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EARLY BYZANTINE PERIODS

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The Poetry of Venantius Fortunatus: The Twilight of Roman Metre

Seppo Heikkinen

Introduction

Venantius Fortunatus (ca. 530-600), who was born and educated in Northern Italy but made his career in the Merovingian court in Gaul, has often been characterised as the last Roman poet. His life and work are seen as overlapping the boundary lying between classical antiquity and the Middle Ages. This duality of his literary personality is clearly reflected in his work: he was a prolific, versatile, and original master of the hexameter and the elegiac couplet, the most classical of the classical metres, but the ends to which he employed these metres manifest a radical departure from classical tradition. One of the most noticeable characteristics of Venantius' poetry is the coexistence of classical form and Christian content. When we evaluate the poetry of Venantius Fortunatus, we must bear in mind that it was composed at a time when the syllable quantities on which classical metre is based had all but disappeared from spoken Latin. Nevertheless, Venantius Fortunatus succeeded in composing vast numbers of hexameters and elegiac couplets that are metrically faultless, which must be regarded as an indication of the poet's high learning. On the other hand, many of Venantius' metric and stylistic solutions are rather idiosyncratic and display an independence from, or disregard for, previous tradition.

Venantius Fortunatus was born in Treviso around 530 and received his education in the 550s or 560s in Ravenna, which at the time enjoyed close and significant ties to Byzantium and was unique in providing the opportunity of a classical education even in the post-Theoderic era. Almost the only sources on the early years of his life are his own works, notably his *Carmina*.¹ In Ravenna, Venantius, although attracted to the church, had a traditional secular education that included grammar, rhetoric and the rudiments of law.² The poet himself describes his education in the following lines of his *Vita Sancti Martini*:

Parvula grammaticae lambens refluamina guttae,
rhetorici exiguum praelibans gurgitis haustum,
cote ex iuridica cui vix rubigo recessit. (*Mart.* 1,29-31).

¹ Georg 1992, 18, 20.

² Manitius, *Geschichte der lateinischen Literatur des Mittelalters. Erster Teil*, Handbuch der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft 9, 2, 1, München 1911, 170.

Etclaro ingenioregant spargenda portum
 Utradians' mergit licet ille nec indig' listis
 Crux cuius ouans acfamia iter occupatoribus
 Arua capaz pelagus intrans superastracoriscaus
 Distribuens miras populis prosp'g medillas
 Quidno famulando suo capte omnia dono
 Et quo xpi habet nomen martinus honorem
 Explicit opus FORTUNATI.

**PRÆDEVINSE MARIN
EPIFELT**

IN EPIPOVVS FORTVNATI
 IN NDOem DISCEMARE;
 Lingua proph'arum cecinit deuincime partum
 Numia fert terris angelus ista poli
 Consona uoce hominum memorat hoc ferre pueri
 Q' d'are absque uiro germine virgo uirum
 Hoce euangelio concordans pandit es'as
 Quæ d'is inspirat haec cant' ipse tuba
 Eloquio torrens dante profunda locutus
 Emmanuel n'm virgine dante canens
 Prædicens olim ut de matre condit' honore
 Radices flor' iesse auinga d'are
 Virgo haec uirga fuit de qua est flor' xpi abortus
 Cuius odor uiuax membra seputra levat

Fig. 10. Page of the *Vita Sancti Martini* in the manuscript N Vaticanus Palatinus 845 from the 9th century, in the Vatican Library.

Venantius' modesty here is obviously affected and must be viewed as representing the then conventional *topos* of self-deprecation:³ elsewhere in his poetry he goes to considerable lengths to demonstrate the extent of his classical learning. His works show that he was familiar with the major Latin poets, pre-Christian and Christian alike, for frequent reminiscences from lines of Vergil, Horace, Ovid, and Statius appear in his work. For all his knowledge of the pre-Christian classics, however, Venantius saw himself as an heir to the tradition of Christian poetry that began with Juvencus:

Primus enim, docili distingens ordine carmen
maiestatis opus metri canit arte Iuvencus.
Hinc quoque conspicui radiavit lingua Seduli,
paucaque perstrinxit florente Orientius ore... (*Mart.* 1,14-17).

The Christian poets whom Venantius mentions as his influences include Juvencus, Sedulius, Prudentius and Paulinus of Nola. Venantius' *Vita Sancti Martini*, the hexameter biography of Saint Martin of Tours, is his own contribution to the genre of epic hexameter poetry on Christian themes.

We can assume that Venantius also picked up a working knowledge of Greek in Ravenna. At that time, the use of the language appears to have been largely confined to certain trades, such as physicians and artisans, but the influx of Byzantine dignitaries after 540 may have stimulated a wider interest in the language. Whether, on the other hand, the actual cultivation of literary Greek underwent a similar revival, has been open to debate, and most references to Greek literature in Venantius' poetry are probably attributable to secondary sources in Latin.⁴

Although the bulk of Venantius' vast output, which includes poems on a wide range of topics from the spiritual to the personal and even the political, was composed in elegiac couplets, his most ambitious work is arguably his *Vita Sancti Martini* (Fig. 10). This hagiographical work essentially paraphrases in hexameter form the prose *Vita* by Sulpicius Severus.⁵ The metre is classical, but in other respects the work can no longer be regarded as representing the tradition of epic poetry: structurally, it is thoroughly medieval. It renders, in a rather disjointed manner, episodes from St. Martin's life, interspersed with lavish and heavily rhetorical encomia of, and invocations to, the saint. *Vita Sancti Martini* can be seen as the last representative of Roman hexameter poetry, while at the same time being one of the pioneering works of medieval hagiographic literature.⁶ In this presentation I will focus on the metric and stylistic features of this particular work, but most of my observations apply equally well to Venantius' other poetry.

³ George 1992, 21; on the *topos* of self-deprecation see Curtius 1948, 410.

⁴ George 1992, 22; Courcelle 1969, 266-267 (on Venantius Fortunatus) and 311-360 (on the interest in literary Greek in the 5th century). Names of classical Greek authors are mentioned in Venantius' works, but according to Courcelle "there is nothing in all this to prove any contact between Fortunatus and Greek literature, even through the medium of translation." On the other hand, he identifies an allusion to *Il.* 3,237 in Ven. Fort. *carm.* 3,4,5: *non enim Polydeucen sua commendasset venae saltentis ubertas, nisi Smyrnei fontis fatidico latice fuisse adtactus.* In other words, the question of the actual extent of Venantius' knowledge of Greek literature remains open.

⁵ Sulpicius Severus (born ca. 363), monk and historian, was Martin's pupil, and his prose hagiography, which was instrumental to the birth of the cult of St. Martin, predates the death of the bishop in 397.

⁶ Quesnel 1996, xlvi.

Vita Sancti Martini: General stylistic features

Although *Vita Sancti Martini* purports to follow classical examples, it shows stylistic features that are more typical of medieval poetry. One of Venantius' most recognizable idiosyncrasies is his endless fascination with strange or foreign vocabulary. The work abounds in long compound words and neologisms, which often seem to be used mainly to fill up the line:⁷

atque *subincrepitans* [=crepitans] casura cacumine nutat (*Mart.* 1,259)
 molliter aero *dissulcans* [=sulcans] nubila lapsu (*Mart.* 4,243)
 limine nullus obest, ad principis ora *perinrat* (*Mart.* 3,225).

He is also, surprisingly enough, one of the first users of some neologisms later adopted by modern languages:⁸

prosaico digesta situ, commune rotatu (*Mart.* 1,13)⁹
submontana quidem castella per ardua tendens (*Mart.* 4,657).¹⁰

One of Venantius' staple mannerisms is his 'Romanic' use of the ablative form of the gerund as a substitute for the present participle, always with the final *o* in shortened form:¹¹

vivificatus enim gressum *meditando* rediscens (*Mart.* 1,196)
ligna trahendo focus nemorum vectore bubulco (*Mart.* 2,155)
 Carnutis hinc etiam dum *praetereundo* veniret (*Mart.* 3,153).

This predilection for words of increasing length and complexity is, however, more than mere showmanship or a self-gratuitous mannerism. It can be argued that the use of such words is an essential part of Venantius' composition technique. In an age where classical syllable quantity had vanished from spoken Latin, writers of quantitative verse had to rely on words and word combinations with predetermined lengths to fill up parts of their lines. Later, this was to form the cornerstone of the verse technique of such insular poets as Aldhelm and Bede. As we shall presently observe, Venantius' hexameter style is highly dactylic, and such prefixes as *sub-*, *in-*, *re-*, and *per-* obviously provided him with the short syllables he needed for the composition of dactyls. The same possibly applies to Venantius' use of frequentative verbs, which also often include such neologisms as *monitare* (*Mart.* 2,387) and *fluentare* (*Mart.* 4,642).¹²

⁷ The technique of using long compound words with predetermined syllable lengths was later extensively employed by the Anglo-Saxon poets; see A. Campbell, Some Linguistic Features of Early Anglo-Latin Verse and Its Use of Classical Models, *Transactions of the Philological Society* (1953) 1-20.

⁸ Tardi 1927, 222-223; S. Blomgren: *Studia Fortunatiana. Commentatio academica*. Upsaliae 1933, 151.

⁹ Niermeyer 2002, 1127.

¹⁰ Niermeyer 2002, 1303.

¹¹ Leo 1881, 425; on the treatment of the final *o* in post-classical and medieval poetry see Norberg 1958, 9.

¹² Tardi 1927, 222-224: "On peut en effet se demander si chez le poète, le suffixe *tare* ou *itare* ajoute quelque chose à l'idée du verbe."

Venantius is certainly one of the wittiest hexameter poets since Ennius, the first Latin poet to compose hexameters, at the beginning of 2nd century BC. Venantius' lines abound with alliteration, assonance, *figura etymologica*, puns, deliberate tautology and wordplay in general.¹³ His lines are often a far cry from the low-key tastefulness of the classical hexameter poets and occasionally they can verge on the bizarre:

prudens prudenter Prudentius immolat actus (*Mart.* 1,19)

post Aeduorum templum dum evellere vellet
obstant inulti cultores ruricolares,
ne colerent melius sua si cultura periret. (*Mart.* 1,325-327)

Leucadis pariter pro praeside prompta precatrix (*Mart.* 4,342).

Witness the dramatic change which Vergil's *parcere subiectis et debellare superbos* (*Aen.* 6,853) has undergone at Venantius' hands:

arma ministra vides: nostrum est *superare superbos* (*Mart.* 1,315).¹⁴

There are also frequent instances of primitive Leonine rhyme:

maiestatis opus metri canit arte Iuvencus.
hinc quoque conspicui radiavit lingua Seduli (*Mart.* 1,15-16)

hinc furor *Australis* premit, hinc velocibus *alis*
flamma volans Borinas mordebat in aera pinnas (*Mart.* 1,289-290).

Venantius is also one of the first and most avid users of the typically medieval device that Curtius has called “verse-filling asyndeton”,¹⁵ as exemplified by the following catalogues:

attonitus, trepidus, hebetans, vagus, anxius, anceps (*Mart.* praef. 2,23)
flos, odor, esca, sapor, fons, lux, via, gloria Christus (*Mart.* 2,440)
faece gravis, sermone levis, ratione pigrescens,
mente hebes, arte carens, usu rudis ore nec expers (*Mart.* 1,27-28).

This is a technique for which the poet was lauded by such medieval authors as the Venerable Bede¹⁶ and which was frequently imitated in the Middle Ages.

In matters of prosody, Venantius Fortunatus is, for his day and age, remarkably faultless. He follows the post-classical practice of shortening the final vowels even of words that are unaffected by iambic shortening:¹⁷

¹³ Tardi 1927, 263-264.

¹⁴ The change in style here can be said to reflect the change in content: the church has inherited the role of the Roman empire and has been invested with its authority. In this line, angels urge the saint to destroy a pagan temple.

¹⁵ Curtius 1948, 289.

¹⁶ *aliquando versum nominibus tantum perficere gratum est, ut Fortunatus...*, *De arte metrica* ed. Kendall 1975, 114.

¹⁷ Leo 1881, 424-425; on this phenomenon in Silver Latin see Raven 1965, 23-24.

vir cunctis bonitate parens, tibi *suggero* luctus (*Mart.* 1,390)
ad cursum levis aura vocat, *paro* linteal ventis (*Mart.* 2,5).

He also often takes other prosodic liberties:¹⁸

fitque *monasterium* Pictava comminus urbe (*Mart* 1,158):
monasterium with short *e*.

qui male polluerint *lavacri* venerabilis undam (*Mart.* 2,186):
lavacri with short *a* in the penultimate.

He also often treats *h* as a consonant, a feature which he shares with Sedulius and other Christian writers of late antiquity:¹⁹

nulla Augustorum meruit *hunc* vestis honorem (*Mart.* 1,65)
tempore sub mortis *hostis* compendia tractans (*Mart.* 1,80).

Venantius has also reverted to the pre-classical practice of ending hexameter lines with words of five syllables, a common feature in the poetry of Lucretius, but shunned by the classics:²⁰

quantum voce valens viduis nec *orfanatros* (*Mart.* 2,405)
patriciis mixtus generosis *consulibusque* (*Mart.* 3,521)
libertate nova surgunt colla *Avitiani* (*Mart.* 4,207).

On the other hand, all other types of archaic verse-ending have disappeared almost completely, including the spondaic line-ending and line-endings where accent and ictus do not coincide. We shall deal with this phenomenon more closely below.

Metrical style: dactyls, spondees and fourth-foot texture

Venantius' pronounced individualism extends beyond matters of prosody and vocabulary: he is probably the most dactylic of all Latin hexameter poets in history, at times exceeding even Ovid. If we observe the first four feet of each line, the *Vita Sancti Martini* has the astonishing ratio of 20 dactyls to 12 spondees; Ovid's *Metamorphoses* have the same ratio whereas in Vergil's *Aeneid* the ratio is 12 spondees to 20 dactyls. However, Venantius' favourite verse patterns are even more dactylic than Ovid's: Ovid favours the pattern *ddss*, where the first and second feet are dactyls and the third and fourth spondees. Venantius, on the other hand, favours the pattern *ddsd*, where the

¹⁸ Leo 1881, 422-427.

¹⁹ This is another practice later adopted by insular poets, as exemplified by Bede's mention in his *De arte metrica: item natura brevis syllaba ad votum poetarum transferri potest in longam, cum correpta vocalis in consonantem desinit et excipitur ab H littera* (Kendall 1975, 89). The practice is apparently based on the example of Verg. *Aen.* 9,610, *terga fatigamus hasta*, which had later been formulated into a metrical rule by the grammarians (Norberg 1958, 7). It is, however, noteworthy that even in classical Roman poetry the hiatus is more common before initial *h* than before vowels and that even classical poets avoid elision before the pronoun *hic*; see Allen 1973, 148.

²⁰ Wilkinson 1963, 231-232.

fourth foot is also a dactyl. This tendency is highly unusual in Roman hexameter, where the dactylic feet are usually placed toward the beginning of the line.²¹ In Venantius' poetry, dactyls also have a tendency to accumulate and appear in adjacent verses. The following passage from the fourth book of *Vita Sancti Martini* is a prime example:

cuius honor tumuli facit hic sua rura tueri;	(dddd)
qui pietatis opem tribuat, nam largus ubique	(ddds)
scit nihil esse meum, sua sed sibi dona recurrent.	(dddd)
si tamen urgueris, ut adhuc temerarius intres	(dddd)
inde Parisiacam placide properabis ad arcem	(dddd)
quam modo Germanus regit et Dionysius olim.	(dsdd)
si pede progrederis, venerato sepulchra Remedi	(dddd) (Mart. 4,632-638).

As we can see, five of the seven lines consist entirely of dactyls. This kind of heavy-handed metric repetition is another feature that Venantius shares with the pre-classical hexameter poets Lucretius and Catullus.²² Venantius' use of dactyls and spondees bears little resemblance to the practices of any other poet. The origins of his often exhaustingly dactylic style are also obscure; in this, as in many other respects, the poet appears to be a true individualist, "*un génie un peu fou*", as he has been characterised.²³ It is possible that the fact that Venantius Fortunatus, like Ovid, mainly wrote elegiac verse has contributed to the extremely dactylic character of his hexameter poetry.

Venantius Fortunatus resembles Lucretius and Catullus in another important respect: the coincidence of word-accent and metrical ictus in the fourth foot, the so-called fourth-foot homodyne, is very common in his work. It is this very phenomenon that Vergil sought to avoid when he chose to write

Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris

instead of

Arma virumque cano, qui Troiae primus ab oris.

As a rule, lines with fourth-foot homodyne are considered smoother, or more fluid, whereas the clash of accent and ictus in the fourth foot is thought to confer an air of *gravitas* or even tragedy. In addition to limiting the occurrence of fourth-foot homodyne in his verses, Vergil strove to create variation between adjacent, otherwise structurally similar lines by subtly altering the texture of the fourth foot.²⁴ Venantius reverted to the practices of the pre-classical authors in his more straightforward manner of dealing with fourth-foot texture. In Venantius Fortunatus' hexameter style, fourth-foot homodyne, like other metrical features, has a tendency to accumulate. The fourth book of *Vita Sancti Martini* has a passage of no less than seventeen lines in which accent and ictus coincide in the fourth foot of all lines save one:

²¹ Duckworth 1969, table I; Thraede (1978, 67-68) has observed that the frequency of spondaic feet in Roman hexameter lines increases progressively over the first four feet of the line.

²² Duckworth 1969, table I.

²³ Tardi 1927, 265.

²⁴ Duckworth 1969, 46-48.

quam modo Germanus regit | et Dio|nysius olim,
 si pede progrederis, vene|rato se|pulchra Remedi
 atque pii fratris con|plectere | templa Medardi.
 si tibi barbaricos con|ceditur | ire per amnes,
 ut placide Rhenum trans|cendere | possis et Histrum (*Mart.* 4,637-640).

and so forth, creating generally a rather flat effect.

Venantius Fortunatus' dual role in the history of literature is reflected by his verse technique: he was an educated poet of evidently great verbal talent; he was thoroughly familiar with the works of his classical predecessors as well as their techniques, which he, however, applied in an idiosyncratic and sometimes undisciplined manner. In his *Vita Sancti Martini* we can witness the coexistence of thoroughly classical expression with a baroque exuberance more typical of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Some features of his verses, such as the frequent use of alliteration and what amounts to a virtual obsession with wordplay are also reminiscent of the archaic Latin poets.²⁵

Greek influence or lack thereof

Adapting Greek hexameter to Roman Poetry

When we evaluate Roman hexameter poetry, or, indeed, any form of Roman quantitative verse, we must be aware of the fact that we are ultimately dealing with a tradition of Greek origin. Although in Rome the hexameter underwent considerable structural changes that were necessary for the accommodation of the unique prosodic qualities of the Latin language, Greek verses and stylistic effects were frequently emulated by the classical hexameter poets. Indeed, the very structural differences of Latin and Greek hexameter poetry make the Greek influences in Vergil's poetry, for instance, all the more noticeable.

The most obvious difference between Greek and Latin hexameter poetry is that the former is considerably more dactylic than the latter. This has usually been attributed to the ratio of short and long syllables in the two languages. In Greek, short syllables are very common, because most of the Indo-European vocalic liquids and nasals have changed into the short *a* sound; in Latin, on the other hand, such phonetic phenomena as the syncope have eliminated many of the short syllables;²⁶ also, Latin lacks the articles and particles that have furnished the Greek poets with the required short syllables. As a result, the first Latin hexameter poets were forced to compromise the dactylic nature of the metre and create a form of hexameter verse that relied more heavily on spondaic feet. The contrast is nowhere as marked as it is in the very earliest Latin hexameter poetry: while in Greek hexameter poetry, and Homer in particular, the overwhelmingly most popular verse-pattern is *dddd*, in the poetry of Ennius it is *ssss*.²⁷

²⁵ The most famous examples of archaic wordplay are, of course, Ennius' at *tuba terribili sonitu taratantara dixit* (ann. 140) and *O, Tite, tute, Tati, tibi tanta, tyranne, tulisti* (ann. 109).

²⁶ e.g. Latin *dexter*, Greek δεξιτερός.

²⁷ Duckworth 1969, 37.

In other words, when borrowing the hexameter from the Greeks, the earliest Roman hexameter poets converted this fundamentally dactylic metre into a predominantly spondaic one. This made the Roman hexameter, by its very nature, heavier and less fluid than its Greek predecessor.

Later, as the Roman poets grew more adept at emulating Greek verse techniques, the Roman hexameter also grew more dactylic. From Lucretius onwards, most Roman poets, including Vergil, favoured dactylic first feet. Vergil's favourite verse-pattern *dsss* has several advantages over Ennius' heavier *ssss*: the dactylic nature of the meter is made clear by the initial dactyl and then reasserted by the dactyl in the penultimate foot, while the spondaic middle feet retain the *gravitas* that had become an essential characteristic of Roman hexameter poetry. Ovid and his followers made the hexameter more dactylic still, and we can actually speak of a 'Vergilian' and an 'Ovidian' school of hexameter writing, the former being more heavy and spondaic, the latter more fluid and dactylic.²⁸ At the same time, spondaic line-endings, which are fairly common in Greek hexameter poetry, as a rule are avoided;²⁹ possibly it was thought that a dactylic fifth foot was required to assert the dactylic nature of the metre in Roman hexameter lines that were often otherwise heavily spondaic.

Another feature that must be taken into account when evaluating Roman hexameter poetry is the Latin system of accentuation which is thoroughly different from the Greek and which was to influence the structure of the Latin hexameter profoundly.³⁰ In Greek poetry, the word-accent has no effect on the verse structures, whereas in Latin poetry new metrical rules were devised to accommodate the regular dynamic accent of the language. In hexameter poetry, this is particularly discernible in the Roman poets' use of caesurae.

In Greek hexameter poetry, the principal types of third-foot caesurae are the strong caesura, which comes after the first $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet, and the trochaic caesura, which comes after the first $2\frac{3}{4}$ feet, as in

"Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα, // πολύτροπον, δέ μάλα πολλὰ (Hom. *Od.* 1,1)

or

Μοῦσαι Πιερίηθεν, // ἀοιδῆσιν κλείουσαι (Hes. *Erga* 1,1).

This type of caesura, which was actually the favourite of many Greek authors,³¹ fell out of favour with the Romans, or at best played only a secondary role in Roman hexameter poetry. The overwhelming majority of Roman hexameter lines have the strong caesura in the third foot, and when the third-foot trochaic caesura is employed, it is virtually always supported by auxiliary strong caesurae in the second or fourth feet, as in

²⁸ Duckworth 1969, 39, 55, 75.

²⁹ Homer has one spondaic line every 19.4 lines and Callimachus one every 15.1 lines, whereas in Vergil's *Aeneid* there is only one spondaic line every 409.5 lines and in Horace's Satires and Epistles one spondaic line every 4081.0 lines. See Duckworth 1969, 3 and tables I-III.

³⁰ Allen 1973, 337-338.

³¹ Sicking 1993, 76.

Infandum, / regina, // iubes, / renovare dolorem (Verg. *Aen.* 2,3).

In such lines, the role of the auxiliary caesura at 3 1/2 feet is often actually more prominent than that of the trochaic caesura at 2 3/4 feet.³² It can, in fact, be argued that most Roman hexameter lines are divided by a strong caesura either at 2 1/2 or 3 1/2 feet. The trochaic caesura unsupported is a very rare thing indeed, and it is usually employed in emulation of Greek models.

This change in the use of caesurae is a direct result of the Latin accent system: strong caesurae cause lines where there is little coincidence of accent and ictus, whereas trochaic caesurae give the opposite result. The classical Roman hexameter poets preferred a type of line where accent and ictus clash in the middle of the line and coincide in the final cadence.³³ Trochaic caesurae and word-division between feet result in lines such as:

spárgens úmida mélla // sopòriferúmque papáver (Verg. *Aen.* 4,486),

where we have complete coincidence of accent and ictus. In this line, Vergil deliberately deviates from established Roman metrical practice: the line, which is completely lacking in strong caesurae, is supposed to be *soporifer*.³⁴ Often, such lines are intended to create a Greek-sounding effect, associated with images of eastern languor or effeminacy. Frequently such lines are paraphrases of Greek hexameter lines that were well known to Vergil's readers.

As we can see, Roman hexameter poetry developed a set of rules of its own. These rules were often dictated by the prosodic qualities of the Latin language itself, and evolved over a length of time independently of Greek influence. As a result, deviations from these rules in classical hexameter poetry are frequently Graecisms and lines that show such deviations are often direct paraphrases of Greek models.

Venantius Fortunatus' Vocabulary and Style

We have previously observed the original and witty, if at times also heavily ornate metrical style of Venantius Fortunatus. Is it possible to detect any similar metrical or stylistic Graecisms in his poetic style? Venantius certainly often deviates from the strictest classical norm in his hexameter lines, but are these deviations attributable to Greek influence?

As mentioned above, the most noticeable metrical feature of Venantius' hexameter poetry is his extremely dactylic style. In this respect, he is metrically closer to the Greek hexameter poets than any other Roman poet. The ratio of dactyls and spondees in his eight favourite verse patterns (20 dactyls to 12 spondees) equals that of Theocritus, the most spondaic of the Greek hexameter poets.³⁵ Furthermore, his

³² Raven 1965, 94.

³³ Wilkinson 1963, 120-121; Raven 1965, 98-99.

³⁴ Wilkinson 1963, 72.

³⁵ Duckworth 1969, table III. The corresponding ratio for Homer is 22 dactyls to 10 spondees and for Hesiod 21 dactyls to 11 spondees.

preference for fourth-foot dactyls over fourth-foot spondees can be regarded as a distinctly un-Roman feature.³⁶ It is interesting to note that Venantius, who is one of the very last representatives of Roman hexameter poetry, was the closest to the Greeks in terms of his use of dactylic feet, but as evidence of Greek influence this is hardly conclusive.

Venantius' use of caesurae betrays no Greek allusions: in general, he observes the Roman rules of word-division quite closely. His lines are almost always divided by a strong caesura at either 2 1/2 or 3 1/2 feet. There is some deviation from the strictest classical norm,³⁷ but the trochaic caesura or the bucolic diaeresis play no discernible structural role in his lines.

As already mentioned, Venantius had reverted to some archaic types of line-ending which the classical Roman poets avoided. He often ends his lines with pentasyllabic words, and not infrequently these words are actually of Greek origin:

haec memorante pio stupidus hebet *archidiacon* (Mart. 3,38)

pastor adesse iubet quandam es grege *daemonicum* (Mart. 1,474)

Augustinus adest pretiosus *Basiliusque* (Mart. 4,664).

These examples cannot, however, be attributed to any actual Greek influence; it is probable that Venantius has in these cases used Greek loans because of their appropriate length. Furthermore, it is notable that such loan words are also often prosodically faulty: in the previous examples *archidiacon* and *daemonicus* are scanned with long *a* in the penultimate and *Basilius* with a long *a* and a short *i*. There are numerous other examples of prosodic liberties that Venantius has taken with Greek loans:

emblema, *gemma*, *lapis*, *toreumata*, *tura*, *Falerna* (Mart. 1,80):
emblema with short *e* in the penultimate, *toreumata* with long *o*

qui necdum Christi *charismata* senserit exsors (Mart. 4,416):
charisma with long *a* in the first syllable

tabida *paralysis* gelido languore puella (Mart. 1,368):
paralysis with a long *a* in the first syllable

dum pede tardat *heros* praecessit cura volatu (Mart. 3,83):
heros with short *e*

quaestio tanta ligat neque *problema* solvit egeni (Mart. 3,44):
problema with short *e*, cf. *emblema* in Mart. 1,80.

³⁶ Thraede 1978, 67–68; Sicking 1993, 73–74.

³⁷ In classical Roman hexameter poetry, lines with a strong caesura at 3 1/2 feet should also have a strong caesura at 1 1/2 feet to preclude the coincidence of ictus and accent in the middle feet (Raven 1965, 96). This is something Venantius occasionally neglects as in *dogmate luce fide informans / virtute sequaces* (Mart. 1,140) or *huius in affectu insertus / solidatus adultus* (Mart. 2,442), see Leo 1881, 423.

Such liberties are by no means unusual even in classical hexameter poetry, and often they are unavoidable because there are prosodic structures such as the proceleusmatic that cannot be accommodated into a dactylic metre. *Paralysis* would belong to this category of liberties taken out of necessity, exactly like the Latin words *Italia* and *religio*, where similar prosodic changes occur in dactylic poetry. As a rule, however, Venantius appears to take such liberties much more often with words of Greek origin, even ones that are fairly common and metrically unproblematic like *heros*, which may reflect the decline of Greek letters in Western Europe.

Venantius occasionally uses hiatuses, but they are usually attributable to the Late Latin practice of treating *h* as a consonant, as previously noted. The only spondaic verse in the whole work of over 2,000 lines is an example of Venantius' word-play. It occurs in the description of an ox that kneels before the saint:

flexit et ipse genu, qui non habet *intellectum* (*Mart.* 3,315).

The line-ending is deliberately clumsy, the unusual and heavy structure being a metrical allusion to the great size and dim wit of the animal. In other words, the spondaic line-ending seems to have not only virtually disappeared from Venantius' metrical technique but also become divested of its previous prestige.³⁸

We may safely conclude that the hexameter poetry of Venantius Fortunatus shows no clear Greek influences on a metrical level. There is no subtle application of Greek verse techniques or allusion to lines from the Greek classics. Such devices, had Venantius had them at his disposal, would have been wasted on his audience. Of course, his poetry displays many rhetorical and poetic devices that were common to Greek and Roman poets alike, but their immediate sources are in Latin poetry – or, in some cases, ecclesiastical language – and they can scarcely be attributed to any direct Greek influence. On the lexical level, however, we often encounter a virtual congestion of Greek loans that are often also prosodically shaky.

According to Tardi, nearly all of the Greek words Venantius used are words that had taken root in Christian Latin and subsequently received religious meanings or connotations.³⁹ This may explain their use, or overuse, by the poet. The religious context of Greek loans, together with the fact that the Greek language itself was becoming increasingly foreign to Western Europeans, made Greek words all the more prestigious to Venantius and his followers, often resulting in their self-gratuitous use. This tendency was later taken to extremes by the insular writers of the so-called hermeneutic school, whose texts are often rendered virtually unintelligible by their foreign and arcane vocabulary.

Something of the imagery associated with Greek elements seems to have persisted in the poetry of Venantius Fortunatus. As previously mentioned, Graecisms in the classical poets are frequently intended to convey images of either languor or luxury, sometimes quite irrespective of actual geographic context. Vestiges of such *topoi* can be found in Venantius' poetry. The poet practically revels in the foreign

³⁸ It is interesting to note that the spondaic line-ending has also disappeared from the verse technique of the late Greek hexameter poets Nonnus and Musaeus (see Duckworth 1969, table III). These poets are also metrically the most repetitious of the Greek hexameter poets.

³⁹ Tardi 1927, 224: "Même les termes d'origine profane, come *amphiballum* ou *encoenia*, avaient pris depuis quatre siècles un sens religieux."

sounds of his Greek words (*y*, *z*, and the Greek aspirates), and this effect is further enhanced by the poet's habit of overusing every means of expression at his disposal. A case in point is the description of the temple in the third book of *Vita Sancti Martini*, which is a good illustration of his baroque style:

O sinceri oculi, nulla caligine pressi,
 mens radiata *sopho*, retinens sine nube serenum,
 inspicis aeriam carnali lumine *Theclam*
 atque vides Agnem redimita fronte corona,
 cernis et egregiam pretiosa luce Mariam.
 Vidisti templum domini *diademate* fultum,
 vidisti *thalamum* sponsi super omnia pulchri,
 conpositum gemmis auroque ostroque decorum.
 Qualis *iaspis* erat pedibus laterique *topazus*,
 qui digitis anuli viridi fulgore venusti,
 quales armillae dextrae ardescente *hyacintho*,
 quanto *zona* die lapidum radiabat honore,
cycladis aut qualis *cataclyzis* effora rasis,
 quae palla ex humeris mixto *chrysoprase* *beryllis*,
 quodve monile decens collo rutilabat in illo? (*Mart.* 3,455-469)

The poet has sought to convey an image of grandeur and opulence, and the Greek vocabulary, together with the anaphora, serves to heighten the effect. Similar in style is the description of the court of emperor Maximus in the second book, where we encounter asyndetic lines crammed with geographic names or names of jewels:

Augusti obsequiis fremit undique concitus orbis,
 divitias pariter producens deliciasque
 quas habet Indus, Arabs, Geta, Thrax, Persa, Afer, Hiberus,
 quod fert meridies, arctos, occasus et ortus,
 quod Boreas, Aquilo, Libs, Circius, Auster et Eurus,
 quod Geon et Phison, Tigris Eufratesque redundant,
 Rhenus, Atax, Rhodanus, Tibris, Padus, Hister, Orontes,
 quod mare, terra, polus pisce, alite, fruge ministrat,
 emblema, gemma, lapis, toremata, tura, Falerna
 Gazaque, Creta, Samos, Cypros, Colofona, Seraptis,
 lucida perspicuis certantia vina lapillis,
 vix discernendis cristallina pocula potis. (*Mart.* 2,72-82).

Although as a rule Venantius Fortunatus is fond of neologisms, he usually relies on Greek words already in existence. There are relatively few cases where he has actually ventured to coin new words from Greek roots.⁴⁰ Such neologisms are usually very simple constructions where a Latin ending has been grafted onto a Greek word-stem:

dum satiat vindicta famem *lymphatilis* Irae (*Mart.* 2,276).

⁴⁰ Tardi 1927, 224.

Other such examples can be found in his *Carmina*:

in me qui regit ire lutum *plasmabile* numen (*Carm.* 2,5,3)

atque *zmaragdineo* ianua poste viret (*Carm.* 8,4,18).⁴¹

As a rule, Venantius' own creations from Greek roots tend to be fewer and less imaginative than his Latin neologisms.

Conclusion

In general, the poetry of Venantius Fortunatus reflects many of the metric practices of late antiquity. At the same time, he seems to have reverted to some archaic practices shunned by the classics. As a user of dactylic rhythm he is certainly unique, and he appears to have developed a highly personal poetic style. Although *Vita Sancti Martini* is a fascinating document of the evolution of the Latin hexameter, it can no longer, in the strictest sense, be regarded as a representative of classical epic poetry.

The poetry of Venantius Fortunatus also documents the evolution of a Latin literature that is no longer in direct contact with Greek poetry. As we have noted, all Greek influences in his poetry have been filtered to him through either Latin poetry or ecclesiastical Latin. These influences are predominantly lexical or stylistic: the lines in his poetry are devoid of direct allusions to Greek metric techniques, but in contrast we are faced with an abundance of Greek loan words and, occasionally, neologisms from Greek roots. Venantius' use of Greek loans appears predominantly ornamental and must be viewed as simply one aspect of his exuberant baroque aesthetic: the Greek words are there to express foreignness and exoticism rather than familiarity. As we study the poetry of Venantius Fortunatus we can feel that we are gradually entering the medieval realm of glossaries and “*Graeca sunt, non leguntur.*”

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⁴¹ TLL VII:2, 1944; Tardi 1927, 221.

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