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### Sol ecce surgit igneus

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# INTRODUCTION

## § 1. PRUDENTIUS, HIS LIFE AND HIS WRITINGS

### *a. Spaniard, Christian, Roman*

AURELIUS PRUDENTIUS CLEMENS<sup>1</sup>, a Spaniard by birth, a Christian by confession and a Roman by conviction, was born in 348 during the consulship of Salia<sup>2</sup>. Whatever else we know, or think we know of Prudentius is arrived at by inference.

As place of birth three alternatives are generally named: Caesaraugusta, Calagurris and Tarraco. Each of these carries the attribute "our" at one point or another in the *liber Peristephanon*<sup>3</sup>. The former, present-day Saragossa, is preferred by a number of scholars<sup>4</sup>; the latter is considered unlikely because in Pe 6,150 Prudentius refers to Fructuosus of Tarraco as *vestrum Fructuosum*; Calagurris, present-day Calahorra, is preferred by e.g. Rodriguez p. 9\* *sqq.* and, on very persuasive grounds, by Lana pp.3-10. But Lana rejects the theory that a native of Calagurris would belong to the *conventus Caesaraugustanus* which is part of *Hispania Tarraconensis* (p.3-4). This argument was earlier advanced by Arev. in his proleg. § 36, but he feels that for this reason the place of birth cannot be established: it could be any town or village in the province of Tarraco.

The assumption that the poet was born into a Christian family rests on an *argumentum ex silentio*. A poet whose Christian belief is expressed so sincerely and cogently throughout his writings would not have left unsaid

<sup>1</sup> F. Arevalo has a lengthy discussion on the name of Prudentius (prolegom. § 41) and concludes by saying that a *praenomen* is required. Which is more appropriate, he asks, than *Marcus*. He then gives the poet *ex lege nominum mediae aetatis* the name Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius, explaining: (*eorum*) *primum est praenomen, Aurelius et Clemens nomina gentilia, Prudentius nomen proprium.* (Sic!). Oddly, the *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum*, 1 (Washington D.C. 1960) p.72a lists him as Prudentius Clemens, M. Aurelius.

<sup>2</sup> Praefatio 24-25.

<sup>3</sup> (The abbreviations of the titles of Prudentius' poems, as well as other abbreviations to be used in this book, can be found on p. 245. Bibliographical details will be found in the bibliography.) Pe 4, celebrating the eighteen martyrs of Caesaraugusta, has forms of *noster* in vv.1,63,85,97,101,114,141-142. Pe 1, in honour of martyrs of Calagurris, has *nostro oppido* in v.116 (cf. Pe 4,31). Pe 6, in honour of martyrs of Tarraco, has *nostrae urbis* in v.143. Bergm., p.ix, rightly considers the simple use of "our" a poor indicator of a likely birthplace. It refers rather to "our" in the sense of "common to all of us Spaniards", or "common to the province of Tarraco" (*vid.* Arev. proleg. § 26).

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Sixt, p.3 n.1; Bergm., p.ix-x; Raby, p.44; Stam, p.4; Kurfess, col.1040; Lav., introd.p.iii; Thoms., introd. p.vii; V. Edden, p. 160.

so essential a feature of his life as conversion from paganism to Christianity<sup>5</sup>. He does lament the vain folly of the wastrel life-style of his youth, a favourite form of self-blame among Christian writers<sup>6</sup>. The *praefatio* indicates that his life can be divided into two parts, the first being devoted to *negotium*, the second to *otium*<sup>7</sup>.

As a Christian and a Spaniard, Prudentius expresses great loyalty to Rome. The lines *Antiqua fanorum parens, / iam Roma Christo dedita*<sup>8</sup> show Prudentius' conviction that Rome had been destined from the first to play an important part in Christianity. This thought predominates in the two poems *contra Symmachum*, may in fact be the mainspring of both poems, as the opening lines of each suggest<sup>9</sup>. Though well aware of the great distance between his own country and Rome<sup>10</sup>, Prudentius explicitly recognizes Rome as the center and unifying force of the Christian world. *En ades, Omnipotens, concordibus influe terris. / iam mundus te, Christe, capit quem congrege nexu / pax et Roma tenent. Capita haec et culmina rerum / esse iubes ...*<sup>11</sup>. This reflects the decision of a council of 378 or 379<sup>12</sup> which established Rome's supremacy in the Christian world on the strength of Christ's promise to Peter.

## b. *Negotium*

In Pr.7-12 the poet deals with his education and career. The fact that Prudentius received "higher" education, coupled with his career, implies that he came from a well-to-do family<sup>13</sup>. He practised as a lawyer prior to

<sup>5</sup> Lana speaks of conversion (e.g. p.31) as does Amatucci, p.37; cf. Thraede, p.33 n.47.

<sup>6</sup> Pr.10-12. Cf.e.g.Aug.Conf.2,2; P.Nol.Carm.10,133 *sqq.*. Bergm., APC p.37, rightly assumes that the poet's conduct was culpable in his own eyes, in retrospect, rather than by contemporary standards. Cf. Brockhaus, p.16; Lav., intro.p.vi: "il s'est amusé quelque temps"; Rodr.-Her., p.12. Thraede, p.30 n.36, dismisses it as a "traditioneller Topos vom 'lubricum adulescentiae'".

<sup>7</sup> As will be shown (*infra*, c) many critics have assumed that Prudentius announces his intention to break with his *negotium* in the preface, hence in 404/405, as if he is only about to embark on the writing of various kinds of poetry.

<sup>8</sup> Pe 2, 1-2. Cf. G. Torti, RIL 104, 1970, pp.337-368; R. Cacitti, Aevum 46, 1972, pp. 402-435; Ferguson, Utopias p.180.

<sup>9</sup> S 1, 1-4: *Credebam vitis aegram gentilibus urbem / iam satis antiqui pepulisse pericula morbi / nec quidquam restare mali, postquam medicina / principis inmodicos sedarat in arce dolores.* S 2, 1-3: *Hactenus et veterum cunabula prima deorum / et causas quibus error hebes conflatus in orbe est / diximus, et nostro Romam iam credere Christo.*

<sup>10</sup> Pe 2, 537-540: *nos Vasco Hiberus dividit / binis remotos Alpibus, / trans Cottianorum iuga, / trans et Pyrenas ninguidos.*

<sup>11</sup> S 2, 634-637; cf.e.g. S 1, 287 *sqq.*; 427 *sqq.*; S 2,583 *sqq.*; 619 *sqq.*; 655 *sqq.*, particularly 662; 758-759; Pe 9,3.

<sup>12</sup> C.M.H. 1, p.173.

<sup>13</sup> The *toga (virilis)* of Pr 8 hints at his "graduation" to the school of rhetoric. Cf. Marrou, p.345 *sq.* and p.447 *sqq.*, where he quotes Prudentius' schooling and career as normal. Jones, p.997 (cf.p.1006), shows that higher education was reserved for members of the upper and middle classes.

entering the civil service<sup>14</sup>. Precisely which cities he governed (vv.16-18) is not known. In a forceful discussion Lana (p.16 *sqq.*) argues that Prudentius must have been *corrector* of Savia. In part at least, he bases this argument on his interpretation of vv.19-21 to mean that Prudentius was elevated to the position of *proximus* of the *scrinium libellorum* (p.10 *sqq.*). This is, to use his own words, “un’ipotesi che la prudente valutazione dei competenti giudicherà se sia accettabile” (p.19). His views break with several traditions:

- 1) that Prudentius governed the *provincia Tarraconensis*<sup>15</sup>
- 2) that he saw the tomb of Quirinus in Rome (not in Siscia)<sup>16</sup>
- 3) that later he was given the honourable rank of *comes primi ordinis*<sup>17</sup>, or that of *proximatus*<sup>18</sup>.

Lana assures us, however (p.19 n.83), that Siscia, the capital of Savia, can be considered a *nobilis urbs*<sup>19</sup>. The weakness of his argument, which is the very strength of those who favour the governorship of the *provincia Tarraconensis*, is the plural *urbium*. The province Savia has only one city possibly worthy of the name. However, one must tread warily when dealing with poetic language: a plural cannot clinch the argument one way or the other.

Prudentius’ reference to his final post with the words *militiae gradu* (v.19) does not indicate some military rank. Gennadius, *Vir.ill.*13, bases his remark that Prudentius was a *Palatinus miles* on the poet’s own writings, possibly on this very verse, though this is not clear from the context. By the fourth century the term *militia* (= *militia officialis*) had come to denote the legal profession<sup>20</sup>. Military terms in connection with the bar had always been common, as *tirocinium fori* e.g. shows (cf.n.14, *armarunt*). No doubt Prudentius is referring to a civil government post. Specifically which post, is

<sup>14</sup> Pr.13-15. With *casibus asperis* are not meant “quelques dangers” (Puech, p.48), “des hasards fâcheux” (Lav. §1373; cf. his transl. *a.l.* and introd.p.vi) or, vaguer still, Thoms.’s “cruel falls”. Bergm., APC p. 38, considers the passage to refer to religious strife in Spain, which induced Prudentius to travel to Rome (cf. e.g. Pe 9,3;11,1 *sqq.*; 12,65). Within the context this interpretation is not convincing. Why should *turbidos animos* refer to a general restlessness, as Bergman suggests, when the passage, the *praefatio* as a whole, deals with the person of Prudentius? If he is discussing religious strife, why should he condemn his part in it as *male pertinax vincendi studium*? Or is he referring to the *studium* of unspecified opponents? The key to the interpretation lies in *casibus*. The word simply means “case, court-case” (ThLL s.v.578,50: *causa iudicialis*) and the passage can be interpreted as follows: heated (court-) disputes then made my (youthfully) turbulent heart aggressive (*armarunt*, cf. Cic. pro Cael.47,9 and Austin’s comment *a.l.*) and my foolhardy ambition to win was connected with harsh cases.

<sup>15</sup> Puech, p.48-49; Bergm., APC p.38-39; Kurfess, col.1041.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. Bergm., APC p.41 *sqq.*

<sup>17</sup> E.g. Puech, p.49: much favoured because of the choice of words. However, the words have every bit as much significance in Lana’s argument.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Bergm., APC p.44; Kurfess, col.1041; cf. Arev.*a.l.*

<sup>19</sup> He quotes CIL 3,1,3969 in support, but he omits the compiler’s introductory remark: *Huc rettuli, cum Siscia ibi primariis urbibus imperii adiuncta videatur studio magis quam iure.*

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Jones, p.507; also p.556. Bergm. discusses the term *miles Palatinus* in APC p.40 *sq.*

presumably fated to remain a mystery. That he served at the court of Theodosius seems virtually certain.

### c. *Otium*

It may be difficult to reconstruct the poet's *negotium*, but his *otium* is even more nebulous. Most critics, with a greater or lesser degree of indulgence, make of the whole preface an exercise in rhetoric. The poet has finished writing his poetry, he needs a preface. In this preface he makes it appear as if he has just realized that he is old, that he has done nothing of lasting value in life and must make amends before it is too late. He then tells us of the poetry he will write to the greater glory of God, poetry which in fact has already been composed<sup>21</sup>.

By the simple expedient of looking more carefully at the verb tenses used by Prudentius, Lana remarks, we may easily glean more acceptable information from the second half of the preface<sup>22</sup>. Prudentius knows as he writes that old age is upon him (v.4-5); in fact, he began to realize it when he was still leading his public life (v.22-23, *haec* referring to his career), but more than ever he is aware of it now that he has been devoting himself to writing for some time (vv.25-27). The interpretation hinges on the difference in tense of *inrepsit* (v.23) and *probat* (v.27).

Prudentius was 31 years old when Theodosius, his compatriot and his senior by one year, left his private affairs in Spain to return to public service. This would be a normal age for Prudentius to embark on his administrative career, be it in Spain or in Savia<sup>23</sup>. Twenty years of service would have entitled him to his *honorata quies* in 398/399, just a few years after the death of Theodosius (395). This gives us a lapse of six or seven years until the date of publication<sup>24</sup>, a period of contemplation which Prudentius decided

<sup>21</sup> Brockhaus, p.55 *sq.*; Manitius, Poesie p.62-63; Bergm., APC p.35 *sq.*; Rodr.-Her., p.12-13; Rand, Humanism p.72; Raby, p.45; Kurfess, col.1041; Stam, p.5, cf.p.7; Lav., introd.p.vii; Fuhrmann, p.82.

<sup>22</sup> P.37 *sqq.*. Less convincing are his insistence on a strong punctuation after *mihi* (v.25) and his interpretation of *senium* (v.5). A full stop after *mihi* would create the only instance in the *praefatio* of a break after the first line of a strophe (change of thought occurs in or after the second line in vv.6,9 and 32, and after the third in all other instances, except vv.37 *sqq.* where there is no break). *Senium* is used as a synonym of *senectus* and *senecta*, contrary to Lana's assertion. All three are used by Prudentius to indicate old age, with both its infirmity (of body) and its venerability (of mind; compare e.g. C 10, 101 and S 2, 323 with Ps 848; Pe 10, 1118 with S 1,435; S 1,511, S 2,653 and 656 with S 1,543; S 1, pr.68 with S 2,323). Actually, Lana's laboured argument is not needed to justify his chronology.

<sup>23</sup> Marrou, p.390, describes higher education as lasting until one was about twenty years old. After some ten years of law practice one was well-qualified to begin a "civil service" career (cf.p.447). Jones, p.577, gives 20 years of service as a normal time span meriting the *honorata quies*.

<sup>24</sup> Vv.1-3 show that he is in his 57th year as he writes the preface. Lana, p.1 n.2, gives an