

Chapter X

Ausonius, Fortunatus, and the Ruins of the Moselle

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The *Mosella* of Decimus Magnus Ausonius, a poem in widespread distribution by the year 371, describes the Moselle valley (*das Moseltal*) in some detail. Two centuries later, another visitor to that valley, Venantius Honorius Clementianus Fortunatus, depicted the same region in his own poetry, but where Ausonius' vision was one of bucolic splendour, Fortunatus' countryside had begun to decay — the lofty villas had disappeared, the town walls were broken, the high places bristled with fortifications and weapons of war. There are political and cultural continuities, to be sure, in the poems of both Ausonius and Fortunatus, but far more striking is the evidence of the transformations experienced by the region in the centuries that separated them. The *Moseltal* of Ausonius lay squarely within the jurisdiction of the Western Augustus, and the focus of its citizenry extended south into the heart of the Roman Empire, whereas the power structures evidenced by Fortunatus seem far more localised, and more intensely polyvalent. Transformations within these patterns of governance find resonance in the poets' descriptions of the constructed landscape itself, with the bustling *Moseltal* of Ausonius subsiding into the ruinous wilds of Fortunatus, and yet, despite these differences, both poets seem to derive very similar cultural memories from these divergent artefacts.

This chapter will begin, therefore, with an analysis of the constructed landscape of the *Moseltal* as presented by Fortunatus, comparing that description to Ausonius' testimony, before contextualising both within the political history of the region in Late Antiquity. The landscapes of poetry, however, exist only partly within a phenomenal world, and so the second aim of this chapter is to contemplate also the role of the idealised landscape in the ontology of these two poets, and to discuss the ways in which we might see, or cannot see, transformation here as well.

Das Moseltal, c. 370 and c. 570 CE

Ausonius was more than a mere visitor to Trier. Invited to the city by the emperor Valentinian I in the early 360s, Ausonius served as tutor to Prince Gratian and accompanied the emperor on his expedition against the Alamanni in the winter of 368/9. With Gratian's succession to the throne, Ausonius was elevated first to the Prefecture of Gaul, and then to the Prefecture of the West. By 379 he had become consul. He returned to his home town of Bordeaux following the assassination of Gratian in 383, to work his estates and to concentrate on his poetry. Ausonius' *Mosella*, however, found publication long before his enforced retirement — we know from a letter written to the poet by the Roman statesman Quintus Aurelius Symmachus (Ep. 1.14) that the work was in circulation by the early 370s.

Obviously but not inelegantly didactic, Ausonius' *Mosella* is an extended meditation on the beauty of nature and the folly of human craft — as I have written elsewhere: 'in the *Mosella*, we witness a criticism of artifice that is strikingly at odds with Ausonius' Golden Age predecessors' and 'the beginning of a Christian and Late Antique rejection of the man-made' (Bishop, 2017: 17). But the aspect of Ausonius' *Mosella* that draws our attention in this chapter is not the moral he draws from the landscape of the Moselle valley, but rather his description of the country-side itself.

The environment that Ausonius presents in his *Mosella* is predominantly a constructed one, an 'urbanized and cultured' nature, 'filled with domiciles and baths' (Pavlovskis, 1973: 36). The fields that line Ausonius' Moselle are not expressions of a natural landscape, but rather testaments to agriculture. They are: *agrī* (l. 23); *arva* (ll. 4, 9, 472); or, most commonly, *cultūs* (ll. 6, 72, 298, 325, 347, 460). The poem is dominated by descriptions of villas adorned with marble-floored atriums (l. 20, ll. 48–49), bath complexes (l. 341), cities ringed by defensive towers and walls (ll. 454–6), fortresses and granaries (ll. 457–460) all of which culminate thematically in a prolonged discussion of architecture that occupies some 20 lines at the very centre of the poem (ll. 298–317): 'who has the skill to unfold the countless embellishments?' asks Ausonius, and then proceeds to answer his question by doing so himself. Even

the river itself seems subjugated by rapacious fishermen (ll. 240–282) and ships of all sizes (ll. 27, 39–47, 196–239) but, while humans dominate Ausonius' poem, it is important to note that the *Moselta* of Ausonius is not that of Fortunatus.

Michael Roberts has described the influence of Ausonius upon the poetry of Fortunatus as 'detectable, but not obtrusive' and has elucidated the relationship between the two (Roberts, 2009: 83–6). We can see the antecedent for Fortunatus' *inter villarum fumantia culmina ripis* (10.9, l. 17) in Ausonius' *culmina villarum pendentibus edita ripis* (Mos. l. 20), while the *inde per exstantes colles, et concava vallis* (10.9, l. 19) of the former recalls Ausonius' *et virides baccho colles et amoena fluenta* (Mos. l. 21) in both diction and form — a relationship already understood as early as 1823, when the Valpy edition of Ausonius' works was published (Valpy, 1823: 1139, n. 355). A century after Valpy, Carl Hosius noted that just as the vine-covered slopes in Ausonius' *Mosella* 'entice the wandering eye' (*sollicitentque vagos Baccheia munera visus*, l. 153), so too the meadows below Nicetius' villa in Fortunatus 3.12 'delight the wandering minds' (*oblectant animos mollia prata vagos*, l. 118) (Hosius, 1926: 46.). Hosius also noted that this *oblectant animos* in Fortunatus was also used by Ovid in his *Remedia Amoris* (Hosius, 1926: 169), but if a number of Fortunatus' poems offer descriptions of the Moselle valley, for the reader, and in particular, the reader familiar with the earlier work of Ausonius, the most striking feature of these poems is the absence of human construction in the landscapes they describe.

The first seven books of Fortunatus' poetry were published at the urging of his friend and patron, Gregory of Tours, probably around 576 (Fortunatus, 2017: viii). The last of these books opens with four poems dedicated to Gogo, a man whom Fortunatus had met some ten years earlier at the marriage of King Sigibert and Brunhilde. Gogo was a close advisor to the Merovingian king and may have become Mayor of the Palace (Fortunatus, 2010: 49). In *Fortunatus* 7.4 the poet imagines Gogo catching salmon from the Rhine:

... an super uviferi Mosellae obambulat amnem,

quo levis ardentem temperet aura diem,
pampinus et fluvius medios ubi mitigat aestus:
vitibus umbra rigens, fluctibus unda recens. (ll. 7-10)
[... or roaming along the grape-laden Moselle's course
where a gentle breeze tempers the heat of the day
where vine and river mitigate the midday heat:
the steady shadow of the foliage, the fresh billow of the waves.]

The harmony of the landscape is made manifest in the harmony of Fortunatus' lyric — the breeze (*aura*) is contrasted against the day (*diem*), as are the pertinent adjectives (*levis* and *ardentem*), with both the adjectival grouping and that of the nouns separated by the active verb (*temperet*). This symmetry is then reinforced in the sound and the scansion of the final line of the quatrain, the *vitibus umbra rigens* with the *fluctibus unda recens*.

It is a well-crafted piece of poetry, and it describes a beautiful scene, but it is largely a description of a natural, rather than constructed, environment. The grape-vines are there, and they are heavy with fruit (*super uviferi*), but it cannot be under grape-vines that Gogo shades himself from the sun's intense heat, the foliage of a vineyard is too sparse, and so it is to the heavy shade on the banks of the river that Gogo retreats, where the wild vines proliferate — Venantius uses the term *pampinus* here, and we are reminded of Pliny's use of the same term to describe *smilax aspera*, the sarsaparille or rough bindweed (*Naturalis Historia* 16.63.153). More importantly for the argument at hand, Gogo does not seek shelter in a courtyard, for villas are all but absent in Fortunatus' description of the Moselle.

Fortunatus 3.13 is dedicated to Vilicus, the bishop of Metz and, in that poem, we witness the same *Moseltal* of *Fortunatus* 7.4. To be sure, there are still burgeoning fields (l. 11, *vernantibus arvis*) of grain (l. 12, *sata*) and roses (l. 12, *rosas*), presumably cultivated roses, but wild vegetation proliferates.

What first meets our imagined gaze are not cultivated fields, but meadows of spring grass (l. 3, *vernanti gramine*) and wild herbs (l. 4, *herbarum*). The hills are clothed in shady foliage (l. 13, *umbrosos vestitos palmite colles*) — we should recall here Lewis and Short’s equation of *palmes* with *pampinus* (the plant from *Fortunatus* 7.4), and Pliny’s use of *palmes* to describe plants of the family Arecaceae (*Naturalis Historia* 13.4.6 ff.). Pliny’s *Natural History* makes a sharp distinction between the cultivated palms of the East, which produce fruit, and their wild European relatives, which do not, so the varying forms of fertility (l. 14, *varia fertlitate*), like those of *Fortunatus* 7.4, include a predominance of wild variants.

The poem does give a glimpse, however, of the buildings that dot the vine-clad hillsides and grassy river banks of the Moselle, for the river is also part of the defences of Metz, a city fortified not only by the walls that surround it, but also by the merits of its bishop (ll. 15–16, *Urbs munita nimis, quam cingit murus et amnis, pontificus merito stas valitura magis*). The intrusion of the fortifications serves as a reminder of the political climate traversed by men like Vilicus (and Fortunatus). Where Ausonius’ Moselle was filled with people, people whose agency was to be seen everywhere and at all times, the Moselle of Fortunatus is a wilder watercourse, punctuated by fortresses and the scant fields that surround them.

Moreover, the constructed landscapes we witness in the poetry of Fortunatus are in a worse state of repair than those of Ausonius — at least part of Vilicus’ merit rests in the implementation of his program to restore the roofs of broken churches (l. 39, *Culmina templorum renovasti*). Similarly, in *Fortunatus* 3.11, we read of Nicetius, the bishop of Trier, doing the same:

Templa vetusta Dei revocasti in culmine prisco

et floret senior te reparante domus. (ll. 21–22)

[You have restored the ancient Church of God to its former height

and the old house flourishes through your repair.]

There is a spiritual value to all this labour, of course — Simon Coates, for example, has written on the importance of (re)building churches as an episcopal duty (Coates, 2000) — and it is clearly the intention of Fortunatus to elucidate the role of these men both in rebuilding churches and in rebuilding the Church, but we must not ignore the physical reality of this work as well — the roofs have actually collapsed, the buildings are falling down. This is not the architectural affluence that prompted Ausonius to reprimand his contemporaries on their pride. This is a landscape of fortified ruin.

Fortunatus' lionising of Nicetius continues in the next poem of book three, in which the episcopal castle at Trier is described in some detail. *Fortunatus* 3.12 divides neatly into two halves. The first eighteen lines survey, once again, the landscape of the Moselle: the fertile plowlands (l. 13, *frugiferos... sulcos*); the fields covered in verdant herbage (l. 17, *ager tectus viridantibus herbis*); the soft meadows (l. 18, *mollia prata*). But the poem takes a sharp turn at line nineteen with a protracted metaphor — the shepherd of this flock has constructed a serious defence to keep the wolves at bay. The sheepfold (l. 20, *ovile*) of Nicetius is a wall of towers, and just as the thirty towers of Nicetius enclose the congregation of Trier, so too Fortunatus uses the thirty towers (*turribus... ter*) to constrain the verb of enclosure itself (*incinxit*): *Turribus incinxit ter denis undique collem* (l. 21, the hill enclosed on every side by thirty towers).

The *castellum* (l. 28) of Nicetius is twice described in this poem as a palace (*aula*, ll. 25 and 29), so huge the viewer imagines the roofs must cover acres of land (l. 32, *iugera tecta putes*). Indeed, perched upon a mountain top, the house of Nicetius is itself a mountain (l. 26, *et monti imposito mons erit ipsa domus*). Nor is the bishop's castle defended by the word of God alone. Fortunatus describes a war-machine maintained by Nicetius, the 'Twin-flight Ballista' (l. 35, *gemino ballista vollatu*) which leaves death in its wake while it itself flees (l. 36, *quae post se mortem linquit et ipsa fugit*).

On the face of it, Fortunatus would seem to be describing a trebuchet — wheel mounted stone-throwers that recoil rapidly away from their targets once the payload is released — but we have no

reliable references to such weapons predating the crusades. Leif Petersen has suggested that Nicetius' ballista may have been a traction trebuchet, a very modern weapon for the late sixth century to be sure, but not anachronistically so (Petersen, 2013: 412–3). Still, the description offered by Fortunatus hardly seems suitable for anything but the wheel-mounted version, and it remains an intriguing (although insoluble) mystery. Less intangible, however, is Nicetius' presence at the forefront of military technology, the extent of his fortifications, and his investment in the military infrastructure of his bishopric.

In this respect Fortunatus compares the *castellum* of Nicetius to the Praemicum, the fortified villa of bishop Leontius in Bordeaux. Leontius had not constructed the Praemicum, indeed it had been celebrated in poetry a century before by Sidonius Apollinaris, but Leontius (who married the great-granddaughter of Sidonius, Placidina) had fortified the villa and used it as a base of operations during his rebellion against the Merovingian King Charibert (Wickham, 2005: 171). Nicetius' castle, therefore, like the Praemicum of Leontius, was a distinctive feature of the new landscape (both physical and political) of sixth-century Frankia, a landscape quite unlike the peaceful river-lands of Ausonius' Moselle, where the fortresses had been turned into granaries (Ausonius, *Mosella*, ll. 457–460).

Fortunatus 10.9 describes a river-journey from Metz to the fortress of Andernach undertaken by King Childebert II and his mother Queen Brunhilde probably around 588. Fortunatus evidently accompanied the monarchs on their expedition, composing several poems dedicated to them, none of which were to find publication until after Fortunatus' death in the very early seventh century. For the modern reader of *Fortunatus* 10.9 it seems clear that the royal pair are proceeding through a series of fortresses, and that the terrain between these fortresses is wild and uninhabited.

Leaving the safety of Metz, the company traverses a series of rapids which lead them into open plains (l. 11, *campos*). The sense of this first section is one of wilderness, and Fortunatus offers the reader no description of the landscape's inhabitants, their agricultural activity, or their buildings until we reach the

smoke-wreathed roofs of the villas (l. 17, *villarum fumantia culmina*) that mark the point where the Moselle is joined by the Sauer — the old Roman establishment of Biliacum, modern Wasserbillig. Leaving Biliacum the landscape becomes once again desolate and eerie as Fortunatus skips forward to the arrival at Trier.

Fortunatus' descriptions of Trier, and later Andernach, do include praise for their vineyards and farmland, but the reader gets the sense that these signs of habitation exist only in the immediate proximity of the settlements themselves. Between the fortresses, the cultivated flora gives way to the fugitive and the wild. Throughout the journey (l. 49, *omne per illud*), here perhaps referring to the leg between Trier and Andernach, but possibly referring to the entire trip from Metz, the party amuses themselves with music, but the voices of the lyres are met only by echoes from the rocks and the scrub:

Vocibus excussis pulsabant organa montes

reddebantque suos pendula saxa tropos.

Laxabat placidos mox aerea tela susurros,

respondit cannis rursus ab alpe frutex. (ll. 53–56)

[The shimmering voices of the instruments were striking the mountains

and the overhanging rocks were returning the music.

The bronze web was releasing the gentle whisper,

The alpine scrub replying with reedy echoes.]

One voice may have united the rocks and the river in song (*collibus et fluviis vox erat una tropis*, l. 60), but the only human voices are those of the royal party. Nor are the settlements themselves unmarked by the wrath of war.

For the reader approaching Fortunatus' Trier through the memory of Ausonius, the initial vision of the city is a confronting one. We are longing for rest after our long voyage, and the consolation and safety of a 'Rome in the North', but what we see first are the broken walls of the old imperial capital:

Perducor Treverum qua moenia celsa patescunt,
urbs quoque nobilium nobilis aequae caput.

Ducimur hinc fluvio per culmina prisca senatus,
quo patet indiciis ipsa ruina potens. (ll. 21–24)

[I am led to Trier, its lofty walls torn open,
Noble city and noble capital too.

The river takes us hence by what once had been the roof of the senate-house
That, broken, betokens power by its very ruin.]

The image is made all the more jarring by Fortunatus' use of the verb *patēscere* (to reveal, to open) which, like so many inchoative verbs, is intransitive. The implication, therefore, is of a change of state or an ongoing action, and we think immediately of the violent 'opening up' of Priam's halls in the *Aeneid* (*apparet domus intus et atria longa patescunt*, 2.483; and *crebrescunt optatae aurae portusque patescit*, 3.530). We might like to imagine the walls of Trier opening before us to welcome us in, but the *patet* and the *ruina* that follows in the wake of *patescunt* deny us this consolation. Trier is a broken city and in this Fortunatus is, once again, delineating for us the immense changes that the *Moselta* underwent between the era of Ausonius and that of Fortunatus.

Trier: Decline and Fall

Ausonius begins his *Mosella* by marvelling at the defensive walls newly erected around Bingen (*addita miratus veteri nova moenia Vinco*, l. 2). The *Historia* of Ammianus Marcellinus informs us that Bingen was only one of seven northern cities to be fortified by the emperor Julian in 359 (Marc. Hist. XVIII. ii. 4), evidencing both the strategic importance of these citadels and the pressure being brought to bear against them from across the Rhine.

Prior to this the office of the Praetorian Prefect of Gaul had been established in 337, and Augusta Treverorum (Trier) served as the seat of the prefecture from the outset. Magnus Maximus, Augustus of the West from 383 until 388, had also made Trier his imperial residence, but his defeat in 388 must have signalled a sharp decline in the city's fortunes. The Frankish general Arbogast seized the city for Theodosius I, Augustus of the East, and carried out retaliations against the followers of Maximus. The city was stripped of its imperial function, and by 407 (but perhaps as early as 395), the Praetorian Prefecture was transferred from Trier to Arles.

This transfer of power was neither arbitrary nor punitive, but rather, recognised a shifting of borders. The imperial war-machine combined with Roman soft-power had pushed the northern *limens* deep into the Germanic heartlands, but a shift in power was in the process of contracting those borders. Trier, once well within the shelter of Roman *auctoritas*, was now on the frontier, a fact delineated dramatically on the night of 31 December 406 when an army of Vandals, Alans and Suebi, unprecedented in its size, crossed the frozen Rhine.

That army must have impacted on the city of Trier, even if they made no direct assault against it — Jerome omits Trier from the long list of cities sacked (Epistle 123.16) — and their loss of control over the major north-south trunk road that linked Marseilles, Arles and Trier must have been a critical factor in the Roman decision to abandon the northern capital (Mitchell, 2007: 364). We know that Constantine III took Trier in 407, during the ongoing Roman civil war of the early fifth-century. A few years later, perhaps as early as 411 but certainly no later than 418, the city was sacked by the Franks, and by 439 Salvian was able to claim that Trier had been sacked four times that century. (De Gubernatione Dei 6.13) The eighth-century Liber Historiae Francorum reports that Attila's Huns also sacked Trier during their incursions into the empire in 451. (Liber Historiae Francorum 5)

By the late 1960s, Edith Wightman was arguing that Trier and the surrounding region had gone into a sharp economic decline during the first half of the fifth century, and that thesis still enjoys widespread

acceptance among scholars today (Wightman, 1970: 250).¹ Certainly, the archaeological evidence supports the written sources from Late Antiquity, with ‘considerable deposits of material, principally pottery’ in the city’s major monuments indicating the ‘disuse or ‘destruction’ of these complexes’ towards the middle of the fifth century (Esmonde-Cleary, 2013: 426). We know also that settlement patterns in the surrounding region changed dramatically during the first half of the fifth century, with the effective disappearance of the traditional (indefensible) villa (Van Ossel and Ouzoulias, 2000: 138, 143). Nor did this situation improve in the decades following the death of Attila.

Only six years after the Hunnic sack of the city, the Ripuarian Franks captured Trier (in 457) (Kim, 2013: 221, n. 325). By the 470s the city was being governed by the *comes* Arbogast, a Romanised Frank and descendent of the fourth-century *magister militum* Flavius Arbogastes. Arbogast may have held the city for a Frankish king, the origin of his military commission remains unclear, but the praise heaped upon him by the famously partisan Sidonius Apollinaris (Epistulae 4.17) urges us to identify the man as a Roman general rather than a Germanic warlord. Sidonius’ characterisation of Arbogast as the last bastion of Romanitas on the Rhine is also supported by the archaeological evidence, for while the depredations against Trier are visible, it has also been noted that Frankish graves are entirely absent from the area before the turn of the sixth century (Staab, 1997). The Franks attacked Trier often, but they do not seem to have settled there before 500.

Nevertheless, the situation must have remained difficult and Wightman was no doubt correct when she equated Arbogast, the late fifth-century bishop of Chartres, with his namesake the *comes* of Trier — it would seem that Arbogast was forced out of Trier in the mid-to-late 480s, possibly by yet another Frankish attack (Wightman, 1985: 304).² A decade later, Trier was caught up in the war between Clovis and the Alamanni. A letter from the Ostrogoth king Theodoric to Clovis dated to around 504 (Cassiodorus *Variae* 2.41) congratulates Clovis on his success in this war but warns him also that the

¹ But see L. Bailey (2016) *The Religious Worlds of the Laity in Late Antique Gaul*. London: Bloomsbury, 94–5.

² See also H. Anton (1987) *Trier im frühen Mittelalter*. Munich: Paderborn, 55–58.

remnant Alamanni have fled into the protection of Theodoric. We know from Ennodius' panegyric to Theodoric (15) that the Ostrogoths took control of the region of Rhaetia about this time, but just how far this control extended geographically is difficult to discern — Gregory of Tours' *Life of the Fathers* would seem to indicate that this control extended as far as Trier (6.2).

Theodoric's control over Trier, if it existed at all, could only have been fleeting as, indeed, was that of Clovis. The death of the Merovingian king ushered in a series of dynastic disputes which were rapidly exploited by Burgundians from within the empire, and Saxons from without. Theuderic, one of Clovis' four sons, inherited Trier as part of his patrimony and was soon at war with the Burgundians Sigismund and Godomar, and, shortly after that, became embroiled in the Thuringian civil war fought between King Hermanfrid and his brother Baderic. It was the devastation of this later war that was to be immortalised in the *De Excidio Thuringiae*, a poem written from the first-hand perspective of the Thuringian princess Radegund and variously attributed either to Venantius Fortunatus, or to Radegund herself.

It should come as no surprise, then, to find the landscape of the Moselle so radically altered in Venantius' poetry. Ausonius had written as a citizen of an empire at the height of its power, and as a visitor to a city both cosmopolitan and extensive. The Trier of Ausonius may have housed as many as 80,000, but by the end of the following century, that number had shrunk to perhaps 5,000.³

The Ruined City as *Topos*

David Lowenthal has argued that the 'overriding message' of decay 'is our own mortality', and that ruins serve as '*memento mori*, reminders of death's implacable imminence', but this impulse is not evident in the poetry of Fortunatus, for whom 'the sky glimpsed through a fallen roof' did not enduce a discernible

³ Although, for a more conservative estimate of this decline in population see, for example, M. Benes (1998) 'Cities in Turmoil and Transition: The Continuity of Trier and Regensburg between the Late Roman Empire and the Early Middle Ages'. *Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers*, 83: 1–17.

melancholy (Lowenthal, 2015: 277). This begs the question, therefore, as to when this melancholy impulse *did* establish itself in European poetry.

The Romantic literature that serves as Lowenthal's focus postdates that of Fortunatus by more than twelve-hundred years and is itself a development of earlier *memento mori* that sought to contextualise the apparent vicissitudes of fate within a greater, Christian, ontology. What interests me at this point, however, is the possibility of determining the period in which the change from elegy to *memento mori* occurred. If we compare, for example, Fortunatus' *De excidio Thoringiae* to Alcuin's *De clade Lindisfarnensis monasterii*, two poems separated by roughly two centuries, we see two poets using very similar material to entirely different ends.

De excidio Thoringiae is written in the voice of Queen Radegund and renders an elegy to her people, the Thuringiae, who were overwhelmed by the Frankish kings Theuderic and Chlothar in the early 530s. Chlothar later took the captive princess as a consort (one of six) but, by 550, he had murdered Radegund's brother, the last surviving male member of the Thuringian royal family. Radegund then fled to the protection of the Church, eventually founding a monastery at Sainte-Croix in Poitiers, from where she continued her membership of a close literary circle that included not only Fortunatus, but also Gregory of Tours. We know that Radegund wrote frequently to her learned friends, and we know that these writings included poetry. It was this knowledge, perhaps, that led Charles Nisard to accept that the former queen might well have been the author of the *Excidio* — an idea that gained greater currency in the 1980s (Nisard, 1887; McNamara and Thiebaut, 1987; Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, 1993). Today, the weight of scholarly opinion has shifted back to crediting Fortunatus with the poem's composition (Wasył, 2015; Reimitz, 2015; Fielding, 2017).

Fortunatus' *Excidio* is firmly founded in the Classical tradition. The influence of Ovid upon the works of Fortunatus in general (and upon the *Excidio* in particular) has also been noted elsewhere (Wasył, 2016) and, as Christine Fell wrote some time ago, the poem 'looks to Troy for comparison' (Fell, 1993: 178).

There are ruins in *De excidio Thoringiae*, but, like the ruins of Troy, and in keeping with the Classical tradition, they do not serve as *memento mori*.

For classical writers, it would seem, ruins did not bring in the same ‘eternal note of sadness’, as Matthew Arnold would later write. We are put in mind of Servius Sulpicius using a meditation upon ruins to console his friend Cicero on the death of Tullia. While sailing the Saronic gulf, Sulpicius found himself midway between Aegina and Megara, with Corinth and Piraeus also in clear view:

... quae oppida quodam tempore florentissima fuerunt, nunc prostrata et diruta ante oculos iacent. coepi egomet mecum sic cogitare: ‘hem! nos homunculi indignamur, si quis nostrum interiit aut occisus est, quorum vita brevior esse debet, cum uno loco tot oppidum cadavera proiecta iacent? visne tu te, Servi, cohibere et meminisse hominem te esse natum?’ crede mihi cogitatione ea non mediocriter sum confirmatus. (Cic. Fam. 4.5.4)

[... all of them towns which once had flourished, now lying broken before my eyes and fallen into ruin. I began to think to myself: ‘Huh! We little humans resent it if one of us dies or is killed — we, to whom so short a life is owed — when the corpses of so many cities lie scattered in a single place! Can you not control yourself, Servius, and remember that you were born a man?’ Believe me, I was more than a little fortified by that thought.]

The final book of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* features a similar meditation, no doubt referencing Cicero (Met. XV ll. 420–449), and some four centuries later, Ambrose used the ruined cities of southern Italy in the same manner to console his friends on the recent death of a member of their community (Ambrose, Ep. 39.3). This Classical use of the ruined city *topos* is what finds resonance in Fortunatus’ *Excidio*. There is sadness in the poem, of course, but it is not a sadness without hope, and it is not a sadness that questions the purpose of living.

That Alcuin knew the work of Fortunatus is beyond doubt — compare his *nobilis urbs regni et prima potentia regum* (*De clade Lind.*, l. 31) with Fortunatus’ *urbs quoque nobilium nobilis aequae caput* (10.9, l.

22) — but Alcuin's poem is at least as didactic as it is elegiac. For Alcuin, the destruction of the Northumbrian monastery during a Viking raid illustrated a lesson in morality, and his subsequent poem located itself within a greater genre of ruin elegies which include Gildas' sixth-century *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, as well as Biblical antecedents such as the books of Revelation, Jeremiah and Isaiah. But Alcuin's poetry is more than just salutary instruction, there is tangible melancholy underlying it as well, a quality described by Chris Abram as 'that most Anglo-Saxon of preoccupations: the transitoriness of worldly glory' (Abram, 2000: 23).

The extant poetry of the Anglo-Saxons that so manifestly preoccupies itself with the 'transitoriness of worldly glory' (*The Ruin, The Seafarer, The Wanderer, Deor*, and the like) belongs to a vernacular corpus that found inscription following the reforms of the late ninth-century West-Saxon king Alfred, but it seems reasonable to assume that any such editions must represent written exemplars of an older (perhaps much older) poetic tradition. The depredations of time have left us very few specimens of early vernacular poetry from any of the Anglo-Saxon polities, and yet we know from what does survive (the inscriptions on the monument at Ruthwell, for example, and the Franks Casket) and from contemporary sources such as Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, that the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and particularly the kingdom of Northumbria, had a long-established tradition of native poetry.

We should remember that Alcuin was a Northumbrian by birth, educated in the cathedral church of York under Archbishop Egbert, himself a disciple of the Venerable Bede. Alcuin was not a young man by the time he became master of the Palace School of Charlemagne and he must have retained much of his Northumbrian sensibilities, artistic and otherwise. Christine Fell's observation, therefore, that '(m)any of the themes that we find later in Old English vernacular poetry are signalled in Alcuin' (Fell, 1993: 178) should come as no surprise.

The distance between the Anglo-Saxon ontology of ruin and that of their Classical precursors is most demonstrable when we look at the development of *ubi sunt* poetry. *Ubi sunt* (lit. 'where are...') poems

trace their lineage back to the rhetoric of Classical Rome, but where politicians like Cicero used such phrases for rhetorical effect (*ubinam ille mos, ubi illa aequitas iuris, ubi illa antiqua libertas...* where on earth are those ancestral ways, where that equality of law, where that ancient liberty? Cic. Planc. 13.33) the Anglo-Saxons seem to have adopted the simple question to express deep and nagging doubts about the value of existence itself. Compare Boethius' Ciceronian apostrophe: *ubi nunc fidelis ossa Fabricii manent, quid Brutus aut rigidus Cato?* (Boethius, *Consolatio*, 2.m7.15-6) [Where now are the bones of faithful Fabricius? What of Brutus or unyielding Cato?] to the Anglo-Saxon 'translation' credited to Alfred the Great:

Hwæt synt nu þæs foremeran 7 þæs wisan goldsmiðes ban Welondes? Forþi ic cwæð þæs wisan forþy þa cræftegan ne mæg næfre his cræft losigan, ne hine mon ne mæg þon eð on him geniman ðe mon mæg þa sunnan awendan of hierre stede. Hwær synt nu þæs Welondes ban, oððe hwa wat nu hwær hi wæron? Oððe hwær is nu se foremæra 7 se aræda Romwara heretoga se wæs haten Brutus, oðre naman Cassius? Oððe se wisa 7 fæstræda Cato, se wæs eac Romana heretoga; se wæs openlice uðwita. Hu ne wæran þas gefyrn forðgewitene? 7 nan mon nat hwær hi nu sint. Hwæt is heora nu to lafe, butan se lytla hlisa 7 se nama mid feaum stafu awriten? (Alfred, 1899:46)

[Where now are the bones of Weland, the wise and famous goldsmith? I call him wise, because the man of craft can never lose his cunning — he can no more be deprived of it than the sun can wander from its course. Where now are the bones of Weland, or who now knows where they are? Or where now is the famed and courageous Roman chieftain that was called Brutus, or by his other name Cassius? Or the sagacious and steadfast Cato, who was also a war-leader of the Romans, and well known for his wisdom? Did they not depart long ago? And not a man knows where they are now. What is there left of them now, but this paltry glory, and a name written with a few scratchings?]

Fortunatus' poem lacks any such existential crisis. Indeed, rather than questioning the 'paltry glory' of a 'few scratching's', it states explicitly that Radegund's ruined Thuringia lives on in the stories of her people: *qua virtute atavos repares, qua laude propinquos... crede, parens, si verba dares, non totus abesses* (ll. 77–79) [such manliness might recall our forebears, such praise our kindred... Believe me father, if words remain, you are not gone entirely].

Alcuin, by comparison, begins his *Excidio* in a tone only too familiar to readers of *The Seafarer*, *postquam primus homo paradisi liquerat hortos, et miseris terras exul adibat inops, exilioque gravi poenas cum prole luebat* (*Excidio*, ll. 1–3) [After the first man had given up the gardens of Paradise and, a destitute exile, was venturing into the wretched lands — having paid, with his children, the penalties for that bitter banishment] before plunging into the heart of the matter, *perfidiae quoniam furta maligna gerit, per varios casus mortalis vita cucurrit, diversosque dies omnis habebat homo* (*Excidio*, ll. 4–6) [because of the perfidies and the heinous sins it bears, each mortal life hastens towards myriad calamities and all men endure conflicting days]. The ultimate subject of the poem therefore, the ruin of Lindisfarne, is, like all vicissitudes of this world, a logical consequence of Adam's fall.

Conclusion

The shrinking of the Western Roman Empire brought war into the northern provinces, and with war came ruin. Buildings were broken, walls were toppled, roofs caved in. Naturally then, ruins abound in the *Moseltal* of Fortunatus, both in the physical landscape he experienced and in the poetic landscape he subsequently chose to create. A modern reader, conditioned by the Waste Land imagery of later poetry, might expect these ruins to function as locus to meditation, symbols of the caprices of fate or the transience of life, but this impulse is entirely lacking in Fortunatus' work. And yet, as we have seen, the Carolingian poet Alcuin, himself a student of Fortunatus' work, used the ruined landscape of his day to do just that.

In Alcuin's *Excidio* the ruined landscape can be seen to engender some level of spiritual disquiet, although this disquiet does not reach the level of ontological anxiety displayed in the later vernacular Anglo-Saxon poems. *The Ruin*, *The Wanderer* and the Gnostic verses of the Cotton manuscript all depict civilisations fallen to ruin for no reason beyond the whim of fate. The people of these poems were not akin to those of biblical Sodom and Gomorrah, no charges of wantonness or vice are laid against them, no crimes enumerated. Nevertheless, their destruction was absolute.

Significantly, though, the ruined civilisations depicted in the poems of Fortunatus were not those of the Anglo-Saxon poets, but ancient, 'other' cultures. I have written elsewhere on the conception of 'giants' in Anglo-Saxon vernacular poetry (Bishop, 2006), but for the discussion at hand it is important to recall that when Anglo-Saxon poets depicted the ruins that haunted their landscapes as the work of a fallen race of giants, they were demonstrating their profound dissociation from both the beings that created those structures and the ruins themselves. Moreover, the disquiet of Alcuin and his *ængelcynn* correspondents is altogether absent in the poetry of Fortunatus precisely because, I suspect, Fortunatus did not experience alienation from his subject in any way comparable to Alcuin or the later Anglo-Saxon poets.

Erica Buchberger has argued that 'Fortunatus, Gregory, and their contemporaries still related their environs to a Roman past' and that theirs was perhaps 'the last generation in Gaul to have a strong enough connection to the symbolic weight of the empire and the imagery of its grandeur' (Buchberger, 2017: 146). This continuity 'between the world of fourth-century Gallo-Romans and the sixth-century Merovingian kingdoms' (Roberts, 2009: 83) meant that Fortunatus could read the ruins in his landscape as signifiers of an ancient ancestral connection — as symbols of endurance, stability, even permanence.

But as the Roman empire receded further into the collective memory of Western intellectuals, this association became less profound, less persuasive. The new, Germanic courts that began to flourish during the seventh century — Toledo, Paris, Aachen — imagined their geneses as lying beyond the

limes, outside the orbit of imperium and the Classical world. For them, these inherited ruins were the crumbling edifices of a distant and dissolute people, broken by time, but also by their opposition to the living word and to the incarnation of God, born, like them, on the edge of empire.

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