum mundialis eloquentiae inflatis sermonibus perornatum."

<sup>65</sup> Wood and Martínez Jiménez, "New Directions," p. 34.

indirectly, on the Church of Spain, and even on...Sisebut, the prince regent at Toledo.”<sup>66</sup> Isidore’s writing on proper speech issued rules to those obligated to his authority, and explained the logic behind the rules to those who were not. Naturally, types of discourse circulated among the bishop’s contemporaries that were not in alignment with his ascetic views. Indeed, Fontaine once showed how Sisebut’s prose makes sense as a target for correction in Isidore’s theories of style and speech. Whereas Isidore called for verbal sobriety and clarity, the king, with his taste for archaic vocabulary and periphrasis, developed in his letters and hagiography “un galimatias grandiloquent et prétentieux.”<sup>67</sup> Whereas the bishop wrote as an “auteur ascétique,” Sisebut performed as a virtuoso of mannerism.<sup>68</sup> The matter of poetic expression and its potential debate among these divergent authors remain unexplored.

Forgoing a deeper dive into the well of Isidore’s philosophy of language, the particular rules he established for its use, and Sisebut’s prose stylistics, I wish here to drive home a more summary point. The king’s *De eclipsi lunae* was a response to literary output from Isidore, the champion of a kind of ascetic discourse. As such, the poem comes into contact and invites comparison with the ascetic discursive practices the bishop promoted. In what follows, I will pursue two lines of inquiry to move the investigation forward from this observation. First, I want to show how the exchange of literature between monarch and prelate qualified as high-stakes, *political* communication. Competition over literary expression and over ecclesiastical power was, if not one and the same, closely related for Isidore. As we have seen, he anchored the Church’s authority in the preservation and control of Christian discourse. That claim to control was legitimized and strengthened by the rise of Iberian asceticism as a cultural force in the seventh century, and by increasing cooperation in the political domain between ascetic episcopal leaders and the secular ruling elite.

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<sup>66</sup> J. Fontaine, “Théorie et pratique du style chez Isidore de Séville,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 14.1 (1960), pp. 65-101:89-90.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.* p. 77.

<sup>68</sup> See “Isidore de Séville auteur ‘ascétique’: les énigmes des *Synonyma*,” *Studi Medievali* 6.1 (1965), pp. 165-195.

Consequently, Sisebut's poem functions not just as a playful rejoinder to Isidore the individual, but as a response to the powerful and political Christian culture for which the bishop advocated. Second, I will show that, in several texts treating Christian discursive practice, Isidore introduced specific guidelines for and warnings about verse, as distinct from prose and speech in general. These betray a distinct ambivalence about the reliability, usefulness, and propriety of poets and poetry. In light of them, Sisebut's poem to Isidore seems a more critical exercise; one which risked creating some friction to engage the bishop in negotiation over the direction and control of a Visigothic idiom of power, faith, and reason.

### *The Rise of Iberian Asceticism*

By the seventh century, Gaul and Italy together laid claim to over 300 monastic institutions.<sup>69</sup> In Iberia, though the numbers were not as staggering, monasticism was nevertheless proliferating.<sup>70</sup> During the sixth century, ascetic communities thrived throughout the peninsula: at the center, in the vicinity of Toledo, the monastery of Agali produced numerous bishops for neighboring sees;<sup>71</sup> to the northeast near the Pyrenees, the monastery of St. Victorian in Asan maintained connections with ascetics in Gaul;<sup>72</sup> to the southeast, there is evidence of a hermitage at Merida and of a monastery and convent near Seville where Leander and Florentina, older siblings to Isidore of Seville, may have practiced their ascetic vocations;<sup>73</sup> and to the

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<sup>69</sup> See P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, p. 221 for discussion and bibliography.

<sup>70</sup> For a good summary treatment of late antique Iberian monastic history, with special attention to this period of growth and the assimilation of multiple foreign influences, see P. C. Díaz, "Monasticism and Liturgy in Visigothic Spain," in A. Ferreiro (ed.) *The Visigoths: Studies in Culture and Society* (Leiden, 1999), pp. 169-199.

<sup>71</sup> See the many references to the monastery, whose exact location remains unknown today, in Ildefonsus of Toledo, *De Viris Illustribus*.

<sup>72</sup> See, e.g., the epitaph for Victorianus by Fortunatus in *Carm.* 4.11, and another inscription memorializing the same man, recorded in J. Vives, *Inscripciones cristianas de la España romana y visigoda* (Barcelona, 1942), p. 89, n. 284, with reference to his Iberian and Gallic foundations.

<sup>73</sup> For the establishment at Merida, see the biographical note on the hermit Nactus at *Vita Patrum Emeretensium*, 3, J. N. Garvin (ed. and trans.), *The 'Vita sanctorum patrum emeretensium': Text and Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (Washington, DC, 1946). For Leander and Florentina's asceticism, see Leander of Seville, *De institutione virginum et contemptu mundi*.

northwest, Martin of Braga's (d. 579) abbey at Dumium stood as a landmark in Galicia's burgeoning ascetic culture.

The seventh century yielded significantly more growth in the numbers of monastic communities for the region. Fructuosus of Braga (d. 665), a veritable "Johnny Appleseed" of Iberian monasticism, planted by himself over a half-dozen coenobitic institutions in Galicia, and founded one monastery in the southern coastal city of Cádiz.<sup>74</sup> The *Regula monastica communis*, a general rule for monasteries ascribed to Fructuosus, opens with two chapters condemning the apparently common problem of makeshift monasteries—religious coalitions formed among families, neighbors, and ambitious priests.<sup>75</sup> Fructuosus declared these communities anathema because of their propensity to fracture over minor disputes, and to infest the Church with the resultant controversy. For him, the growth of the discipline had outpaced efforts to fix rigorous, orthodox rules for its practice. Fructuosus's response represented a conservative interest in controlling the dissemination of monastic enterprise. Asceticism had to be pruned back. It needed a gardener's touch.

Whether or not such charges against private asceticism were warranted, they speak to a groundswell of conviction in the ascetic life. By Fructuosus's time, asceticism had become highly relevant and pervasive within Iberian religious culture. Its roots reached at least to the late fourth century, when the first imperially convicted heretic Priscillian of Avila (c. 350-385) had attracted Hispano-Romans to his severe and gnostic form of Christian spirituality.<sup>76</sup> Priscillian's execution at the hands of the usurping emperor Maximus did not kill all interest in extreme asceticism and its authorities within the province. Pockets of Priscillianists probably survived in Iberia into the sixth century. At the First Council of Braga, held in 561, Galician bishops declared Priscillianism an abomination, and rebuked its strict ascetic beliefs regarding such practices as celibacy and

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<sup>74</sup> See references within the *Vita sancti Fructuosi*, PL 87, 460-470, translated by Fear in *Lives of the Visigothic Fathers*, pp. 123-144.

<sup>75</sup> PL 87, 1111-1113B; for discussion see Allies, "The Monastic Rules of Visigothic Iberia," pp. 46-49.

<sup>76</sup> See esp. H. Chadwick, *Priscillian of Avila: The Occult and the Charismatic in the Early Church* (Oxford, 1976) and V. Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic: Gender, Authority, and the Priscillianist Controversy* (Berkeley, 1995).

vegetarianism.<sup>77</sup> Although it is impossible to determine whether the attack was simply abstract or aimed at anachronistic strawmen, the concern among sixth-century church leaders to manage routines of austere bodily discipline is suggestive of asceticism's proliferation.

As elsewhere through Late Antiquity, a profound "redefinition of sanctity" was at least partly responsible for the spread of asceticism in Iberia. A developing discourse of "secret martyrdom" held that Christians could achieve salvation as confessors through ascetic discipline.<sup>78</sup> So, in his *Etymologies*, Isidore distinguished between two kinds of martyrdom, "one in obvious suffering, the other in the secret strength of the soul."<sup>79</sup> The late seventh century hermit Valerius of Bierzo described the "secret strength" of private martyrs as "virtue prepared for suffering blazing in the mind."<sup>80</sup> Through abstinence, through all-consuming reading and prayer, through the rejection of worldly desire, Iberian ascetics argued, it was possible to make an honorific sacrifice of the self to God. Monasticism offered the most obvious culture for such practices.

As the previous section indicated, ascetic training covered the mind just as much as the body. Regulating discourse was crucial in the formation of monastic converts. Within coenobitic communities telling tall tales, or even speaking of one's own eloquence and literary abilities were strictly forbidden because they led straight to pride.<sup>81</sup> "Lazy words and vain thoughts are harmful," Isidore warned in the *Sententiae*. "If one wakes from the sleepiness of his mind, he will immediately dread those words he considered of small

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<sup>77</sup> See canons I-XVI, and esp. XII and XIV, printed in C. Barlow's edition of the work of Martin of Braga, *Martini episcopi Bracarenensis opera omnia* (New Haven, 1950), pp. 107-109.

<sup>78</sup> See Maldonado "Angelorum Participes," pp. 175-179

<sup>79</sup> *Etymologies* VII.xi.4: "Duo sunt autem martyrii genera, unum in aperta passione, alterum in occulta animi virtute."

<sup>80</sup> *De vana saeculi sapientia*, 10, PL 87 428B: "Martyrii meritum in occulto est, cum virtus ad passionem prompta flagrat in animo." For more on the understudied eccentric, see Sister Consuelo Maria Aherne, *Valerio of Bierzo: an Ascetic of the Late Visigothic Period*. (Washington, DC, 1949).

<sup>81</sup> See Fructuosus, *Regula monastica communis*, c. 13.

importance.<sup>82</sup> Reading for contemplation was the primary intellectual activity that monks undertook to cultivate correct thinking and behavior. Isidore's monastic rule assigned three hours of reading a day, and prescribed a daily gathering after vespers for the abbot to clarify any difficult passages the monks had encountered.<sup>83</sup> At this meeting, all others were to listen silently. Abbots, most of all, were to acquire "minds full of eyes" by reading saints' lives and mastering the patristic tradition, for such religious-literary knowledge promised to keep their communities progressing on the straight path of orthodoxy.<sup>84</sup>

Importantly, the proliferation of monastic communities and the ideology of secret martyrdom did not have a cloistering effect on the peninsula. In fact, the opposite was true. Among Iberia's ascetics, intellectual outreach and correspondence often prevailed over insularity and isolation. Martin of Braga, who had come to Iberia from the Holy Land in the mid-sixth century, laid essential groundwork for an intellectually "global" Christian culture in the region. He imported his Latin translation of the sayings of the Desert Fathers, and readied Greek canons formulated at eastern synods for installation in the Iberian church.<sup>85</sup> He also opened lines of communication for literary exchange with ascetic *littérateurs* in Gaul. The monk-bishop was in touch with the nun Radegund and her poet-friend Fortunatus, who praised Martin as the apostle of Galicia, the *Gallisueba salus*.<sup>86</sup> Interest in Gallic asceticism remained active through the seventh century.

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<sup>82</sup> *Sententiae*, II.10.2: "Tepidus in conuersione otiosa uerba et uanas cogitationes noxias esse non conspicit; quod si a torpore mentis cuiuslibet ea quae leuia existimabat, confestim quasi horrenda atque atrocia pertimescit."

<sup>83</sup> *Regula monachorum*, c. 8, PL 83, 877C.

<sup>84</sup> Fructuosus, *Regula monastica communis*, c. 10: "Retroacta sanctorum patrum per scripturas sciscitantes reuoluant, ut ab ipsis quod facere debeant agnoscant, ut intus ac foris, ante et retro, plenam mentem oculis habeant, ne, quod absit, in aliquam haeresin devoluantur."

<sup>85</sup> See his translations of certain sayings in the *Sententiae Patrum Aegyptiorum*, handled by Barlow, *Opera omnia*, pp. 11-29, with text at pp. 30-52. For the suggestion that Martin had briefly lived in Egypt, see Collins, *Early Medieval Spain*, pp. 82-84. For his work with ecclesiastical legislation, see Barlow, *Opera omnia*, pp. 80-104, esp. 84-85, and 123-144 for the text.

<sup>86</sup> See Fortunatus, *Carm.* 5.2. Fortunatus' poem for Martin is preceded by a letter (*Carm.* 5.1) in which he explicitly mentions that Martin of Braga's initial missive reached him by a courier named Domitius, who had traveled by ship to Gaul (see section 2). Fortunatus creatively contrasts the properties of the usual shipment of alum from Iberia with his special import, Martin of Braga's prose (section 5). For conservative analysis confirming the presence of Fortunatus' poetry in seventh-century Visigothic Iberia, with particular reliance on evidence for the textual transmission of two poems (4.11 and 9.2), see P.F. Alberto, "Venancio

Among the letters of Fructuosus, for example, exists a request to Braulio, bishop of Zaragoza, for the *Conferences* of John Cassian and Venantius Fortunatus' hagiographical life of St. Germanus.

The international character of Iberian asceticism went hand in hand with the gradual politicization of ascetic culture. King Sisebut's aforementioned hagiographical life of Desiderius of Vienne, most prominently, demonstrates a desire to forge relationships between Merovingian and Visigothic communities using ascetic literature as a chain of connection. In addition, the occasional diplomatic efforts of monks evince the long reach of Iberian asceticism. In a late sixth-century missive to King Reccared (d. 601), for example, Gregory the Great acknowledged certain Spanish abbots who had come to Rome as emissaries of the Visigothic state.<sup>87</sup> Even earlier, the aforementioned Leander of Seville traveled to Constantinople to plead for support on behalf of the Catholic claimant to the Visigothic throne, where he struck up a friendship with Gregory, who was also sojourning there. In sum, through travel and sustained interest in Mediterranean Christian intellectual culture, ascetics helped make post-Roman Iberia a port of call for the commerce of religious ideas and literature.<sup>88</sup> Monks functioned as essential agents, their monasteries as key sites in the exchange operation, as they interacted with ascetic practitioners outside of the peninsula.

In the next section, I wish to show that Iberian ascetics were not merely agents for the transmission of knowledge, but agents of cultural and political change within the region. In particular, a history of influential monk-bishops within Iberian administrations prepared for the relationship between Sisebut and

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Fortunato en la Hispania visigótica," in M. Domínguez García (ed.), *Sub luce florentis calami: Homenaje a Manuel C. Díaz Y Díaz* (Santiago de Compostela, 2002), pp. 251-269.

<sup>87</sup> Gregory the Great, *Reg. Ep.* 9.220.12-13, D. Norberg (ed.), *CCSL 140A* (Turnhout, 1982), p. 810.

<sup>88</sup> In contrast, however, state and church law sometimes conspired to enact isolationist policies, especially with regard to migration across the borders into enemy territory. The Franks were a particularly nettlesome menace to the Visigoths. See Collins, *Early Medieval Spain*, pp. 111-113 and n. 39 for citations from the legislation. One should also mention the reprehensible actions taken against the Jews in Spain, who were forced into baptism, economically handicapped, and made secondary citizens in a legal sense to Christians. See Collins, *Early Medieval Spain*, pp. 129-145. For a recent review of the rich archaeological evidence for trade and Mediterranean exchange in Visigothic Spain, see P. Reynolds, "Material Culture and the Economy in the Age of Saint Isidore of Seville (6th and 7th centuries)," *Antiquité Tardive* 23 (2015), pp. 163-210, who nevertheless concludes that Visigothic Spain was "essentially introspective" in terms of its material and architectural culture.

Isidore as politicians and intellectuals. For decades before and after Isidore, men trained in the techniques of ascetic discourse profoundly shaped the rhetoric of power within the kingdom in concert with Visigothic royalty.<sup>89</sup> Consequently, the literary exchange between Isidore and his king appears as a link in a chain of interactions between secular and ascetic religious leadership, a chain that brought and held together the Visigothic Kingdom as a cohesive political and cultural unit.

### *Ascetic Politics*

With the arrival of the missionary Martin of Braga in Galicia from the eastern reaches of the Mediterranean, Iberia began to experience increasing effects of interaction between Catholic monks and the ruling Arian Gothic elite. Around 550 Martin landed in modern Portugal, hailing from the Levant with enough foreign charm to secure land quickly for a new abbey in Dumium, which he was eager to shape according to eastern monastic ideals.<sup>90</sup> As the story goes, according to Gregory of Tours, Martin arrived in port on the same day Suevic envoys returned with salubrious relics of Martin of Tours to save a dying prince.<sup>91</sup> Almost all at once, the prince was healed, the king and his household converted from Arianism to Catholicism, and the living Martin was appointed the local bishop. So many miracles occurred at this serendipitous meeting of holy Martins that, for Gregory, it was too tedious to list them all.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> The impact of intellectual training at monasteries manifested itself clearly in the literary output of the Iberian episcopacy. As Pierre Riché put it, “the monastic education of the important bishops of Visigothic Spain explains the character of their literary work.” See Riché, *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West*, p. 297.

<sup>90</sup> The evidence for Martin’s life has been collected and briefly analyzed in C. Barlow, *Opera omnia*, pp. 1-10. For a translation of Martin of Braga’s collected oeuvre, minus the poetry, see C. Barlow, *Iberian Fathers*, Volume 1 (*The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 62), (Washington, 1969).

<sup>91</sup> *De virtutibus sancti Martini*, 1.11. For discussion of this project and a translation of the specific episode, see R. Van Dam, *Saints and Miracles*, pp. 142-146, and 211-213, respectively. For other references to Spanish devotion to Martin in the same book, see 3.8, 3.21, 4.40. In the last of these episodes, a mute gives a coin to sailors to bring in his stead as a donation to the tomb of Martin, further evincing maritime religious commerce. For analysis of the anecdote as historical evidence, see Ferreiro, “Braga and Tours.” Thompson, “The Conversion of the Spanish Suevi,” p. 83 n.1, dismisses the account’s historical validity too sweepingly.

<sup>92</sup> “Talemque gratiam ibi in adventu pignorum beati patroni Dominus tribuit, ut virtutes, quae ibidem illa die factae sunt, enarrare perlongum sit.” For a similar case of an easterner reaching the Iberian peninsula and obtaining a bishopric, see the report of the Greek doctor Paul who became bishop of Mérida in *VPE* 4.1-2., with discussion by Collins, *Early Medieval Spain*, pp. 92-93, and 98.



Fantastical or historical, Gregory's story opens a window onto the rise of a certain type of star. Martin of Braga was just one of several monks in post-Roman Iberia to ascend rapidly to power, following a trajectory from ascetic to active administrator and political advisor. In the seventh century, Helladius of Toledo retired from a career *illustrissimus* in the royal court to live contemplatively as a monk at Agali, where he attained to the position of abbot. But around 615 he was called back by his king—Sisebut—to serve as bishop and in the court of the *urbs regia*. Helladius' biographer reports that, in Toledo, the monk-bishop performed a feat of virtue by "managing with great discernment the worldly affairs he despised."<sup>93</sup> Ascetic luminaries like Martin and Leander of Seville had blazed a path for Helladius and others. Decades earlier, they had become bishops after stints as abbots, and infiltrated the political domain as councilors to barbarian royalty and conveners of episcopal councils.<sup>94</sup> Under their influence, state-sanctioned Arianism came to an end in Iberia with the Catholic conversions of the Suevian and Visigothic monarchies in c. 558 and 589 respectively.<sup>95</sup> The success of these monk-bishops as power-brokers and advisors to the royal elite contributed to the formation of an empowered ascetic episcopacy, and created a sort of *cursus* for bishops that would hold in Iberia for more than a century.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Ildefonsus of Toledo, *De viris illustribus*, 6: "statum mundi, quem contempsit virtute, magna perhibetur rexisse discretionem."

<sup>94</sup> As a model for Isidore, see especially the moral philosophical work of Martin of Braga, who composed a treatise called *Formula vitae honestae* for the Suevic King Miro sometime after his accession in 570. It proffered advice on how to live according to four noble virtues (*prudentia, fortitudo/magnanimitas, temperantia/continentia, and iustitia*) that was so blatantly Senecan in tone, and so devoid of scriptural quotations that, in the manuscripts, the text is often attributed to Seneca himself. See Barlow, *Opera omnia*, pp. 204-205. Isidore included Martin in his *De viris illustribus*, see c. 35.

<sup>95</sup> For competing discussions of the complicated issue of Suevian conversion, see E.A. Thompson, "The Conversion of the Spanish Suevi to Catholicism," in E. James (ed.), *Visigothic Spain: New Approaches* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 79-92, and A. Ferreiro, "Braga and Tours: Some Observations on Gregory's *De virtutibus sancti Martini* (1.11)," *J ECS* 3.2 (1995), pp. 195-210, with comprehensive review of previous scholarship at 196, n. 3. On the Visigothic side, Reccared personally converted in 587 and then officially abjured Arianism at the Third Council of Toledo in 589. The standard historical overview in English on post-Roman Iberia is R. Collins, *Early Medieval Spain: Unity in Diversity, 400-1000* (New York, 1983). For a general and slightly more recent examination of the historiography on these two sovereignties, see A. Barbero, A. and M.I. Loring, "The Formation of the Sueve and Visigothic Kingdoms in Spain," in P. Fouracre (ed.) *The New Cambridge Medieval History I, c. 500-c. 700* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 162-192.

<sup>96</sup> For brief treatment of the monastic bishops of the Church of Toledo, the Visigothic Kingdom's secular and religious capital, see Collins, *Early Medieval Spain*, pp. 75-76.

The rise of ascetic power gained significant energy from its coincidence with the political and religious unification of the peninsula. In the midst of Martin and Leander's episcopal careers, the Visigoths, championed by the Arian Leovigild (r. 568-586), led several winning campaigns against bands of local resistance throughout Iberia, including the Suevi in Galicia around 585. By the time of Leovigild's death, the Visigoths had stabilized what was long a politically fragmented and contentious region, and had brought all but a small strip of the peninsula under a single kingdom for the first time in the post-Roman era. Not long after Leovigild's passing, the king's heir Reccared gathered together many of Iberia's bishops and aristocrats to make a momentous public announcement: he was converting from Arianism to Catholicism. Unsurprisingly, leading thinkers did not conceive of the region's religious and political integrations as isolated phenomena. On the contrary, they saw them as inextricably intertwined. At the Third Council of Toledo in 589, where King Reccared made his statement of conversion, the abbot-turned-bishop Leander closed the proceedings with a homily that succinctly expressed the new mission of the unified state:

It remains then that we should all unanimously be brought together as one kingdom, as much for the stability of the earthly kingdom as for the blessedness of the kingdom of heaven. Let us pray to God that the kingdom and the people that have glorified Christ on earth be glorified by Him, not only on earth, but also in heaven.<sup>97</sup>

The Visigothic Kingdom's revised objective reflected the formation and consolidation of a new power bloc in the region, one that would fundamentally shape Iberian culture and discourse through the seventh century. That power bloc comprised a militarized Gothic elite headed by the sovereign king, and an episcopal leadership consisting of many former monks.

The success of this alliance hinged on the ability of each side to reinforce the other's claims to control. Legal documents most visibly preserve their efforts to cooperate. Both the church and the state created

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<sup>97</sup> Leander of Seville, *Homilia in laudem Ecclesiae*, PL 72, 898: "Superest autem ut unanimiter unum omnes regnum effecti, tam pro stabilitate regni terreni, quam felicitate regni coelestis, Deum precibus adeamus; ut regnum, et gens, quae Christum glorificavit in terris, glorificetur ab illo non solum in terris, sed etiam in caelis."

substantial bodies of law that normalized reciprocity and overlap between secular and religious authority. At Toledo IV, headed by Isidore, the episcopal collective made it clear in canon law that salvation and allegiance to the state were tightly interlocked:

If any one of us or from the whole population of Spain violates the guaranty of his faith, which he has pledged for the stability of the Gothic country and its people, or for the preservation of royal prosperity...let him be anathema to Christ and his apostles, and let him be excommunicated from the Catholic Church, which he has denigrated by his treachery.<sup>98</sup>

The bishops sought therefore to stabilize a historically volatile country by insisting on the spiritual stakes of political action. In this way, they interwove ideologies of church and state.

Visigothic legal discourse and administrative practice indicates that the secular leadership did not take lightly their rank and involvement within the Church. Several laws preserved in the Visigothic Code of the mid seventh century concern issues related to the potential undermining of ecclesiastical authority. It is striking, for instance, to find statutes targeting wayward priests, counterfeit ascetics, and apostates. In these cases, it was not uncommon for imprisonment in monasteries and periods of penance to be prescribed as punishments.<sup>99</sup> Such laws indicate that the kingdom was deeply invested in a well-regulated clerical practice. Moreover, to sustain order, the judicial elite could enlist institutions of asceticism to deal with criminals and domestic enemies of the state.

The peace and cohesion of Visigothic Iberia therefore relied on the reciprocal reinforcement of state and church authority, led by the king, but achieved collectively through a shared ideology and set of power structures. A “rhetoric of unity” manifestly expressed in secular and religious juridical texts bolstered the mutually beneficial alliance between ecclesiastical and royal regimes.<sup>100</sup> Of course, the ideological rhetoric

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<sup>98</sup> Toledo IV, c. 75: “Quiquumque modo ex nobis vel cunctis Spaniae populis...sacramentum fidei suae, quod prope patriae gentisque Gothorum statu vel conservatione regiae salutis pollicitus est, violaverit...anathema in conspectu Christi et apostolorum eius sit, atque ab ecclesia catholica quam periuria profanaverit efficiatu extraneus.”

<sup>99</sup> See, e.g., *Leges Visigothorum*, III.4.18, and 5.3, in K. Zeumer (ed.), *MGH, Legum sectio I, Leges nationum germanicarum*, (Hannover, 1902).

<sup>100</sup> See Koon and Wood, “Unity from Disunity,” p. 804.

that undergirded shared power was neither unanimously conceived nor set in stone. Like all ideologies, it consisted of ideas, identities, and symbols under constant negotiation, constantly reshaped as they were reproduced in discourse.

Reflection on this dynamic of ideological formation brings us back into the orbit of Sisebut and Isidore's literary exchange. As chief representatives of the ascetic-episcopal and royal-aristocratic factions, their correspondence promises to unveil some of the ways in which the rhetoric of collaboration and power-sharing operated in political dialogue, before trickling down to a more condensed form in normative writings. A reexamination of their back-and-forth surrounding the eclipse will demonstrate their concentrated efforts at image-making in text, and argue that their respective stylizations and self-presentations of leadership were implicated in a negotiation over the articulation and control of Visigothic culture.

*Sisebut and Isidore (II): shaping the poetics of power*

The preface of the *DNR* and to the *De eclipsi lunae* contain rich examples of Iberian leaders negotiating within a rhetoric of unity to broadcast carefully crafted images of each other through texts. Within these depictions, the image and idiom of power were at stake.

For Isidore, negotiations began at the salutation. He addressed the preface "to my Lord and son Sisebut." The formula almost deceives in its simplicity. In truth, it puts the king's power in contradiction, framing him as both the bishop's sovereign and his spiritual charge. Isidore's greeting puts him on level ground with his lord. He and Sisebut both must perform the paradoxical role of authority-and-subject.<sup>101</sup> This subtle maneuver encapsulates the bishop's design to deploy a rhetoric of unity that affirmed Sisebut's sovereignty, while still retaining an idiom of spiritual authority through which he himself remained empowered.

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<sup>101</sup> For discussion of this point, see Fontaine, "Théorie et pratique," pp. 89-90.

A similar strategy motivates Isidore's praise of the king in his preface. Earlier in the introduction we saw how Isidore acknowledged the king as a man "distinguished for the gift of eloquence and the flowering variety of learning," as he assented to his investigation into the causes of natural phenomena.<sup>102</sup> In fact, the bishop punctuated his calculated portrayal of Sisebut with a reference to the Old Testament king Solomon. To justify their joint inquiry into astronomy, he quoted a passage from the Book of Wisdom in which the biblical *rex sapiens* connects scientific knowledge to the divine: "He has given me true knowledge of the things that are, that I may know the disposition of heaven, and the powers of the elements, the changes of their courses, and the distinctions of the seasons, the revolutions of the years, and the arrangements of the stars."<sup>103</sup> Sisebut, of course, stood to gain from the implied comparison with the wise king Solomon; but Isidore too benefited from making it. Even as he presented himself as the monarch's responsive admirer, the bishop claimed for himself some authority both to define his activity and to shape the king's image. Sanctioning his investigation with an appeal to scripture, Isidore's message was subtle, yet clear: biblical precedent had legitimized his authorship and inquiry alongside Sisebut's command. While the bishop recognized the powerful position of his correspondent, and acted in accord with his wishes, he still situated their relationship and his scholarship in spiritual and biblical terms. The location of their intellectual exchange was therefore in his sphere of religious power.

In his verse reply, Sisebut was just as tactical. He employed a much different mode of representation to portray himself and his bishop in their respective roles, one which complicated the sense of cooperation that had emerged from Isidore's preface, and challenged the idiom in which the bishop had developed it. Most striking is the lack of a religious tenor to the king's language and argument. Whereas Isidore had rooted their

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<sup>102</sup> See n. 4.

<sup>103</sup> Isidore, *De natura reum*, pref. 2, quoting selectively from Wisdom 7:17-19: "Ipse mihi dedit horum quae sunt scientiam veram, ut sciam dispositionem coeli, et virtutes elementorum, conversionum mutationes, et divisiones temporum, annorum cursus, et stellarum dispositiones."

investigation in the bible and written in prose, Sisebut's contribution came in the form of classicizing poetry. Lucretius, more than Solomon, provided his model of discourse.

Critics have consistently described the king's poetic epistle as a gracious expression of friendship in response to the *DNR*, but in fact his rhetoric does just as much to contrast himself with Isidore as to create the sense of a united front. In the first place, the opening line addresses the bishop as "lazy" (*lentus*), and curiously, depicts him as a poet: "Perhaps within the woods you are lazily at work on meandering poems, and dabbing your clear mind with the Muses' nectar amid babbling waters and songful breezes."<sup>104</sup> Deferring analysis of the image of Isidore as poet, I wish to focus first on the conspicuous charge of laziness. Although *lentus* fits easily within the bucolic portrait—it surely refers to Virgil's first eclogue, where Tityrus is described as *lentus in umbra*—such rhetoric is not necessarily without claws.<sup>105</sup> The fourth line of the *De eclipsi lunae* provides more insight into the poet-king's tactic. It begins with an adversative conjunction that translates the bishop's leisured repose into an essential point of difference with Sisebut. Isidore may compose like a relaxed rustic bard, "but I," the king writes:

I am overwhelmed by a messy assemblage of public affairs,  
And pressured by the hard anxieties of our myriad soldiery.  
The law-barkers do their damage, the forums howl, trumpets stir confusion  
And we are borne straight across the Ocean for as long as  
The snowy Basques hold their ground and the dreadful Cantabrians do not yield.<sup>106</sup>

The king's lament sets up a rhetorical excuse for his potentially poor poetship. He claims to be so bogged down that "Slow elephants will outstrip agile eagles, the lazy tortoise will overtake the swift hound, before I

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<sup>104</sup> *De eclipsi lunae*, 1-3: "Tu forte in lucis lentus vaga carmina gignis  
Argutosque inter latices et musica flabra  
Pierio liquidam perfundis nectare mentem."

<sup>105</sup> Eclogue 1.4: "...tu, Tityre, lentus in umbra."

<sup>106</sup> *De eclipsi lunae*. 4-8: "At nos congeries obnubit turbida rerum  
Ferrataeque premunt milleno milite curae:  
Legicrepae tudent, latrant fora, classica turbant  
Et trans Oceanum ferimur porro, usque nivosis  
Cum teneat Vasco nec parcat Cantaber horrens."

track down the dewy moon in song.”<sup>107</sup> But still, the contrast with “lazy” Isidore requires explanation; all the more given the circulation of a profoundly different image of the bishop among his ecclesiastical company. To contemporaries, Isidore was known as a captain of religious industry.<sup>108</sup>

Just as Isidore had done in the preface to the *DNR*, therefore, the king claimed for himself the power and authority to present his correspondent in the manner and in the language he wished. But to what end? If the picture of Isidore is ironic, it is oddly so. A jocular tone finds no resonance in Isidore’s preface, or even in the poem’s ensuing verses, where the poet-king describes himself as a man overwhelmed with serious concerns. It seems better to admit that Sisebut’s rhetoric works to generate contrast with the bishop, and possibly to undermine his public reputation as a model of the active life. From one angle, the poem’s “lazy Isidore” recalls language from a different piece of correspondence from the king to another of his bishops—the letter to Cicilius reviewed above. There Sisebut had lambasted the priest for his entry into a monastery. He accused him of indolence, and compared him to a negligent shepherd.<sup>109</sup> The striking overlap with Isidore’s depiction as a lazy rustic may be coincidental; but it also allows for the possibility of a motivating antagonism behind Sisebut’s attempt to shape Isidore’s image.

To conclude, I want to explore why Sisebut may have imagined Isidore as a poet, and to consider how that vision aligns with Isidore’s self-conception and cultural program. The depiction is just as jarring as the image of a lazy Isidore when viewed in light of a basic fact: he hardly wrote any poetry at all. Only a few faceless epigrams, most famously for the decoration of a library, have been ascribed to him.<sup>110</sup> What is more,

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid. lines 12-14:           “Quin mage pernices aquilas vis pigra elephantum  
  Praecurret, volucremque pigens testudo molossum,  
  Quam nos rorifluam sectemur carmine lunam.”

<sup>108</sup> See, e.g. the prologue to the *Vita sancti Fructuosis* (PL 87 460) where the author (perhaps Valerius of Bierzo) compares his ascetic-contemPative subject to Isidore, the exemPLar of Christian activity: “[Isidorus] activae vitae industria universam extrinsecus eruditiv Spaniam.”

<sup>109</sup> Cf. Sisebut, *Ep.* I, Gil (ed.), p. 5: “ex tuis cognobimus litteris non ob aliut te monasterium fuisse adeptum, nisi ut tuis opem possis ferre langoribus.”

<sup>110</sup> Isidore, *Carmina*, J. Maria Sanchez Martín CCSL 113A (Turnhout, 2000).

at various points, the bishop disclosed a certain discomfort with poetry. Occasionally, he warned off his readers from reading verse and engaging in poetic language. In the *Etymologies*, he even situated his entry on poets among articles on heretics, sibyls, and magicians, suggesting that the *poeta* occupied a strange, countercultural place in Isidore's ideal religious landscape.<sup>111</sup> For Sisebut to fashion Isidore as a poet, and to place him in a bucolic scene, may have represented an effort to found their relationship on a common respect for classical literature; but such tactics also clashed with certain principles and preferences within Isidore's ascetic literary program.

In what follows, I will reconstruct Isidore's theories about poets and poetry in order to understand the set of ideas with which Sisebut's poetic experiment interacts. My argument is not that the poet-king overlooked or ignored the bishop's ambivalence toward verse, but that, in writing the *De eclipsi lunae*, he sophisticatedly navigated those concerns. Using a discursive medium fraught with danger to correct superstitious belief, Sisebut innovated to produce an ideal poem for Isidore's program, a poem to undo the iffy alchemy that pagan poets had performed on the truth, a poem to reclaim the poetic mode from a tradition of obfuscation for the clarification of the eclipse.

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It is remarkable that, at the inception of his literary career, Isidore cited poets and poetry as the root causes of his turn to scholarly, grammatical work. His very first text, a linguistic treatise called the *Differentiae*, begins by addressing a serious problem introduced by ancient poets. Unlike previous generations of Christian writers, the bishop was not so much fazed by the "paganness" of classical verse as by the obscurity of its language.

Out of metrical necessity pagan poets have confused the properties of words. And so, because of them, it has become normal for many words to be understood interchangeably by authors. Though

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<sup>111</sup> *Etymologies*, VIII.vi-ix.



the words seem similar, nevertheless they are differentiated among themselves by their peculiar origin.<sup>112</sup>

Disgruntled by poets and their abuse of language, the bishop began what became a lifelong project aimed, in part, at clarifying all that had been obfuscated by the oblique and opaque aspects of ancient writing.

According to the literary history proffered in the *Etymologies*, a draft of which we know to have been addressed to Sisebut, poetry held seniority in the order of literary expression: “Among the Greeks just as among the Latins, interest in poems was far more ancient than in prose. For all things used to be composed in verse.”<sup>113</sup> Drawing from the preface of Suetonius’ *De poetis*, Isidore also forwarded the idea that verse had emerged as a natural development of civilization:

When men had first begun to practice a rational way of life, having shed their wildness, and had become aware of themselves and their gods, they developed for themselves a modest culture and a functional way of speaking, and devised for the worship of their gods a magnificent form of each [...] They thought the gods should be honored with an eloquence that was, as it were, more regal, and they offered up their praise with a more dazzling vocabulary and in more pleasing meters. Because this type of thing is made in a certain form, which is called ποιότης (quality), it is named a *poema*, and its makers *poetae*.<sup>114</sup>

The connection between poetry and *ratio* is particularly arresting, given the importance of the latter concept in the history of Sisebut and Isidore’s relationship. The bishop had criticized the king for failing to promote the Christian faith following a principal reason in his religious administration. Here in the *Etymologies*, Isidore makes a fundamental connection between the verse form, human rationality, and religious speech. That circuit of ideas would seem to sanction poetry, to some degree. Elsewhere in the encyclopedia, the bishop

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<sup>112</sup> Isidore, *Differentiae*, praef. in C. Codoñer Merino (ed.), *Diferencias*. Belles Lettres. (Paris, 1992): “Poetae autem gentiles necessitate metrica confuderunt sermonum proprietates. Sicque ex his consuetudo obtinuit PLeraque ab auctoribus indifferenter accipi, quae quidem quamvis similia videantur, quadam tamen propria inter se origine distinguuntur.”

<sup>113</sup> *Etymologies*, I.xxxvii.2: “Praeterea tam apud Graecos quam apud Latinos longe antiquiorem curam fuisse carminum quam prosae. Omnia enim prius versibus condebantur.”

<sup>114</sup> Suetonius’ text has survived in fragments. This section derives from the preface to the work. *Etymologies* VIII.vii.1-2: “Cum primum homines exuta feritate rationem vitae habere coepissent, seque ac deos suos nosse, cultum modicum ac sermonem necessarium commenti sibi, utriusque magnificentiam ad religionem deorum suorum excogitaverunt[...] eloquio etiam quasi augustiore honorandos putaverunt, laudesque eorum et verbis inlustrioribus et iucundioribus numeris extulerunt. Id genus quia forma quadam efficitur, quae ποιότης dicitur, poema vocitatum est, eiusque fictores poetae.”

implicitly authorized poetic discourse through a biblical, literary historical argument, naming Moses the first hexameter poet, David the first hymnographer, and Solomon the inventor of the *epithalamium*.<sup>115</sup> In light of these arguments, Sisebut's decision to write poetry appears less contentious. It could rather symbolize the king's design to reconstruct and promote a kind of primordial, rational, and religious discourse.

However, certain aspects of Isidore's poetology complicated the possibility of poetry in Visigothic culture. As much authority as poetry garnered from its antiquity, the ancient practice of writing verse had entailed a measure of immorality. He observed that, in the process of honoring their pre-Christian gods, ancient poets had developed the distinctive and pernicious habits of refashioning reality and relying on verbal ostentation. The *officium poetae*, Isidore claimed, was to twist the truth. "The poet's job resides in translating things that have really happened into different images, altered with some adornment by figurative fashioning."<sup>116</sup> These characteristics were tightly linked to the linguistic problem Isidore had sought to correct in his *Differentiae*. Abuse of poetic license had also caused confusion in the sphere of scientific understanding. Poets, for instance, had completely invented connections between the names of their gods and the powers and origins of the elements.<sup>117</sup> Following a patristic school of thought, Isidore did not conceive of these poetic fictions as harmless fun. Christians were to avoid them at all costs for their misinformation, and for the cravings of the mind they introduced. "A Christian is prohibited from reading the fictions of poets since they impel the mind towards the temptations of desire by the enticements of pointless fables," he wrote in the *Sententiae*. "For sacrifice is made to demons not only when one offers incense, but also when one listens

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<sup>115</sup> See the entry on meters in *Etymologies* I.xxxix.11, 17-18. For discussion of Isidore's sources, which include authors from Josephus to Jerome, see Fontaine, *Isidore de Séville et la culture classique*, pp. 169-172.

<sup>116</sup> *Etymologies*, VIII.vii.10: "Officium autem poetae in eo est ut ea, quae vere gesta sunt, in alias species obliquis figurationibus cum decore aliquot conversa transducant."

<sup>117</sup> *Etymologies*, VIII.xi.29. See also the entry on fables in *Etymologies*, I.xl.

blithely to their sayings.”<sup>118</sup> Poetry had no place in Isidore’s idealized discourse, or in education. Where Quintilian had famously formulated the study of grammar as “the science of speaking correctly and the explanation of the poets,” Isidore strikingly omitted poetry from his definition of grammar in the *Etymologies*.<sup>119</sup> Grammar became simply *scientia recte loquendi*.<sup>120</sup>

Importantly, the danger of poets was neither dead nor limited to the page. The crooked *mos poetarum* lived on in Isidore’s contemporary Christian world in the form of bad teachers and in the celebration of charlatans. For example, the bishop complained, “Some curious folks enjoy listening to certain ‘wise men,’ not to seek the truth from them, but to become familiar with the eloquence of their speech. In the manner of the poets (*more poetarum*) they prioritize the arrangement of words over the understanding of truth.”<sup>121</sup> Isidore therefore positioned the poetic mode as something close to the antithesis of the ascetic discursive practices he promoted elsewhere. Ascetics were supposed to seek after the truth as quiet listeners, or to speak as clear-minded and humble teachers. They were to put comprehension and orthodoxy before eloquence. In his *Synonyma*, Isidore impelled readers to recite precepts that would practically mold them into his conception of the anti-poet. “Reject impure speech, flee dishonest words”; “hold back the word which does not instruct your listeners”; “may what you say prove to have importance and meaningful teaching”; “when you teach do not use obscure phrasing, speak so as to be understood.”<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> *Sententiae*, III.13.1: “Ideo prohibetur Christianus figmenta legere poetarum quia per oblectamenta inanium fabularum mentem excitant ad incentiva libidinum. Non enim solum tura offerendo daemonibus immolatur, sed etiam eorum dicta libentius capiendū.” See also, similarly, Isidore, *Regula monachorum*, c. 8: “Gentilium libros...monachus legere caveat, melius enim eorum perniciosa dogmata ignorare quam per experientiam in aliquem laqueum erroris incurrere.”

<sup>119</sup> *Institutio oratoria*, 1.4.2, L. Radermacher and V. Buchheit (eds.), Teubner. (1971): “haec igitur professio, cum brevissime in duas partis dividatur, recte loquendi scientiam et poetarum enarrationem.”

<sup>120</sup> *Etymologies* I.v.1: Grammatica est scientia recte loquendi, et origo et fundamentum liberalium litterarum.

<sup>121</sup> *Sententiae*, II.29.13: “Quidam curiosi delectantur audire quoslibet sapientes, non ut ueritatem ab eis quaerant, sed ut facundiam sermonis eorum agnoscant, more poetarum qui magis compositionem uerborum quam sententiam ueritatis sequuntur.”

<sup>122</sup> *Synonyma* II.45: “Respue sermones impudicos, fuge inhonesta uerba”; 46: “retice uerbum quod non aedificat audientes”; 47: “Ea quae loquaris gravitate atque doctrina digna existant”; 68: “Cum autem doces, noli uerborum obscuritate uti, ita dic, ut intelligaris.”

Returning now to the *De eclipsi lunae*, acquainted with the bishop's pessimistic vision of poetship, we are equipped to test how the poet-king's exercise may have measured against the Isidorian standard of proper discourse. Would the poem have qualified as an example of the bad, truth-warping poetry Isidore warned against? In fact, I argue, the opposite is true. As a poet, Sisebut's professed motivations and execution directly opposed the *mos poetarum* described by Isidore. After presenting Isidore as a relaxed country minstrel, and himself as the overwhelmed poet and commander-in-chief, the king's programmatic language reveals a design to attack a form of lunacy underwritten both by popular superstitious practice, and by the ancient Latin poetic tradition He wrote:

I shall say why the disk darkens, exhausted in its orbit, and why the brilliant light of its snow white face wastes away to deep red. It is not, as the people believe, that a madwoman howling under deathly shadows in black caves draws it down from its loftily roving lookout; neither overcome by her incantation, nor a drop from the Styx, nor herbal juice does it seek the earth clanging with brass, an irresistible sound.<sup>123</sup>

The notion of a witch drawing down the moon was not the king's fiction. As the introduction showed, the superstitions outlined in the poem likely reflect real, ritualistic responses to the eclipse in late ancient and early medieval communities. Even subtle linguistic details reveal a strong awareness of the intricacies of these practices. In particular, the king's description of the supposed "irresistible sound" (*vincibilem clangorem*) thought to help the moon outduel the darkness may allude to an actual incantation, a kind of *malum canticum*, recorded in other medieval sources. *Vince lunam* ("triumph, moon") was sometimes chanted to aid the moon during the eclipse.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> *De eclipsi lunae*, 15-22:     "Dicam quur fesso livescat circulus orbe  
Purpureumque iubar niveis quur tabeat oris.  
Non illam, ut populi credunt, nigrantibus antris  
Infernas ululans mulier praedira sub umbras  
Detrahit altivaga e specula, nec carmine victa  
Vel rore Stygis aut herbae terram aerea crepantem  
Vincibilemque petit clangorem."

<sup>124</sup> See n. 9 above, and Flint, *Rise of Magic*, pp. 99-101 for discussion of this ritual and its relation to Sisebut's poem. The ritual language is recorded in the *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum*, (ed.) A. Boretius, *MGH Capit. I*, (Hanover, 1883), pp. 222-223: "De lunae defectione quod dicunt 'Vince lunam.'

Moreover, Sisebut's scientific poem represented a challenge to improper poetry as much as to improper belief. Most strikingly, he referred to the howling madwomen's incantation as a poem, a *carmen*, the same word he deployed to refer to Isidore's "poetry" in the very first line, and to his own efforts later on.<sup>125</sup> In fact, the targets of his scientific argument—the poet-sorceress and the poetically bewitched moon—are familiar features in the classical Latin poetic tradition. Virgil's eighth eclogue asserts "*carmina* can bring down the moon from the heavens."<sup>126</sup> Propertius' first elegy calls on magicians with the same power for help.<sup>127</sup> Lucan, too, describes the moon in eclipse as "beset by the baleful venom of words."<sup>128</sup> The most explicit connection, however, may be Ovid's depiction of Medea in the *Metamorphoses*. There the witch boasts of her power to enchant the heavenly body with a *carmen* despite the countervailing clang of bronze.<sup>129</sup>

Before now, critics have not fully investigated the reasons behind Sisebut's decision to write a poem to respond to Isidore, and to accomplish his apparently scientific goal. Most have been satisfied with the idea that his efforts correspond with a basic interest in classical literature, and a desire to bring back the refinements of imperial culture to his post-Roman court. However, Sisebut's (implicit and explicit) references to dangerous poetry, and his declared intention to contest the non-Christian and unscientific belief it supported, hint at a more compelling answer. The poet-king was attuned to an Isidorian anxiety surrounding poetry, which put ascetics and learned Christian readers on high alert. If anything about poets truly vexed Isidore, if they posed any threat to his cultural program, it was through their perceived preferences for verbal fireworks,

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<sup>125</sup> See *De eclipsi lunae*, 1, 14, and 20.

<sup>126</sup> Virgil, *Eclogues*, 8.69: "Carmina uel caelo possunt deducere lunam."

<sup>127</sup> Propertius, 1.1.19-20: "At vos, deductae quibus est fallacia lunae  
et labor in magicis sacra piare focus."

<sup>128</sup> Lucan, *De bello civili*, 6.501-502: "non aliter diris verborum obsessa venenis  
palluit et nigris terrenisque ignibus arsit."

<sup>129</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 7.207-208: "te quoque, Luna, traho, quamvis Temesaea labores  
aera tuos minuant."

and the stunt-piloting of poetic license over and above the truth, a veritable object of Christian worship. Like Isidore, perhaps even in cooperation with the bishop, Sisebut confronted these problems by attempting to destabilize the intellectual authority of the poetic tradition.

As the king's poem shows quite beautifully, however, this effort did not have to entail the complete abandonment of poetic discourse. One could flip poetry on its head. Rather than "translating things that have really happened into different images," as Isidore had woefully complained poets do, Sisebut strove to reverse the poetic transformation process, to restore the truth by deconstructing received intellectual traditions that had authorized bad belief. The poet-king therefore artfully engaged with the principles of the Isidorian intellectual project. He abided by the ascetic imperatives to use eloquence to teach, and to prize the truth over artifice as ancient poets often had not; but that he did so in verse made his a virtuoso performance of power. Instead of renouncing poetry, Sisebut mastered it. He demonstrated a new poetic ideal in alignment with the goals of the Isidorian project. He combatted the sorcery that poets and superstitious folk had used to transfigure reality by administering to them the perfect antidote to their own faulty medicine.

Writing the poem, and presenting Isidore as a poet in its world, were tactics both of cooperation and competition. Sisebut imagined the bishop as a capable partner in the new mode of discourse he enacted, but not necessarily as his equal. The king's "active life," which was the context for his poetship, involved a mountain of major concerns, and matters of life and death. In comparison, Isidore's situation was—in the king's telling—a day in the park. This contrasting picture enhanced the perceived difficulty and impressiveness of Sisebut's literary feat. The poet-king's composition therefore strengthened his ideological bond with Isidore, even as it helped to assert his superior position within that relationship. Through the poem the king supplied support to the Isidorian project, and yet also endeavored to wrest some amount of control from Isidore over the kingdom's evolving Christian culture. That Sisebut's political intervention and literary gambit manifested itself in verse reveals the power to which poetry still laid claim in yet another post-Roman world.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE VOICE OF THE DEAD KING CHINDASUINTH: POETRY, POLITICS, AND THE DISCOURSE OF PENANCE IN VISIGOTHIC SPAIN

*Epitaph composed for King Chindasuinth*

- Mourn for me, all of you whom the world holds.  
In this way your shameful stains may be washed away by your own waters.  
In this way merciful Christ may forgive you your debts.  
In this way the shining gate of high heaven may stand open.  
5 Bring forth mournful weeping from your contrite heart  
And grieve reverently by weeping together.  
Sigh to God, let out a sorrowful groan  
And say on my sorry behalf, "Have mercy, I pray."  
I am Chindasuinth, evil's steadfast friend.  
10 I am Chindasuinth, the patron of wickedness.  
Unholy, hateful, shameful, disgraceful, unjust,  
Wanting none of what is best, prevailing in all the worst,  
Whatever someone does who desires wrong, who seeks out harm,  
I did all these things, and then I was worse.  
15 There was no sin that I did not want to commit.  
I was the greatest, the leader in vices.  
See how I who wielded the royal scepter have returned here as ash.  
Now the earth covers me, whom royal purple clothed.  
Now the purpled royal garments are of no use to me,  
20 Nor verdant gems, nor a glimmering crown.  
Silver does no good, nor does shining gold bring aid.  
The couches of the court do me harm, and treasure brings me no pleasure.  
All the deceptive grandeur of this bemired life  
And of pride has left—soon dissolved, it passes away.  
25 Exceedingly happy is that man, and blessed by the bounty of Christ,  
Who always despises the short-lived riches of the world.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eugenius Toletanus, *Carm.* 25, P.F. Alberto (ed.), *CCSL* 114 (Turnhout, 2006), pp. 241-242.

Epitaphion Chindasuintho Regi Conscriptum

- Plangite me cuncti, quos terrae continent orbis,  
sic vestra propriis probra laventur aquis,  
sic Christus vobis debita Clemens,  
sic pateat summi fulgida porta poli.  
5 Promite funereum contrito pectore fletum  
et facite luctum conlacrimando pium.  
Suspirate Deo, gemitum producite maestum  
ac pro me misero dicite "parce precor".  
Chindasuinthus ego noxarum semper amicus,  
10 patratior scelerum Chindasuinthus ego.  
Impius obscenus probrosus turpis iniquus,  
optima nulla volens, pessima cuncta valens,  
quidquid agit qui prava cupit, qui noxia quaerit,  
omnia commisi, peius et inde fui.

The voice of the preceding poem purports to belong to the Visigothic king Chindasuinth, who reigned from 642 to 653 AD. Harsh and penitent, it speaks from the grave through an epitaph composed in elegiac verse by Eugenius II (d. 657), who served as bishop of Toledo from 647 and was Visigothic Spain's most prolific poet.<sup>2</sup> This chapter is concerned to understand this voice within the Visigothic social and political contexts in which it originally sounded, and as it relates to the evolution of post-Roman Christian poetship.

To the majority of critics this voice has sounded implausibly self-incriminating, but not because the speaker was beyond reproach. Most historians agree that Chindasuinth was unpopular with the courtly and clerical elite, and with Eugenius in particular, for reasons to be explained. For this readers have often interpreted the composition of his epitaph as an act of defamation.<sup>3</sup> In the rhythm and run of abusive epithets,

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15 Nulla fuit culpa, quam non committere vellem,  
maximus in vitiis et prior ipse fui.  
En cinis hic redii sceptrum qui regia gessi:  
purpura quem texit, iam modo terra premit.  
Non mihi nunc prosunt biblatta tegmina regni,  
20 non gemmae virides, non diadema nitens.  
Non iuvat argentum, non fulgens adiuvat aurum,  
aulica fulcra nocent nec mihi gaza placet.  
Omnis enim luteae deceptrix Gloria vitae  
et flatus abiit, mox liquefacta perit.  
25 Felix ille nimis et Christi munere felix  
qui terrae fragiles semper abhorret opes.

<sup>2</sup> The original tombstone inscription has not survived, and the conditions surrounding its making are unknown. Today, however, one can visit the supposed tomb of the king at the Museo del rey Chindasvinto in San Román de Hornija. The site displays a 19<sup>th</sup>-century inscription of the poem. See P.A. Farmhouse, "Notes on the Earliest Editions of Eugenius of Toledo: Some Manuscripts that Never Existed," *Aevum* (2006), pp. 1-17. Eugenius himself authored more than 100 poems in many meters.

<sup>3</sup> Interpretations of this kind generally break down into two groups. The first asserts that the epitaph reflects low approval of the king among the upper classes. The second argues for the poem as an expression of Eugenius's personal dislike of Chindasuinth. As representative of the former: A. Barbero and M.I. Loring, citing the epitaph, "Chindasuinth was a king who, because of his rigour, was treated harshly by his contemporaries", "The Catholic Visigothic Kingdom", P. Fouracre (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History* (Cambridge, 2005), I, p. 359; E.A. Thompson calls the epitaph "abusive", adding, "it is known that the murderous old man was unpopular with the bishops", *The Goths in Spain* (Oxford, 1969), p. 199; A.K. Ziegler suggests, "[the epitaph] probably reflected clerical opinion of the late sovereign; its frank disloyalty to the memory of the monarch scandalizes Dahn" *Church and State in Visigothic Spain* (Washington, 1930), p. 106—see F. Dahn, *Die Könige der Germanen*, 12 vols (Leipzig, 1885), pp. 197-198; J.D. Adams argues, "the ferocious criticism in this epitaph suggests the tensions inherent in any political office dependent on the approval of religious authorities", "King Chindasuinth and Queen Recibergera", in O.R. Constable (ed.), *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources* (Philadelphia, 1997), p. 24.

Among the latter group: H.J. Diesner, who sees behind the epitaph, "[die] Abneigung des Metropoliten gegenüber dem machthungrigen und...schroff regierenden König", "Eugenius II von Toledo im Konflikt zwischen Demut und Gewissen," in E. Dassman and K.S. Frank (eds.), *Pietas: Festschrift für Bernhard Kötting* (Münster, 1980), p. 478; D. Claude, "[Eugenius] haßte



and in the stern, penitential sermonizing, they have claimed to hear the poet's snide impersonation of the king rather than any sincere confession. Yet though these defamatory readings correspond with evidence for aristocratic disapproval of the king's rise to power and some of his policies, and provide reasonable explanations for what the disgruntled poet-bishop might have hoped to gain by settling the score with the king, the logic of a poetic invective strategy within this context requires scrutiny. There is still no satisfactory explanation for why Eugenius would have chosen to defame Chindasuinth using these words, in the king's own voice, and in the form of a verse tombstone inscription.

This study challenges the consensus critical reading of Chindasuinth's epitaph by reconsidering its social logic. It reassesses the contemporary social structures and processes that underlie the poem, and the prevailing ideologies to which it simultaneously contributes and responds. Interpreters of this poem have overlooked a number of pertinent ideologies. Defamatory readings have not accounted for the potential repercussions for slandering the monarch (even when deceased) in Visigothic Spain, for which normative sources, such as the laws of the church and kingdom, provide ample evidence. These laws give access to the minds of Visigothic legislators, Eugenius among them, who collectively condemned malevolent speech (*maledicere*) against the king, and sought to threaten slanderers with excommunication and forfeiture of property.

More importantly, critics have not given enough weight to a discourse of penance that pervaded secular and ecclesiastical spheres of seventh-century Visigothic society.<sup>4</sup> The language and ideology of penance

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Chindasuinth aus tiefstem Herzen, wie sein Epitaphium...ein bitteres Schmäggedicht, erweist", *Adel, Kirche und Königtum im Westgotenreich* (Sigmaringen, 1971), p. 132; J.M. Pizarro, while remaining ambivalent, concedes, "it is impossible to read certain parts of the epitaph without thinking that Eugenius derived much satisfaction from what the penitential formula allowed him to say", *The Story of Wamba* (Washington, 2005), p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> For an approach influential to this paper's, see P. Brown, *The Ransom of the Soul* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 124-149. Brown attempts to explain the "discourse of penance" in the context of fifth- and sixth-century Southern Gaul. I use Brown's term "discourse of penance" to refer to a similar ideological current in Visigothic Spain, but that is not to imply acceptance of any of his specific conclusions.

suffuses the contemporary liturgy, the *Visigothic Code*, and many of the canons of the national councils held at Toledo between 589 and 701. The ubiquity of penance is enough to suggest that it ought to feature prominently in any attempt to contextualize and interpret Chindasuinth's confessional epitaph. The specifics, though, are even more compelling. Visigothic thinkers conceived of penance as a prolonged moment of conversion, as a drastic change in the life of a sinner that was incompatible with secular (especially kingly) life. The rite involved self-scrutiny and priestly admonition, and was often administered near the moment of death. This combination of discourse and practice coincides with important features of the king's epitaph, which reads like a kind of deathbed confession, the central drama of penance, scripted by a poet-priest. In fact, Eugenius's wider poetic corpus contains multiple innovative experiments with penitential rhetoric. The epitaph for Chindasuinth hardly stands out when juxtaposed with the five epitaphs the poet wrote for himself using similarly sardonic, confessional language.<sup>5</sup> I propose that Chindasuinth's epitaph represents a unique event in the history of ascetic-poetic experiments so far reviewed. Examining the poem in light of the discourse of penance and some of Eugenius's other literary projects reveals it to be more than a flat arrowhead launched as part of a personal or political vendetta. It becomes instead a complex, multidimensional moment in Visigothic penitential culture, and in the history of Christian Latin poetship.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Eugenius, *Carmina* 14b, 16-19, *CCSL* 114, Alberto (ed.), pp. 231-235. See K. Smolak, "Omnia passus—die Lieden des Eugenius von Toledo. Zu den Gedichten 5, 13-19, 101 Alberto," in R. Corradini, M. Gillis, R. McKitterick, and I. van Renswoude (eds.), *Ego Trouble. Authors and Their Identities in the Early Middle Ages*, (Wien, 2010), pp. 79-87.

Eugenius's poetry is relatively understudied. Critics once tended to read the morbid content of some of his poems as reflecting a depressive personality or a general pessimism that suffused the medieval world, and even worse, in unity with the morbidity of the Latin language; see, for example, F.J.E. Raby, *A History of Christian Latin Poetry*, (Oxford, 1953), p. 127; G. Bernt, *Das lateinische Epigramm im Übergang von der Spätantike zum frühen Mittelalter*. (Munich, 1968), p.137. For more recent studies that emphasize Eugenius's lyrical originality, see C. Codoñer, "The Poetry of Eugenius of Toledo", in F. Cairns (ed.) *Papers of the Liverpool Latin Seminar III* (Liverpool, 1981), pp. 323-342; and M. Tizzoni, "The Poems of Dracontius in their Vandalic and Visigothic Contexts," PhD thesis, University of Leeds, (2012), pp. 233-260.

<sup>6</sup> The first modern editor of Eugenius's poems, Friedrich Vollmer, supported a similar reading. He proposed that Chindasuinth may have even ordered Eugenius to compose the epitaph as proof of penance ("*paenitentiae documentum*"), but did not bolster his claim with evidence or analysis; see *Eugenii Toletani episcopi carmina et epistulae*, F. Vollmer (ed.), *MGH AA* 14, (Berlin, 1905), p. 301b. Andrew Fear has put forward the most developed argument along these lines. He suggests that "to read hostility into the epitaph is to misunderstand Eugenius's purpose," and reads the self-critical language as a show of piety; see "Moaning to Some Purpose: the Laments of Eugenius II", in A. Deyermund and M.J. Ryan (eds.), *Early Medieval Spain: A Symposium*. Papers of the Medieval Hispanic Research Seminar 63. (London, 2010), pp. 69-77. Pizarro, *Wamba*, p. 22, recognizes the poem's "conventional penitential tone"; Thompson considered Vollmer's suggestion "improbable", *Goths in Spain*, p. 199.

This case study contains six subsequent sections, and a conclusion. Subsections two and three outline a history of Chindasuinth's reign, paying attention to his relationships with Eugenius in particular, and with the church and aristocracy more broadly. An unsettling language of royal compulsion and violence circulates in contemporary depictions of Chindasuinth. Some sources from after the monarch's death contain markers of discontent with his policies, particularly with those measures connected to his severe stance against traitors. Consequently, critics have often read the epitaph as a subversive text informed by pervasive political discontent. The fourth subsection complicates that mode of interpretation by situating the poem's rhetorical strategy within prevailing Visigothic ideologies of kingship and admonition. It argues that the king's self-criticism in the poem does not constitute an act of ventriloquism, with the poet as puppet-master and the monarch as his dummy. Rather, the poet astutely remains hidden in the text so that the king may demonstrate his legitimacy through voluntary correction, and so reconcile with his community while maintaining his honor and authority. The fifth subsection then contextualizes the poem's language of correction by reading it within a Visigothic discourse of penance and by situating it among other examples of Eugenius's epitaphic poetry. This investigation reveals that penitential self-criticism was not only conventional among seventh-century Visigothic Christians, but conceived of as a restorative, paradoxically dignifying speech-act. The sixth subsection examines the poem as one literary expression of penance among other, related literary projects developed during Chindasuinth's reign. It argues that a penitential reading of the epitaph corresponds with evidence for a developing literary culture at Chindasuinth's court that fostered special interest in ideas of Christian justice and mercy from across the Mediterranean. The conclusion remarks on the import of this new reading of the king's epitaph for our historical understanding of penance as a political tool in Visigothic Spain.

In 646 Braulio (d. 651), bishop of Zaragoza, received word that King Chindasuinth had chosen his prized archdeacon Eugenius to replace the recently deceased metropolitan of the *urbs regia*, Eugenius I. Braulio was distraught. In a passionate, but carefully crafted letter the aging bishop petitioned the king to rethink his decision.<sup>7</sup> He spun his request as an occasion for Chindasuinth to have mercy on an old man, whose “one comfort in life” was his well-trained deacon.<sup>8</sup>

His appeal to compassion was deliberate, and reflected a well-established ideology of kingship in the Visigothic world, which held that mercy was a cornerstone of any good king’s character. Mercy featured prominently, for example, in Isidore’s formula for ruling rightly, which advised monarchs to give in merciful compassion when it was possible to take justly by force.<sup>9</sup> At the Fifth Council of Toledo (636), where Braulio was present, an assembly of bishops agreed to make the monarch the supreme instrument of mercy in the kingdom by investing him with the right of pardon in all cases not covered by canon law.<sup>10</sup> Chindasuinth himself had asserted the king’s prerogative and his own inclination to show mercy on whomever he saw fit. He promulgated a policy that reserved for the crown the right to “overlook the sins of sinners out of pious mercy whenever petition is made on behalf of those implicated in some crime in our court.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise noted, references to and translations of Braulio’s letters are taken from *Iberian Fathers: Braulio of Saragossa and Fructuosus of Braga*, The Fathers of the Church 63, C.W. Barlow (trans.) (Washington, 1969).

<sup>8</sup> Braulio, *Ep.* 31, Barlow (trans.), p. 72. PL 80.678A “Erat mihi utcunq̄ huius vitae solamen etsi in multis necessitatibus constituto servi vestri Eugenii mei archidiaconi visio.”

<sup>9</sup> Isidore, *Sententiae*, III.49.2, CCL 111 (Turnhout 1998), p. 300. Though Isidore died ten years before the situation with Braulio, Chindasuinth, and Eugenius unfolded, his thought remained a redoubtable influence on numerous strands of seventh-century Visigothic ideology. His influence is especially apparent in the work of Braulio and Eugenius. Braulio was a close friend of Isidore’s, and their correspondence is preserved, along with a book list and eulogy for the bishop of Seville, in Braulio’s epistolary corpus; see Braulio, *Ep.* 1-8, and *Renotatio Isidori*, Barlow (trans.), pp. 15-26, 140-142.

<sup>10</sup> Toledo V, c. 8, *Concilios Visigoticos e Hispano-Romanos*, J. Vives (ed.), (Barcelona, 1963), p. 230. Regrettably, I was not able to consult the more recent critical edition of the Visigothic Councils by G. Martínez Díez, F. Rodríguez.

<sup>11</sup> *Leges Visigothorum*, VI.1.7, K. Zeumer (ed.), *MGH, Legum sectio I, Leges nationum germanicarum*, (Hannover, 1902), p.256: “Quotienscumque nobis pro his, qui in causis nostris aliquot crimine implicati sunt, subplicatur, et suggerendi tribuimus aditum et pia miseratione delinquentibus culpas omittere nostre potestati servamus.” Hereafter I refer to this text as “LV.” The *Liber Iudiciorum* or *Leges Visigothorum* was a project initiated c. 643 under Chindasuinth and later published under his son, Reccesuinth; for a succinct

In this instance, however, another cardinal virtue prevailed. Justice, to return to Isidore's conceptual world, was the counterbalance opposite mercy on the scale of the good judge, and Chindasuinth's subsequent refusal of Braulio's request took full advantage of its ideological weight.<sup>12</sup> He framed Eugenius's promotion as an unavoidable matter of justice and God's will. Kings are principally bound to these things, he argued, while still capitalizing on the bishop's appeal to his compassion by referring to himself metonymically as *Clementia* in their correspondence.<sup>13</sup> The notion of the monarch as *the* agent of divine providence and enactor of justice was familiar to Braulio. In a letter to Pope Honorius several years earlier, he had described King Chintila's (r. 636-640) anti-Jewish measures as divinely inspired.<sup>14</sup> Chindasuinth's arm-twisting rhetorical maneuver in the negotiation over Eugenius's promotion is to use this ideology against the bishop. "Since you do not believe that I can do other than what is pleasing to God," he wrote, "it is necessary that you accede to my exhortation."<sup>15</sup>

The summons to Toledo in 646 may have also chafed Eugenius, who, though a native of the city, had fled from it in his earlier years and entered upon a monkish life (though clearly he remained within the clergy). The reason for his departure remains unknown, but Ildefonsus, Eugenius's successor and biographer, portrays his forced return in unmistakably dark shades, referring to the king's *violentia* in bringing Eugenius back to

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review of the modern scholarly arguments surrounding the *LV*, see Barbero and Loring, "Catholic Visigothic Kingdom", 356, n. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Isidore, *Sententiae*, III.52.4; see also *Sententiae*, III.48-51 for similar applications of *iustitia* and *patientia* in his theory of kingship.

<sup>13</sup> See for example Braulio, *Ep.* 32, PL 80.678D: "Quam ad nostram clementiam tua curavit sanctitas transmittendam, suscepimus."

<sup>14</sup> Braulio, *Ep.* 21, Barlow (trans.), pp. 51-52.

<sup>15</sup> Braulio, *Ep.* 32, Barlow (trans.), pp. 73-74. PL 80.679B: "Ergo, beatissime vir, quia aliud quam quod Deo est placitum non credas me posse facturum, necesse est ut iuxta nostram adhortationem hunc Eugenium archidiaconum nostrae cedas Ecclesiae sacerdotem." See *LV*, II.1.2, Zeumer (ed.), p. 46 for the idea that the law derives from both necessity (i.e. divine providence) and the will of the king, set in apposition to one another.

the Visigothic capital.<sup>16</sup> Once in Toledo, Eugenius appears riddled with anxiety in his new position.<sup>17</sup> In one letter to Braulio from his see, he asked for insight regarding the uncertain status of a priest whom the previous bishop had been forced by the king (probably Chindasuinth) to ordain. Not wanting to follow the king's orders, but being unable to disobey, the previous bishop had purposely botched the ceremony by pronouncing a curse instead of a blessing over the unwitting initiate, leaving Eugenius unsure of the validity of all the rites the priest had thereafter performed. Leaving aside the theological intricacies of the question, the anecdote reveals the type of strong pressure the king could apply to the metropolitan at Toledo, and one of the manifold ways the monarch could impose his designs on the Visigothic church at large.

A congruent language of compulsion is present in the evidence for one of the few well-documented cases of direct interaction between the archbishop and the king, fascinating in light of the present study for its connection with poetry. Ildefonsus reports that Eugenius edited and amplified two late-fifth-century poems composed by the Vandal North African versifier Dracontius, and indeed both the originals and Eugenius's recension survive in the manuscript tradition.<sup>18</sup> The Spanish biographer redacted Chindasuinth's role as patron of the project, however, to which both a prose letter from Eugenius and the hexameter preface to his edition of Dracontius bear witness. In each of these texts Eugenius underscored the fact that he was complying with the king's commands in making what some might perceive as an audacious attempt to improve upon poems of old. The epistle, for instance, begins by acknowledging the king's "orders" (*iussis*) that had the bishop correct Dracontius' poems, which were "overrun with manifold errors" (*multis erroribus involutos*).<sup>19</sup> In the

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<sup>16</sup> Ildefonsus of Toledo, *De Viris Illustribus* 13. Forced appointments were not uncommon. Kings could use them to assert their authority in ecclesiastical affairs; see Braulio, *Ep.* 5, 6, 35, and 36; P.D. King, *Law and Society in the Visigothic Kingdom* (Cambridge, 1972), p. 126, n. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Eugenius complained that his spirit was "seriously wasting" (translation my own); see Braulio, *Ep.* 35, PL 80.680D: *Duae res obortae sunt in Ecclesia mea unde nimium contabescit anima mea.*

<sup>18</sup> Ildefonsus of Toledo, *De Viris Illustribus* 13, C.C. Merino (ed.), *CCSL* 114A, pp. 615. For historical discussion and literary analysis of the recension, see *CCSL* 114, Alberto (ed.), pp. 17-20; Tizzoni, "The Poems of Dracontius", pp. 148-232; and K. Reinwald, *Die Ausgabe des ersten Buches der Laudes dei und der Satisfactio des Dracontius durch Eugenius von Toledo*, (Speyer, 1913).

<sup>19</sup> Eugenius, *Eugenii epistula ad Chindasuinthum*, *CCSL* 114, Alberto (ed.), p. 325.

verse preface, a twenty-five line poem addressed to the *libellus* itself, Eugenius preempts critics of the project by claiming: “Blame is never assigned when one cannot exercise his will, but is coerced by a more powerful directive.”<sup>20</sup> Six lines later, he emphasizes again that he has been “ordered by a great ruler” to undertake the project, and draws an explicit comparison between himself and Virgil’s editors Varius and Tucca, who prepared the *Aeneid* for circulation after Virgil’s death at the request of the emperor Augustus.<sup>21</sup>

Later, this particular poetic project will be examined more closely for its rhetorical and thematic relevance to the epitaph at hand. For now it is worth highlighting the following important related facts: first, Chindasuinth was interested in patronizing Latin poetic projects; second, Eugenius described his role as poet-editor as one of obedient service to the king.<sup>22</sup>

#### *A state of high anxiety*

A more pronounced rhetoric of violence, perhaps compatible with the language of compulsion analyzed above, is prevalent in the early medieval histories that treat Chindasuinth’s reign. According to the chronicler Fredegar, at almost eighty years old Chindasuinth seized the throne unlawfully from the boy-king Tulga (r. 639-642 AD) and forced him to take the tonsure. Thereafter he is said to have slaughtered 700

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<sup>20</sup> Eugenius, *Praefatio*, lines 16-17, *CCSL* 114, Alberto (ed.), p. 328:

“...nusquam culpa putatur,  
cum non uelle ualet, sed maior iussio cogit.”

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, lines 20-26.

“Quod si Vergilius et uatum summus Homerus  
censuram meruere nouam post fata subire,  
quam dat Aristarchus Tucca Variusque Probusque,  
cur dedignetur quod iussus principe magno  
paruula praeparui Draconti carmina libri  
paruulus Eugenius nugarum mole piaui?”

<sup>22</sup> There was a small tradition of literary patronage and poetic composition among Vandal and Visigothic kings. For poetry at the Spanish court, see Y. Hen, *Roman Barbarians: the Royal Court and Culture in the Early Medieval West*, (New York, 2007), pp. 124-152. For the Vandal court, see Hen, *Roman Barbarians*, pp. 59-93 and J. Conant, *Staying Roman: Conquest and Identity in Africa and the Mediterranean 439-700*, (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 146-147.

former conspirators to dissuade the nobility from future rebellion.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the *Chronicle of 754* depicts the old king “crushing Goths” (*demoliens Gothos*) for the six years he ruled alone before sharing the throne with his son Reccesuinth.<sup>24</sup>

Historians have marshalled these depictions alongside evidence from normative sources, such as legislation issued under Chindasuinth, to portray the king as a ‘murderous’ and overbearing tyrant, especially as a crusader against treason.<sup>25</sup> Of the ninety-nine laws attributed to the monarch in the Visigothic Code, one of the earliest gives insight into what has been described as a “severe” and “violent” policy against traitors and rebels.<sup>26</sup> It applied retroactively to those who had ever committed treason against the country, deserted to an enemy, or conspired with criminal intent against the Gothic people; and it leveled punishments of death and confiscation of property against them.<sup>27</sup> In two separate laws the king even limited the possibility of clemency in cases of conspiracy or treason.<sup>28</sup> He would only allow himself to commute the death penalty to blinding so the traitor “would not see the disaster in which he had wickedly taken pleasure,” and to restore a mere one-twentieth of his property.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Fredegar, *Chronicle*, IV.82, ed. B. Krusch, *MGH, SRM 2*, (Berlin, 1888), pp. 162-163. The text probably originated within a decade of Chindasuinth’s death. See I. Wood’s classic analysis of the *Chronicle*, “Fredegar’s Fables” in A. Scharer and G. Scheibelreiter (eds.) *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter*, (Wien, 1994), pp. 359-367, and R. Collins’ recent study, *Die Fredegar-Chroniken*, (Hannover, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> *Continuatio Hispana*, T. Mommsen (ed.), *MGH AA 11*, *Chronica minora saec. IV, V, VI, VII*, bd. II, (Berlin, 1894), p. 341.

<sup>25</sup> See n. 3 for relevant historiography on Chindasuinth; for the epithet see Thompson, *Goths in Spain*, p. 199.

<sup>26</sup> *LV*, II.1.8, Zeumer (ed.), pp. 53-57: “Concerning those who desert in opposition to the king, or the people, or their country, or who behave arrogantly.” See Ziegler, *Church and State*, pp. 101-102.

<sup>27</sup> Chindasuinth cleverly distinguished in the *capitulum* between external conspirators and internal ones, so that the former would be held responsible for crimes dating from the time of Tulga’s father, King Chintila, up to 643. The latter, a group to which Chindasuinth technically belonged (having ascended to the throne by way of insurrection), were to be held accountable only from the start of his own reign. The loophole allowed the king to avoid culpability under his own law.

<sup>28</sup> *LV*, II.1.8 and VI.1.7, Zeumer (ed.), pp. 53-57 and 256.

<sup>29</sup> *LV*, II.1.8, Zeumer (ed.), p. 55-56: “Quod si fortasse pietatis intuitu a principe fuerit illi vita concessa, non aliter quam effossis oculis relinquatur ad vitam, quatenus nec excidium videat, quo fuerat nequiter delectatus”; see Barbero and Loring, “Catholic Visigothic Kingdom”, 358-359.



Whether the proliferation of these laws stemmed from Chindasuinth's own insecurities or was symptomatic of widespread angst about the threat of political instability is a matter for debate. A number of sources reveal a state of high anxiety in Visigothic Spain over the potential for conflict and political challengers at this time. One letter from Braulio and a certain Bishop Eutropius to the king, for example, speaks directly to the dreaded threat of incursion and insurrection weighing on the kingdom. They pressed the aged king to appoint his son Reccesuinth to the throne, which he did in 649, since he was virile enough to effectively thwart ongoing invasions and uprisings.<sup>30</sup> And at Toledo VII (646), the only council held during Chindasuinth's reign, the bishops posed a poignant rhetorical question in the first canon before coming down harshly on traitors and rebels: "Who does not know how much is perpetrated by usurpers and deserters crossing over to foreign areas illegally, and how constantly we run up against their accursed pride, which weakens the country and imposes incessant labor on the Gothic army?"<sup>31</sup> These bishops prescribed punishments of excommunication for clerics and lay people who committed treason or voiced agreement with conspirators.<sup>32</sup> It was hardly out of the ordinary. In the preceding decade the Visigothic Church had already taken a stance against the destabilizing forces of treason through canon law.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the tradition of Spanish political infighting was so well known in the Mediterranean world that Gregory of Tours had noted how, "the Goths had taken up the loathsome habit of assassinating any monarch who did not win their favor, and establishing as king whomever they preferred."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Braulio, *Ep.* 37, Barlow (trans.), p. 84.

<sup>31</sup> Toledo VII, c. 1, *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), pp. 249-250: "Quis enim nesciat quanta sint hactenus per tyrannos et refugas transferendo se in externas partes inclite perpetrata, et quam nefanda eorum superbia iugiter frequentata, quae et patriae diminutionem afferent et exercitui Gothorum indesinentem laborem inponerent?"

<sup>32</sup> Toledo VII, c. 1, *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), pp. 249-253.

<sup>33</sup> Toledo V, c. 5, *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), p. 230; Toledo VI, c. 18, *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), p. 245.

<sup>34</sup> *Libri historiarum*, III.30, ed. Krusch and Levison, *MGH*, Script. rer. Mer., 1. (Hannover, 1937), p. 126: "Sumpserant enim Gothi hanc detestabilem consuetudinem, ut, si quis eis de regibus non placuisset, gladio eum adpeterent, et qui libuisset animo, hunc sibi statuerent regem." Along the same lines, see also Fredegar's remark on the "morbus Gotorum" at IV.82.

However, evidence of civil and clerical discontent with Chindasuinth's policies from before the king's death is relatively weak. Attendance numbers for the aforementioned Toledo VII are comparatively low, for example, but there is not much else.<sup>35</sup> Yet this small evidence has been used to support the defamatory readings of his epitaph described above. If this is a sign of a lack of ecclesiastical support during Chindasuinth's tenure—and it is only possible to speculate—it may owe to the king's inconstant relationship with canon law, especially in view of his questionable accession. On the one hand, when he had deposed Tulga by way of tonsure, his methods were in accordance with the seventeenth canon of Toledo VI (638), which made all tonsured persons ineligible to rule.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, by plotting against the reigning king, he had run roughshod over canons issued at Toledo V and Toledo VI, which threatened conspirators and calumniators with excommunication.<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, around the time of Chindasuinth's death the ecclesiastical establishment did express regret over its own rigid position (perhaps encouraged by Chindasuinth) against enemies of the state, and a reforming desire to relax it. This change in policy required a degree of negotiation with the royal authority.<sup>38</sup> Bishop Fructuosus of Braga, for example, directed a letter to Reccesuinth asking that he pardon those imprisoned under Chindasuinth, promising that in doing so he would earn forgiveness for his own sins and those of his father.<sup>39</sup> Another text published after Chindasuinth's death points even more overtly to collective

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<sup>35</sup> Only thirty bishops were present, whereas an average of fifty bishops attended the councils immediately preceding and following it. The low numbers may be explained by Chindasuinth's own absence. Kings were present at almost every general council held before 681. They would often set the agenda in a *Tomus* presented at the outset of each meeting (e.g. Toledo VIII, *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), pp. 260-266). Chindasuinth is one of only two kings in the seventh century not to have contributed overtly to a program for a council, though the conciliar acts for Toledo VII noted that they had "reverently gathered in this holy city at the desire of the king": "Nos autem immortalis Deo et glorioso Cindasvindo principi, ob cuius votum in hac urbe sancta devotione convenimus;" see Toledo VII, c. 6, *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), pp. 256, and Ziegler, *Church and State*, p. 42.

<sup>36</sup> Toledo VI, c. 17, *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), pp. 244-245.

<sup>37</sup> See n. 32.

<sup>38</sup> For a more extensive discussion of the evidence, see Collins, *Early Medieval Spain*, p. 126-128.

<sup>39</sup> "Letter to Recceswinth", Barlow (trans.), p. 211.

dissatisfaction with the king and the lingering effects of some of his legalistic policies, especially those that had disadvantaged the church financially or affected its applied methods of justice. In the *Decretum iudicii universalis*, a document attached to the acts of Toledo VIII (653), the Visigothic church, in conjunction with ministers of the court, spoke out vociferously against the exercise of excommunication and the throne's arrogation of property, which had been major components of Chindasuinth's anti-treason campaign.<sup>40</sup> The text describes the state as though it were in the aftermath of disaster, "having passed through a time of hard tyranny" (*decursis temporibus durae dominationis*). The assembly first expresses concern for the masses trapped under the "accursed weight" (*execranda pressura*) of excommunication, which, as we have seen, had served as a punishment for political crimes. Interestingly, the *Decretum* appears to respond directly to Reccesuinth's opening appeal in the council's *Tomus*, which prefaces the record of conciliar decrees, and supposedly set the agenda for the congress. In the *Tomus* the king wearied himself over the "heavy and burdensome" (*grave onerosumque*) fact that so many people had been sentenced harshly for treason and denied hope of reconciliation.<sup>41</sup> The council reacted in the *Decretum* by promising the distribution of "sacred medicines of holy healing" (*sanctae sancionis sacra remedia*) within the church to the excommunicated. Even still, the *Decretum* had its own agenda. Attention turns to economic matters in the document, with a petition for reparations for Chindasuinth's confiscations. Court and ecclesiastical officials joined together to ask Reccesuinth to treat the property gained via Chindasuinth's expropriations not as familial inheritance, but as state property to be redistributed for damages incurred by his subjects.<sup>42</sup>

Chindasuinth does not come off well in the *Decretum*. While the document falls well short of invective, it contains a frank, negative evaluation of the dead king's legal and economic policies—one

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<sup>40</sup> *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), pp. 289-293. See Collins, *Early Medieval Spain*, pp. 126-128 for a useful analysis of this document.

<sup>41</sup> *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), pp. 263-264.

<sup>42</sup> *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), pp. 289-293.

reminiscent of king's epitaphic voice as it offers words of warning against excessive love of worldly wealth (lines 18-26).<sup>43</sup> That sentiment dovetails nicely with the low opinion of his practice of expropriation articulated in the *Decretum*. Therefore in both the poetic epitaph and the conciliar appendix, composed after Chindasuinth's death, there is evidence that the tense politics and controversial policies during the monarch's reign had led to fraught rethinking of his tenure and to a subsequent renegotiation of power among royal, noble, and ecclesiastical parties. The discursive context of these negotiations (of which Chindasuinth's epitaph and the *Decretum* are a part) remains to be explored.

#### *How to admonish the king*

If the *Decretum* and Chindasuinth's epitaph are critical in tone, it must be said that neither text registers complaints simply as matters of record. On the contrary, each experiments uniquely with a rhetoric of reconciliation in an attempt to correct the perceived misuse of royal power. In other words, they endeavor to initiate dialogue between the throne and society to achieve resolution—the *Decretum* by negotiating over policy in unison with the living monarch, the poem (as I will argue in greater detail) by portraying the king as voluntarily engaging in a public act of atonement.<sup>44</sup>

These rhetorical strategies should not be taken for granted, or presumed to have been easily enacted. Negotiations over royal power and reconciliation were not so freely accomplished in Visigothic Spain.<sup>45</sup> With the high anxiety over potential conflict and political challengers came legal policies that attempted to frustrate

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<sup>43</sup> For a discussion of literary *insultatio* in a Visigothic political context, see M. de Jong, "Adding Insult to Injury: Julian of Toledo and his *Historia Wambae*," in P. Heather (ed.), *The Visigoths from the Migration Period to the Seventh Century: an Ethnographic Perspective* (Woodbridge, 1999), pp. 373-402, especially 384-386.

<sup>44</sup> Fructuosus of Braga's aforementioned letter to Reccesuinth, which criticizes Chindasuinth's policies openly, but also offers forgiveness, operates similarly. See n. 39.

<sup>45</sup> See R. Stocking's study of the brokerage of power in Visigothic Spain, *Bishops, Councils, and Consensus in the Visigothic Kingdom, 589-633* (Ann Arbor, 2000). For comparison, see M. de Jong's thought-provoking discussion of royal admonition in the Frankish court surrounding the public penance of Louis the Pious, *The Penitential State: Authority and Atonement in the Age of Louis the Pious, 814-840*. (Cambridge, 2009), in particular pp. 112-147, and 214-259.

dissidents at the level of discourse. Behind the shield of secular and conciliar code, kings protected themselves from indecent reproach and outright slander (*maledicere*), which made criticism of the throne tricky business.

One law issued by Reccesuinth against slandering the king strikes at the heart of this complicated issue, and speaks to its special relevance in the time after Chindasuinth's death.<sup>46</sup> *LV* II.1.19, dating to the mid-to-late 650's, paints malevolent detractors (*maledicentes*) as traitors. It prescribes a punishment of fifty lashes and forfeiture of half of all one's property to the king—a penalty that may represent a designed pushback against aristocratic complaints about royal expropriation policies. Admittedly, conciliar legislation against slandering the king had already existed for over a decade, dating back to Toledo V (636) where bishops proclaimed that those who slandered (*maledicere*) the monarch would be punished with excommunication.<sup>47</sup> But one detail in Reccesuinth's law suggests that it was more than a recapitulation of church precedent, and may have instead represented the throne's reaction to the disgruntled murmurings of clerics and nobility surrounding the king's deceased father, Chindasuinth. The ordinance warned those audacious enough to defame the memory of a dead king in particular: "The living cast darts of slander against the dead to no good end, who, now that they have passed, cannot be bothered by insults or influenced by regulations."<sup>48</sup>

This unusual stipulation calls to mind the *Decretum*, as well as Eugenius's epitaph for Chindasuinth, a text that, as we have seen, has often been read as dart-casting against the deceased ruler. While it is tempting to toss around hypotheticals about whether the epitaph in particular could have prompted a legal response from Reccesuinth or qualified as illicit slander (defamatory readings would suggest both are possible), the uncertain sequential chronology of publication makes speculation futile. We cannot be certain whether the poem or the law appeared first. But *LV* II.1.9's curious provision does suggest ideological interconnectedness

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<sup>46</sup> *LV* II.1.9, Zeumer (ed.), pp. 57-59.

<sup>47</sup> Toledo V, c. 5, *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), p. 229.

<sup>48</sup> *LV* II.1.9, Zeumer (ed.), pp. 57-58: "Incassum etenim his qui vivit detractionis in defunctum iacula mittit, cum iam defunctus nec consitutionibus imbui nec increpationibus possit argueri."

with both the *Decretum* and the epitaph. Rather than reading the legal code in tension with these texts, it is possible to interpret them as working, if not necessarily together, then at least at the same negotiating table, each operating with different language and at different levels of discourse towards the resolution of Chindasuinth's memory and the afterlife of some of his policies.

Although admonishing the king, even a dead king, was made seemingly difficult and dangerous by strict regulations against slander (not to mention the history of vicious reprisals against conspirators that had happened during Chindasuinth's reign), it was not an altogether impossible act. We have already seen one manifestation of the widespread notion among Visigothic thinkers that rulers could require critical advice from time to time. As the correspondence between Braulio and Chindasuinth over Eugenius's appointment nicely showed, the balance of the king's distribution of mercy and justice was a matter for debate in the Visigothic world. Subjects could ostensibly petition, counsel, or negotiate with the king over his decisions and disposition. It simply required tact. Reccesuinth's law defending monarchs from malevolent debasement reflects this thinking; for *LVII.1.9* does not forbid all forms of criticism against the monarch. Rather, it draws a clear distinction between unacceptable, "brash and arrogant defamation" (*superbe et contumeliose insultare*) and "humble and quiet admonition" (*humiliter et silenter admonere*), giving implicit permission to a kind of respectful, behind-the-scenes criticism. This particular qualification offers a key to help decode the rhetoric of the admonitory messages of the *Decretum* and Chindasuinth's epitaph. Each text in its own way may be read as fashioning forms of "humble and quiet" criticism of the crown.

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Consider first the *Decretum*. There the aristocratic body uses at least two strategies to craft admonition "humiliter et silenter." First, it speaks of the old king reverently as Chindasuinth "of blessed memory" (*divae memoriae*) even in the midst of its attempt to reverse the disastrous effects of his policies.<sup>49</sup> Second, the text

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<sup>49</sup> *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), p. 292.

reads like an echo of Reccesuinth's *Tomus*, supposedly issued before Toledo VIII where the *Decretum* was composed. As the conciliar acts are constructed, the king's *Tomus* introduces the same problem of punitive excommunication that the *Decretum* later tries to address. The records from this council therefore produce a call and response effect between the king and his chorus of receptive aristocratic subjects, a movement in the key in which power was sung, so to speak, in Visigothic Spain.<sup>50</sup>

The authors of the *Decretum* quieted their admonitory tone by allowing Reccesuinth to keep the initiative in moderating royal policy. This mode of admonition was well suited to the mechanics of monarchical legitimacy and the presentation of kingly authority in Visigothic Spain. Isidore, the kingdom's most influential theoretician of monarchical power, had argued that no king could lay claim to intrinsic sacredness or goodness by virtue of his title. "Those men are rightly called kings," he wrote, "who, in ruling well, show they know how to moderate their own behavior as well as the behavior of their subjects."<sup>51</sup> Along the same lines, in the *Etymologies*, he claimed that the word *rex* derived from the phrase *recte agendo* ("acting rightly"), arguing that a king's sovereignty is rooted in his ability to do well—to uphold justice, show compassion, and carry out a favorable divine will.<sup>52</sup> Within this ideology, then, the burden of correction rested on the king. Even more, the king's sovereign power was rooted in his ability to control his constituents *and himself*.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> It is important to stress here that these council records are not verbatim transcripts, but texts that have undergone editing and transmission processes. Their presentation of the dynamics of power between church and state should be read as deliberate and self-conscious. It is even possible that the *Tomus* was written after the council, with foreknowledge of the deliberations and decisions reflected within of *Decretum*.

<sup>51</sup> Isidore, *Sententiae*, III.48.7, *CCSL* 111, ed. Razier, p. 298: "Recte igitur illi reges uocantur qui tam semetipsos quam subiectos, bene regendo, modificare nouerunt."

<sup>52</sup> Isidore, *Etymologies* IX.iii.4, ed. W.M. Lindsay, (Oxford, 1911): "The title of king is held by behaving rightly, and lost by sinning. For which reason also there was such a proverb among the ancients: "You will be king if you have acted rightly; if you do not, you will not"; repeated almost verbatim at *Sententiae*, III.48.7. For the corresponding view that the Visigothic church was a steadfast defender of kingship, but noncommittal toward individual kings see Collins, *Early Medieval Spain*, pp. 108-129.

<sup>53</sup> Isidore emphasizes this point elsewhere at *Sententiae*, III.50.4, *CCSL* 111, p. 302, where he argues that, while sinful people are kept from wrongdoing by fear of a judge and the law, "kings, on the other hand, unless they are checked by pure fear of God and the dread of Hell, easily fall headlong and slip over the cliff of license into every sinful crime."

But while the *Decretum* may have allowed the king to lead the process of correction, and thus acquired an obsequious tone when read as a reply to Reccesuinth's agenda, the text still treads awfully near the line between *admonere* and *maledicere*. Remember, for instance, that it refers to Chindasuinth's reign as a "time of hard tyranny." The epitaph, on the other hand, creatively sidesteps this problem by giving a self-critical voice to the dead king himself. The poem enables Chindasuinth to demonstrate his legitimacy through personal and voluntary chastisement of his own behavior in accord with the ideology of kingship outlined above.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, it is important to emphasize that, though the king's poetic voice is confessional, it is not solipsistic. The voice projects a sermon outward to the community, engaging with an audience from the first word. This too fits seamlessly within the Visigothic theory of royal rule. Self-control was not only a matter of importance for the king's own well-being, but for the subjects for whom he acted as a paradigm of good behavior. "Kings easily make or break the lives of their subjects," Isidore insisted. "Therefore it is not right that a leader sin, in case he should make a model for sinning out of the unpunished intemperance of his error."<sup>55</sup>

The Visigothic population was not meant to constrain, but to replicate its king's actions. Constraint was left to the king, who was to abide by the law and to hold himself morally accountable for his behavior. Understood within the parameters of this ideology, it is reasonable to argue that Reccesuinth's law against *maledicentes* envisioned proper criticism as that which would not infringe on the public image of the monarch as the archetype of good behavior. To voice disapproval of the royal authority was a conceivable act in the Visigothic world, but appropriate admonition would never upstage the king. Admonishment was to happen humbly and quietly, behind the scenes. This allowed the king to keep the initiative in negotiating reconciliation or a change in policy, and so to maintain honor and authority by appearing as the self-aware

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<sup>54</sup> Diesner has read this strategy as the manipulation of a legal loophole, arguing that the poet made Chindasuinth act as his own slanderer in these verses so as to cleverly escape any penalty for libel. See. "Demut und Gewissen," p. 478

<sup>55</sup> Isidore, *Sententiae*, III.50.6, *CCSL* 111, p. 302: "Reges uitam subditorum facile exemplis suis uel aedificant, uel subuertunt, ideo que principem non oportet delinquere, ne formam peccandi faciat peccati eius impunita licentia."



and responsible moderator of his own conduct. It is possible to see this ideology as motivating Eugenius, or at least giving him room to write a poem that exposes the king's failings, without qualifying as slander. The poet creatively fashions a mode of "humble and quiet" critique by having Chindasuinth expose his own faults in the epitaph, eliminating the invasive and detracting presence of an outside inveigher in the process. In the process, the king is allowed to keep his honor unimpaired.<sup>56</sup>

This same ideology of kingly power does not itself provide a script for the king's self-modification, however. At this juncture, the relationship between the poem's most basic rhetorical strategy—the fact that the king speaks—and its specific language—the king's words—needs to be explored. In what follows, I will show that, in order to fashion such a script for the king in his epitaph, Eugenius drew from a contemporary Visigothic discourse of penance for the lyrics to his verse, a discourse in which ideas about voluntary self-criticism and episcopal admonishment circulated side-by-side.

#### *The discourse of penance*

At the end of Fredegar's short chapter on Chindasuinth's reign, the chronicler included a report that the king had entered upon a life of penance (*poenitentiam agens*) sometime after appointing his son Reccesuinth to share the throne in 649. It is not possible to know what exactly the king's penance entailed, or when he began to do penance in the four years between his son's ascension and his own death. The chronicler only added that Chindasuinth made many charitable donations out of his own pocket—an important detail considering how the clergy and aristocracy seem to have been bothered by his avariciousness—but whether almsgiving stands in apposition to penance or constitutes a separate Christian act is unclear.<sup>57</sup> This intriguing

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<sup>56</sup> For an engaging literary analysis of the rhetorical techniques of confession, especially with regard to how the self-condemning nature of confessional reflection liberates the performer from the influence of the "other", i.e. negative evaluators, see M. Bakhtin, "Performed Action and Confessional Self-Accounting" in *Art and Answerability*, trans. M. Holquist and V. Liapunov (Austin, 1990), pp. 138-150. Fear, "Moaning to Some Purpose", p. 74 suggests that Eugenius's moralizing poems may be read as "gentle warning(s)" not to Chindasuinth, but to Reccesuinth, who is described in some sources as a prodigal king.

<sup>57</sup> Fredegar, *Chronicle*, IV.82, ed. B. Krusch, *MGH*, *Script. rer. Mer.*, 2, (Berlin, 1888), p. 163: "Chyntasindus paenitentiam agens, aelymosinam multa de rebus propriis faciens, plenus senectutae, fertur nonagenarius, moretur"; canon law regulating the financial

bit of biographical information, derived from a text that may have originated within a decade of the king's death, offers one potentially important clue about the end of the king's life that may illuminate the context for his epitaph.<sup>58</sup> If this is to come into focus, it will require laying out what evidence exists for the practice of penance in Visigothic Spain.

Unfortunately, the question of how penance was normally performed in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages is fraught with controversy. Modern scholarship on penance has recently worked to reassess the standard historiographical narratives of the rite. Significant change has come in the scrutiny applied to an entrenched rhetoric of decline in the historiography. Previously, scholars had used a model of decay to describe the supposed shift starting in the fourth century from a canonical form of penance, defined by dramatic public ritual, to modes of private penance, including, most prominently, a deathbed rite.<sup>59</sup> Historians have lately presented arguments that challenge and complicate the standard narrative, providing us with a complex patchwork of micro-contextualized ideas to replace an all too broad and rhetorically obscured history of penance.<sup>60</sup> Without delving too deeply into this critical moment, it will be worthwhile to highlight one important conclusion: penance was still very much a product of innovation and experimentation in the early medieval world. Christian communities across the Mediterranean were

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lives of penitents was not uncommon in the Visigothic period—at the First Council of Barcelona (540) one canon decreed that penitents were “to refrain from commerce and simply lead frugal lives in their own homes”, see c. 8, *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), p. 53. In the *Exhortatio poenitendi*, a penitential poem of the Visigothic period in semi-hexametric rhythm, sometimes assigned to Isidore, lines 76-77 link very clearly almsgiving and atonement; see the text in (ed.) K. Strecker, *MGH, PLAC* 4.2 (Hanover, 1923) pp. 762-768: “Data elemosina, si habes, redime probra | Et sequi vanissima respue, contempne, recusa.”

<sup>58</sup> It is even possible to imagine that Fredegar's note is informed by knowledge of the poem. Critics do not often read the two texts as mutually informative, but see Pizarro, *Wamba*, p. 22 n. 41.

<sup>59</sup> For the standard narrative, see B. Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*, (New York, 1964), pp. 81-123; for critical analysis of the historiography, see, for example, M. de Jong, “Transformations of Penance” in F. Theuvs and J. Nelson (eds.) *Rituals of Power: from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2000), pp. 185-224; R. Meens, “The Historiography of Early Medieval Penance” in A. Firey (ed.) *A New History of Penance* (Leiden, 2008), pp. 77-95. For a succinct description of the differences between late antique and early medieval practice, see de Jong, *Penitential State*, pp. 232-234.

<sup>60</sup> See de Jong, “Transformations of Penance”; R. Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe, 600-1200* (Cambridge, 2014); K. Uhalde. *Expectations of Justice in the Age of Augustine* (Philadelphia, 2007), pp. 101-134; Brown, *Ransom of the Soul*, pp. 124-149.

laboratories of ideas and practice for penance that produced idiosyncratic compounds of public and private, quotidian and dramatic, liturgical and non-liturgical modes of engagement. It is productive to examine the Visigothic culture of penance within this framework, and to think of it as one such laboratory for experimentation, bringing consideration especially to the language, idioms, tropes, symbols and images of penance in circulation at this time.

The central image for penance in mid-seventh-century Spain that emerges from the sources resembles a transformative punishment leading to the disavowal of secular life. According to Isidore's fanciful etymology, *poenitentia* derived from the verb to punish, *punire*.<sup>61</sup> The *Exhortatio poenitendi*, a seventh-century penitential lyric of Visigothic origin but uncertain authorship, repeatedly plays with this same apparent linguistic connection:

No crime is atoned for except by doing penance (*poenitendo*)—  
no, rather it is annihilated by being punished (*puniendo*), so that it no longer even exists [...]  
Punish (*puni*) sin while repenting (*poenitens*) over your crimes and you will live.  
In this life, extinguish the flames of hell with tears.<sup>62</sup>

In describing the penitential rite, Isidore also speaks of weeping as the primary form of cleansing punishment, likening penitential tears to a fountain that washes away sin. The same metaphor appears in the second line of Chindasuinth's monody and elsewhere in Eugenius's verse compositions.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Isidore, *Etymologies*, VI.xix.71. The real etymology of the word remains uncertain, but Isidore's definition does not appear to rely on a classical source; see *TLL*, "paenitet", 10.1.585.3-8.

<sup>62</sup> *Exhortatio poenitendi*, 40-41 and 47-48:

"Nullum scelus aliter nisi poenitendo piatur,  
Immo puniendo, ne sit iam ultra, deletur.  
[...]  
Sed admissa poenitens puni peccatum et vives.  
In hac vita lacrimis extingue tartari flammis.

<sup>63</sup> Eugenius, *Carm.* 1.17-18, and 16.4, *CCSL* 114, Alberto (ed.), p. 206 and 233: "Da pater alitonans, undosum fletibus imbrem, quo valeam lacrimis culparum solvere moles"; "elue probra." The image is common in Isidore's writings, e.g. *De ecclesiasticis officiis* 2.25. It has origins in the work of Gregory the Great, however. See the discussion of the motif of the penitential fountain and relevant citations in J. Hillner, "Gregory the Great's 'Prisons': Monastic Confinement in Early Byzantine Italy", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 19, p. 448. For biblical references to penitential weeping see Ps. 6:6, 51:2, 102:9, and James 4:8-9.

The intrinsically private nature of contrition did not limit the rite to an idiosyncratic, psychological experience, however. Much as Foucault's "gentle art of punishment" described a mechanics of representation to produce "legible lessons" for convicts and spectators alike, Visigothic penance incorporated communal participation and public display for the purposes of collective edification.<sup>64</sup> The same verses in the epitaph that speak of mournful weeping, for example, evince the complex nature of the penitent's relationship with his community. There the king sermonizes about how the reader's tearful lamentation is integral to an economy of forgiveness—the people receive pardon for their sins by mourning the king's.<sup>65</sup>

Other texts—literary, theoretical, and practical—hint at a similar camaraderie, penitent to penitent, and between the penitent and members of his community. Bishops at Toledo III, interested in reasserting what they saw as the canonical form of penance, mandated that anyone undergoing penance take frequent visits to a priest "with the rest of the penitents" (*inter reliquos poenitentes*) for ritual purposes, vaguely suggestive of an *ordo paenitentium*.<sup>66</sup> In the *Liber ordinum*, a later liturgical handbook that preserves the seventh-century Visigothic rite of deathbed penance, bystanders are called to "join tears to tears" (*iungentes nostros cum fletibus fletus*) during the ritual and participate in penitential, prayerful weeping with the atoning sinner.<sup>67</sup> And in one of the five epitaphs Eugenius composed for himself (to be reviewed in greater detail below), readers of the "bitter lament in death song" (*funesto amarum carmine threnum*) are asked to pray to the Lord on his behalf.<sup>68</sup> In

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<sup>64</sup> M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, A. Sheridan (trans.), (New York, 1995), pp. 101-111; the history of public penance in the early medieval world, including an *ordo paenitentium*, remains a contentious topic of discussion among modern historians; see de Jong, "Transformations of Penance," pp. 190ff.

<sup>65</sup> "Mourn for me, all of you whom the world holds | in this way your shameful stains are washed away by your own waters" (Eugenius, *Carm.* 25, 1-2).

<sup>66</sup> c. 11, *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), p. 128.

<sup>67</sup> *Le Liber ordinum en usage dans l'Eglise Wisigothique et Mozarabe d'Espagne du cinquième au onzième siècle*. M. Férotin (ed.) Monumenta Ecclesiae Liturgica 5 (Paris, 1904), p. 90; for discussion of the penitential rite in the *Liber ordinum*, see Paxton, *Christianizing Death: the Creation of a Ritual Process in Early Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, 1990), pp. 69-78.

<sup>68</sup> Eugenius, *Carm.* 17.9-12, CCSL 114, Alberto (ed.), p. 234.

projecting outward to the community, Chindasuinth's epitaphic voice not only corresponds with the idea of the king as society's role model, outlined above, but also participates in the well-established public side of penance. Most prominently, it deploys an economic model of reconciliation involving the exchange of prayers for forgiveness central to the discourse surrounding the rite.<sup>69</sup>

A contrasting emphasis on the antisocial nature of penance is also present in Visigothic discourse. Some texts underscore a penitent's obligation to remove himself from his normal environments, full of occasions for sin, and to engage in a continuous, mournful review of past wrongs as part of a commitment to avoiding sins in the future.<sup>70</sup> A ritual chastisement from the *Liber ordinum*, titled "The priest's rebuke against one who has now received penance" (*castigatio sacerdotis ad eum qui iam penitentiam accepit*) warns the penitent to avoid sin through tearful repentance for as long as he remains alive in the body.<sup>71</sup> The priest further advises the penitent to treat penance as a kind of death to this world. This idea appears to have contributed to the development of a natural, but by no means exclusive pattern of administering penance at the deathbed, a practice not limited to the Visigothic world.<sup>72</sup> It is reasonable to assume that the perceived difficulty of the ritual, centered on dramatic conversion and irrevocable social transformation, could lead to the deferral of the rite until death. Evidence from Isidore's scholarly treatment of penance in his *Etymologies*, conciliar legislation, and the *Liber ordinum* indicate that the rite incorporated dishonoring, self-shaming acts that

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<sup>69</sup> In light of this reading of the epitaph, Chindasuinth's penance invites comparison with the public penance that Louis the Pious performed in 833, for which see M. de Jong's study, *The Penitential State*, cited above n. 44, here pp. 1-13, and 214-259.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Isidore, *Etymologies*, VI.xix.71-74.

<sup>71</sup> *Liber ordinum*, ed. Férotin, p. 93, "esto iam velut mortuus huic mundo"; the metaphor likely derives from Pauline theology. See Romans 6:11, for example.

<sup>72</sup> Paxton, *Christianizing Death*, pp. 73-78; Uhalde, *Expectations of Justice*, 110. Sixth-century conciliar legislation from Gaul and Spain consistently approved of the administration of penance to sick people on their deathbeds. At the Council of Aige (506) where Caesarius of Arles presided, the bishops decreed that *viaticum* was not to be denied to those on the precipice of death, and a canon from the Council of Girona (517), a city in modern day Catalonia, specifically defined *viaticum* as the combination of the blessing of penance with the Eucharist. These and other contemporary conciliar sources for the practice of penance in Gaul and Spain are usefully compiled in the appendix to P. Saint-Roch, *La pénitence dans les conciles et les lettres des papes des origines à la mort de Grégoire le Grand*, (Vatican City, 1991), pp. 123-174; here, c. 15, p. 163, and c. 9, p. 165.

amounted in part to symbolic performance of that death as well. The physical and social identity of the penitent was effaced through such spiritual and bodily humiliation as taking the tonsure, wearing sackcloth and ashes, and covering the body in filth.<sup>73</sup> In the Visigothic discourse of penance, these acts were portrayed as logical counterparts to confession, or *exomologesis*, the process by which a man acknowledged past wrongs before God.<sup>74</sup> The logic of the rite rested on the idea that critical self-discipline of body and mind could transmute the sinful soul into something better. In the deathbed rite, this ameliorative transformation was symbolized by ritual action in the removal of the sackcloth and “the putting on of fresh clothes” (*mutatis vestibus nitidis*).<sup>75</sup>

With these conceptions and practical frameworks now outlined, it is clear to see how Chindasuinth’s scornful language towards his past behavior in Eugenius’s poem (lines 9-16) reflects contemporary conventions of penance. The poem’s rhetoric emerges from and participates in penitential ritual. The king’s scathing flow of self-critical vocabulary, scripted to some degree by a castigating priest, scours clean his sin-encrusted soul. One of Eugenius’s personal epitaphs begins with a similar run of self-abasement: “He heavily laden with a burden of sins, the greatest in crime, abounding in vice...lies in this place.”<sup>76</sup> The poet’s latest editor Paulo Farmhouse Alberto has also pointed out the resemblance between lines 9-16 of Chindasuinth’s epitaph and the strange admonitory and penitential phrases compiled by Isidore in the *Synonyma de lamentatione*

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<sup>73</sup> *Liber ordinum*, ed. Férotin, pp. 87-92; Barcelona I (540), c. 6, *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), p. 53; Toledo III, c. 12, *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), pp. 128-129

<sup>74</sup> Isidore, *Etymologies*, VI.xix.75-79; see Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, XXXV.VI.7, for discussion of the use of ashes and sackcloth in penance.

<sup>75</sup> *Liber ordinum*, ed. Férotin, p. 91.

<sup>76</sup> Eugenius, *Carm.* 17, lines 1-2, 4, *CCSL* 114, Alberto (ed.), p. 234:

“Mole culparum graviter onustus,  
Crimine summus, vitiis abundans

...

occubat istic.”

*animae peccatricis*, a booklet that would have been available to Eugenius.<sup>77</sup> Isidore's *Synonyma* lays out a host of sayings that comprise a kind of formula for readers to use to interrogate their suffering, sinful souls. The number of permutations for individual themes is staggering: "I willingly sinned against my sorry self before; I stained myself long ago with self-seeking interest; I ruined myself first by my own judgment; I tainted myself of my own free will."<sup>78</sup> Amazingly, the list of pejorative epithets in Chindasuinth's epitaph does not repeat a single phrase of the hundreds amassed in the *Synonyma*.<sup>79</sup>

When the text is read alongside this manual of piety, the stain of defamation is no longer visible on the king's confession. Instead it retains the sheen of virtue in light of its subscription to prevailing ideologies of penance, and gains the luster of authenticity in its originality.<sup>80</sup> While Chindasuinth's speech is guided by a poet-priest and relies on the basic scaffolding of an available rhetoric for penitential self-examination, the king's remorse, poetically expressed, is translated to the innovative, the personal, the unique. The poem's linguistic inventiveness, structured according to penitential convention, allows Chindasuinth to appear as a pious, self-aware moderator of his own behavior, and so to fulfill the paradigm of the good king. The poem creatively insists on the voluntary and personal character of the ruler's penance to preserve his kingly honor in the moment of reconciliation.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> PL 83.827-868; see Eugenius, *Carm.* 25, app. font. 9/16, *CCSL* 114, Alberto (ed.), p. 242; see also Braulio, *Ep.* 1, Barlow (trans.), p. 15. J. Fontaine, "Les trois voies des formes poetiques au VIIe siècle latin" in J. Fontaine and J. Hillgarth (eds). *The Seventh Century, Change and Continuity* (London, 1992), pp. 1-18, intrigues for its reading of the *Synonyma* as poetic experimentation, a "prose poetique."

<sup>78</sup> Isidore, *Synonyma*, 44, PL 83.837.B: "Ultro me miserum antea vitiavi, spontaneo me dudum studio pollui, proprio me prius arbitrio perdidit, propria voluntate me maculavi."

<sup>79</sup> But compare *Exhortatio poenitendi*, 102 with line 11 of the epitaph:  
"Quamvis sis peccator **impius**, malignus, **iniquus**."

"**Impius** obscenus probrosus turpis **iniquus**."

<sup>80</sup> See Fear, "Moaning to some purpose", pp. 69-77 for a complementary analysis of the rhetoric of compunction in the poem.

<sup>81</sup> See de Jong, *Penitential State*, p. 244.

Penance was never conceived of as purposelessly punitive in the Visigothic world. It ostensibly rehabilitated the soul, and granted nobility through discipline. To do penance was to earn a badge of honor and restore dignity.<sup>82</sup> It was a matter worthy of record, as several surviving Visigothic tombstones (including two belonging to the 650's) show. They commemorate the deceased's penitential status for posterity as though it were an essential biographical detail: "Maria, a believer in Christ, loved this place while she was alive and her body was buried here. She lived 41 years. She passed away peacefully with penance on March 9, in the second year of the reign of Prince Reccesuinth with his father (650)."<sup>83</sup> Chindasuinth's voice, dignified in its self-criticism, boasting in its weakness, may be read as an extended poetic riff on Maria's epitaphic insignia: *cum penitentia*.<sup>84</sup>

*Penance, poetry, and literary patronage at Chindasuinth's court*

The Visigothic discourse of penance tended to conceive of the rite as a process that could paradoxically bestow honor through self-abasing acts that cleansed body and soul. At his court King Chindasuinth fostered the development of a literary culture of penance and an idiom of correction that both reflects and contributes to this conceptual framework. This section will argue for the king's interest in the literature of repentance. Relatedly, it will show that Eugenius's epitaph for Chindasuinth was not a one-off experiment in the lyric of atonement, but rather representative of a much larger investment of penitential significance in his poetry.

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<sup>82</sup> For the circulation of this idea in sixth-century Gaul, see for instance the Council of Agde, c. 2 in Saint-Roch, *La pénitence*, p. 163.

<sup>83</sup> ICERV, ed. J. Vives (Barcelona, 1969), n. 178 (expanded from Vives' transcription): "Maria, fidelis Christi, in vita sua hunc diligens locum ibique suum umatum est corpus. Quatuor deni uno supervixit annos. Cum penitentia recessit in pace d. VII id. Martias, secundo Reccisuinthi regnans cum patre principis anno"; see also nrs. 44, 57, 142, 480.

<sup>84</sup> Lending credence to the argument that Chindasuinth's epitaph was read as an honorific and dignifying monument rather than a stamp of notoriety are the medieval epitaphs that quote from Eugenius's *Carm.* 25, including an anonymous epitaph from the 8<sup>th</sup> century uncovered near Seville and the epitaph of Therese, daughter of Vermudo II, King of León (d. 1039); see Alberto, *CCSL* 114, pp. 101-102, 143; "Poetry in Seventh-century Visigothic Spain," in C. Codoñer and P.F. Alberto (eds.), *Wisigothica. After M. C. Díaz y Díaz*, (Florence, 2014), p. 156 n. 153; and Fear, "Moaning to Some Purpose", pp. 73-74.



Several literary projects constructed in and around Chindasuinth's court—aside from the king's epitaph itself—are especially pertinent to this argument: a cycle of poetry on death in Eugenius's *libellus*, his aforementioned edition of Dracontius's *De laudes Dei*, and Bishop Taio of Zaragoza's dispatch to Rome to locate a copy of Gregory the Great's massive exegetical treatise, *Moralia in Job*.<sup>85</sup> Working backwards, here we can only briefly survey Taio's *Sententiae*, an anthology of Gregory's teachings compiled under Chindasuinth's orders. Suffice it to say, however, that his work reflects the formative influence of Gregory's interpretation of the Book of Job on the development of penitential discourse and practice around the Mediterranean.<sup>86</sup> The pope points to Job as one source for the application of ashes and putting on of sackcloth during penance, for example. Consider also that Gregory himself is perhaps the first to portray the ritual as bathing in a cleansing fountain of tears, which we now know was an important metaphor within the Visigoth's penitential imaginary.<sup>87</sup> Chindasuinth's patronage of Taio's project therefore implies at least some interest in one major theoretician of penance from outside the Iberian Peninsula.

Eugenius's editorial project is suggestive of similar interests. The two-book recension of two separate poems by Dracontius was completed at Chindasuinth's request.<sup>88</sup> The first book of Eugenius's edition comprises a large section of the African poet's *De Laudibus Dei* I, a work that describes the creation of the world in six days, to which Eugenius added verses treating the seventh day. The second book consists of a

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<sup>85</sup> For a long description of Taio's stay in Rome, with reference to Chindasuinth's patronage, see *Continuatio Hispana*, 28-33, Mommsen (ed.), *MGH*, AA, 11, pp. 341-343. The *Moralia* was dedicated to Leander of Seville, Isidore's brother, who had come to know the pope during their time in Constantinople.

<sup>86</sup> See especially the chapter "*De poenitentia*", in Isidore *Sententiae* III.47.

<sup>87</sup> See n. 63. More generally, Collins, *Early Medieval Spain*, p. 60 calls Gregory "the greatest single influence upon the learning of the Spanish Church in the seventh century"

<sup>88</sup> See n. 18. Some scholars have made interesting attempts to determine and analyze what Eugenius might have actually changed; see Tizzoni, "The Poems of Dracontius" and Reinwald, *Die Ausgabe des ersten Buches der Laudes dei*. While this type of investigation is attractive for its potential to provide fascinating insight into the early reception of Late Latin poetry and Eugenius's theological interpretations of Dracontius, the enterprise has been called into question by Alberto, who advises caution due to "the extremely small body of witnesses to [the] Hispanic exemplar prior to Eugenius"; see *CCSL* 114, Alberto (ed.), pp. 19-20.

truncated and modified version of Dracontius' *Satisfactio*, a poem delivered at the court of the Vandal king Gunthamund (r. 484-496 AD). In it Dracontius, who has been imprisoned for a vaguely defined offense against the king, begs forgiveness from the monarch.<sup>89</sup> He does so not through explicit confession, however, but by constructing an academic treatise on the historical and biblical importance of mercy as a kingly virtue. A recurring argument in the *Satisfactio* is that the king should emulate God's forgiveness, because in doing so he himself earns the reward of forgiveness from God. So Dracontius writes, "David spared hostile people from the sword, and though he was an adulterer, resolved in wickedness, when he confessed his sin he earned pardon instead of ruin."<sup>90</sup> Such an argument is congruent with the prevailing notion of confession in Visigothic penitential discourse as an honorific and restorative speech-act, particularly for kings. Moreover, these lines bear a striking resemblance to the wider economy of forgiveness described in Chindasuinth's epitaph, as Dracontius insists on the interplay between the monarch's confessional relationship with God, and the relationship between the sovereign and his people. Such an argument stands out as another plausible source for the king's voice in the epitaphic poem. Given these eye-catching ideological similarities, Chindasuinth and Eugenius's interactions with Dracontius's *Satisfactio* seem indicative of a developing intellectual culture at the king's court surrounding ideas of royal mercy and penance.

The manner in which Eugenius portrays his Dracontian editorial project is even more telling, however. As we have already seen, in the verse preface to his recension the bishop writes openly about the hostility he expects to encounter as a result of correcting Dracontius's poetry. Whether real or imagined, Eugenius anticipates detractors will question his role as editor of ancient, and therefore authoritative texts.

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<sup>89</sup> A.H. Merrills, "The Perils of Panegyric: the Lost poem of Dracontius and its Consequences", in A.H. Merrills (ed.), *Vandals, Romans and Berbers: New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa* (Burlington, 2004), pp 145-162.

<sup>90</sup> Eugenius, *Dracontii librorum recognitio*, II.133-135, *CCSL* 114, Alberto (ed.), p. 383. These verses exist in the same form in the Dracontian tradition (lines 157-159):  
"Rex inimicorum populis mucrone pepercit  
Dauid et sceleris certus adulter erat:  
confessus facinus ueniam pro clade meretur."

Consequently, he develops a preemptive defense of emendation. He justifies his work by pointing out historical precedents—the editors who redacted Homer and Virgil, for instance—and by insisting that his project originated with an order from the king.<sup>91</sup> The Visigothic editor also constructs a clever metaphorical argument to legitimate his critical role in which he presents the editorial process in ecclesiastical, and specifically, penitential terms. The redaction of Dracontius’ poetry, addressed in an apostrophe at the beginning of the preface, is said to have “earned freedom from uncleanness” (*meruisti sorde carere*) and to “wear the shining cloak” (*capere nitidam pallam*) that makes it worthy to enter the royal throne room.<sup>92</sup> The penitential connotations are striking. Recall how Visigothic thinkers imagined penance as a cleansing process, an image that surfaces in Isidore’s thinking on penance and in Chindasuinth’s epitaph. In Eugenius’s verse preface, Dracontius’ texts are similarly said to be washed of error, and Chindasuinth is even called the “patron of washing” (*lautorisque tui sollers patronus*).<sup>93</sup> The image of the “shining cloak” (*nitidam pallam*) calls to mind the white, ritual outer garment with which priests clothed deathbed penitents after they had made confession and received *viaticum*.<sup>94</sup> The *Liber ordinum* even uses the same Latin adjective as the poem, *nitida*, to describe the “clean change of clothes” (*mutatis nitidis vestibus*) at this moment. Finally, in the last line of the verse preface, Eugenius remarks that he has “purified the books of Dracontius from much of their nonsense,” deploying the liturgically charged verb *piavi* to make it clear that he conceived of his poetic project in ritual

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<sup>91</sup> See n. 21.

<sup>92</sup> Eugenius, *Praefatio*, lines 1-5, *CCSL* 114, Alberto (ed.), p. 327:

“Principis insignem faciem uisure libelle,  
 cuius ad imperium meruisti sorde carere  
 et capere nitidam longo post tempore pallam,  
 coeperis ut limen aulae regalis adire  
 atque auro rutilo radiantem cernere sedem.”

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*, line 9.

<sup>94</sup> See n. 75.

terms.<sup>95</sup> Using the metaphor of penance, Eugenius blends together his occupation as poet-editor with his role as priest-bishop.

Fundamentally, Eugenius relies on an idea central to the Visigothic discourse of penance—that dignity was restored through correction—to describe and authorize his role as emendator of Dracontius’s texts. Hence, under the direction of its poet-bishop-editor, the poems of Dracontius undergo a kind of textual penance. The verses are cleansed of their grammatical and rhetorical sins—all their superfluous, half-finished, and dysfunctional aspects.<sup>96</sup> Eugenius’s emendations amount to a kind of “humble and quiet” critique of an authoritative text. The revised Dracontian verse speaks for itself, but the editor guides it behind the scenes. He is only detectable in the new language he offers the poems, in the differences between the mistake-ridden original and the corrected edition he creates. That Chindasuinth sponsored this type of endeavor, and the poetic-penitential rhetoric that Eugenius promoted in the process, is telling in light of the present reading of his epitaph. It supports the idea that the king, or “the patron of washing,” employed (Eugenius might say *commanded*) his poet-bishop to fashion for him a poetic voice free from uncleanness, and yet still his own; a voice humbly and quietly emended to help make proper amends without diminishing kingly authority.

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Eugenius experiments even more extensively with the power of a penitential poetics in his *libellus*, the collection of 101 original poems that contains both Chindasuinth’s epitaph and the poet’s own five self-composed epitaphs.<sup>97</sup> A repentant humility and a pessimistic realism regarding suffering and mortality form the crux of his self-fashioning. But though Eugenius’s verse is remarkably confessional and inwardly-focused in many poems, it is never wholly self-obsessed. The poet-bishop’s concern to interact with his community

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<sup>95</sup> *TLL*, *pio*, 10.1.2183.9- 10.1.2184.18.

<sup>96</sup> *Epistola ad Chindasvinthum*, *CCSL* 114, Alberto (ed.), p. 325.

<sup>97</sup> The collection’s date of publication is unknown.

through poetry emerges at the very forefront of his anthology, where he attempts to stifle and denigrate the contemptuous critics of the Visigothic public. In the book’s preface, the author rails against snooty scoffers, whom he casts as “faithless” (*perfide*): “Back off: it does your soul good, believe you me, (listen up!) neither to harm me nor seek to profit yourself when envy is there disturbing you.”<sup>98</sup> The apparent goal of Eugenius’s threat is not to strut confidently in the face of hateful critics, but to engender mutual respect between his readers and himself. The poet does not attack cynical readers as a way to preface grandiose claims about his special talent or the importance of the anthology he has produced. On the contrary, he calls his poetry trifling (*nugas*) and his language uncouth (*rustica*), as he austere avoids calling upon the Muse or the Holy Spirit for personal inspiration.<sup>99</sup> Turning the poetic invocation on its head, Eugenius prays instead for his benevolent readers to become influential speakers themselves, to experience flourishing genius, and to blossom as inspired poets.<sup>100</sup> A similar symbiosis exists between humble author and pious readership in Chindasuinth’s epitaph where the king insinuates that his audience’s undeserved goodwill towards him pays spiritual dividends for all parties involved.

Eugenius’s deflection of attention often veers into stark self-depreciation elsewhere in his verse. The poet’s self-scrutiny produces penitential resonances that reverberate throughout his poetry book, especially its first quarter. The first poem after the preface, a hexameter piece entitled an *oratio*, is exemplary in this regard. As expected of a large collection’s programmatic frontispiece, here the author invokes his patron, in this case a monarchical figure not named Chindasuinth—“God the great King” (*Rex Deus immense*)—and

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<sup>98</sup> Eugenius, *Praef.* 7-10:

“...perfide, cessa:

Prodest hoc animae, fac mihi crede, tuae:

Quod si livor adest et adhuc te concuit, audi:

Nec nobis noceas nec tibi proficias.”

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.* 11-12:

“At tu, qui nostras tranquillo pectore nugas

Perlegis et blande rustica verba foves.”

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.* lines 11-18.

reveals his creative mindset.<sup>101</sup> But Eugenius's opening prayer functions contradictorily as a work of poetic self-fashioning, since it operates with an ascetic rhetoric of self-cancellation. The poet paradoxically presents an image of himself through a series of ego-effacing petitions. In the first lines, he declares himself "pitiful" (*miser*). He seeks personal transformation, and asks his merciful King God "especially for immediate moral rectification for [himself]."<sup>102</sup> Eugenius takes the rest of the poem to articulate fully this penitential desire to convert, to become what he is not yet. He expresses his vision of righteousness in terms of selflessness and self-denial:

May the arrogance of wealth, contentious strife,  
Envy of affluence, and the weight of an unseemly belly be far from me.  
May I neither harm anyone nor be harmed by criminal offense.  
May I be so capable of maintaining good intention that the ability to do wrong dissipates.  
May I never desire, do, or say anything shameful.<sup>103</sup>

Rejecting ambition as the pathway to vice, praying to act as a servant with perfected virtue, Eugenius foils classical expectations of self-aggrandizement in the opening statement of his poetic collection.<sup>104</sup> Prayer and penance, and a desire for spiritual change, replace pomposity.

In fact, the poet-bishop's persistent use of the language of atonement distinguishes his poetry even from the rhetorical tradition of Christian Latin poetic self-fashioning. All the anxiety that Christian poets from

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<sup>101</sup> In clear reference to the first line of Dracontius' *Satisfactio*; cf. Alberto's *apparatus fontium*, p. 205.

<sup>102</sup> Eugenius, *Carm.* 1.2, 4:  
"quod miser Eugenius posco, tu perface clemens:  
sit mihi praecipue morum correctio praesens."

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.* 11-15:  
"absint diuitiae fastus et iurgia litis,  
inuidia luxus et uentris pensio turpis.  
Crimine nec laedam quemquam nec crimine laedar.  
Sic bene uelle queam, quo prauum posse recedat.  
nil turpe cupiam, faciam uel proloquar umquam."

<sup>104</sup> The rhetoric of the poet's preface produces a similar effect. Rather than invoking the Muse or the Holy Spirit for personal inspiration, or staking a claim as to the importance of the anthology he has produced, Eugenius instead prays for his reader to become an influential speaker, a flourishing talent, and an inspired poet. See *Praef.* lines 11-18.

Juvenius to Arator had expressed in their prefaces either about the poetic mode or the pagan verse tradition is missing in Eugenius, who more easily conceives of the capacity of poetry to express humility, to realize conversion, and to champion for religion.<sup>105</sup> Spiritual worry is still there in his verse; it has merely been transmuted into penitential anxiety. In his collection the poet frequently focuses on the themes of sin, atonement, old age, and death—the moment when forgiveness may be conclusively awarded—and so communicates with concomitant angst and urgency. Again in his opening *Oratio*, these themes and modes are conspicuously present: “Grant, Father thundering on high, a surging storm of weeping in which I can melt away a mass of sin with tears [...] And when the last day shall open death’s jar, grant pardon to the one from whom sin stole the crown.”<sup>106</sup> The final lines bring elegant closure to the *Oratio* in ring composition. The last word, *coronam*, the crown of salvation, metaphorically recalls the first word, *Rex*, used as an epithet for God. In view of the main concern of this section—the interpretation of a poem about royal penance—the language is striking. The metaphor would seem to assimilate the prayerful poet-bishop to his eventual subject, Chindasuinth the repentant king, and to do so in the self-deprecating idiom of penance.

Nowhere does Eugenius’s penitential anxiety make more of an impression, or offer more nodes of connection with Chindasuinth’s epitaph, than in his cycle of laments on senectitude and self-composed epitaphs, *Carmina* 13-19. Aside from the obvious fact that Chindasuinth’s poem takes the form of the autobiographical tombstone inscription, the king’s funerary text also shares with Eugenius’s multiple funereal dirges and auto-epitaphs a common penitential language and rhetoric. Structure, idiom, and argument

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<sup>105</sup> See in *Praef.* 12, Eugenius describes his poetry as “rustica verba.” In line 15 of the same poem, he prays for his readers to create poetry inspired by God: “suavibus effingas sat dia poemata metris.” And in *Carm.* 1.16, he asks God that his tongue may sing his praise: “Te mens desideret, lingua canat, actio promat.”

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.* 17-18, 21-22:

“da, pater altitonans, undosum fletibus imbrem,  
 quo valeam lacrimis culparum solvere moles  
 [...]
 Cumque suprema dies mortis patefecerit urnam,  
 concede veniam, cui tollit culpa coronam.”

therefore bind these pieces and their speakers tightly together. To start, consider these lines from the polymetric *Carmen* 14, “A Lament on the coming of his old age” (*Lamentum de adventu propriae senectutis*):<sup>107</sup>

What will the worm, putrefaction, ash do  
    To blessed hearts if they fear the Lord?  
I have been domineering, I have stolen, I have robbed, I have criminally lied.  
    My heart was deaf to the voice of the indigent.  
I afflicted my own body with the wound of lust:  
    So I carry on as a wretch, in fear, full of trembling.  
Mercy never restrained my anger  
    As I raged caustically and feuded violently.  
[...]  
I pray that punishment may be light for me, pitiful Eugenius.<sup>108</sup>

As in the opening *Oratio*, the pitiful poet (*miser Eugenius*) appears personally in this poem, here to deliver a devastating review of his past sins amid a sermon on human mortality. The synonymic texture (*rapui, nudavi, crimina finxi*) and asyndetic syntax of the poet’s admission of fault, adjoined to evocative imagery of death and decay, recall for us the self-scathing confession of Chindasuinth’s epitaph and its warning against life’s transitory enticements (though the poet’s lament actually precedes the king’s epitaph in his collection). The prayer to avoid harsh punishment punctuates the poem with a penitential mark, given the Visigothic belief in the inherent relationship between *poena* and *poenitentia*, reviewed above. Sealing the connection, the poet-

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<sup>107</sup> See Smolak, “*Omnia passus*,” pp. 79-83 for analysis of this poem as part of what he identifies as a cycle in the *libellus* (*Carm.* 13-19). Smolak provides convincing biblical, patristic, and classical Latin and Greek sources for the language and rhetoric of this series, and some textual critical commentary on Alberto’s edition.

<sup>108</sup> *Carm.* 14.59-66, 80:

“quid faciet ergo vermis, putredo, favilla,  
    si Christi faciem corda beata pavent?  
Opressi, rapui, nudavi, crimina finxi,  
    pauperis ad vocem mens mea surda fuit,  
corrupti proprium lascivo vulnere corpus:  
    hinc miser, hinc pavidus, hinc tremulentus eo.  
Nulla meas umquam venia compescuit iras  
    nec sine felle furens nec sine caede fui.  
[...]  
    Eugenii miseri sit rogo poena levis.”



bishop caps his lament with a tombstone testament in five Sapphic stanzas in which he tells passersby that, after having lived 49 unhappy years, fever has brought him to death's door.<sup>109</sup>

After a brief four-line interlude, a separate tetrastich also on the theme of old age, Eugenius includes in his collection four more experiments in auto-epitaphic poetry (*Carmina* 16-19), which develop a poetic mode of self-fashioning through penitential rhetoric and funerary form that culminates eventually in Chindasuinth's poem. Here I will present a short reading only of the first *Epitaphion proprium*, *Carmen* 16, which is exemplary of the poet's penitential, epitaphic poetics. It consists of eight hexameter verses, whose first and last letters form an acrostic and telestich, respectively, that divulge the identity of the poet entombed—*EUGENIUS MISELLUS*.<sup>110</sup> The author's pitiful persona literarily frames the entire epitaph, which elaborates on the rationale behind his self-deprecation.

Almighty Christ, take my mind separated from its body  
So I may be able to avoid the punishment of pitch-black hell.  
Great fault is within, but you abound in holy virtue.  
Wash away wickedness, and remove the sins of life  
That I might not be excluded on merit from the gatherings of the saints.  
With you as judge, it would be a benefit to have been witness to the holy tribunal.  
Reader, should you want to know in a single verse who I am,  
Read the first letters, then the last. You will be able to tell.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Cf. *Carm.* 14b. Though I concur with Smolak, "Omnia passus," p. 83, who argues against treating this epitaph as separate from *Carm.* 14, *pace* Alberto.

<sup>110</sup> Each of the other self-composed epitaphs, *Carm.* 14b, and 17-19, are clearly autobiographic, as they include either the name of the poet or use the first person singular.

<sup>111</sup> *Carm.* 16:

“Excipe, Christe potens, discretam corpore mente**M**  
Vt possim picei poenam vitare barathr**I**.  
Grandis inest culpa, sed tu pietate redunda**S**.  
Elue probra, pater, et vitae crimina tolle**E**,  
Non sim pro meritis sanctorum coetibus exu**L**.  
Iudice te prosit sanctum vidisse tribuna**L**.  
Vis, lector, uno qui sim dinoscere vers**V**,  
Signa priora lege, mox ultima nosse valebi**S**.”

The image in the opening line of the mind cleaved from the body would seem to find structural representation in the poem's acrostic and telestich. The paratextual message, *EUGENIUS MISELLUS*, functions as the husk of the text, a superficial marker of identity. The core of the poem, however, presents a more complex and grammatically discrete account of the poet's cognitive disposition. "Great fault is within" (line 3) serves as an interpretive key—it allows readers to see the poem as structurally and rhetorically unified. The poem itself, bounded by the nominal identity of the poet in the acrostic, is made to represent the poet's mind, which gives a prayerful account of its own penitent self-conception. The mentality it presents has a clear relationship to the broader Visigothic discourse of penance. The notion of washing away sin (*Elue probra*, line 4) is a routine metaphor. The communal aspects of the poet's repentance are typical as well. Eugenius, after all, opens his epitaph with a funeral prayer to Christ, but comes to address an anonymous *lector* at the end.<sup>112</sup> Note too how the poet's anxiety is partially rooted in a fear of exile—here from the community of saints (*sanctorum coetibus*, line 5)—which was commonly part of penitential punishment according to the Visigothic Code. The combination of penitential imagery, atoning authorial posture, and strategic efforts to engage the community of readers in the poetic confessional act are all strikingly reminiscent of Chindasuinth's epitaph. For it also contains a bold assertion of identity (*Chindasuinth ego*, lines 9-10), washing imagery (line 2), and imperatives for the reading community (lines 1-7).

As with Chindasuinth's voice, Eugenius's epitaphic ego should not be misconstrued as entirely antisocial for its apparent self-flagellation and self-cancellation. Neither should the multiplicative nature of these poetic self-critiques—that is, each speaker's almost ceaselessly synonymic treatment of their sin—be interpreted separately from one another. Eugenius's multifarious experiments in epitaphic confession are of

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<sup>112</sup> See also *Carm.* 17.10-12, in which the entombed poet addresses the reader and asks for prayers in view of his sin:

“propter has culpas dominum precare  
quisque funesto relegis amarum  
carmine threnum.”

a kind. These poems emerge from the same specific subculture of penance. Even more locally, they belong to a coherent literary project undertaken by the poet-bishop in his *libellus*, an ascetic effort to develop a penitential poetics through verse epitaphic writing. The poet's five *epitaphia propria* in succession produce a similar effect to the king's lengthy run of self-criticism within his funerary poem. The repentant narrators display something akin to the psalmist's reflex to repetition and pleonasm as they over-describe their sins, expose them from every angle. When read consecutively, the individual speakers of these deeply personal, confessional poems meld together. The self-depictions of poet-bishop and poet-king paradoxically fuse into one faceless image of the repentant sinner, enabling penitential readers to see their own reflections in the words. Such poetry could function as a script, like the priest's prayer in the *Liber ordinum*, for penitents to recite during contrite self-examination—exactly what the anonymous poet behind the Visigothic *Exhortatio poenitendi* prescribed:

In your sighing, read over and over sequential poetry made of laments.  
From time to time sing in your weeping.  
For the Lord is capable of translating grief into joy,  
And changing all hardships into good fortune.<sup>113</sup>

*Conclusion: the politics of penance*

Returning at last to the question of why Chindasuinth and Eugenius may have designed to craft a posthumous expression of royal atonement, it is important to emphasize that the transformation of the penitent and restoration of dignity were not automatic, and that the penitent's position was always liminal in this life.<sup>114</sup> The penitent's reformation was timeless. It took place somewhere in the conceptual borderlands

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<sup>113</sup> Lines 171-174:

“Sequentia vero carmina constructa lamentis  
Suspirando lectita, nonumquam plorando decanta;  
Nam potens est dominus transferre in gaudio luctum  
Et adversa omnia in prosperitate mutare.”

<sup>114</sup> F. Paxton, *Christianizing death*, pp. 5-9.

between public and private, corrupt and perfected life, where his actions were guided by his own conscience, but still regulated by ecclesiastic and court legislation.<sup>115</sup> This was no place for kings, it turns out.

Sixth- and seventh-century canon law, infused with a rigorous ascetic spirit, ordered penitents to disengage with legal, commercial, and military affairs for good; in other words, to die to the world.<sup>116</sup> Commitment to penance could be enforced and the standard procedures safeguarded by priests and bishops, who often played the role of intermediary guides, a role we have seen in action in the priestly *castigatio* described by the *Liber ordinum*.<sup>117</sup> While no evidence survives from this period for the case-by-case prescriptions of peculiar penitential sentences, such as those from the Anglo-Saxon church, there are indications that priests occasionally took penance into their own hands and cultivated private practices of the rite within their congregations.<sup>118</sup> The discipline needed for severe self-analysis might even be ensured through monastic confinement, sending the penitent into a kind of social-religious exile.<sup>119</sup> This measure was written into secular legal code. A civil law promulgated under Chindasuinth equated a return from penance to secular life with apostasy. It extended the hope of pardon only to those who had received the sacrament while unconscious or in an impaired state. Those convicted were confined to life in a monastery, subjected again to penance, stripped of their rights to testify or accuse in court, and had their property commuted to

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<sup>115</sup> These features of the Visigothic discourse of penance mirror those of the discourse circulating in fifth-century Gaul; see Brown, *Ransom of the Soul*, 126-127. There, as Brown puts it, “Penance was about change—about the shedding of past sins through conversion to a different life. [...] This notion of penance gave contemporaries a language with which to speak of the emergence of a new class of leaders.”

<sup>116</sup> Barcelona I, c. 8, *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), p. 53; Toledo XII, c. 2, *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), p. 389.

<sup>117</sup> See n. 71. The intermediary role of priests in penance is also crucial to understanding why the penitential words of Chindasuinth’s epitaph were scripted by his poet-bishop.

<sup>118</sup> For the Anglo-Saxon penitentials, see J.T. McNeill and H.M. Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal Libri poenitentiales and Selections from Related Documents* (New York, 1965), and Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, 37-69. For canon law prohibiting various abuses of private penance, see Toledo III, c. 11 and Toledo XI, c. 7, *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), p. 128 and 360-361, respectively.

<sup>119</sup> For the history of forced monastic penance, see Hillner, “Monastic Confinement’ and *Prison, Punishment and Penance in Late Antiquity*, (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 279-341.

their heirs. Flip-flopping penitents were lumped together with wartime deserters, Chindasuinth's worst kind of criminal. Like defectors, wayward penitents were to be branded with the "mark of notoriety" (*infamie nota*).<sup>120</sup> One wonders whether the severity of these punishments would have further influenced Visigothic Christians to defer penance until their last hours. In any case, the legal *capitulum* is congruent with the prevailing idea of penance as a death to the world, which entailed the scrambling of one's social identity and reputation in a drastic and enduring way.

Among the Visigothic elite this confusion of identity could be more than a pious sacrifice willfully and bravely undertaken. Penitential conversion could be used as a weapon to tremendous political effect. Some Visigoths exploited the liminal zone of confluent secular and ecclesiastic influences where the penitent operated for political advantage. Again, this liminal space was no place for kings. Chindasuinth himself manipulated this space in religio-political combat when he tonsured the boy king Tulga to clear his way to the throne, capitalizing on canon law that forbade the religiously disfigured to rule or join the military.<sup>121</sup> Most notoriously, Wamba (r. 672-680), Reccesuinth's successor, was deposed after receiving the rite of penance from his bishop, Julian of Toledo (Eugenius's pupil), while suffering a grave illness that may have been induced by poison.<sup>122</sup> After his surprising recovery, the king was prevented from reclaiming his title because of his penitential status. A subsequent church council, Toledo XII (681) arbitrated the bizarre incident. It decided to enforce a conciliar precedent that prevented those who had received the blessing of penance from returning to secular life.<sup>123</sup> The verdict looked past an important caveat in Chindasuinth's aforementioned law on

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<sup>120</sup> *LV*, III.5.3, Zeumer (ed.), pp. 161-163; see Toledo VI, c. 7, *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), p. 238-239.

<sup>121</sup> See n. 36.

<sup>122</sup> See de Jong, "Adding Insult to Injury", 373-402; Pizarro, *Wamba*, passim. For discussion of other examples of the political use of penance in Visigothic Spain, see Stocking, *Bishops, Councils, and Consensus*, in particular pp. 101-103 and 177-178.

<sup>123</sup> Toledo XII, c. 2, *Concilios*, Vives (ed.), pp. 387-389.

wayward penitents, which exempted from punishment those who came to penance in such distress that “they were neither aware that they received it, nor could remember asking.”<sup>124</sup>

But while the church prevailed against Wamba by wielding penance as a weapon and applying the sharp edge of a conciliar law’s technicality, it would be misguided for historians to retroject these politics from the late 670s and early 680s to the time of Chindasuinth. It seems likely that, consciously or not, some critics have examined the king’s epitaph through the lens of the later period, and applied the circumstances of Wamba’s deposal to their analyses of the poem. Yet as we have seen, despite some signs of disagreement between Chindasuinth and contemporaries, including his bishop, and a spirit of reform that emerged after the king’s death, there is absolutely no evidence suggesting that the king was forced to do penance. Rather, this close reading of the epitaph indicates that the king was able to harness the power of penance and poetry to his advantage.

This interpretation may affect readings of other contemporary sources for Chindasuinth reign, most importantly Fredegar’s chapter on the king. The chronicler portrays the monarch as highly aware of the notorious Gothic weakness for dragging down kings (*cognetus morbum Gotorum quem de regebus degradandum habebant*). This cognizance is said to have motivated his violence against potential political challengers; but might it also have motivated his penance? By doing penance (and patronizing Eugenius’s related epitaphic composition) Chindasuinth degraded himself before his opponents had the chance. He did so voluntarily and piously, keeping the initiative and his honor while effecting reconciliation with the community, standing behind the shield of the church. The king’s penitential atonement, fossilized in the epitaph, may therefore be read as part of a strategy to ensure a smooth succession by heading off adversaries from attempts to denigrate, and so destabilize, the history and legitimacy of his royal line.

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<sup>124</sup> *LV*, III.5.3, Zeumer (ed.), pp. 162: “Illos etiam ab hac sententia immunes effcimus, qui sic invalescente langore ad penitentiae vel tonsurae ordine, ut id se nec accepisse tunc noverint nec petisse meminerint.”

More than a century ago, Eugenius's editor Friedrich Vollmer hypothesized hastily that Chindasuinth's epitaph might have served as documentary evidence for the king's penance. As I have tried to demonstrate, it is fruitful to follow Vollmer's suggestion. Reading Chindasuinth's epitaph as a composition in the key of penance, as an experiment in the development of penitential lyric, in concert with the conventional idioms and ritual practices of penance in the king's day, in harmony with his poet-bishop's own ascetic penitential poetship, exposes the poem's essential richness. An appreciation of the poem as a polyphonic piece informed by the discourse of penance and attuned to norms surrounding royal admonishment affords a more convincing and accurate understanding of its social logic than previous readings have supplied. Readers must now question those interpretations that would have us hear the poem as a monody of personal hatred or political discontent. The tune of power in the post-Roman world, played on the instrument of classicizing poetry, had acquired an ascetic timbre.

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