

MEROBAUDES ON THE IMPERIAL FAMILY

T. D. BARNES

“THE GLIMMERINGS of an abridgement or the doubtful light of a panegyric”: Gibbon’s characterisation of the sources for the reign of Trajan aptly describes those available for reconstructing a narrative political history of the Western Roman Empire during much of the fifth century.¹ On the careers and reigns of Avitus (455/6), Maiorianus (457–461) and Anthemius (467–472), three panegyrics of Sidonius Apollinaris can be made to disclose a great deal.² From the middle years of the reign of Valentinian (425–455), there survive some four hundred lines of the work of Flavius Merobaudes, which deserve (and have recently received) detailed investigation from a competent historian.³

The first poem, a fragment of twenty-three lines, which is panegyrical in tone, if not in form, perhaps poses the most delicate problems of interpretation. Merobaudes is clearly describing the painting or mosaic decoration of a vault or ceiling which depicts the emperor Valentinian and his closest relatives.⁴ But the passage of time has erected two serious obstacles to comprehension of the poem. Merobaudes’ precise meaning must sometimes be elicited from literary reminiscences of classical poets, which do not automatically come to the mind of a modern reader, and the scenes which Merobaudes describes allusively and with an air of familiarity must be reconstructed from his words alone. Recent exegetes have not always taken enough account of the literary allusions, and they have sometimes attempted to overcome historical difficulties by the easy hypothesis that the poet glides insensibly from the description of visible features to private reflection or meditation.⁵ There is room, therefore, for an interpretation which attempts to identify all the classical reminiscences relevant to determining Merobaudes’ meaning and to allow each of his statements to have its most natural significance.

¹*Decline and Fall* 1 (ed. J. B. Bury⁵, London 1909) 74 f.

²A. Loyen, *Recherches historiques sur les panégyriques de Sidoine Apollinaire* (*Bibliothèque des Hautes Etudes* 285, Paris 1942) 35 ff.

³F. M. Clover, *Flavius Merobaudes. A Translation and Historical Commentary* (*Trans Am Philos Soc* n.s. 61.1, Philadelphia 1971).

⁴For discussion of other possibilities, Clover (above, note 3) 16 ff.

⁵See the closely similar interpretations of S. I. Oost, *CP* 60 (1965) 4 ff.; Clover (above, note 3) 19 ff.

TEXT⁶

- incumbit foribus pictae Concordia mensae
 purpureique sacer sexus uterque laris,
 aeternas ubi festa dapes convivia gestant
 purpureisque nitent regia fulcra toris.
 5 ipse micans tecti medium cum coniuge princ(eps
 lucida ceu s(u)mmi possidet astra poli,
 terrarum veneranda salus: pro praeside n(ostro
 amissas subito flet novus exul opes.
 cui natura dedit, victoria reddidit orbem
 10 claraque longinquos praebuit aula toro(s.
 hic ubi sacra parens placidi petit oscula na(t)i,
 Castalium credas cum genetrice deum.
 cum soror adsistit, nitidae candentia Luna(e
 sidera fraterna luce micare putes.
 15 si coniux aderit, dicas Nereia Pelei
 Haemonio Thetidos foedera iuncta toro.
 hac etiam de prole licet sperare nepotem,
 cui Larisa suum conferat una virum.
 en nova iam suboles, quae vix modo missa sub (auras⁷
 20 mystica iam tenero pectore sacra gerit,
 vagitu confessa deum; sentire putare(s,
 mollia sic tremulo moverat ora sono.
 o felix, uno geminam cui tempore vitam . . .

TRANSLATION

Over the doors sits the Concord of a table portrayed and both the sacred pair of the imperial house, where festive tables bear eternal banquets and royal couches shine with purple cushions.

The emperor himself, sparkling, occupies the middle of the ceiling with his wife, like the bright stars of the highest heavens,⁸ the salvation of the adoring world: before our protector a new exile bewails his suddenly lost riches.⁹ Victory has restored the world to him to whom nature gave it,¹⁰ and a famous court has offered a marriage from afar.

Here, where his sacred mother seeks kisses from her placid son,¹¹ you would believe that it was the Castalian god with his mother. When his sister stands beside him, you would think the shining orb of the bright moon was flashing with her brother's light. If

⁶On the manuscript (of the fifth or sixth century), see E. A. Lowe, *Codices Latini Antiquiores* 7 (Oxford 1956) 35 no. 962.

⁷The required meaning is clear from line 23, where the two lives are the physical and the spiritual. *Sub auras* is a frequent enough phrase in Latin poetry (*TLL* 2.1477), but note especially Cyprianus Gallus, *Hept.*, *Gen.* 177 f. (*CSEL* 23.7): *sub auras exiit* = "was born."

⁸I.e., the fixed stars, cf. Lucan 5.561 ff.: *non solum . . . cadentia . . . sidera, sed summis etiam quae fixa tenentur/astra polis*.

⁹Clover translates "suddenly weeps for his lost power"—but denies that the weeping was actually depicted ([above, note 3] 11; 21).

¹⁰The antecedent of *cui* is the implied indirect object of *reddidit*.

¹¹A pun on the emperor's full name, Flavius Placidus Valentinianus (*ILS* 1284; 2948).

his wife is there, you would say it was the joining in marriage of the Nereid Thetis to Macedonian Peleus. From this child too one may hope for a grandson, to whom Larissa alone might compare her hero. And look! a new-born child, who, scarcely yet sent into the world, already carries the mystic rites in her infant breast, confessing God by her crying; you would think she understands, so had she moved her soft mouth with trembling sound. O happy one, to whom at one time . . . a double life . . .

The poem as extant begins with a scene above the doorway (1-4), passes to a scene in the centre of the ceiling (5-10), and then seems to describe a series of portraits which surround, but are not part of, the central scene, and each of which depicts a separate member of the imperial family (11-18). Finally, there is a composition which depicts or alludes to the baptism of an infant (19 ff.). There were thus depicted the following scenes and portraits:¹²

1-4: the emperor Valentinian and his wife Eudoxia dining (above the door);

5-10: the emperor and empress (centre of the ceiling); in front of them an exile in a suppliant attitude;

11/12: Valentinian's mother, Galla Placidia;

13/14: his sister, Justa Grata Honoria;

15/16: his wife, Licinia Eudoxia;

17/18: his older daughter, Eudocia;

19-23: his younger daughter, Placidia, receiving or just having received infant baptism.

Some minor points of interpretation require comment before the main historical problem (lines 5-10) can be broached.

Lines 1/2:

"Incumbit foribus" means "sits over the doors" (compare Statius, *Theb.* 7.44: *ferratis incumbunt tecta columnis*). But what is the scene depicted? The *sexus uterque laris* might be the *genius et tutela domus Augustae* or "the guardian spirits of the imperial house."¹³ Better, the emperor and empress. Indirect support comes from Claudian on Proba, the mother of the consuls of 395:

ceu sibi certantes, sexus quid possit uterque,
hunc legere torum. taceat Nereida nuptam
Pelion. (*Cons. Prob. et Olyb.* 201-203)

Merobaudes also compares the emperor and empress to Peleus and Thetis (15/16).

¹²J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire* 1st (London 1923) 251 f. Clover inclines to the view that lines 11-16 refer to persons not depicted on the painting or mosaic ([above, note 3] 18; 22).

¹³So, respectively, F. Vollmer, *MGH*, Auct. Ant. 14 (1905), 3; Clover (above, note 3) 17.

Lines 3/4:

The phrase *dapes convivia gestant* presents a problem, since it seems that either *gestant* or *convivia* must be taken in a slightly unusual sense. It has been translated "guests carry on banquets."¹⁴ But the rendering "tables bear banquets" may be preferable, since the noun *convivium* is elsewhere used with a wide range of meaning.¹⁵ If so, Merobaudes' lines may imply that no others were depicted dining besides the imperial pair.

Lines 11/12:

Which noun does *sacra* qualify? Although *sacra . . . oscula* might be reckoned a possibility, *sacra parens* are normally, and probably correctly, construed together. As for the action depicted, *petit oscula* indicates that Galla Placidia seeks to be kissed by her son (cf. Ovid, *Her.* 18.102) rather than that she seeks to give kisses to him (cf. Ovid, *Met.* 8.211; *Ars amat.* 2.69: *dedit oscula nato*; *Met.* 4.222; 6.504: *dedit/dabat oscula natae*).

Lines 17/18:

The allusion to Catullus' poem on the marriage of Peleus and Thetis is clear (64.379 f.: *nec mater . . . caros mittet sperare nepotes*). There could be—but there need not be—an allusion to the betrothal of Eudocia to the son of Geiseric, the king of the Vandals (in or shortly after 442).¹⁶

Line 21:

The line is composed of reminiscences of Vergil (*Aen.* 2.591: *confessa deam*) and Ovid which should indicate the meaning of *sentire*. Ovid twice ends a line *sensisse putares* and in both cases he refers to yelling babies who are being exposed:

vagitus dedit ille miser—sensisse putares—(*Her.* 11.85);
vagierunt ambo pariter: sensisse putares (*Fasti* 2.405).

In both bases, the crying suggests that the baby or babies understand what is happening. Although Merobaudes disjoins *sentire putares* from *vagitu confessa deum*, a similar use will give the best sense: the expression on the baby's mouth suggests that the infant understands the significance of baptism.¹⁷

The problem of lines 5–10 can now be posed: who is the *novus exul* (8)? Three identifications have been proposed: the usurper Johannes, who was executed in 425;¹⁸ Valentinian himself, who fled to Constantinople in

¹⁴Clover (above, note 3) 11.

¹⁵Note the examples, including the sense "dining room," collected at *TLL* 4.885.

¹⁶Not explicitly attested, but perhaps implied by Merobaudes, *Pan.* 2.27 ff.

¹⁷Clover, who does not here adduce Virgil or Ovid, translates "you would think she felt his" (i.e., God's) "presence" ([above, note 3] 11).

¹⁸Vollmer (above, note 13) 3.

423;¹⁹ and Huniric, the son of Geiseric, who came to the imperial court at Ravenna as a hostage under the terms of a treaty between Rome and the Vandals in 442.²⁰ None of the three identifications can be regarded as wholly satisfactory. Since Johannes was executed many years before Valentinian married, then either the scene is entirely fictitious or there must be an impossibly abrupt transition to a new scene (in line 7)—and Johannes was neither a recent nor a young exile.²¹ If the suppliant were Valentinian, then *praeses noster* must be his cousin Theodosius, emperor of the eastern empire. But *praeses noster* (7) must be the same person as *ipse princeps* (5), and the latter phrase more naturally designates the western emperor Valentinian than the eastern emperor Theodosius.²² As for Huniric, the sentiments voiced are surely inappropriate: he should not be a pitiful exile who has lost his wealth, but rather one called to the highest felicity by the emperor's generous kindness. Moreover, this identification entails the equation of a glorious victory (9) with an ignominious peace treaty,²³ and compels part of Merobaudes' apparent description to be construed as private meditation.²⁴

In so brief a description, where transitions are so formally marked by demonstratives (11: *hic*; 17: *hac* . . . *de prole*; 19: *en*), there hardly seems space for intimate reflection. Merobaudes' words can (I submit) at each turn be given a perfectly natural interpretation, if the exact nature of the scene is correctly envisaged. The emperor stands or sits with his wife (5); in front of him the new exile bewails his losses (8); and the picture in some way alludes both to an imperial victory (9) and to the coming of a bride from afar (10). One date seems to satisfy all four indications. In 437 Valentinian travelled to Constantinople to marry Eudoxia, returning to Ravenna in the spring of the following year.²⁵ Both before and after this journey armies under Roman command were engaged in serious fighting in Gaul, principally against Goths and Burgundians.²⁶

¹⁹J. B. Bury, *JRS* 9 (1919), 7 f.

²⁰Oost (above, note 5) 5 f; Clover (above, note 3) 21; A. Loyen, *REA* 74 (1972) 168.

²¹Johannes was executed in 425 (Philostorgius, *HE* 12.13). For his age and career, cf. O. Seeck, *RE* 9 (1916), 1745 f. Vollmer tamely conceded that *poetae verba non apte concinunt cum testimoniis aliorum* ([above, note 13] 3).

²²Compare *Carm.* 2.9: *socia cum coniuge princeps* (of Valentinian and his consort); *Pan.* 1, frag. 2 A, 2 ff.: *pro his me laudibus tuis Roma cum principe* (i.e., Valentinian) *victuro aere formavit, pro his denique nuper ad honoris maximi nomen ille nascenti soli proximus imperator exivit* (i.e., Theodosius).

²³On which, see Clover (above, note 3) 52 ff.

²⁴Clover (above, note 3) 22: "Merobaudes, then, devotes much of verses 5–10 to meditating on a mosaic decoration showing Valentinian, Eudoxia, and Huniric at the center of a palace room's ceiling."

²⁵*CTh, Gesta senatus*; *MGH*, Auct. Ant. 9 (1892), 661; 11 (1894), 79; *Annales Ravennatenses* a. 437 (ed. B. Bischoff, *Studi romagnoli* 3 [1952] 6).

²⁶E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire* 1^a (Paris 1959) 323 f; 577 f.

Precisely in 437, however, so it appears, Tibatto, leader of the Bacaudae in central Gaul, was defeated and captured.²⁷ His fate is unknown, and it is possible that he was taken to Ravenna for triumphal ceremonies which also celebrated the return of Valentinian with his wife. If Tibatto is the *novus exul*, all seems to fall into place: the victory and marriage, the exile grieving at the loss of his wealth.

It may nonetheless be premature to assume that Merobaudes refers either to an otherwise attested victory or to a known person. The description *novus exul* is barely apposite to an insurgent like Tibatto. Since the words would better suit a defeated barbarian king or prince, they might refer to an unknown victory in Gaul. On an occasion not far removed in time from Merobaudes' poem, the Roman Senate honoured Aetius: he had secured the safety of Italy, they proclaimed, by defeating distant tribes, destroying the Burgundians and overwhelming the Goths.²⁸ The inscription and the poem might both contain an allusion to the same victory.²⁹

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²⁷*Chron. Gall. a. 452* §119 (MGH, Auct. Ant. 9.660): *capto Tibattone et ceteris seditionis partim principibus vinctis, partim necatis Bacaudarum commotio conquiescit.*

²⁸*AEpigr* 1950, 30, cf. 54, on which see especially A. Degraffi, *Bull. Comm. Roma* 72 (1946-48), 33 ff. = *Scritti vari di antichità* 1 (Rome, 1962) 299 ff.

²⁹I am grateful to my colleague Richard Tarrant for several very helpful suggestions, and to Alan Cameron for allowing me to see the typescript of a discussion of Merobaudes' poem which restates and amplifies J. B. Bury's interpretation of lines 5-8 (pp. 317-318) in a far more persuasive form. The question appears to depend almost exclusively on the identity of *ipse . . . cum coniuge princeps* (line 5), whom I feel obliged to identify as Valentinian, not Theodosius.