

Fluid Identities: Poetry and the Navigation of Mixed Ethnicities in Late Antique Gaul¹

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Abstract



This paper uses the work of Late Antique (4th-6th century) Latin poets to demonstrate the ways that pre-modern sources can be a part of scholarly discussions of the development of environmental imaginations and can usefully contribute to the development of the environmental humanities. The three poets (Ausonius, Sidonius Apollinaris, and Venantius Fortunatus) have many works that explore and describe nature; one theme that emerges is that they closely connected the rivers of Gaul to their concerns over political and cultural identity. Rivers, including the Rhone and the Mosel, were intricately woven into the daily life and cultural identities of 4th-6th century Gaul, and were both tangible and fluid political boundaries. These poems use rivers to confirm cultural identities, validate the Christian cultural experience, and express broader cultural and political concerns about cultural integration and hybridity.

Keywords: rivers, medieval, poetry, Late Antiquity, ecocriticism, identity.

Resumen

En este ensayo se utilizan textos de poetas latinos de la antigüedad tardía (siglos IV y VI) para demostrar cómo algunos recursos pre-modernos pueden formar parte de discusiones académicas sobre el desarrollo de la imaginación ambiental y contribuir al desarrollo de las humanidades ambientales. Los tres poetas que se discuten aquí—Ausonio, Sidonio Apolinar y Venancio Fortunato—tienen obras que exploran y describen la naturaleza. Uno de los temas que surgen es que ellos conectan los ríos de la Galia con su preocupación por la identidad política y cultural. Algunos ríos, entre ellos el Ródano y el Mosela, eran fronteras políticas fluidas y tangibles que estaban intrincadamente relacionadas con la vida diaria y las identidades culturales de la Galia durante los siglos IV y VI. Estos poemas usan los ríos para confirmar las identidades culturales, validar la experiencia cultural cristiana, y expresar profundas inquietudes culturales y políticas sobre la integración cultural y la hibridez.

Palabras clave: ríos, medieval, poesía, la antigüedad tardía, ecocrítica, identidad.

In a beautiful and tragic poem about the murder of a young queen, Venantius Fortunatus (c. 530- c. 600-609) let his literary imagination fly when describing her arrival in Gaul:

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The channel of the Vienne is crossed by an alder craft; the accompanying throng emerges briskly from the fast-flowing waters. From there the slow-moving Loire receives her with its bright and chilly stream, where the smooth sand gives over not even to a fish. She reaches the place where the Seine with fishy wave makes for the sea, near the curved bend by Rouen. (George, *Personal and Political*, 6.5 45)

Fortunatus, himself an immigrant, wrote many poems in which the rivers of Gaul play pivotal roles: they are in turns beautiful, dangerous, sheltering, alienating, welcoming, rushing with chaotic waters and dried up and disappearing. In pre-modern Europe, Rivers were vital to economic development, travel, industry, and agricultural development. Settlements, trade routes, military campaigns, and industries were established and maintained along rivers, and leaders worked to develop, protect, and control both the rivers and access to them. But beyond this, rivers were part of the cultural fabric of society, and deeply embedded in the early medieval environmental imagination.

This paper uses the work of three poets, Ausonius (c. 310- c. 390), Sidonius Apollinaris (c. 430- d. after 479), and Venantius Fortunatus, all of whom lived in Gaul (roughly France, Germany, and the Low Countries) during a period marked by intense cultural change. These men were all members of the local elite, which during this time meant that they were (at times) fairly wealthy, of the political and social upper classes, and, increasingly, Christian. They were also Latinate—schooled in the Roman educational system and seeped in the traditions of Latin literature. All told, they wrote hundreds of poems and letters, a surprising number of which describe and praise the natural and built environments of Gaul, using nature as a way to express broader cultural and political concerns. They contain many fascinating details about the rivers themselves, human uses of rivers, the seasonality of water resources and the risks and rewards of living in close proximity to these powerful resources. But in this paper I want to focus on only one aspect of this poetry of nature: rivers as markers of cultural identity.

This paper explores how these poets, recognizing that they were in a cultural and political borderland, let rivers work for them as they worked through their own questions about cultural identity. Because so much of ecocriticism has been modern in its focus, the process that I am looking at in these poems has often been termed the development of a “national imaginary.” Tricia Cusack links this directly to rivers and riverscapes, pointing out that “It is clear therefore that river narratives, transmitted through stories and visual imagery, have tended to metamorphose to accommodate the dominant religious and political groups in different cultures at different times. National riverscapes will be seen to fulfill a similar function that is, one adapted to carrying the contemporary ideologies of elite strata in the nation-state” (8). But how do we trace this impulse before the rise of the nation? As Franca Bellarsi claims, “Ecocritical questioning goes hand in hand with the interrogation of human identity and borders” (126). Such questions need not be limited to the modern world. In spite of their distance from us in time, these authors’ words and ideas resonate with modern concerns about ethnicity, identity, political boundaries, and the integration of new groups into states and societies.

Rivers' permanence in the landscape, ties to power and wealth, and ability to change, grow, and shrink—to adapt—make them excellent metaphors for the concerns of fragile and adapting cultural groups. As T.S. McMillin notes in his study of rivers in American literature, "All of those variables make it difficult to pin "rivers" down as a category of knowledge. And we also have to consider the notorious paradoxical qualities of rivers, their ability to be or do several things at once. Rivers *move*, flowing over land, through history, and among diverse groups of people, changing considerably from their source to their destination; yet they also *stay*, permanent blue lines on our maps, constant waypoints and lasting landmarks" (xii). River borders are historically and culturally compelling because they make impressive, legible, and visible frontiers. Yet they are also fluid and shifting, attracting the attention of these poets who were also exploring the ways that ethnicity, German-ness, and Roman-ness were constantly being repositioned and renegotiated.

All three poets construct and describe rivers as frontiers and as borderlands, linking identity to riverine allegiance and using differences between rivers as markers of the differences between peoples. This is particularly evident when the poets are negotiating the issue of what marks the German from the Roman. In turn, to firm up their own identities as members of a Roman-influenced elite, rivers and water become ways that the poets show the endurance of Roman identity and civilization (*Romanitas*) in Gaul. Finally, while acknowledging the complexities of ethnic identity, all three poets show a close identification with *place*. Their work creates a sense of geographic belonging, of being closely allied to a landscape and a place, is embodied in the region's rivers. The Mosel, the Rhine, and the Garonne, in particular, signify the poets' belonging and Gaul as home and homeland. As Lawrence Buell points out, "place" can be a "resource of environmental imagination," and that "an awakened sense of physical location and of belonging to some sort of place-based community have a great deal to do with activating environmental concern" (*Writing* 56).

Such claims are not limited to the modern world. Ecocritical questions and concerns can reach across the boundary of the modern, and a growing body of work has shown the relevance of ecocritical concerns to medieval and Early Modern literature (Nardizzi). Though some of these works (Siewers, and Overing and Osborn) explore older pieces, most have focused on later authors, and particularly English ones, primarily the recognized authors viewed by modernists as relevant and resonant--Shakespeare (Brayton) and Chaucer (Kiser). However, little of this pre-modern ecocriticism focuses on medieval Latin literature, despite the fact that this dominated European culture for centuries before the emergence of vernacular writing. As I hope to show in this essay, Late Antique and early medieval voices have much to contribute to ongoing discussions of the formation and transformations of environmental imaginations.

As but one example of how conversations across centuries might enhance ecocriticism, I would like to point to Isabel Maria Fernandes Alves' essay on the modern Portuguese poet A. M. Pires Cabral's work *Arado*. This book of 76 poems both celebrates the landscape of Northern Portugal and mourns its loss, and includes several poems on

the river Douro as a key part of that landscape. Fernandez-Alves argues that “Cabral, pursuing his poetic work on rural experiences and on the landscapes of his native land... shows a poetic voice that does not cast aside social and environmental tensions, but instead [highlights them]” (163). Though those tensions have changed since 300 CE, I hope to show that Late Antique poets similarly used their poetic voices to reflect on, negotiate, and even participate in transforming their social contexts. The poets of Gaul, by bringing the rivers and riverscapes of Gaul into the foreground of their works, used nature as a way of exploring and confronting changed identities.

Gaul

Roman Gaul (Gallia) comprised the area between the Northern Alps, the Pyrenees, and the Rhine river; it included the areas we think of as Provence, Northern France, Belgium, and the Alsace. Gaul was bordered by Germania to the East and the Atlantic Ocean to the West. By the Merovingian period (where this paper ends), Gaul stretched as far as the Rhine, where the area between the Rhine and the Elbe was a zone of shifting control. Merovingian control did not encompass the Danubian frontier, though did reach into Bavaria, and the Rhine, Mosel, Rhone, Loire, and Garonne rivers represented the main traffic arteries and economic drivers of Gaul.

To situate Late Antique concerns about identities and ethnicities, I’ll start where all histories of Gaul start: “All Gaul is divided into three parts.” Julius Caesar’s famous opening line is a reminder that from its earliest encounters with Rome, the region of Gaul was recognized as diverse—ethnically, politically, and even linguistically. Yet Caesar simplified the landscape, making a complicated set of relationships and identities more easily legible. The story of Rome’s engagement with Gaul is one of piecemeal conquest, settlement, and negotiations with the various Celtic or Gallic tribes. The integration of so many different peoples was much less smooth and complete than Caesar would have us believe, but over the course of the Roman imperial project, the residents of the three Gauls became increasingly Romanized, and added the identity of ‘Roman’ to their other identities.

By the third century CE, historians are able to speak of a new ethnic, cultural, and political hybrid, the “Gallo-Roman.” Gaul emerged as a vibrant center of Roman culture, with major cities such as Trier, Metz, Bordeaux, and Arles. These cities were connected via a network of roads and rivers, and the countryside contained Roman *villae*, traditional Celtic settlements and new hybrid towns. The cities had all the modern conveniences of Roman imperial culture, including aqueducts, amphitheaters, and baths. Rome, too, was changing as a result of its contact with Gaul and the Germans. Jane Webster has pointed out that because of the complex integration of both cultures into each other, “we should think of the societies that emerged in the Roman provinces not as Romanized, but as *creolized*” (209).

By the late 3rd and through the 4th century, as the Roman Empire was experiencing radical internal and external changes, Gaul was put center-stage. Civil war drove armies through the region, and at one point the Gallo-Romans even acclaimed an

emperor. Gaul and its cities and rivers became the frontier or borderland across which new Germanic groups like the Franks, Goths, and Alamans migrated, invaded, and slowly integrated themselves into a new Rome (Wells). Gaul was also a crucial part of the story of the integration of a new religious identity into Rome: Christianity. Constantine (himself representative of the coming of age of the provinces) legalized Christianity and patronized Trier. Missionaries and soldiers all along the Germanic frontiers spread the faith, while at the same time bishops in Gallic cities became religious and administrative leaders of urban territories.

Over the course of the 4th and 5th centuries, Gaul continued to be the center of the contest over Roman power and Germanic migration and integration. The Rhine and Danube frontiers remained contested zones, and especially as Gothic Migration was propelled by changes within the Byzantine Empire and by the arrival of the Huns, Gaul was a contested zone, with Visigoths, Gallo-Romans, imperial troops, Alamans, Lombards and Franks jostling for recognition, land, and imperial authority. It was the Franks who emerged by around 500 as the dominant Germanic group in Gaul, establishing the Merovingian dynasty which, while forming the roots of medieval Europe, also looked to Rome for cultural and religious legitimacy.

Between 300 and 500 CE, Gaul was at a cultural and political crossroads, and these poets were all part of it; pulled between the distant culture of Rome and the immediacy, vibrancy, and beauty of Gaul—the “New Frontier” of Late Antiquity. The poetry of Late Antiquity is itself a bit of a hybrid, working out the literary merging of Rome and Christianity, trying to find a modern voice within a classical frame. In such a changing world, as José Manuel Marrero-Henríquez points out, “literary landscapes of national imaginaries act not only as literary signs of aesthetic interest, but also seek to impose models for inhabiting the world....literary imaginaries respond to a world in constant change” (6). There is a modern perception that the period often termed the “Dark Ages” was somehow stagnant. Yet this was a vibrant and shifting political and religious landscape. Faced with a new religion, new Germanic cultures, new languages, and new aesthetics, the residents of Gaul were dealing with a crisis of identity, and needed to renegotiate their relationships to Rome, to the Germanic other, and to their own landscape and homeland.

Rivers of Empire

Ausonius of Bordeaux’s life and career (310-390) spanned almost the entire fourth century. He came from a prominent and wealthy (and Christian) Gallo-Roman family who were part of the newer elite. Peter Brown explains “the aura of faded nobility that seems to have clung to his family proved an advantage to Ausonius” (188). He became a prominent teacher in Bordeaux, a job he held for almost thirty years. Around 364, he went to Trier where he served as a tutor to the imperial family, allying himself with the emperors Valentinian and his son Gratian. He retired to Bordeaux around 379—just in time to avoid the turmoil of the 380s when Gratian was killed, shifting the political scene in Gaul quite dramatically (Sivan; Brown).

Ausonius wrote hundreds of poems and letters, ranging from 121 brief epigrams to the complex 483-line *Mosella*. The range of length, styles, and subject matter of Ausonius' poems makes them a hard corpus to master, and has made Ausonius in turns fascinating and frustrating. As his most recent editor, R.P.H. Green, notes, "a poet who tackles such matters as astrology, zoology, the Nicene Creed, the Olympic Games... and if not cabbages and kings... then at least hyacinths and Caesars, is likely to appear forbiddingly arcane and bewilderingly diverse" (vii). This range is on full display in his best-known work, the *Mosella*, which presents a series of vignettes of human and non-human life along the river.

The poem is a striking reminder that nature-writing existed in the pre-modern world, and that the people of Late Antiquity were attuned to the subtleties, beauty, and natural dynamics of their local landscapes. Ausonius' Mosel is the prime geographic feature of Gaul and as a symbol of Gallic pride (Green; Kenney; Roberts, "The Mosella"). He links the river to economic development, sport and leisure, natural beauty and abundance, and, I argue, the successful integration of Germanic peoples into the Roman Empire. In the passage that follows, from late in the poem, Ausonius has just finished a long description of the villas and bath houses along the river (a subject I will return to) and then shifts the focus to the many tributaries of the Mosel:

But for me, O Moselle—as worthy to be remembered as the ocean— how can there be an end to speaking of your sparkling tributaries, the numberless streams which run through many different mouths (into your) breadth. They might be able to change their courses, but instead they rush to bestow their name upon you. (ll. 349-543)²

Ausonius then lists rivers that are tributaries of the Mosel, including the Sauer, the Dhron, and the "famed Kyll, known for its fish," finally invoking the Saar, which he describes as prolonging its course so that, though tired, "it may let its wearied mouth flow out underneath imperial walls" (l. 369). Ausonius ends this excursus by concluding that "a thousand others desire to become yours, each according to the greater strength that propels it: each hurried by the course of their waves and their character" (ll. 362-364). Personifying the rivers suggests that each have wills and character of their own, and are in fact agents in their destinies.

At first, this passage seems to be a poetic topography; but if we step back, and take the Mosel as representing the Gallic version of Rome, and the other rivers as the Germanic tribes of the 300s, it becomes an even richer passage. We can read this as not only a description of a powerful river, but as a way of the poet working out the complex status of the Roman tributary states--the many tribes who by the fourth century wanted to integrate into late antique Roman culture. Michael Roberts backs up this interpretation, pointing out that this "catalogue of tributaries...presents the ideal: a mutually gratifying, non-aggressive assimilation" ("The Mosella" 351). And Tricia Cusack sees a similar literary impulse in a 19th century work on the Thames, in which "the Thames functioned as a metaphor for the assimilation of waves of conquerors into a

² All translations of Ausonius' work are mine, using Green's edition and his numbering of the smaller works. I have chosen prose translations in order not to lose meaning for the sake of rhyme or metre. All citations are of the Green edition.

single stream of national history” (60). Importantly, by the 300s, Roman culture was itself represented for many not by Rome itself, but by the vibrant cities along the Mosel. As Peter Brown explains, “it was a world where, for much of the fourth century, many roads led to Trier—and few to Rome” (187). Ausonius recognizes the agency and desires of the tributaries, all hurrying to join (with varying degrees of force) the Roman cultural stream. The tribal streams all aspired to become merged with the Roman Mosel.

This reading of rivers and bodies of water as ethnic groups is supported by both classical precedent and the other poets who later built on Ausonius’ work. As Prudence Jones observes, in the classical world “a shared water source indicates a shared culture. The river from which one drinks is convenient shorthand for the group to which one belongs. The river also shares in the identity of those it nourishes” (47). Herodotus made just such a claim about the Egyptians since, “just as the climate belonging to them is different and their river displays a nature different from other rivers, for the most part they have established customs and laws contrary to other peoples” (qtd. in Jones 39). The poets of Late Antiquity picked up and continued this classical habit. Sidonius Apollinaris describes “the Frank” as “he whose land is washed by the sedgy waters of the Neckar” (trans. Anderson, I.7), and blends ethnicity, nature, and physiognomy when describing the “Herulian with his blue-grey eyes, who haunts the uttermost retreats of Ocean and is almost of one colour with its weedy depths” (Anderson, II, 8.9).

Rivers as both physical and metaphorical boundaries loomed large in the Roman imagination. Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon and the Germanic campaign across the ice-bound Rhine, and Constantine’s ultimate victory on the Milvian bridge spanning the Tiber were not only decisive military engagements, but also representative of larger transitions. All three occurred at watershed moments, when political, cultural, and religious regimes were in a state of flux, and Roman identity was poised for redefinition. Rivers, on the one hand fixed and permanent, on the other always shifting and changing their courses, came, over the course of the 4th-6th centuries, to stand in for the problems of defining, marking, and bounding the many ethnicities of the Roman and post-Roman world.

The Danube and the Rhine were the two most prominent riverine boundaries in the Late Roman world. During the first century CE, the Emperor Tiberius began the process through which the Rhine would be linked indelibly with the Roman frontier, the German integration into Rome and the shifting identities of the later Empire. According to the Roman historian Dio Cassius, Tiberius “transferred forty thousand captives from Germany and settled them on the banks of the Rhine in Gaul” (qtd. in Mathisen 1024). The poets imagined both of these rivers as frontiers and as symbols of imperial power and identity. In one of Sidonius Apollinaris’ panegyrics, an Alaman crosses both a political and ethnic barrier when he “drinks from the Roman side of the Rhine” (Anderson I.7, 151). Though the Rhine would remain a boundary between the German and Roman worlds for the next several centuries, in practice, this was a porous boundary for cultural identity, legal citizenship, and *Romanitas* or Roman-ness (Geary, Wells). Germanic settlement continued along both sides of the river, as did Roman urban growth and civic culture.

Two of Ausonius' short poems take the voice of a personified Danube, praising the emperor Valentinian, himself born across the Danubian frontier in Pannonia. Both poems use the Danube to establish and confirm imperial dominion over the ethnic Germans. In the first, a personified Danube discusses Valentinian's recent victory over the Suevii (Swabians) and announces a desire to become the mouthpiece and embodiment of empire:

Ruler of the waters of Illyricum, second only to you Nile, I, Danube, offer up the fertile source of the spring/fountain-head (*fonte caput*). I greet the *Augustii*, both son and father, whom I myself reared among the sword-bearing Pannonians. Now I want to rush as a messenger to the Black Sea, so that there the victory can be made known to Valens, *cura secunda*, [how] by means of slaughter, flight, and flames, the Suevii have been struck down into ruin, and the Rhine is no longer the boundary-line of Gaul. And if it was possible for the current to flow back to me from the sea, I would then be able to bring the news to there of the victory over the Goths. (Epigram 2, 66)

The poem is full of claims on the part of the Danube to being the true river of empire. The river names himself³ as "ruler of the waters of Illyricum,"⁴ second only in greatness to the Nile. The Danube then offers up its source (and thus its origin point) to the emperors. The Danube claims a deep connection to Roman rule, as "I myself reared [the emperors] among the sword-bearing Pannonians." The proud river then praises Valentinian's recent conquests, stating a desire to be able "to rush as a messenger to the Black Sea, so that there the victory can be made known to Valens [Valentinian's brother and co-emperor]... the Rhine is no longer the boundary of Gaul." The Rhine, once the limit of empire, has shifted from frontier to part of the empire solidly ruled over by the Roman emperors who the Danube itself reared. The Danube commands primacy over the Nile and replaces the Rhine as the demarcation of Empire. This reading of the Danube as the vehicle of empire is supported by Simon Schama's discussion of rivers as roads or highways, when he points out that "in Latin texts, too...history was straightened out in linear development so that rivers—not least the Tiber—might also be imagined as lines of power and time carrying empires from source to expansive breadth" (261).

In addition to reflecting on the changed status of the Rhine, Ausonius' Danube also longs for a new identity. Not content to fulfill natural routes of communication, it longs to reverse course to inform Rome of the expansion of empire: "But if at the sea's behest my stream should flow backwards may I hither bring from there news that the Goths are vanquished." In this brief poem, Ausonius commends Roman triumphs over the Goths, recognizes distinctions amongst the different Germanic peoples, acknowledges the "barbarian" birthplace of the emperor, and uses rivers to mark both the integration of the Germans (the Rhine) into Rome and the expansion of Rome's influence and power into new Germanic lands (the Danube).

In his second Danube poem, Ausonius has the river (again personified) continue to serve as a vehicle for marking and defining different Germanic identities, and to then note their subordination to Rome and Valentinian. The poem (Epigram 4) opens with a

³ In Latin, river is a male noun, and rivers are normally portrayed as male. On the shift of the gender of European River allegories, see Schama, 367-374.

⁴ A Roman province in the modern Balkans.

direct statement of the expanded imperial power and gaze, as the river's source has not only been discovered, but conquered:

I, Danube, having had my source once fully hidden on the edges [of the Empire], now flow entire under your command. Just as I pour forth my icy source amid the Suevii, so I cleave the Pannonian [lands], pregnant with empire, and I let free my rich waters at the mouth, into the Scythian [Black] Sea, all of these waters I submit to your yoke. The palm [of victory] shall be given to Augustus, but the next will go to Valens: he will also discover/acquire sources—even yours, Nile. (66-67)

The poem again acknowledges the Danube as source of both Germanic identity and Valentinian's own power, and the river describes itself as dividing "the Pannonians, pregnant with empire"—a second reference to Valentinian's birth in the borderlands of the Empire. Then the Danube winds up in the sea, but not before gathering together all of its waters submitting them to imperial power. Finally, the Danube confirms Valens' imperial succession, implying that he will expand the empire even further, notably by discovering and controlling even more river sources.

Rivers are porous boundaries, and though they marked Romanness and served to define the German other, those differences could still become blurry. Ausonius gives us the chance to explore this in more detail in a series of poems about a young Swabian slave Bissula, who was given to him as spoils of war. Ausonius first freed his apparent concubine, and then devoted a full book of poetry to her, though only three of the poems survive. The first of these poems essentializes her ethnic otherness from the beginning, connecting her physical (and sexual) identity to her birth:

Bissula, sprung from the stock of and (belonging to) the household gods beyond the icy Rhine, Bissula, knowing the origin source of the Danube, seized as a captive into my hands, but released from my hands, through her charms she has dominion over him whose war-prize she once was. Without a mother, lacking a tutor, [not knowing the patriarchal mastery of empire⁵]... (XVII 3, ll.1-5, 131)

Bissula is presented as able to intuit and embody nature. She in some ways *is* the icy Rhine, and she knows "the Danube's birth"—her own source and origins give her native knowledge. Yet Roman culture and her male master tame her, and she is freed. But, though "civilized", she remains German:

And, just as she was changed by the good things of Latin culture, she remained a German in appearance, with blue eyes and golden hair. The girl is changeable; sometimes her tongue defines her, sometimes her form; the one shows her to be born of the Rhine, the other of Latium⁶ (ll. 9-12)

Bissula's culture and identity change radically (free to slave to free again, barbarian to civilized, ruled to ruler), yet she is not fully transformed, and Ausonius struggles to classify her.

Generations later, Venantius Fortunatus, whose work is clearly indebted to Ausonius', echoed these images of rivers as the markers and the mouthpieces of Empire. In a poem addressed to the emperor Justin and his wife Sophia, Fortunatus has Gaul and its rivers proclaim fealty to the Eastern Empire: "Gaul too sings this song to your merits,

⁵A problematic transmission of text.

⁶ A poetic and ancient phrase for Italy and Rome.

Augustus, the Rhone, the Rhine, the Danube and the Elbe proclaim this” (George, *Personal and Political*, 113, Appendix 2). But of course, there is still a big question in this attempt to integrate or define the German: what about Rome?

In an imperial panegyric, Sidonius Apollinaris (ca. 430-489) puts this very question into the mouth of a personified Rome, who bemoans to Jupiter her dwindling culture and power, remembering a time when the empire had more sway and more visual power. Rome cries, “Alas! Where now are those pageants, those triumphs rich of a consul poor? My spears affrighted Libya’s clime, and I laid the yoke even a third time upon the faithless Carthaginian” (Anderson I, Epigram 7 125). Sidonius then presents the dwindling power of Rome in much the same way he in other works represents the ascendancy of the North—through her river. Rome adds that, once upon a time, at the height of her power, “Ganges of the Indian, Phasis of the Colchian, Araxes of Armenia, Ger of the Ethiopians, Tanais of the Getae, all trembled before my Tiber.” Sidonius was able to recognize the shifting of power to the German lands, the changing character of the empire, and, interestingly, the beauty of the Gallic landscape and the way in which *Romanitas* could still play out in “barbarian” or “alien” lands.

Sidonius was well-positioned to understand this dynamic. He was from a powerful and well-connected Gallo-Roman family. He was raised as a Christian, and he received both schooling and access to the highest levels of society, perhaps allowing for his eventual marriage to the daughter of the future emperor Avitus (Anderson I, p. xxxii-xxxvi; “Sidonius” 780). Through this marriage, he was connected with powerful people, and as is common in such a context, his career reached high points but was also full of turmoil and setbacks. His personal and political ties got him in some trouble once Avitus was killed, though he was able to win both a pardon and renewed positions from his successor Majorian (for whom he wrote a panegyric in thanks). Throughout his career he moved back and forth between Gaul and Rome, where he held political office. Yet when Majorian, too, was unseated and killed, Sidonius retreated to the Auvergne, the area in Gaul near Bordeaux. There, as Helge Köhler notes, “he felt more at home than in his birthplace of Lyons” (4). He focused during this period on his writing, though this was (according to Sidonius himself) set at the wayside by 470, when, perhaps as a result of his political disenfranchisement, or perhaps for more personal reasons, he took over as the bishop of Clermont. As bishop he was pulled back into larger affairs when the city was repeatedly besieged by the Goths. Despite his tumultuous and rather worldly role as bishop, Sidonius would be venerated as a saint after his death.

Sidonius’ work was important even in his lifetime, and his literary fame was part of the key to his continued ability to politically reinvent himself (Köhler 8-10). Sidonius, like Ausonius, wrote hundreds of poems and letters, which he published during his lifetime. His 147 surviving letters were published in nine books, which provide rich and important evidence for the social and political worlds of late Rome. The first poems that he published were lengthy imperial panegyrics that draw heavily on the work and style of classical poets, indicating the continuing importance of classical style in the Late empire. Van Dam points out that “Sidonius always retained a strong nostalgia for the Roman Empire” (349).

Rome loomed large in Sidonius' poetic imagination, and he expressed concern for the future of Rome's culture and power. Yet he was also a resident of Gaul, and in the same poem that presents Rome's sad complaint to Jupiter, Sidonius reveals his own deep connection to Gaul. He has Jupiter suggest that in fact, there is another land that might save Rome: the Auvergne, which "carries its head high as sprung from Latin blood" (trans. Anderson I, p. 129-130). Sidonius presents it as a place of natural bounty and the potential seed-bed for renewed empire. Auvergne is "a land famed for its men, a land to which Nature, the blessed creator of all things vouchsafed no peer in days gone by." And Bordeaux is the center point of this landscape: "from the city extend rich and fertile fields; scarce are they cloven with the early ploughing when they thirst for the tardy seeds, and while the ox enjoys luxurious ease they display clods made black by some fatness mysteriously at work." Its soils abound, and make the soils of Libya and Apulia look bleak and washed out. Though Rome may feel that the Tiber and Italy have been leached of power, the Auvergne presents salvation. Jupiter sees in the Avernians "the sole hope for the world." Sidonius picks up this theme in another piece when he claims that the various Germanic groups of Bordeaux "are called for, so that the Garonne [River], strong as its warlike settlers, may defend the dwindled Tiber" (Anderson, Letter 8.9 447-449).

The most extreme recognition on the part of Sidonius of the shifting of the cultural power and identity of Rome to the Germanic/Gallic regions is found in a remarkable poem, "On the Castle of Pontius Leontius," (poem 22). This poem is characteristic of a type of poetry of praise that these poets wrote for their patrons who wanted to be presented as Roman, and who wanted Latin-speaking poets to provide them with reflections of an elite lifestyle and identity, to show their wealth, taste, power, and culture to their peers. Thus a wide variety of "villa" poems exist, encomia to the little micro-Romes that bishops, counts, Roman officials, and Gallic leaders had built up for themselves in the cities and countryside of Gaul (Brown). More often than not, these villas were on rivers, and the rivers figure heavily into the representation of Roman-ness. At times, the poets even pit Gallic waters directly against Roman ones, such as when Sidonius claims that "rich Campania would be ill-pleased with the Lucrine mere if she beheld the waters of *our* lake," and that the baths at his villa were comparable to those of the famous resort town of Baiae (Anderson Epigram 18, 257; emphasis mine).

In Poem 22, Sidonius (a Christian) imagines a conversation between the pagan gods Bacchus and Phoebus Apollo, in which Apollo tries to convince Bacchus to abandon Rome/Olympus and move with him to the castle along the River Garonne in Gaul. This poem, which serves partially as a praise of Leontius and partially as a praise of the estate he has built, links both the landscape of Gaul and the culture of Gaul to classical models and standards. It also shows an appreciation for both the beauty (Apollo) and the pleasure (Bacchus) of that landscape.

Though the castle lies squarely in Bordeaux, because of the owner's *Romanitas*, reflected in the building's baths, granaries, porticoes, etc., the gods (and Rome) can find their new home there. This tie to the new landscape is made even more explicit when Apollo tells Bacchus that he can have the vineyards and hills and the baths, and

everything else as long as he agrees to grant Apollo “my spring, which flows from the mountain, shadowed by an arched covering of ample circuit, much pitted. This needs no embellishment, for Nature has given it beauty. It seems good to me that there no counterfeiting should seem good” (281). Here is an appeal to the fundamental, unembellished, natural identity of Gaul amidst the praise of baths, fountains, and the other trappings of *Romanitas*.

Venantius Fortunatus (c.530–c.600/609), continued to develop the connection between the waters of Gaul and the cultural heritage of Rome. He wrote poetry both on request and as a way to seek patronage, and many of his poems reflect his clients’ desires to be seen as part of a broader Roman literary and cultural scene. His reputation as a poet who could help give political and ecclesiastical efforts validation and the ring of *Romanitas* appears to have spread quickly, and his first decade in Gaul saw, as Michael Roberts points out, the “most intense poetic activity” of his career (Roberts, *Humblest Sparrow* 5).

Fortunatus was not shy about linking these Frankish princes, bishops, and minor nobility to the imperial past. He wrote of Duke Lupus of Champagne, “Rome’s might shone in splendor; but with you as Duke, Rome has now here returned for us” (George, *Personal and Political*, Poem 7.7 56). However, for the most part, Fortunatus is subtler than this, and demonstrates *Romanitas* rather than naming it outright. In several prominent instances, this is shown through control of rivers and waterworks. He devotes a whole poem to Bishop Felix of Nantes’ river engineering project on the Loire, which he describes as bringing “empire,” invoking Homer and Achilles (Van Dam 349). His poems often evoke an older kind of Roman bucolic leisure, with villas, baths, fountains, and fishponds.

One of these poems, “Ad Gogo,” not only presents a traditional life of the leisured elite, but frames it to echo Vergil’s *Georgics*, presenting his patron with a double dose of *Romanitas*. The titular Gogo hunts, fishes, and enjoys an “outdoors” lifestyle of sport and comfort along the rivers of Gaul:

What occupies his carefree mind in tranquil times?
if he lingers by the banks of the wave-driven Rhine
to catch with his net in its waters the fat salmon,
or roams by the grape-laden Moselle’s stream
(Roberts, *Humblest Sparrow*, Poem 7.4 257-58).

In this poem we see a medieval poet adapting a classical trope to a new landscape. But it is also more than that—it is a recognition of the characteristics and beauty of his adopted home, and an example of the ways that Fortunatus found in the forests, fields, and rivers of Gaul fertile ground for his poetic imagination.

Poetry and Pride of Place

All three of these poets appear to have been personally quite proud of and attached to their homeland, its climate, and its landscape. Ausonius wrote in the *Ordo Urbium Nobilium* (a series of poems about cities) that he identified both Rome and

Bordeaux as his homelands (*patria*): “I love Bordeaux, I devote myself to Rome” (l. 167, 175). Sidonius spent time in both Rome and Bordeaux, and his preference for the Auvergne goes beyond Bacchus and Apollo. In a teasing letter to a friend, he writes “you say,” writes Sidonius, “you are delighted that I, a friend of yours, have at last got a view of the sun, which as one who drank of the Arar, I have seen (you say) at all events very seldom” (Anderson, Letter 1.8 381). The friend has clearly written that Sidonius must, as someone who, living in rain and clouds and fog and mist, must be loving the Mediterranean clime during his visit. “You bring up against me the fogs of my countrymen,” Sidonius writes, but how can he “talk this balderdash to me, you a native of Caesena, which is an oven rather than a town?” This letter underscores something that is important to recognize and is my final theme: early medieval Gallo-Roman people could not only artfully praise their own lands and identities, but also be proud of them, and prefer them to others. This sense of pride in place, of “belonging” to a landscape as well as a community has been a key theme taken up by ecocritics. As Lawrence Buell points out, placedness is closely connected to other types of bonding: “Those who feel a stake in their community think of it as their place....Place is associatively thick” (Buell, *The Future* 63).

For Ausonius, the Mosel was a meaningful place that helped him situate himself within the new communities that were emerging in Gaul; the rivers of Gaul marked his homeland and wove through his identity. In the opening passages of the *Mosella* (115-130). Ausonius describes travelling on foot through the Hunsrück, under a cloudless sky and the “golden” sun. He enters the forest, “where the sky is blocked from view by the green gloom,” and then all at once walks out to a clearing with an overview of the Mosel valley opening up beneath him. He immediately connects the landscape below him to his own identity and his own familiar landscape:

Truly, the whole charming vista struck me as if it were my own homeland of Bordeaux, bright and cherished. From the heights [I saw] the roofs of the *villae* that clung to the riverbanks, and the green Bacchic hills and the beautiful Mosel River, flowing underneath, quietly murmuring. (ll. 18-22)

This suggests not only an appreciation for the beauty of the view, but also an emotional response to it. Ausonius’ pride in the Mosel (and by his own extension Gaul and Bordeaux) is apparent throughout the poem. He compares the river favorably to all other waters, describing it as “the greenest river: ship-bearing as the sea, with steep and sloping waters like a river, and with your glassy depths imitating a lake...” Like Roman Gaul, the Mosel gets its strength and identity from the blending of the characteristics of all its tributaries. “You alone have everything: features of the spring, the river and the brook, the lake, and the double-flowing ebb and flood of the sea” (ll. 26-33).

Towards the end of the *Mosella*, Ausonius invokes the Rhine, which he urges to incorporate the Mosel into its stream. Just as the smaller rivers “speed” to merge with the Mosel, the poet imagines the power of the blended Rhine/Mosel. (Intriguingly, the Rhine and the Mosel do meet at Koblenz, but in the poem this is presented in the future subjunctive, as something that might yet happen). In his essay “The Mosella of Ausonius,” Roberts points out that “the successful unification [of the rivers and the

peoples] is represented as something still to be achieved, and it is set in the context of the still uncertain outcome of imperial policy on and near the Rhine” (351).

Ausonius asks the Rhine to “to measure out a space for the new stream, [with] fraternal waters increasing yours” (*Mosella*, ll. 419-420). The Rhine, by taking in other German waters, will expand and grow—but this is not to suggest that Ausonius saw all “Germans” as equal or as successfully integrated (or able to be integrated) into Rome. He was Gallo-Roman, and his concerns reflect those of the Gallic integration into Rome, especially when new Germanic peoples arrived to complicate matters and relationships. He addresses this tension directly as he addresses the Rhine, explaining that if the Rhine stretches out its channel to include the Mosel, they could be a tremendous force: “Your source could extend twin banks, separated, and together pour out mouths through different courses. The men shall approach, quaking; the Franks as much as the Chamaves and the Germans. Then truly will you be considered the frontier. Then the twin name will come to you from this great river, and though you flow from a single source, you shall be called ‘two-horned’” (ll. 433-437). The idea of a twin name also links the Rhine to the Danube, referred to earlier in the poem as the “twice-named Ister” (l. 106), as does the connection between the river’s source and the course of empire, as noted above.⁷

For the Rhine/Mosel hybrid, the two mouths and two sources of the river would thus help both blur and reinforce identities. Immediately after calling the Danube two-horned, Ausonius himself makes the link between the rivers and the problems of multiple allegiances, loyalties and identities inescapable. He turns the issue of a “double source” directly onto himself: “Thus indeed am I, from my birth drawn from the Viviscan people, [but] long-familiar through old ties of friendship to the Belgian people. Ausonius—by name Italian—by home and homeland [from] between the borders of the Gauls and the high Pyrenees, where cheerful Aquitaine mixes honorable character for her residents--with this little hope, I bravely harmonize” (ll. 440-443).

Venantius Fortunatus: Citizen of the Rhine

In his poetry Fortunatus depicted the complexities, concerns, and preoccupations of the sixth century Gallo-Roman elite, struggling to navigate political change and conflict, the growing cultural force of Christianity, the continuing gravitational pull of classical culture, and the new economic, urban, and geographical realities of Merovingian Europe. His poetry is full of descriptions of the natural world that surrounded him, including river poems filled with discussions of the nature of exile, homeland, and travel. The rivers become the points of transit along which Fortunatus (and others) transform their identities, and river travel becomes (for the devout Christian and eventual hagiographer and saint) amongst other things a kind of a

⁷ River gods were often depicted as horned; they also carry cornucopia, or horns of plenty, often associated with rivers (Green 509; Schama 652). So by wearing or having two horns the Rhine will be taking on two identities, and two sets of abundance.

pilgrimage.

Fortunatus was himself an immigrant to Gaul, though rather than moving across the German frontiers, he left Italy to become part of the Merovingian world. In later years, after having successfully become an essential part of the social and religious fabric of Gaul, Fortunatus reflected back on his arrival in the North, and wrote in a poem to an early patron: “When Germania, a strange land, filled my gaze you were like a father, and were there to take thought for my homeland” (George, *Personal and Political*, Poem 7.8 63). Fortunatus’ transformation from Roman to Gaul was strikingly complete. After leaving Ravenna, he never returned to Italy, and his works reflect his adoption of his new homeland—in fact so much so that Michael Roberts has referred to his “Gallocentricity, which even marginalizes Rome” (51).

Fortunatus, though most famous in his own time for his religious writings, wrote many smaller poems, including occasional poems, encomia, and epigrams. He covered topics as wide-ranging as flowers, food, episcopal duties, and wedding celebrations. He was deeply indebted to his classical training and to Ausonius’ work, but he also showed a willingness to be poetically adventurous and to experiment with newer genres of Latin poetry (Brennan; George, *Latin Poet*). Though many of his poems are light, he did not shy away from tackling trickier issues including theology, good government, and the tabloid scandal of the day, the shocking murder of Galswinth, the Visigothic princess who married Childebert I. In “On Galswinth,” Fortunatus recounts the princess’ departure from Spain, and her arrival in “the chill North” (George, *Personal and Political* 40). The poem is laced with images of the natural world; it is a story of loss (of family, happiness, home, and life) and longing, and these powerful emotions are echoed by the landscape. Fortunatus imagines her parting from her family and her homeland, writing that “rivers of tears disfigure the faces of the people.” Then Galswinth “speeds over the Pyrenaean mountain range through the clouds, where July is freezing with frosty rains, where the mountains, white with snow, disappear into the stars and their sharp peaks emerge above the rains. From here Narbonne welcomes her, where the gentle Aube, nibbling away at the flat coast, softly enters the waters of the Rhone” (46).

Unfortunately the transition of identities that Fortunatus was himself able to make was impossible for Galswinth, as she was murdered shortly after her arrival in Gaul, cutting short all opportunity at integration. Fortunatus directly addresses some of the tensions and complexities of Late Antique identity: “An ancient people are divided between two new kingdoms; the father stays, the son goes; the father-in-law stays, the son-in-law goes. Anyone seeing the confusion would think that the nation was emigrating, and would believe that it was going alone virtually as a captive” (43). Galswinth’s shift of identities is never complete, and she winds up a captive to her marriage, and is ultimately killed, possibly on her husband’s orders. Fortunatus cannot directly blame the king, but he does find ways to suggest that the fault lies in the fragmented polity of Gaul.

This poem resonates with the same issues of ethnicity and identity and “betweenness” that were so much a part of Ausonius’ poetry. All three of these poets, whose lives and careers span almost the entirety of Late Antiquity in Gaul, were working through the

questions of who is who and who belongs where? How are new identities layered on top of old? How do identities blend and merge? Fortunatus picks up on the tensions of identity and of people pulled between two places and two cultures when Galswinth's mother laments her daughter's departure: "Likewise, wandering here without you, I seem a foreigner, and in my own land I am both native and exile" (44). After her untimely death, Galswinth's fate echoes her mother's state of being in-between, as she becomes "a foreigner in her own tomb" (46).

Once Galswinth's murder is known, has rivers stand in for both lands and peoples: "Here the sister, there the distraught mother, with shared tears one lashes the Rhine with her tears, the other the Tejo; the Batavians shared in the grief of one, the land of Andalusia mourns here; the Waal's waters roared here, and there the Ebro's stream" (50). Echoing the work of Ausonius and Apollinarius and drawing directly on classical precedent, Fortunatus connects his landscape to the classical world. As Jones points out, in the work of classical poets,

rivers understood in an ethnographical context share in the idea that a river not only establishes a distinction between one group or state of being and another but also provides a means of connection, something that can represent the ties within a group or that can transform colonists from visitors to inhabitants. (47)

One of Fortunatus' more striking river poems, and one that has direct connections to Ausonius' *Mosella*, is poem 10.9 "On His Voyage." The poem describes Fortunatus' arrival in Gaul, and is structured around the river as vehicle for his personal rise in political status, and his transformation from stranger to welcome guest. The poem begins with a moment in which Fortunatus arrives at the royal court at Metz, but is kept at arm's length, an unknown stranger: "Coming upon the royal pair where Metz' walls stand strong, I am observed and held back from my horse by my lords. From here I am commanded to skim the Moselle by oar, a sailor, and to make my way, swiftly gliding over the trembling waters" (George, *Personal and Political* 109).

The poem then describes his river-borne experiences as he follows the royal fleet (en route to the king's wedding) down the Mosel to the Rhine confluence, and continuing up the Rhine. He travelled through Gaul, passing by key cities and "drinking in [the muses'] song," listening to his companions' voices, which "unite the sundered bank with their sweetness, and there was a single voice of song in hill and river." After this voyage, in which he recognizes both the beauty of Gaul and is, through his poetry and through music, himself brought into the landscape, he is finally received at court. The transformation wrought by Gaul's river is complete, and the question of identity might be answered at last. The poem ends with a royal feast of fish borne forth from the abundance of the river, and Fortunatus, "the stranger to the Rhine is welcomed to the feast as a citizen" (111).

The river, and his experience of it, becomes integrative. Though at first this might seem a sharp difference with the Ausonius' riverine frontier, it is instead the culmination of a Late Antique recognition that rivers were fluid boundaries, across and along which culture and identity spread. These poets represented and responded to common cultural concerns about defining, explaining, and understanding their own tenuous cultural

identities. Rivers, ever-present and ever-changing, were powerful metaphors for these men, and in their hands the rivers were themselves transformed. In their works, though dependent on classical and Roman ideas, the medieval river emerges as a distinct metaphor, just as medieval culture, though sprung from Rome, transformed and emerged from Late Antiquity with distinct forms.

Medieval rivers were drawn into Christian belief systems—they miraculously acknowledged sanctity and punished malfeasance, providing abundance, protected Christian infrastructure, and transported ideas, relics, and saints as they travelled through a converting world. As the Roman Empire dissolved and the successor kingdoms emerged in the North, the rivers became the internal roads and highways of new polities. But they also retained some of the functions of boundaries and frontier, becoming the favored sites of political treaties and negotiations. Eventually, *Romanitas*—so important to Late Antiquity—also slipped away as newer identities and expressions of culture, art, and value took over—but all of this is a different story, and one that I’m currently figuring out how to tell. For now, I leave the present study with the words of Sidonius Apollinaris from a poem that is a self-conscious embodiment of the idea of shared poetic space (Anderson, Poem 22 327). The poem is addressed to his own book of poetry—urging it to move through his circle of friends and out into the wider world, following the routes and rivers of Gaul, moving through the fields, following the fishes, and finally putting out to sea. Sidonius ends the poem with a final metaphor on river travel: “But enough! Away with you, put out from the harbour and, lest I weight you further with a load of sandy ballast up with the anchor even while these verses sound!”

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