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Venantius Fortunatus' Panegyrics to Kings and the Tradition of Latin Verse Panegyric

Besides numerous poems dedicated to dignitaries of the Church and to noblemen of sixth-century Gaul, the collection of Venantius' poems also contains several poems dedicated to emperors, empresses and kings. These poems are, on the one hand, epithalamia (carm. 6.1) and consolatory poems (carm. 9.2 and 3), and, on the other hand political poems, which celebrate the virtues and the glory of a sovereign. From 566 to 587, Venantius composed major panegyric poems in praise of the Merovingian king Sigibert and his wife, Brunichilde (carm. 6.1a), of Charibert (carm. 6.2), of Queen Theudechild (carm. 6.3), of Chilperic (carm. 9.1) and of the royal couple Childebert and Brunichilde (carm. 10.8), as well as the two minor poems in praise of Childebert (app. carm. 5) and Brunichilde (app. carm. 6). Furthermore, the collection contains a *gratiarum actio* for the Byzantine emperor Justin II and his wife Sophia, written to celebrate the reception of a relic of the Holy Cross.

In my paper, I intend to examine the position of Venantius' panegyrics to kings within the genre of verse panegyric, to analyze their relationship to their literary predecessors, and to underline the specific peculiarities of the poems. The paper, therefore, aims at showing the achievements of Venantius as well as his intermediate position between late antique and medieval literature.

The first part of the paper deals with the genre of epic verse panegyrics in general. On the basis of a short definition of the term "epic verse panegyric" and the particular characteristics of this literary genre, I will give a survey of the development of the various forms of verse panegyric in late antiquity. The typology I suggest is based upon two criteria: (1) the length of the poems and (2) the structure of the poems and the relationship between narrative and descriptive parts. These criteria suggest dividing the genre of late antique verse panegyric into three sub-genres: (1) the panegyric epyllion combining a narrative with a descriptive structure, which is represented by the political poems of Claudius Claudianus and his successor Sidonius Apollinaris; (2) the panegyric epic poem, which is represented by the poems of Flavius Cresconius Corippus (*Iohannis*) and Ermoldus Nigellus (*In honorem Hludovici*) and, (3), the panegyric epyllion consisting exclusively of a descriptive enumeration of the emperor's virtues and achievements, to which the panegyric poem of Priscianus in praise of the emperor Anastasius and the panegyric poems of Venantius can be subsumed.

The major part of the paper deals with the topics, the structure and the literary technique of Venantius' panegyrics to kings. It consists of an examination of their particular formal characteristics, such as their length and their meter as well as of an analysis of their structure, their topics and their train of thought. Furthermore, the paper examines the relationship of Venantius' poems with the literary traditions of late antique panegyric. The most important questions are to which extent Venantius follows the instructions given by rhetorical treatises, such as Menander Rhetor and Aphthonius, and to which

extent his work is committed to his poetic predecessors, especially to Claudius Claudianus.

The following questions outline the chief aspects I wish to analyze: (1) How does Venantius present typical topics of panegyric literature, such as origin, youth and achievements of the king in war and peace? (2) Does he emphasize any special virtues of the person he celebrates? (3) Which traditional topics of panegyric literature does Venantius employ (e.g. visions of the golden age [carm. 6.2. 41-44]; the poet's own aims and faculties [e.g. topoi of modesty at the beginning of carm. 6.1a])?

Another aspect of the paper is the influence of the epic tradition on Venantius' panegyrics. In my interpretation, I will concentrate on (1) explicit references to epic poems and epic poets (such as the references to Virgil and Homer in carm. 6.1a); (2) the poet's language and diction, his usage of metaphors, circumscriptio, metonymies and allegories and (3), allusions to epic predecessors and epic topics. The analysis will show that Venantius sees himself as an epic poet and places his poems in the tradition of heroic epic, but, on the other hand, uses only sparingly or omits totally typical elements of the heroic epic such as catalogues, similes and ephrasia. Thus, his poems show closer relationship to the prose panegyrics than the poems of Claudian and Sidonius Apollinaris and even the panegyric of Priscian.

In summary, one can say that Venantius' panegyrics to kings represent an innovative type of panegyric poetry, that in fact takes up the outlines of late antique panegyric, but emancipates itself from late antique poetry. Therefore, Venantius' panegyrics are an excellent example of the process of transformation of late antique into medieval literature.

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