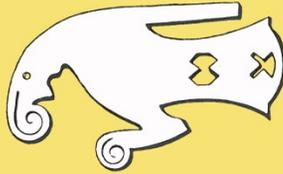


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The article is a short introduction to four poems by Venantius Fortunatus concerning the Merovingian duke Lupus. They were included in the seventh of the books published in AD 576. Here the four are viewed as a quartet selected to form, and perhaps partly composed to make up, a plea for the duke who lost power when his King, Sigibert, was murdered in AD 575. The poems can be characterised as the result of participant observations and, analysed in this way, they may give us first-hand insights into the mentality of the Germanic aristocracy, in 6th-century Gaul.

Keywords: *Venantius Fortunatus, poems to noblemen, Germanic code of honour.*

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In AD 576 the Latin poet Venantius Fortunatus, who lived in Gaul, published his first seven books of poems. Among these he included four which concerned the Merovingian duke Lupus. They are the ones translated by Johan Flemberg in this volume of *Tor* (Flemberg 1996). An introduction to Venantius may be obtained from Reydellet (1994), from George (1992) or from Brennan (1985). Some basic facts can be found in Herschend (1996), included in this volume. The present short note is meant to introduce the reader to the four Lupus poems.

The translations and the introduction are in their turn part of what may eventually become a larger scheme, namely the translation of less well known Latin and Greek texts describing the mentality of Germans from AD 300 to 800. Herschend (1992) and Flemberg (1992) may be seen as the first examples of this kind of introduced translations. With Latin and Greek becoming more and more exotic acquisitions, the

project is not unique and readers should be referred to the series entitled *Translated Texts for Historians*, from Liverpool University Press, for a large number of important texts. While the present article was in print, Judith George (1995) published a volume of Venantius' poems in the series.

A Quartet of Poems

Although the Lupus poems are occasional, they are intended, in the collection, to be read *en suite* and in Venantius' seventh book of poems they are listed as poems 7 to 10. The seventh book contains poems to Merovingian noblemen and the position of the Lupus poems reflects Lupus' ranking among the other noblemen to whom Venantius dedicated poems. All these aristocrats were connected with King Sigibert's court in Metz.

So, before we come to the poems to Lupus, we find four poems to Duke Gogo and two to Duke Bodigesilius. If we check the order of these dukes in Book 7 with the way they are described by Gregory of Tours in his *History of the Franks*, we find that Gogo is by far the most important, being the *nutricius*, i.e. the fosterer of Sigibert's son Childebert (Gregory V, 46). Bodigesilius comes next. He is mentioned under the year AD 585 because he died in that year, but it is pointed out that he died full of years and that his complete inheritance was handed down to his children. Such benevolence on the King's part was not the rule and it shows his high-ranking position in society (Gregory VIII, 22). Lupus, on the other hand, had obvious problems in maintaining his social status around AD 576, when the poems were published (Gregory VI, 4).

This parallel ranking should not come as a surprise to us, since after all it was Gregory who encouraged Venantius to collect his poems and to publish. Moreover, Gregory was Venantius' principal patron around AD 576 and during the greater part of the 570s AD. Like a Maecenas supporting his Horace, Gregory presented Venantius with a small farm pleasantly situated by the River Vienne, possibly with reference to Venantius' description of the river (Book 8, poem 19, ll. 4–6), between Tours and Poitiers (Brennan 1985, pp. 72 f.), where Venantius' princi-

pal patroness from the late 560s and early 570s AD, Queen Radegund, lived in her convent. This situation between Poitiers and Tours, linked with Radegund as well as with Gregory, is significant of Venantius' position in Merovingian society.

Venantius' poems, not least those in Book 7, fulfil a purpose and, although they look like a collection, we must suspect that in reality they were selected, rather than collected, if not partly rewritten, to fit a scheme. If we concentrate upon the four Lupus poems, it becomes evident that they form a quartet consisting of two pairs of poems which we may characterise according to their contents and composition.

Contents

The first poem is an official panegyric to Lupus on his return from a campaign against invading Saxons and Danes. The fragmented narrative behind the praise has been judged to be part of a general panegyric (cf. George 1992, pp. 132 ff. with ref.) on the occasion of his return. However, it must not be overlooked that the underlying story fits the character of the Germanic pillage warfare, in this case undertaken by Saxons and Danes, so well that the interpretation in terms of a general panegyric is not the first option. It should also be remembered that among the nobility the didactic epic, notably the *Beowulf* poem, was a popular Germanic genre, into which this Latin poem, recited by Venantius in King Sigibert's hall in Metz, fits nicely.

The poem begins by praising Lupus. Then an embassy, in all probability consisting of Saxon and Danish emissaries, arrives, but the negotiations with this embassy break down and Lupus sets out on a campaign from which he returns victorious. The emissaries are probably negotiating for a tribute payment; at least this can be inferred from the fact that, when Lupus turns them down, the attack from the north begins.

With half the army under his command, Lupus meets the enemy and manages to destroy them, so that Venantius can eventually, as Sigibert's court poet, sing his praise. This poem is an official panegyric on the occasion of Lupus' return to the hall. By the way the poem dates an early overland attack by Saxons and Danes on the Franks to the year when Venantius stayed at Sigibert's court in Metz, i.e. AD 566.

The second poem reflects the same events, but from Venantius' pri-

vate point of view. It is July and hot. The world and the poet are tormented. Eventually Venantius' troubles are explained by the fact that Lupus is away on a dangerous mission. But, when information comes that Lupus is safe, Venantius and everybody else are relieved.

Although Venantius understands that in the present situation men of different tongues may wish to praise Lupus in their poems and songs, he for his part confines himself to saying that he shall always love Lupus. It took Venantius *c.* 80 lines to state this fact on the very last line of the poem. In the second poem the allusions to Lupus' public qualities point to the same official image as in the first poem, and the first poem looks like one of those songs which Venantius in the second poem suggested that men would now want to compose in praise of Lupus. We may find an inconsistency on Venantius' part, doing in the first poem what in the second one he says he will not do, but such a discrepancy does not exist, since in the first poem Venantius is commissioned to speak the mind of King Sigibert, his court and public opinion, which happen to coincide in the Lupus case. He does not speak his own mind.

In short, the poems fit each other and they comment upon the same events, though from different perspectives. Being already a poet at Sigibert's court and hoping to find new patrons, what more can Venantius do?

In the third poem Venantius is thanking Lupus for sending him gifts and a letter, written in Lupus' name, asking Venantius to write to Lupus. So, what we read in the third poem is Venantius' answer, a sign of life consisting of 20 lines. The poem seems to be nothing more than a short answer, but in it Venantius makes two curiously precise points, which Lupus must have been wholly aware of. They are, however, interesting to the reader. First, he states that, as far as Venantius remembers, it is nine years since he left Italy. Secondly, that Venantius has been asked to answer the letter written in Lupus' name.

By the first fact, the reader, rather than Lupus, is informed that we are in AD 575 and since we have just read about the hot summer in AD 566, when Lupus was successfully campaigning against the invasion from Saxony and Denmark, we get the impression that there has been no contact between Lupus and Venantius for a long time. By the second fact, we are informed that this contact has not really been re-established

The last poem is not addressed to Lupus, but to his brother Magnulfus. In the poem Venantius pleads for the restoration of Lupus, some-

thing that Magnulfus, with his newly won power position, could perhaps bring about. Today, we feel that the blarney which leads up to the plea in the last lines would counteract the author's intentions, but there is nothing to suggest that such delicacy of feeling characterised the average Merovingian nobleman. We must therefore conclude that Lupus has lost power and that Venantius, being a loyal friend, tries to help. From Gregory's Frankish history (Gregory VI, 4), we know that in AD 581 Lupus had 'for a long time' been harassed by his enemies and probably his troubles dates from the assassination of Sigibert, which happened in late autumn AD 575 (cf. Wood 1994, pp. 89 ff.).

The last poem is written in haste, since the messenger who is supposed to forward it to Magnulfus—perhaps Sigismund's herald, who brought news of Magnulfus' victories—cannot be kept waiting any longer.

The last two poems seem to have been purposely included in the collection of poems as a plea for Lupus and, although they concerned only Lupus, Magnulfus and Venantius when they were written, they are bound to interest many when they are published. Venantius stages things carefully. First, he must protect himself and he does so by referring to the code of the Germanic, gift-based friendship, which obliges a man always to help a friend who has given him gifts. Secondly, he must see to it that Lupus is not depicted as seeking the help of a Venantius. Therefore he constructs the third poem with some odd facts for our information. Even the last poem fits the pattern, inasmuch as it is written in a by-the-way fashion intended to make it clear that nobody should expect Venantius to have set himself to work composing it the moment he got the gifts from Lupus. On the contrary, the poem is one of many results of the dexterity of the poet's sensitive, artistic soul.

This means that Lupus can deny that he ever sent Venantius gifts, since they were sent in his *name* only and Magnulfus can, if it pleases him, relatively easily deny that he ever received the letter, since what kind of postman was it given to? Perhaps the poems were never sent, while they fill their purpose best by just being published.

Be this as it may, as a quartet the poems reflect the poetically elaborate height of Lupus' power in AD 566 and the minimum of poetic flattery, stuffed with precautions, bestowed upon a man losing power around AD 575. At these two important moments in Lupus' life, Venantius is given the opportunity to reflect on his relationship with Lupus.

Venantius wants to tell us that they are both civilised human beings and that the young Venantius during nine years of dormant friendship has grown to match Lupus. Only a close reading reveals that in fact Venantius may have been taken slightly aback by the Germanic code of honour, which obliged him actually to support Lupus.

Composition

The poems form pairs, even if we look at their formal character. The first two are *c.* 80 lines long and the last two *c.* 20. The first poem makes Lupus a public person, while the second is devoted to his person. Likewise, the third poem is strictly personal, while the fourth is concerned with his public position.

The last pair consists of one section each, but first the poems start with a section which establishes a general feeling and then proceeds with a chronologically structured narrative which leads up to an understanding of the very moment when the first was recited and the second read for the first time.

The third and fourth poems are improvisations. Their time is now and their space what Venantius calls his hiding-place. From this point in time and space, seemingly far from the centre of events, the poet looks back surprised by the speed with which fame is spreading and time leaping forward in the outside world.

All four are metrically similar and simply filled with conventional expressions. The last pair is hardly more than versified pieces of information, but the first contains some signs of sincere feelings and some metaphors which do not sound too commonplace. In Venantius, speed, convention and cunning purposefulness went hand in hand (Koebner 1915, pp. 84 f.), but, since the poems are juxtaposed two and two and since they comment upon and belong to two widely separated periods in Lupus' life, they also show us a significant change in Venantius' occasional poetry: the change from poetically inspired panegyrics to the versification of everyday matters with an eye to the politics of his day.

Conclusions

Read one by one the Lupus poems range from technically gifted, conventional and superfluous poetry to versified tickets or notes. Read two by two they start to form some sort of message related to the Merovingian reality of the upper classes. Looked upon as a quartet and set in the chaotic, political landscape of the 570s in Gaul, they are a plea for civilisation as the outcome of the merging of Christian Latin and Germanic ideals. The poems stress the honourable friendship of those who represent virtue.

Whether the persons involved do so or not is of little importance to us; what matters is the fact that what Venantius does is *comme il faut* and his motives are obvious. With his Christian and Latin background, he tries to make a career for himself in Merovingian Gaul among the Germanic nobility. Eventually he turned to the Episcopal sphere of society, but in AD 575 he was still the participant observant of the nobility, albeit in the state of observing rather than participating. We may say that Venantius is engaged in the understanding of the social institutions in Merovingian Gaul while complying with their rules (Winch 1963, pp. 86 ff.). He reveals his project to his readers and that makes his poems valuable as a guide to finding one's way in society.

English revised by Neil Tomkinson

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