

## THE CAREER OF THE *COMES HISPANLARUM* ASTERIUS

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IN THE YEAR 420, THE ROMAN *COMES* ASTERIUS launched an attack on a group of Vandals in the Roman province of Gallaecia, forcing them to break off their war against the Sueves and fight the Romans instead. This campaign has long been known to us from the work of the Gallaecian bishop Hydatius, who continued the fourth-century chronicle of Eusebius-Jerome down to 468. Hydatius' account presents certain problems, but until recently our knowledge of Asterius derived only from it and a short notice in Gregory of Tours which records the count's elevation to the patriciate.<sup>1</sup> However, the recently discovered letters of St Augustine, published by Johannes Divjak in 1981, shed new light on the career of Asterius.<sup>2</sup> Two of the letters in Divjak's collection, numbers 11\* and 12\*, were addressed to Augustine by a certain Consentius, a Christian layman of Minorca. Letter 11\* describes at length the tribulations of a monk named Fronto who had attempted at Consentius' behest to expose heretics in the province of Tarraconensis. Among those whom Fronto accuses of heresy are certain relatives of the *comes* Asterius, who, as Consentius tells the story, himself attempts to intervene on behalf of his relatives. The quarrels of Fronto and his adversaries are acrimonious in the extreme, and Consentius' letter 11\* has been much studied as an illustration of internecine conflict within the church of late Roman Tarraconensis.<sup>3</sup> The same letters, however, also suggest a new interpretation of the career of Asterius and of the history of Spain in the last years of Honorius' reign.

As it happens, we know only a very little about Spanish history in these years, and most of what we do know comes from Hydatius. He tells us of the imperially-sponsored Gothic campaign against the Vandals and Alans in Carthaginiensis, Baetica, and Lusitania; of the subsequent withdrawal of the Goths, the stationing of a Roman army in the peninsula, and the return of civil officials; and of the campaign of the *comes* Asterius against the Vandals which resulted in their emigration from Gallaecia into Baetica. On the other hand, Hydatius says nothing of another important event, the second usurpation of Maximus. This Maximus

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<sup>1</sup>Hyd. 66; Greg. Tur. Hist. 2.9. All citations of Hydatius are drawn from Burgess's new edition with revised numeration (Burgess 1993: 69–123) rather than from Mommsen's or Tranoy's earlier texts (Mommsen 1894: 13–36; Tranoy 1974).

<sup>2</sup>The new letters are printed in Divjak 1981, and are numbered from 1\* to 29\*. The asterisk distinguishes them from the series of Augustinian letters already known. The importance of the new letters to late Roman prosopography and the *PLRE* was recognized immediately: see Delmaire 1983.

<sup>3</sup>Amengual i Batle 1979–80; Díaz y Díaz 1982; La Bonnardiére 1983; Amengual i Batle 1984; Frend 1990. Van Dam 1986: *passim* and Burrus 1995: 115–125 are the best treatments.

is a man of uncertain origin, who had first been made emperor during the civil war between the usurper Constantine III and his rebellious general Gerontius.<sup>4</sup> Our narrative framework has necessarily been supplied by Hydatius, but since Maximus' second reign finds no place in the bishop's chronicle, it has always been very difficult to fit this usurpation into any comprehensible context. It is possible, however, that Consentius' letter 11\* provides the information that would give Maximus' second reign some kind of context. Consentius refers to Asterius as the "illustrious man to whom was entrusted the command of a very great army and the direction of a very great war" (*vir illustris cui tanti exercitus cura et tanti belli summa commissa est*). This locution, not in itself particularly striking, is in fact very unusual and finds an echo only in the pages of Orosius' *Historiae*, where very similar language is used to describe the campaign of an imperial *comes* directed specifically against a usurper. The verbal parallel may be no more than fortuitous, but in combination with our other scraps of information it is enough to suggest that one thing Asterius accomplished in Spain was the suppression of Maximus' second usurpation.

Let us look at Maximus first. He was first made emperor by the general Gerontius in 409, when Gerontius rebelled against Constantine III. Constantine was himself a usurper who had come to power in 407 in response to the invasion of Gaul by Vandals, Sueves, and Alans. The motive for Gerontius' rebellion is unclear to us, though it seems likely that he feared replacement as Constantine's chief military figure in the Spanish provinces. Be that as it may, Gerontius raised the standard of rebellion by nominating his retainer Maximus emperor at Tarraco. Maximus maintained some sort of government in the Spanish provinces from 409 to 411.<sup>5</sup> A passage of Hydatius refers to tax collectors who must have served his government. In addition, the mint at Barcino struck coins in his name and there is evidence for major construction work on that city's walls during his reign.<sup>6</sup> Despite this, it is clear that Maximus reigned only as long as Gerontius was nearby. As soon as Gerontius left Spain to carry the fight against Constantine into Gaul, those Vandals, Sueves, and Alans who had by now penetrated into Spain set about dividing the provinces between them.<sup>7</sup> Maximus fell in 411, shortly after Gerontius, defeated in battle and faced by a mutinous soldiery, had committed suicide.<sup>8</sup> The short-reigned usurper, we are told, was deposed by Gallic soldiers and fled to live among the barbarians.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup>The best of many modern narratives of this civil war are Stein 1959: 249–264; Demougeot 1951: 376–396; Stevens 1957; Arce 1988; Drinkwater 1998.

<sup>5</sup>Olympiodorus fr. 16 (Müller) = 17 (Blockley); Sozomen (ed. Bidez/Hanson) 9.13.1. See also the narratives cited in n. 4.

<sup>6</sup>Hyd. 40 refers to *exactores tyrannici* who in 410 can have served no emperor save Maximus. Mint: *RIC* 10.150–151, 351 with references. Walls: Járrega Domínguez 1991.

<sup>7</sup>Hyd. 41.

<sup>8</sup>Soz. 9.13.4–7.

<sup>9</sup>Oros. *Hist.* 7.42.5: "Maximus was divested of the purple and deposed by the Gallic soldiers, who were transferred to Africa and then recalled to Italy, and now dwells in exile amongst the barbarians

All of this is relatively straightforward, but Maximus' subsequent career is considerably murkier. The most connected account we possess of his second usurpation comes from a fifth-century continuation of Jerome's chronicle, written in the south of Gaul and usually referred to as the *Chronica Gallica anno 452* after the date of its last entry.<sup>10</sup> According to this chronicle, Maximus was proclaimed emperor in Spain some time at the end of the second decade of the fifth century, was defeated some time thereafter, and then led in triumph at the tricennalia of the emperor Honorius.<sup>11</sup> The Chronicler is not among our most reliable sources for the early fifth century and he offers no precise chronology.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Maximus' defeat and his appearance at Honorius' tricennalia are well-attested in two other sources.<sup>13</sup> Both record the deposition of Maximus, along with a certain Jovinianus who is otherwise unknown, under the year 422.<sup>14</sup> This, along with the testimony of Orosius already cited, provides the chronological framework within which we can place the second usurpation of Maximus. Orosius refers to Maximus as "now dwelling amongst the barbarians in Spain" (*nunc inter barbaros in Hispania egens*), and the "now" of Orosius is 417. Honorius' tricennalia, at which Maximus was displayed, will have been celebrated in 422 either on or around his *dies imperii* of 23 January. Sometime between these dates, then, Maximus became emperor for a second time.

We can gain greater precision only if we are willing to admit that the relative chronology of the Gallic Chronicler is roughly accurate. His regnal years are no help because, as Burgess has shown, they are no more than a notational fiction with

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in Spain" (*Maximus exutus purpura destitusque a militibus Gallicanis, qui in Africam traieci, deinde in Italiam revocati sunt, nunc inter barbaros in Hispania egens exulat*).

<sup>10</sup> Edited by Mommsen in the first volume of the *Chronica minora*, MGH AA 9.646–662. R. W. Burgess has long been promising a much-needed new edition.

<sup>11</sup> *Chron. Gall. a. 452* (= MGH AA 9.656): "The usurper Maximus obtained rulership of the Spanish provinces by force . . . . The usurper Maximus was deposed, taken to Ravenna and displayed with immense spectacle at the tricennalia of Honorius" (*XXVII . . . Maximus tyrannus Hispaniarum dominatum vi optinet . . . XXX. Maximus tyrannus de regno deicitur ac Ravennam perductus sublimem spectaculorum pompam tricennalibus Honori praeibit*).

<sup>12</sup> Burgess 1994: 243, which along with Burgess 1990 is a response to Jones and Casey 1988 and Jones and Casey 1991. Taken together, Burgess's two articles are the best available study of the chronicle and a useful supplement to Muhlberger 1990: 136–192.

<sup>13</sup> Marcellinus Comes *sub anno 422* (= MGH AA 11.75): *HONORII XIII ET THEODOSII X. in tricennalia Honorii Maximus tyrannus et Iovinus ferro vincti de Hispania adducti atque interfecti sunt*; *Annales Ravennae, sub anno 422* (= Bischoff and Koehler 1939: 127): *his consulibus adducti sunt de Hispania Maximus tyrannus et Iovinianus cum [. . .]alen . . . tricennalia Honorii et . . . ducti sunt in pompa ferro. . . .* The entry is accompanied by an illustration of a Roman soldier leading two bound captives by a rope.

<sup>14</sup> Scharf (1992: 377) believes that the Jovinus of Marcellinus and the Jovinianus of the Ravenna Annals are misplaced references to the Gallic usurper of 411–413. But the Annals of Ravenna know about that Jovinus (*sub anno 412* = Bischoff and Koehler 1939: 127) and clearly distinguish him from the Jovinianus who was displayed alongside Maximus in 422. As *PLRE* 2.622 recognizes, the latter must have been one of Maximus' chief supporters.

no reference to reality outside the chronicle.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the Chronicler does record a sequence of events that may provide a relative chronology: a solar eclipse, a portent in the sky, Maximus' usurpation, the accession and death of Constantius, the defeat and deposition of Maximus, and the tricennalia of Honorius. As it happens, parts of this sequence can be dated. The chronicler's solar eclipse occurred on 19 January 418, while the portent appears to be a comet attested on 25 July 419.<sup>16</sup> Constantius became emperor on 8 February 421.<sup>17</sup> If we allow that the Chronicler has got his relative chronology right, then Maximus became emperor some time between July 419 and February 421. He will thus have reigned for as much as two and a half years before his defeat and deposition.

That, in full, is our evidence for the second usurpation of Maximus. This article will suggest that it was the *comes* Asterius who defeated Maximus and sent him to Italy to grace the imperial celebrations. But before we can turn to that question, we must look at what we have hitherto known of the career of Asterius, and see what sort of place a campaign against the usurper might have had in it. Apart from Consentius' letter 11\*, we have two references to Asterius. In Hydatius, as we have said, Asterius appears fighting the Vandals in Gallaecia, forcing them to break off their siege of Hermeric's Sueves. As Hydatius puts it, "the Vandals were dissuaded from their siege of the Sueves by pressure from Asterius, the *comes Hispaniarum*, and after some men under the command of the *vicarius* Maurocellus were killed in their flight from Braga, the rest <of the Vandals> left Gallaecia behind and crossed into Baetica."<sup>18</sup> It is hard to know what to make of this notice. It is regularly portrayed as a victory for Roman arms,<sup>19</sup> but it is not at all clear from the language of Hydatius that he thought of it as one. Not only are his intentions opaque, but his language is as well. The narrative thrust of the entry is clearly an account of the Vandals, but from a grammatical standpoint the men killed at Braga must be Romans.<sup>20</sup> This fact alone makes it hard to read the entry as a description of a Roman victory. Moreover, within the political framework of the period the results of the campaign suggest Roman disaster more than Roman success.

<sup>15</sup> Burgess 1990.

<sup>16</sup> This is the only solar eclipse between 417 and 419 that would have been visible in Spain or Gaul: see Mucke and Meeus 1992: 160–161 and 383. The portent is also attested by the *Excerpta Sangallensia* 545 (= *MGH AA* 9.300) and Hyd. 65.

<sup>17</sup> Theophanes (ed. de Boor) *anno mundi* 5913.

<sup>18</sup> Hyd. 66: *Vandali Suevorum obsidione dimissa instante Astirio Hispaniarum comite et sub vicario Maurocello aliquantis Bracara in exitu suo occisis relicta Gallicia ad Beticam transierunt.*

<sup>19</sup> For example, with variations of detail, Bury 1923: 1.204; Schmidt 1933: 110; Schmidt 1942: 26; Stein 1959: 267–269; Jones 1964: 1.188; Stroheker 1972–74: 597.

<sup>20</sup> There is also some ambiguity over the position of Maurocellus. It is entirely possible that he is the diocesan *vicarius* (thus *PLRE* 2.738) and that the vicarial office had been restored in 418 along with the diocesan capital at Emerita. On the other hand, civil officials like *vicarii* should not be in command of troops (Jones 1964: 1.373–375) and it is, therefore, possible that Hydatius has used the term *vicarius* in a non-technical way to refer to a subordinate military officer of some sort.

Since the end of the Gothic king Wallia's campaigns in 418, there had been no barbarian presence in the Spanish diocese except in Gallaecia, the one Spanish province apart from Tingitania in which the Goths did not campaign. Whatever reasons Constantius might have had for calling off the Gothic campaigns in that year, it seems clear that he was satisfied with the situation in Spain and confident that the Goths could better serve imperial policies in Gaul. Until the campaign of Asterius against Gunderic in 420, there is no sign that either the Vandals or the Sueves posed a threat to the other Iberian provinces. This fact may, of course, be put down to the inadequacy of the historical record, but we should realize that the one thing Hydatius is at greatest pains to record is examples of barbarian perfidy. It is at least reasonable to believe that the peace he records in Spain between 418 and 420 reflects the actual historical situation. Tarraconensis, Carthaginiensis, Baetica, and Lusitania were in Roman hands, and neither the Vandals nor the Sueves who remained in Gallaecia posed a threat to them. Instead, the barbarians posed a threat to each other.

Thus, as Hydatius tells us, "after a dispute had arisen between Gunderic, king of the Vandals, and Hermeric, king of the Sueves, the Sueves were besieged in the Erbasian mountains by the Vandals."<sup>21</sup> We cannot know what brought the two leaders to blows, and indeed we can only guess at the actual site of their conflict.<sup>22</sup> Given that fact, it is just as hard to provide a motive for Asterius' intervention. Much has been made of supposed Roman strategies for preserving a balance of power amongst the peninsular barbarians, but there is nothing of this in Hydatius.<sup>23</sup> One is inclined to see the count's attack on the Vandals as sheer opportunism, an attempt to exploit dissension amongst barbarians for Roman advantage, perhaps with an eye to finishing the work Wallia had begun. Again, such a reading can only be speculative, but either way, the result of the battle cannot have been desired. After all, instead of two barbarian groups confined to the remote province of Gallaecia, there was now a Vandal people active in the Baetican heart of the Spanish diocese. Try as we might, we cannot read the consequences of Asterius' action as a triumph, even if Hydatius did not mean to record the Roman defeat at Braga which his language seems to imply.

If in practical terms we cannot read Asterius' campaigns as a Roman victory, that fact seems not to have affected the progress of the count's own career. We learn from a passage of the fifth-century historian Renatus Profuturus Frigeridus, fragments of whose work are transmitted in the *Historiae* of Gregory of Tours,

<sup>21</sup> Hyd. 63: *inter Gundericum Vandalorum et Hermericum Suevorum reges certamine orto Suevi in Erbasii montibus obsidentur ab Vandalis.*

<sup>22</sup> Flórez (1689: 218) was inclined to identify the Erbasian mountains with the Arvas, between León and Oviedo, a reasonable guess that we cannot confirm. The name may be derived from the *Narbasoi* noted by Ptolemy 2.6.48, who have not themselves been localized with any certainty: Schulten 1936.

<sup>23</sup> Among a great many others Bury 1923: 204; Stein 1959: 267–269; Jones 1964: 1.188; Stroheker 1972–74: 597.

that Asterius was made a patrician shortly after his Spanish campaign.<sup>24</sup> Gregory's text allows us no great chronological precision, but he does tell us that Asterius' promotion came before a campaign of the *comes domesticorum* Castinus against the Franks. Since in 422 we meet Castinus commanding in Spain as *magister militum*, his Frankish campaign as the lower-ranking *comes* must be dated to before that year.<sup>25</sup> As a consequence, so must Asterius' promotion. We can gain slightly greater precision if we reflect that the imperial codicils which made Asterius a patrician are unlikely to have been issued until after Constantius became Augustus and thus relinquished the title of *patricius* himself. Since his rise to power in 410 or 411, Constantius had been extremely jealous of his position, and no other patricians are reliably attested before his promotion as Honorius' imperial colleague.<sup>26</sup> Asterius' promotion should thus be dated to the months between February 421 and Castinus' campaign of 422.

Now it is not of course necessary to succeed to secure promotion, and the patrician dignity was a vague one, denoting rank rather than office.<sup>27</sup> We know altogether too little about politics in and around the court of Honorius and Constantius to suggest much one way or another about the circumstances of Asterius' promotion. That is to say that, in conditions wholly beyond our reconstruction, even a disastrous Vandal campaign could nonetheless have resulted in Asterius' promotion to patrician rank. If, on the other hand, Asterius was responsible for the defeat and deposition of the usurper Maximus, then the success or failure of his Vandal campaign would have been an entirely subordinate issue. For reigning emperors, usurpations were always a primary concern to which barbarian invasions, however serious, were a distant second.<sup>28</sup> The whole reign of Honorius, in fact, can be explained according to that very principle. As the remainder of this article will suggest, it is indeed possible and perhaps even probable that Asterius' main accomplishment in Spain was the suppression of Maximus. That possibility emerges from the text of Consentius' Letter 11\*.

Consentius writes to Augustine to inform him about the anti-Priscillianist programme he has launched in Spain, partly at the behest of Patroclus, metropolitan bishop of Arles (*Ep.* 11\*.1.1–2). Consentius is sending one of his own anti-Priscillianist tracts to Augustine, along with the covering letter we now possess. He only troubles Augustine with any of this because foul weather has detained Augustine's African courier Leonas with Consentius anyway (1.6). This delay,

<sup>24</sup>Greg. Tur. *Hist.* 2.9 (= MGH SRM 1.1.57): *cum autem Asterius codicillis imperialibus patriciatum sortitus fuisset, haec adiungit [Frigeridus]: eodem tempore Castinus domesticorum comes expeditionem in Francos suscepta, ad Gallias mittitur.*

<sup>25</sup>Hyd. 69.

<sup>26</sup>Sabinianus, *patricius* (PLRE 2.966), who is mentioned in the preface to a letter of Honorius preserved in a Pamplonan codex, is almost certainly fictional: see Kulikowski 1998: 250.

<sup>27</sup>The bibliography on the subject is large and inconclusive: see Picotti 1928; Guiland 1965; Heil 1966: 11–50.

<sup>28</sup>On this point, see Elton 1996: 44 and *passim*, with the articles collected in Paschoud and Szidat 1997.

as it happens, has been quite opportune, because it allows Consentius to record and send to Augustine the wondrous story of the monk Fronto, who had acted as Consentius' agent in Spain and who has now turned up suddenly while Leonas remains stranded (1.2–6). In the previous year, Consentius had written to Fronto and instructed him to proceed against the Spanish Priscillianists (1.4), and it is in the course of these proceedings that Fronto encountered Asterius.

The body of the letter is presented as a verbatim transcript of Fronto's own story, though we should of course assume that the language is Consentius' own.<sup>29</sup> Fronto's story is told at great length and occupies nearly twenty pages in Divjak's Vienna edition. The narrative of his heretic-hunting begins at Tarraco on the day he receives a packet from Consentius detailing the latter's anti-Priscillianist campaign. On Consentius' instructions, Fronto immediately targets the heretical woman Severa, pretending to be a heretic himself and quickly worming his way into her confidence. As Fronto tells it, Severa soon revealed events that had taken place in the previous year and which now gave Fronto the ammunition he needed to act (2.2–4). In that year, which is to say two years before Consentius is writing Letter 11\*, a priest of Osca named Severus was waylaid by certain barbarians while in possession of heretical books.<sup>30</sup> The barbarians soon surrendered these books to Sagittius, the bishop of nearby Ilerda, who kept two and sent the third to Titianus, the metropolitan bishop at Tarraco. Titianus forwarded this volume to Severus' immediate ecclesiastical superior, Syagrius of Osca, instructing him to inquire carefully into Severus' orthodoxy. Severus maintained his innocence of the volume's contents, Syagrius was satisfied on this point, and there the matter rested.

This was the state of affairs when Fronto decided to stir up the hornets' nest, though it is unclear how long after the case had been closed Fronto learned of it and determined to act. The monk dragged the whole matter before an ecclesiastical tribunal, bringing an accusation against both Severus and Severa. The latter took refuge with her niece or granddaughter, who happened also to be the daughter of the *comes Hispaniarum* Asterius. Thus deprived of the testimony of Severa, Fronto was left to face the counter-attack of Severus and his many powerful friends and relatives (5.1–4). Severus sent a letter to Asterius accusing Fronto of wounding the count's reputation, and in response to this Asterius came at once to Tarraco and directed his attention to Fronto, who had already been threatened by the fury of the city mob. As Fronto tells the story, Asterius was initially very hostile towards him, but when Fronto spoke boldly of his relatives' heresy, the count became convinced that there was something in these accusations. He refused to take any action and instead departed from Tarraco, asking Fronto's

<sup>29</sup> For Consentius' Latinity, see Wankenne 1983.

<sup>30</sup> Neither Consentius nor Fronto is being particularly precise in his chronology and it is possible that the *anno superiore* of 11\*.1.4 refers to the same year as the *superiore anno* of 11\*.2.4. This would place both Fronto's receipt of Consentius' instructions and the events of Severa's story in the same year, that is, roughly one year before Consentius wrote Letter 11\*.

blessing for his next military project. This is the last that we see of Asterius in the narrative, though Fronto's case drags on for considerably longer. In the end, a council of Spanish bishops is convoked, which burns the suspect books, absolves everyone involved of wrongdoing, and finally destroys its own *acta* so that the case can never be reopened. Fronto, faced with the uniform hostility of the local episcopate and community, is forced to flee, first to Arles, where he meets Patroclus, and then to Consentius, to whom he recounts the whole story.

What actually happened in the years under discussion we shall never know. Accusations of heresy could be bandied about for all sorts of reasons and were in fact part of the standard armoury of polemic. As very few of the letter's commentators have realized, there need be no objective truth at all behind Fronto's accusations.<sup>31</sup> There is certainly no reason to believe, as some have, that early fifth-century Tarraconensis was in reality a hotbed of crypto-heretics and "Priscillianist fellow-travelers."<sup>32</sup> For our understanding of the events chronicled in Consentius' letter, we are entirely reliant upon the testimony of Fronto as mediated through Consentius. We have no external control on the narrative of the letter, and with the exception of Asterius himself, none of the other figures who appear in it are known from outside sources.<sup>33</sup> A conservative reading of the evidence, and perhaps under the circumstances the best one, is that the community of secular clergy in Tarraconensis objected to the presumption of the monkish interloper Fronto and determined not only to present a united front against the intrusion, but also to silence the intruder by the readiest means available. This united front will have been all the stronger if Fronto trumpeted about his connections to the notorious Patroclus of Arles, a man with a reputation for interfering where he had neither cause nor right.<sup>34</sup> It is a well-documented sociological phenomenon that even communities riven with internal dissent will close ranks and lie determinedly to prevent outside interference in their affairs, a fact that should be remembered by those who study Consentius' letter 11\* from the standpoint of religious history.<sup>35</sup> In the present context, however, we may leave that whole question to one side and concentrate instead on what the letter tells us about Asterius.

Stated briefly, the letter suggests that Asterius was a native of Spain and that his main task as *comes Hispaniarum* was the suppression of Maximus' second

<sup>31</sup> Van Dam 1986, now to be supplemented by the very sensitive discussion of "heresy" and "Priscillianism" offered by Burrus 1995. The latter surpasses all other accounts of so-called Priscillianism, simply because it recognizes the social constructions involved in such labels.

<sup>32</sup> Díaz y Díaz 1982: 74.

<sup>33</sup> This is not really all that surprising, as the *fasti* of the Spanish episcopate are essentially one giant lacuna in this period. Moreau (1983) memorably stigmatized the whole letter as "une pastiche hagiographique." This suggestion has rightly found little support and as Eno (1989: 82) points out, the total discomfiture of Fronto's anti-Priscillianist plot strongly suggests the basic authenticity of the narrative.

<sup>34</sup> For Patroclus, see Mathisen 1989: 27–43 and Kulikowski 1996: 163–167.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Wickham 1998 for a medieval case study and suggestive bibliography.



usurpation. The date of the letter has a bearing on both these issues, but establishing that date is no easy task. The question cannot be resolved by internal evidence.<sup>36</sup> Instead, it turns upon the dates of other works in the Augustinian *corpus* combined with the internal chronology of Letter 11\*. The argument for these dates is involved and it is, therefore, relegated to an appendix (see below, 135–139). In the end, Letter 11\* must be dated to between October 420 and May 421. This places the references to Asterius and the trial of Fronto in the central months of 420, which in turn confirms the chronology of Hydatius, who places Asterius' campaign against the Vandals in 420. Assuming for present purposes that the Consentian evidence for Asterius belongs to the middle of 420, let us see exactly what it tells us.

Fronto's account does great credit to the personal character of the count, who is presented as a fair-minded man, unwilling to see himself or his relatives slandered, but equally unwilling to risk his own salvation in defending what has been presented to him as their heresy. Asterius shows himself solicitous of Fronto's well-being, hopes he has not given offence, and wonders whether the monk might not be able to lend his blessing to the count's next campaign: "Forgive, I pray you, servant of Christ, if by chance we have offended in anything, and when you see me marching off to battle with the army, accompany us with the power of your prayers."<sup>37</sup> How much of this is true we shall never know. We can hardly doubt that Fronto's story and Consentius' account of it are self-serving, even if they cleave close to the truth. Despite this doubt, other parts of the letter allow us to draw potentially meaningful conclusions. We learn, in the first place, of the familial relationship between Asterius, Severus, and Severa, a relationship which, as we shall see, suggests that Asterius was a Spaniard. More importantly, we find the count described as the "illustrious man to whom was entrusted the command of a very great army, and the direction of a very great war."<sup>38</sup> This particular phrasing would seem to suggest a campaign not against barbarians in Spain but rather against a usurper, who would in this case have to be Maximus. Let us take the question of Asterius' family first.

Asterius is first mentioned in Fronto's narrative before he actually appears, and is referred to as an in-law of the wicked priest Severus. Severa, who on the basis of their names was almost certainly a relative of Severus, was either the aunt or the grandmother of Asterius' daughter.<sup>39</sup> The precise relationships

<sup>36</sup> *Ep.* 11\*.2.4 has a reference to the departure of some barbarians (*cum anno superiore idem Severus aestimans barbaros longius abscessisse*), which might be interpreted as referring to the Visigothic withdrawal from Spain early in 418. While the inference is logical enough, there were a great many barbarians in Spain in the years around 420 and assuming that this casual reference refers to a single, identifiable event is not justified.

<sup>37</sup> *Ep.* 11\*.12.1–2: *indulge, obsecro, Christi famule, si quid forsitan laesimus meque ad proelium, ut vides, cum exercitu properantem orationum tuarum virtute prosequere!* (translation from Eno 1989: 90).

<sup>38</sup> *Ep.* 11\*.7.3.

<sup>39</sup> *Ep.* 11\*.4.3: "afterwards, however, relying against me on the power of his in-law, the illustrious comes Asterius, Severus persuaded Severa to take refuge with her niece [or granddaughter], a very

are beyond recovery, but it is clear that ties of both blood and marriage bound Asterius to the enemies of Fronto, and that the count felt these ties strongly enough to come to Tarraco on Severus' behalf.<sup>40</sup> The language of the letter hints that these ties were of long standing, and this in turn suggests that Asterius was in fact a Hispano-Roman himself. Asterius is the *affinis* of Severus. Their relationship can be explained by a single marriage of imprecise date, and could thus be consonant with Asterius' recent arrival in Spain from elsewhere. On the other hand, the count's relationship to Severa cannot be explained as simply. Severa is at least middle-aged, and whatever her precise relationship to Asterius' daughter, that daughter is not only an adult but also a powerful figure in her own right. What is more, some words of Asterius himself clearly refer to other relatives besides Severus as being present at the tribunal in Tarraco.<sup>41</sup> Now, if Asterius was not a native or long-time resident of Spain, then he could have arrived there as *comes* no earlier than the beginning of 418, when Constantius' Gothic army vacated the peninsula to make way for a Roman administration. That the count could have established so broad a familial network in two short years seems most unlikely. Instead, it would appear that he was a native of the province, one whose family belonged to the Hispano-Roman elite. There may, in fact, be a family connection between our Asterius and the *magister militum* Asturius, consul in 449, who was sent to Spain in 441 to fight the Tarraconensian Bacaudae, and who was also the father-in-law of Flavius Merobaudes, the poet and *magister militum*, himself a native of Spain.<sup>42</sup> These relationships can only be speculative, and even a cursory glance at the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* will show that the name Asterius is by no means uncommon, nor by any means confined to Spaniards.<sup>43</sup> But in this instance, the evidence of Letter 11\* alone is enough. Asterius was probably a Spaniard, and if he was, it should come as no surprise. It is well known that after the dark years of usurpation between 406 and 415, Constantius' administrative reorganization of Gaul in 418 ensured that Gallo-Romans were thereafter consistently entrusted with the great Gallic administrative posts.<sup>44</sup> The

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influential woman and the daughter of the *comes* Asterius" (*post autem cum adversum me Severus illustris atque praecelsi vir, affinis sui, Asterii comitis viribus niteretur, id egit, ut mulier memorata [sc. Severa] ad neptis suae Asterii comitis filiae, potentissimae feminae auxilium convolveret*).

<sup>40</sup> *Ep.* 11\*.7.3 shows that Asterius arrived at Tarraco from elsewhere: *venit protinus Tarraconem vir illustris Asterius*.

<sup>41</sup> *Ep.* 11\*.11.8: "nevertheless it is certain that the faith of Severus and the others, though they are bound to me by blood kinship, cannot harm my faith" (*Severi autem et ceterorum fidem, quamvis aliqua mihi consanguinitate iungantur, tamen certum est fidei meae obesse non posse*).

<sup>42</sup> Asturius: Hyd. 117, 120 with *PLRE* 2.174–175 (Astyrius); Merobaudes: Hyd. 120 with *PLRE* 2.756–758 and Clover 1971: 8, though the latter maintains that Merobaudes was not a Spaniard by birth.

<sup>43</sup> *PLRE* 1 lists four genuine Asterii, *PLRE* 2, twelve, and *PLRE* 3 a mere three.

<sup>44</sup> See Stroheker 1948: 43–83 with Matthews 1975: 329–351.

case of Asterius would suggest that imperial policy took the same shape in Spain as it did in Gaul, with important Hispano-Romans being appointed to important Spanish posts.

This inference must of course remain speculative, and we can now turn from one speculative inference to another, that is to say, to the question of whom Asterius was actually in Spain to fight. The count, we are told, had been entrusted with the command of a very great army and the outcome of a very great war (7.3). These words are not easy to reconcile with a punitive campaign against a Vandal chieftain, especially since throughout Letter 11\* Consentius is totally dismissive of any barbarian problem.<sup>45</sup> They make much more sense in reference to a campaign against a usurper, and as it happens, a passage of Orosius provides a suggestive parallel:

*Anno ab Urbe condita MCLXV Honorius imperator, videns tot oppositis tyrannis nihil adversus barbaros agi posse, ipsos prius tyrannos deleri iubet. Constantio comiti huius belli summa commissa est. sensit tunc demum respublica et quam utilitatem in Romano tandem duce receperit et quam eatenus perniciem per longa tempora barbaris comitibus subiecta tolerarit. igitur Constantius comes in Galliam cum exercitu profectus, Constantinum imperatorem apud Arelatem civitatem clausit cepit occidit.* (Oros. Hist. 7.42.1–3).<sup>46</sup>

The parallels between the underlined passages of Orosius and the key line of Consentius' letter (7.3: *Asterius comes cui tanti exercitus cura et tanti belli summa commissa est*) are immediately obvious. The phrasing is distinctive and in fact unique. That the parallel is merely fortuitous is not in this instance very plausible. We are dealing with two Hispano-Roman authors who wrote within four years of each other. Perhaps more importantly, our authors had met. Late in 416, Orosius stopped in Minorca and stayed there with bishop Severus, a friend and literary collaborator of Consentius.<sup>47</sup> In the company of Severus, Orosius and Consentius

<sup>45</sup> E.g., Ep. 11\*.1.4: "Spain so swarms with Priscillianists that compared to them, the barbarians seem next to no problem" (*Priscillianistas quibus ita Hispaniae scatent ut circa eos tantum barbari nihil egisse videantur*), though this sort of sectarian special pleading needs to be treated with care. Better evidence are the barbarians who steal Severus' baggage, in which they find the three suspect books (11\*.2.4–5). Robbers and *hostes* they might be, but their integration into the daily lives of the Spanish provincials is complete since their first thought is to head to town and sell their literary loot to the bishop. Whether these barbarians were Visigothic federates or local Sueve or Vandal settlers is entirely beside the point. Barbarians *per se* were not a threat to inspire the great war conducted by Asterius.

<sup>46</sup> "In the 1165th year after the founding of the city, the emperor Honorius, seeing that nothing could be done about the barbarians with so many usurpers opposing him, ordered that the usurpers be destroyed first. The highest command in this war was entrusted to the *comes* Constantius. It was then that the Roman state understood what benefit it received in finally having a Roman commander and how much damage it had borne when subject to barbarian *comites*. Then the *comes* Constantius advanced into Gaul with an army and, at the city of Arles, besieged, captured, and killed the emperor Constantine" (translation modified from Deferrari 1964: 359).

<sup>47</sup> For the literary influence of Consentius on Severus' letter on the conversion of the Jews, see Bradbury 1996: 53–69.

had discussed at least the problem of Pelagianism and probably other things as well.<sup>48</sup> It is possible that Consentius had seen a copy of Orosius' *Historiae*. Even though Consentius admits in another letter to Augustine that he rarely made it all the way through a book (*Ep.* 12\*.2), Orosius' history is precisely the sort of thing he would not have minded reading, with its perfectly adequate prose and complete lack of intellectual or theological heft. We cannot tell how it happened, but so close and uncommon a verbal parallel in the work of acquaintances can only with effort be explained by mere chance. Some kind of unconscious imitation, whether of written or spoken words, is much likelier. That is to say, when Consentius came to write about Asterius, his language took on echoes of Orosius on a very similar episode, the campaign of an imperial *comes* against a usurping emperor in a region where barbarians were a definite, but secondary, problem.

What are we to conclude? I would suggest that Asterius' main Spanish campaign was directed against the usurper Maximus, and that it was this that won him his promotion to the patriciate, rather than his at best inconclusive campaign against the Vandals. It remains to be asked whether the campaign against the usurper and that against the barbarians were linked. Some sort of connection between Maximus' second usurpation and the peninsular barbarians has long been assumed. The fact that in 417 Maximus was in hiding amongst the barbarians makes the proposition likely. All the same, the connection must remain hypothetical, and we cannot speculate meaningfully about how Gunderic, Hermeric, and Maximus all fitted together.<sup>49</sup> Our best source for the period is Hydatius and he is entirely silent about Maximus' usurpation. This in itself need not disturb us too much, for Hydatius can be a tendentious author. His organizing theme is one of Roman defeat at the hands of barbarians. The climax of his chronicle is the devastation wrought on Spain by a Gothic army in Roman service, and the rest of his account is structured to lead up to that event. It is not impossible that he excluded all reference to the usurpation of Maximus in order to magnify the damage done by Gunderic's barbarians. Just as we do not need the word of Hydatius to know that Maximus' second usurpation was a historical reality, so we do not need his word to suggest that the *comes Hispaniarum* Asterius fought the usurper Maximus and deposed him. This, rather than the ambiguous campaign against the Vandals which Hydatius records, will have been the real achievement of Asterius' tenure as count. And while it is by no means impossible that the Vandal campaign could have led to Asterius' promotion to the patriciate, the new rank makes a good deal more sense as a reward for the suppression of a usurper.

As this article has tried to suggest, there is good reason to think that the *comes* Asterius was responsible for putting down the second revolt of Maximus. If this is true, then we now have a more secure framework for Spanish history in the years

<sup>48</sup> *Ep.* 12\*.9. For the date of Orosius' visit with Severus, see Bradbury 1996: 25.

<sup>49</sup> For speculative reconstructions, see Stein 1959: 269; Scharf 1992.

between Wallia's reconquest in 418 and Castinus' abortive campaign against the Vandals in 422. In those years, it now seems likely, a Hispano-Roman aristocrat was appointed to command an army in the peninsula, whether to safeguard the results of the Gothic reconquest or to perform some more specific task we cannot know. Some time after July 419, the former usurper Maximus became emperor for a second time. In that same year, the Vandal king Gunderic and the Suevic king Hermeric came to blows. The new *comes* Asterius intervened in both affairs. His attack on Gunderic had a most ambiguous result, for Gunderic left off fighting the Sueves and attacked the Roman army instead. What precisely followed is unclear, but the Vandals left distant Gallaecia and moved into the recently restored province of Baetica instead. If the Vandal campaign was thus a failure, then Asterius' campaign against Maximus was a much greater success. In the middle of 420, when Consentius' letter introduces us to Asterius, the count is either about to set off on the campaign or has returned from the front to deal with Fronto's accusations. Either way, Maximus had been defeated by late in 421, for in January 422 he was displayed at the celebrations marking Honorius' tricennalia.

In that same year, Castinus was sent to Spain to deal with the problem of the Vandals in Baetica, a problem created by Asterius' moves against Gunderic in 420. Asterius himself, however, had already received the dignity of the patriciate. The consequences of that promotion are not especially clear, for the patriciate was an honour and not in itself an office. It is nevertheless safe to suggest that Asterius was granted this honour in gratitude for the suppression of a usurper, an action that far overshadowed his much less brilliant performance against the Spanish barbarians. Honorius' reign, as contemporaries recognized, was plagued by a whole *catalogus tyrannorum*.<sup>50</sup> The emperor was preserved by an almost equally long catalogue of able generals. It now seems that we should add Asterius to that second list, as the man who ensured that the last of the tyrants would grace the tricennalia of Honorius, an emperor who in the end survived each and every one of his many challengers.

#### APPENDIX: THE DATE OF EPISTULA 11\*

As we have seen, there is no way to date Letter 11\* solely from internal evidence. Instead, its date can be derived from its relative chronology combined with the testimony of two other sources, Consentius' own Letter 12\* and Augustine's *Contra mendacium*.<sup>51</sup> The first of these provides us with a *terminus post quem* for Letter 11\*, the second provides the *terminus ante quem*. If we turn first to

<sup>50</sup> See Polemius Silvius 1.79 (= *MGHAA* 9.523) and Oros. 7.42.

<sup>51</sup> Letter 12\* is printed in Divjak 1981: 70–80, while the *Contra mendacium* is printed in *CSEL* 41.467–528. That the Consentius of Letter 11\* is the same Consentius who wrote Letter 12\* is beyond question. Whether we are to identify him with another Consentius who appears in the corpus of Augustine's letters is another matter. A man named Consentius sent *Ep.* 119 to Augustine and received *Ep.* 120 in reply, while a Consentius also received *Ep.* 205. Basic rules of historical economy suggest that we identify only one Consentius in all this, but problems of tone, style, and content

Letter 12\*, we realize immediately that it must have been written before Letter 11\*, since Consentius begins it with a long and rather offputting defence of his own inactivity while listing his few accomplishments (12\*.1–2). But as we have seen, in the introduction to Letter 11\* Consentius draws attention to his three anti-Priscillianist works. Had they already been written, they would surely figure in the list of the author's accomplishments in Letter 12\*. They do not, and we must, therefore, conclude that Letter 12\* predates Letter 11\*. Now, we also know that Letter 12\* must date from later than December 418, when pope Zosimus died, since Consentius knows he is dead (12\*.16.1). We cannot know how quickly that news reached Minorca, but Consentius cannot have found out about Zosimus' death before March 419 at the earliest.<sup>52</sup> Letter 11\* must, therefore, date from after March 419 as well.

Yet there is still more. Letter 11\* must in fact date from more than a year after Letter 12\*, as we can infer from the letter's own internal chronology. As we saw, Fronto's mission began roughly a year before Consentius composed Letter 11\*.<sup>53</sup> By the time that mission began, Consentius had already written at least one anti-Priscillianist tract that he forwarded to Fronto along with his instructions (11\*.2.1). As we just saw, Consentius had composed nothing of the sort when he wrote Letter 12\*. Even if we allow a preternatural speed of composition in Consentius, we are taken more than a year beyond the date of Letter 12\*. If Letter 12\* dates at the earliest from March 419, then our *terminus post quem* for Letter 11\* must be summer 420 or so.

To find a *terminus ante quem* for the letter, we must turn to Augustine's *Contra mendacium*. The full title of this treatise is actually *Ad Consentium contra mendacium* and it is a response both to Letter 11\* and to the anti-Priscillianist book or books which Consentius had sent along with it. In the *Contra mendacium* Augustine offers a thorough-going condemnation of the strategy of deception that Consentius had adopted and for which he had solicited Augustine's approval. By dating the *Contra mendacium*, we produce the *terminus ante quem* for Letter 11\*. Now, from Augustine's introduction, we know that the *Contra mendacium*

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interpose themselves. Van Dam (1986: 532–535) argues that we are dealing with at least two and perhaps three different Consentii. His arguments are very persuasive, although, as is the nature of such problems, not wholly probative. The problem need not concern us here, since nothing in letters 119, 120, or 205 can be brought to bear on the contents or date of letters 11\* and 12\*.

<sup>52</sup>This statement is grounded on the proverbial ancient dislike of sailing between October and May save under compulsion (see, e.g., Casson 1971: 270–272, with the exceptions to this general rule tabulated in Saint-Denis 1947 and Rougé 1952). Duncan-Jones (1990: 7–29) demonstrates how much more slowly news travelled in winter, and stresses the very consistent seasonal variations in the speed of communications within the Mediterranean. Braudel (1972: 1.248–253) reminds us that precisely the same difficulties remained current in the sixteenth century. It is not impossible that Consentius could have learned of Zosimus' December death some time in midwinter, but the balance of probability is against it and in allowing for him getting the news as early as March we are possibly being overly optimistic.

<sup>53</sup>*Ep.* 11\*.1.4.

was composed in March or April, right before the annual opening of the seas, but this fact does not help determine the year of composition.<sup>54</sup> Internal evidence gets us no further. However, the basic framework for the dating of Augustine's works has always been the order in which he treats them in the *Retractationes*. The *Retractationes* establish a relative chronology within which some works can be reliably dated from outside sources. Everything else can then be dated at least approximately by reference to the securely-dated works.<sup>55</sup> Within the *Retractationes*, the *Contra mendacium* is treated in book 2, chapter 60. It is flanked by the *Contra Gaudentium* (*Retr.* 2.59) and the *Contra duas epistolas Pelagianorum* (2.61). We know that the second of these works was written before Augustine learned of the death of Boniface I, to whom he dedicated the work. Boniface died on 4 September 422, so the anti-Pelagian treatise must have been written by late in that year. The *terminus ante quem* for the *Contra mendacium*, written in springtime before the anti-Pelagian tract, is, therefore, April 422.

The *terminus post quem* is somewhat more difficult. The *Contra Gaudentium*, which stands directly before the *Contra mendacium*, cannot be dated precisely. On the other hand, the *Gesta cum Emerito*, which appears in the *Retractationes* as the ninth work before the *Contra mendacium* (*Retr.* 2.51), dates to September 418.<sup>56</sup> The *De anima et eius origine*, which succeeds the *Gesta cum Emerito* in the *Retractationes*, almost certainly dates from after summer 419.<sup>57</sup> The *termini* for the *Contra mendacium* are, therefore, summer 419 and April 422, though its date must be much closer to the latter than to the former. Attempts at extracting a more precise chronology from the *Retractationes* tend to get bogged down among too many variables.<sup>58</sup> The three-year period in which the *Contra mendacium* must have been written might seem far too broad to help our enquiry very much, but we can improve upon it if we turn to the chronological relationship between the *Contra mendacium* and Consentius' letters.

Augustine opens his treatise with an apology for his long delay in writing. It is a year since he received the material brought him from Consentius by Leonas, and he has only now had time to respond as the work deserves (*Contra mend.* 1.1).

<sup>54</sup> *Contra mend.* 1.1 (= CSEL 41.473): "I must reply in some way, so that I don't detain further a courier eager to return now that the sailing season has opened" (*ut quomodocumque rescriberem, ne aridente iam tempore navigandi perlatorem remeare cupientem diutius detinerem*). On the sailing season, see above, n. 52. If May was recognized as being the first truly safe month for travel, then the earliest we can push the start of the sailing season in the present context is late March or April.

<sup>55</sup> The reliability of the chronology in the *Retractationes* has been proved empirically again and again (see especially Perler 1969), and under such circumstances the burden of proof must lie with those who dispute their chronological arrangement. Attempts have been made to challenge the strict chronological structure of the *Retractationes*: most recently Berrouard 1983: 318–319. Many of Berrouard's points are provocative, but none of them is probative, and the traditional approach must stand.

<sup>56</sup> Perler 1969: 347.

<sup>57</sup> Perler 1969: 363.

<sup>58</sup> Thus Perler (1969: 360–365) gives a much more precise chronology than is accepted here.

Letter 11\* was thus written one year before the *Contra mendacium*. As we saw in our summary of Letter 11\*, Fronto's mission began a year before the composition of Letter 11\*, while the priest Severus made his fateful journey some time in the year before Fronto received Consentius' instructions. A relative chronology spanning three years is thus established, even if our three sources are not being especially literal in their use of chronological indicators.<sup>59</sup>

Fronto received his instructions at the start of year one, Consentius wrote Letter 11\* a year or so after that, and Augustine wrote the *Contra mendacium* in the springtime a year or so later still. Now, during this three-year period, between the *terminus post quem* for Letter 12\*, and the *terminus ante quem* for the *Contra mendacium*, there emerges a single date around which Letter 11\* must have been written.

Letter 12\*, as we have seen, dates from March 419 at the earliest, while Letter 11\* must have been written more than a year later. At the same time, Letter 11\* dates from a year before the *Contra mendacium*, which was written in April before 422. But because of the *terminus post quem* for Letter 12\*, the *Contra mendacium* can only have been written in spring 422, since if we place it in spring 421 we can no longer accommodate the rest of our chronological data. We may gain some clarity by presenting this information in tabular form:

1. after March 419: Letter 12\*
2. unknown time-lapse before 3
3. Fronto receives Consentius' instructions
4. year after 3: Letter 11\*
5. year after 4, by March/April 422: *Contra mendacium*

As the table shows schematically, there is only one variable in our relative chronology, and that is the length of time it took Consentius to compose at least one of his anti-Priscillianist writings in order to send them to Fronto. There is no way to supply that variable, but even so we are left with a very short period of months in which Letter 11\* could have been written. To repeat the table with dates attached:

1. spring/summer 419: Letter 12\*
2. several months in 419/420
3. spring/summer 420: Fronto receives Consentius' packet
4. winter 420/spring 421: Letter 11\*
5. March/April 422: *Contra mendacium*

We can thus pin the composition of Letter 11\* to within a period of roughly six months between October 420 and May 421, not as precise a date as we might have wished for, but a much clearer one than we have had until now. Whether this

<sup>59</sup> See above, n. 30. Whether we place Severus' journey in the year before or in the same year as Fronto received Consentius' instructions, the chronological argument here is not affected.



date has consequences for the religious history of the period remains to be seen. For the purposes of the argument presented here, it places the meeting of Fronto and the *comes Hispaniarum* Asterius in the central months of 420. It thus confirms what Hydatius tells us about the chronology of Asterius' career, and provides us with a part of the foundation on which the hypotheses of the foregoing article are based.

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