

# Ancient Documents and their Contexts

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## Vergil and Ovid at the Tomb of Agnes: Constantina, Epigraphy, and the Genesis of Christian Poetry

*Dennis E. Trout*

It was almost surely in the 340s that the empress Constantina founded the first Roman basilica dedicated to the martyr Agnes and installed therein a precocious fourteen-hexameter inscription. At the time Constantina, eldest daughter of Constantine I and Fausta, was probably in her 30s. In 335 her father had married her to one of his nephews, Hannibalianus, whom the aging emperor had established as King of Pontus and Cappadocia, but Hannibalianus had perished in the purge that followed Constantine's death in 337. More than a decade later, in 351, Constantina's brother and then sole Augustus, Constantius II, would send her to Antioch as the wife of their cousin, the Caesar Gallus – and it was there in the East, in Bithynia, that Constantina died in 354.<sup>1</sup> Biography and, as we will see, archaeology and epigraphy, too, conspire to promote the 340s, the decade of Constantina's inter-marital widowhood, as the years that saw both her patronage of Agnes's suburban funerary hall and her installation there of the ambitious dedicatory epigram that, there are good reasons to believe, she herself composed for the occasion.

Visitors to Agnes's Via Nomentana site today, of course, spend most of their time not in Constantina's basilica but in her mausoleum, now the stunning Santa Costanza, which stands adjacent to her basilica proper and which received the empress's body when it was returned to Rome from Bithynia in 354. Or they wander through the basilica *ad corpus* that in the early seventh century Pope Honorius I (625–638) built directly over Agnes's subterranean tomb some one-hundred meters to the east of Constantina's basilica and from which they can access Sant'Agnese's catacombs. They tend to walk past the ruins of Constantina's basilica, rediscovered in the nineteenth century and now no more than a grassy expanse partially defined by the remains of the

<sup>1</sup> *PLRE* 1, 222, “Constantina 2”; Kienast 1990: 313–14. She may have been born ca. 320, was the eldest daughter of Constantine I and Fausta (*PLRE* 1, 325–26), and was married to Constantine's nephew Hannibalianus (*PLRE* 1, 407, “Hannibalianus 2”) from 335 to 337. Her subsequent marriage to the Caesar Gallus (*PLRE* 1, 224–25, “Constantius 4”) occurred in 351. Ammianus (14.11.6) records her death in Bithynia in 354 and (21.1.5) burial on the Via Nomentana.

ambulatory structure's southwestern nave and northwestern apse. In its day, however, as archaeologists and historians have come to recognize, Constantina's construction was a strikingly innovative project, one of a group of at least six circus-form basilicas erected in the Roman suburbs in the middle decades of the fourth century that together illuminate the incipient stages of an architectural and topographical revolution that would transform the Roman cityscape in the next century.<sup>2</sup> Constantina's inscribed verses, however, remain in the shadows, as unappreciated as the initial stirrings of a parallel *coup* through which later and better known Christian poets such as Prudentius and Paulinus of Nola would lay solid claim to the city's literary heritage. Restoring Constantina to the list of notable early Latin Christian poets, therefore, is both a step towards rethinking our narratives of the period's literary history and a way of honoring the novel roles played by metrical inscriptions in the invention of Christian Rome.

### *Constantina deum venerans: Text, Date, and Authorship*

The text and date of Constantina's epigram are sufficiently firm. Though her verses now survive only in select manuscripts of Prudentius's *Peristephanon*, appended to that later fourth-century poet's own poem on the virgin martyr Agnes (*Per.* 14), they were once displayed, carved on a marble tablet, in Constantina's fourth-century basilica.<sup>3</sup>

*C onstantina deum venerans Christoque dicata,  
O mnibus impensis devota mente paratis,  
N umine divino multum Christoque iuvante,  
S acravi templum victricis virginis Agnes,*

2 On Constantina's project and its context see, e.g., Frutaz 1960: 28–32; Barbini 2001; Brandenburg 2004 and 2005: 69–86. On Rome's six Constantinian age ambulatory basilicas see, e.g., Krautheimer 1960; the papers collected at Guidobaldi and Guidobaldi 2002: 1097–1262; MacMullen 2009: 80–84; Logan 2011. Constantina's Sant'Agnese alone has preserved its dedicatory inscription.

3 I reproduce here the text of Ihm 1895: no. 84, who followed de Rossi 1888: p. 44. De Rossi's text was also reproduced by Buecheler at *CLE* 301 and by Diehl at *ILCV* 1768. The text of Ferrua 1942: no. 71 (with ample commentary) and Ferrua *ICUR* 8.20752 differs only in that editor's preference for *sacrauit* (attested by some manuscripts) over *sacravi* in line four. Early treatments of the text can be found at Armellini 1880: 369–71; Jubaru, 1907: 246–54. For more recent considerations see Carletti-Colafrancesco 1976: no. 7 and 255–56; Carletti 2000: 443–44; Carletti 2008: no. 154 (with several misprints); and De Santis 2010: no. 96.

*Templorum quod vincit opus terrenaque cuncta,* 5  
*A urea quae rutilant summi fastigia tecti.*  
*Nomen enim Christi celebratur sedibus istis,*  
*Tartaream solus potuit qui vincere mortem*  
*Invectus caelo solusque inferre triumphum*  
*Nomen Adae referens et corpus et omnia membra* 10  
*A mortis tenebris et caeca nocte levata.*  
*Dignum igitur munus martyr devotaque Christo,*  
*Ex opibus nostris per saecula longa tenebis,*  
*O felix virgo, memorandi nominis Agnes.* 14

I, Constantina, venerating God and consecrated to Christ,  
 having devoutly provided for all expenses,  
 with considerable divine inspiration and Christ assisting,  
 have dedicated the temple of the victorious virgin Agnes,  
 which surpasses the workmanship of temples and all  
     earthly (buildings) 5  
 that the golden gables of lofty roofs illumine with reddish glow  
 For the name of Christ is celebrated in this hall,  
 who alone was able to vanquish infernal death  
 and, borne to heaven, alone carry in the triumph,  
 restoring the name of Adam and the body and all the limbs 10  
 released from the shadows of death and dark night.  
 Therefore, martyr and devotee of Christ, you will possess this worthy gift  
 From our resources through the long ages,  
 O happy maid, of the noteworthy name Agnes.

In the sixteenth century Caesar Baronius saw a fragment of the poem's marble plaque, presumably original, embedded in the paving of a recently refurbished atrium at the Via Nomentana complex.<sup>4</sup> The panel's initial location in Constantina's basilica, before its reuse as flooring tiles, however, remains uncertain; the manuscripts, which must reflect some earlier stage of autopsy, variously (and ambiguously) place it "in absida basilicae" or "super arcum qui basilicam continet."<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, there is no reason to think that the verses

4 Baronius 1880: vol. 4, 85–86 (*an.* 324, no. 108). The atrium had been restored by then Cardinal Alessandro Ottaviano de' Medici (Pope Leo XI): "modo marmoreae tabulae vix fragmentum superest, stratum in ingressu atri recens restituti a S.R.E. cardinali Mediceo archiepiscopo Florentino." See also Ferrua 1942: 247–48.

5 Ferrua 1942: 246–47.

were not elegantly inscribed and prominently displayed, perhaps fastened to the apse wall or the nave's interior façade.<sup>6</sup>

Constantina's authorship can be inferred from a combination of salient details, several of which will be taken up later. The poem's acrostic – *Constantina Deo* – almost surely asserts the empress's hand: literary acrostics had long served as a way for authors to “sign their works.”<sup>7</sup> Equally assertive is the initial word of line four, *sacravi*, if it should be preferred to the third person form (*sacravit*) found in some manuscripts. No less crucially, the brickwork of the basilica has been dated to the 340s, the very years of Constantina's momentary widowhood between her marriages to Hannibalianus and Gallus.<sup>8</sup> Was Constantina resident in or near Rome in those years? It seems so. An honorific inscription dedicated to Constantina by the *praepositus rerum privatarum* Flavius Gavianus, uncovered near the Lateran and published only twenty years ago, suggests her presence in the city for some period of time between 340 and 350.<sup>9</sup> Further support derives from the fact that soon after her death

6 The most likely locations; see Krauthemier 1989: 9.

7 For acrostic signatures in Vergil, an author whose influence upon fourth-century poets is immeasurable, see Zarker 1966: 129–30 and Somerville 2010; and on literary signature acrostics in general see Courtney 1990, quote 4.

8 Cecchelli 2001: 207–09.

9 *CIL* 6.40790, though Geza Alföldy, *qui non vidit*, expressed caution (= *AE* 1989, 76). The inscribed statue base was discovered, though not in its original setting, in the *campo laterano* in a Christian “*capella*” (north of the so-called *domus Faustae*) that Valnea Santa Maria Scrinari has argued was part of a fourth- and fifth-century complex connected to the administrative offices of the imperial *res privata*. See Scrinari 1989: 2210–17; with Liverani 1996. The statue was dedicated to *d(omi)nae Constantinae nob(ilissima)e ac venerabili* by the (otherwise unattested) *p(rae)p(ositus) rer(um) privatar(um)* Flavius Gavianus *v(ir) p(erfectissimus)* and is securely dateable between 340 and 350. Two similar dedications suggest Constantina was present in the city at the time: (1) the *praepositus rerum privatarum* Fl. Pist(r)ius (*PLRE* 1, 704) dedicated a monument, also discovered in the Lateran zone, to “Helena Augusta” sometime between November 324, the earliest likely date of Helena's promotion to Augusta, and ca. 328/29, when she died; see *CIL* 6.1135 and 4327. Helena (*PLRE* 1, 410–11, “Helena 3”) was primarily resident in Rome, at the Sessorian palace, from ca. 312 until she departed for her Holy Land pilgrimage in late 326/27. Only after her death at the imperial court (perhaps at Trier) ca. late 328/29 would her remains be returned to Rome for burial on the Via Labicana. See Drijvers 1992: 31–34, 46–47 (on *CIL* 6.1135), 56–76; and Barnes 2011: 42–45. Thus Pistrius' dedication most likely occurred during Helena's period of Roman residency. (2) The same archaeological context that yielded Gavianus' dedication to Constantina also produced a dedication (*CIL* 6.40806 = *AE* 1989, 77) by Flavius Florenus *vir clarissimus* to “Eudoxia Augusta” (*PLRE* 2, 410–12, “Eudoxia 2”), the wife of Valentinian III. The dedication must date between 6 August 439, when Eudoxia became Augusta, and 16 March



in 354, her body was transported to Rome and buried in the grand mausoleum (S. Costanza) that had by then been erected adjacent to the Via Nomentana basilica that she had recently founded.<sup>10</sup> All of this creates a highly plausible context not only for Constantina's patronage of the fourth-century Sant'Agnese but also for her composition of the basilica's dedicatory epigram.

The poem itself, like the architecture of the ambulatory basilica it adorned, subtly blends tradition and innovation. Artfully composed, its fourteen lines easily meet the standards of classical prosody and metrics, while also indulging an emerging penchant for acrostics, announcing donor and honoree through the first letter of each line *Constantina Deo*.<sup>11</sup> The poem's final three verses recall its first four in ring structure. Opening and closing highlight the entwined themes of Constantina's benefaction and Agnes's virginity. The empress's financial outlay is highlighted by line two's *impensae* then reprised in line thirteen's *opes nostrae*. Agnes is styled *victrix virgo* in line four and then *felix virgo* in line fourteen. Together these seven lines also blur the boundaries of identity between the empress and the martyr, whose two names are the first and final words of the poem. Initially, in lines one and two, it is Constantina who is *Christoque dicata* and *devota mente* (1–2);<sup>12</sup> but the echoing *devotaque Christo* of line twelve applies rather to Agnes. Indeed, the fact that the two phrases – *Christoque dicata* and *devotaque Christo* – occupy the same metrical position but entertain lexical variation and inverted word order draws attention to them. The effect of this word play is not only to assimilate empress and

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455, when Valentinian III was killed. Between 439 and 450 Valentinian's court was frequently in Rome, permanently after February 450; see Seeck 1919: 366–400, Gillett 2001: 142–48, and Humphries 2012: 162. Thus *CIL* 6.40790, Gavianus' dedication to Constantina, provides persuasive but not absolute evidence that Constantina was resident in Rome during the 340s, the time of the dedication, when Italy was the domain of her brother Constans (337–350).

10 Brandenburg 2004: 141 on construction in a second phase but before 354.

11 Carletti Colafrancesco 1976: 255–56 on metrics; Sanders 1991 on the assertiveness of acrostics. For a less generous view of the poem as “un disorganico *pastiche* di topoi celebrativi” see Carletti 2000: 444; and for a different context see Trout 2014. Line three's *numen divinum* must represent an alternative expression for the *deus* found in line one and in the acrostic and distinguish in some manner “god” from *Christus*; Constantina's near contemporary Juvencus uses *numen* only in the first half of book one, where, as Green 2006: 95, observes it seems to denote God as distinct from Christ. On the concept of divine aid in benefactions see Duval and Pietri 1997: 377, with *adiuvante deo* already in early fourth-century Aquileia stressing God's help in a Christian context.

12 Carletti 2008: 250, suggesting that line one means “convertita e battezzata.”

saint but also to align Constantina's act of munificence with Agnes's martyrdom as expressions of Christian piety appropriate to their respective ages.

These seven lines frame seven central lines (5–11) that provocatively expand the idea of victory introduced by the description of Agnes in line four as *victicis*, a word weighted by the preceding caesura but notably given no narrative context. Indeed, the imagery of conquest evoked by this section's *vincit*, *vincere*, and *inferre triumphum* pushes well beyond the martyr's elided tale to present Constantina's basilica as a victory monument that resonates both within and against traditions of triumphal building at Rome. The unmatched grandeur of her *templum virginis Agnes*, expressed in lines 5 and 6, establishes Constantina herself in the role of beneficent *triumphator* played by so many before her.<sup>13</sup> Yet the real victory celebrated in this *sedes*, the victory to whose implications a third of the poem is devoted (7–11), is that of Christ over hellish (*tartaream*) death, a Christ whose name stands at the virtual center of the poem (7), who alone (*solus*), borne to heaven, "brought home the triumph" that no one else could, redeeming mankind from death's dark night. The epigram's foregrounded themes of victory, aristocratic competition, and personal salvation fit especially well a building that is, in fact, one of Rome's largest known ambulatory basilicas and that served, like all of these structures, as a vast covered cemetery and funerary banquet hall.<sup>14</sup>

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- 13 The choice of *templum* is noteworthy, influenced perhaps by the poem's classicizing thrust and a desire to sharpen the contrast with the non-Christian *templorum opus* of the next line. *Templum* appears as a term descriptive of the structure in which it appears in thirteen Christian verse dedications in Rome; Constantina's is the only one of the thirteen earlier than the fifth century, though Ambrose used similar language in an inscription that commemorated his translation of the relics of S. Nazarius to Milan's Basilica Apostolorum in the mid-390s (*ILCV* 1800 = Carletti 2008: no. 186: *condidit Ambrosius templum dominoque sacrauit*). For discussion see De Santis 2010: 125–30. Two wall inscriptions from St. Peter's on the Vatican (*ICUR* 2.4092 and 4094), both roughly contemporary with *Constantina deum venerans*, employ *aula* to denote the structure in question. *Sedes*, which appears in the plural in line seven, is also used in one of the Vatican texts (*ICUR* 2.4094: *Iustitiae sedes, fidei domus, aula pudoris*); see further De Santis 2010: 103–4.
- 14 Constantina's basilica measured 98 × 40 meters excluding its large atrium; see Barbini 2001: 34. The Constantinian S. Lorenzo on the Via Tiburtina, Sant'Agnese's sole rival in size, measured approximately 99 × 35 meters; see Serra 2005: 205. On funerary cult, the *refrigerium*, and ambulatory basilicas see, e.g., MacMullen 2009: 76–89, with Barbini and Severini 2002 on the graves of Sant'Agnese.

### Reading *Constantina deum vernerans*: Text and Inter-Texts

The ambition of Constantina's poem is evident in the complex textures, structural conceits, and lexical gestures that ripple across its surface. Its pretensions, however, would have been no less obvious to readers alert to the epigram's deeper engagements with earlier texts and previous poets. Indeed echoes of classical authors are sufficiently prominent in Constantina's text that she could be glossed in one eighth- or ninth-century manuscript as "Constantina . . . prudentissima et vehementer litteris mundialibus erudita."<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, in 1895, Maximilian Ihm cataloged many of the epigram's classical parallels, and a more recent reader, Pasqua Carletti Colafrancesco, has remarked upon the "tecnica quasi centonaria" that informs the poem's composition.<sup>16</sup> Some of Constantina's borrowings may seem relatively inert, for example, the reminiscence of Vergil's *summi fastigia tecti* in line six or of Ovid's *per saecula longa* in line thirteen.<sup>17</sup> Others, however, are arguably more properly inter-textual – allusions, that is, that are thematically "appropriate" and encourage a knowing reader to construct meaning by recalling and resituating a hypo-text whose words are now set into a new poetic and ideological frame.<sup>18</sup> It is Constantina's nimble deployment of this strategy, which would reach its apogee in the poets of the later fourth and early fifth centuries, that earns her the right to be considered present at the "genesis of Christian poetry."<sup>19</sup> Two moments can serve as exemplary; both suggest the poet's dexterity with the Latin literary tradition.

#### *Agnes and Polyxena*

Ihm noted that line 14, "O felix virgo, memorandi nominis Agnes," echoed *Aeneid* 3.321, "O felix una ante alias Priameia virgo," wherein Vergil (in the voice

15 Ferrua 1942: 246–47.

16 Ihm 1895: 88; Carletti Colafrancesco 1976: 255.

17 Ver. *Aen.* 2.302: *summi fastigia tecti* (Troy); see also *Aen.* 8.366: *angusti subter fastigia tecti* (the hut of Evander). Ovid, *Meta.* 15.446: *per saecula longa potentem* on Helenus' prophecy to Aeneas that Rome would be made powerful through the long centuries until Augustus appeared to make her *domina rerum*; and Ovid, *Ep. ex Pont.* 3.3.81: *post saecula longa revisam*. All noted by Ihm. See also Hoogma 1959: 242.

18 Begin with Hinds 1998. For "appropriate" as descriptor of lyrical "borrowings" that enrich the recent songs of Bob Dylan see Thomas 2007: 38 and Wilentz 2010: 312. To be clear, in what follows I mean to foreground authorship and composition on the principle that all "art . . . involves conversations with the past" (Wilentz 2010: 311) but without insisting on a single reading or denying the countless ways that meaning might be constituted at the point of reception.

19 For demonstration see Palmer 1989: 180–204; Mastrangelo 2008; and Malamud 2011.

of Andromache) describes Priam's daughter Polyxena as fortunate (in retrospect) to have been sacrificed by the Greek host to the shade of Achilles after the fall of Troy (3.321–24).

*O felix una ante alias Priameia virgo  
hostilem ad tumulum Troiae sub moenibus altis  
iussa mori, quae sortitus non pertulit ullos  
nec victoris eri tetigit captiva cubile.*

She was the one, / the happiest one of all, Priam's virgin daughter / doomed to die at our enemy's tomb – Achilles – / under the looming walls of Troy. No captive slave / allotted to serve the lust of a conquering hero's bed! (transl. R. Fagles)

As scholars, including Ihm, have long been aware, a half century after Constantina's death, at the close of his poem on Agnes, Prudentius also drew his readers' attention to Vergil's Polyxena by addressing his young Christian martyr as "*O virgo felix, O nova gloria*" (*Per.* 14.124).<sup>20</sup> Both Constantina and Prudentius, however, may have intended this Vergilian prod also to awaken their readers' memories of Ovid's more expansively told tale of Polyxena, a *fortis et infelix et plus quam femina virgo*, who in his telling preserved her nobility and purity by freely embracing her execution.<sup>21</sup> Through her own words in the *Metamorphoses* Ovid's Polyxena crystallized the Vergilian notion of violation escaped and honor preserved through "an unsullied, free death": "Keep far away, let no man lay his hands on my virgin body. Whoever he is you seek to please by killing me, more welcome my blood will be if freely given."<sup>22</sup> Such sentiments, of course, not only expressed deep-seated Roman values of honor and shame but also might have seemed to fourth-century readers to anticipate (though inversely) subsequent Christian constructions of martyrdom as the willful acceptance of sacrificial death.

20 As Palmer 1989: 179 notes, *nova gloria* (*Aen.* 11.154) both aligns Agnes with Evander's tragically dead son Pallas and elevates her death *in armis* over his.

21 Ovid, *Meta.* 13.439–80 (quote at 13.451). She announced to Neoptolemus her nobility (13.457): "utere . . . generoso sanguine" and in falling to the ground at her execution took care "castique decus servare pudoris" (13.480). The argument for Prudentius's indirect play to Ovid is made by Burrus 1995: 39–40.

22 *Meta.* 13.466–69: *tactuque viriles / virgineo removete manus! Acceptor illi, / quisquis is est, quem caede mea placare paratis, / liber erit sanguis.* Translation by R. Humphries and quote at Fratantuono 2011: 379.

One effect, then, of Constantina's Vergilian allusion must have been to provoke sophisticated readers to view (what they knew about) Agnes's resistance to male aggression and sexual violation in a religious context through the lens of the classically sanctioned Polyxena. In light of the latter heroine's noble defiance, the former, too, could be configured as more victor than victim. But even that is to miss a step. In fact, it is only Polyxena's backstory, drawn from an earlier heroic age but activated by the Vergilian allusion, that supplies any (textual) narrative at all for the Agnes of Constantina's epigram, wherein the young martyr is merely a maiden *victrix* and *felix*. Presumably oral tradition provided one framework for reading these verses, but Constantina now refined Agnes's tale by mobilizing Polyxena's. She may also have hoped to elevate the Christian martyr over her classical forerunner, for both lexically – through the overlapping language of victory – and structurally it is the unique triumph of Christ over death that provides the ultimate context for assessing Agnes's final victory, a realm to which Polyxena had no access.

### *Constantina and Perilla*

Classical learning and poetry are at the heart of an even more complex set of echoes in Constantina's metrical inscription. Ihm's list of parallels refers the reader of Constantina's *quod vincit opus* in line five to Ovid's *Tristia* 3.7.19–20.<sup>23</sup> In those lines, admonishing his addressee to continue composing poetry, Ovid had written: *ergo si remanent ignes tibi pectoris idem, / sola tuum vates Lesbia vincet opus* ("so, if the same fire still burns in your heart, only the Lesbian singer will surpass your work"). The verbal echo will have seemed less faint to late ancient readers.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, an "appropriate" thematic link increases the likelihood that Constantina's *quod vincit opus* did indeed nudge readers to recall Ovid's poem: to assert the incomparability of her own achievement (ostensibly her *templum victricis virginis*) Constantina alluded to lines in which Ovid prophesized (hyperbolically) the preeminence of his addressee's poetry (*opus*) over that of all rivals except Sappho. In this manner, then, Constantina's enlistment of Ovid would be the neat deployment of a classical allusion to underwrite her boast in respect to her own accomplishments, poetic perhaps as well as euergetic.

But is it likely that Constantina had in mind *Tristia* 3.7 when she composed her epigram? The case can be built on several grounds. Ovid's *Tristia* were hardly obscure. They had, in fact, long been a popular source for epigraphic

23 Ihm 1895: 88; followed by Diehl, *ILCV* 1768.

24 On the typicality of two or three word "imitations or reminiscences" in Constantina's contemporary Juvenius see Green 2006: 52.

poetry, especially metrical epitaphs.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, *Tristia* 3.7 itself is a particularly prominent poem within the corpus of the *Tristia* both architecturally and thematically: it was the “central poem” of book three, when Ovid sent that book to Rome in 11 CE, while book three itself was eventually the pivotal book of the five books of *Tristia*.<sup>26</sup> In addition, 3.7 is a distinctive poem amid the collection: it is the sole poem in the *Tristia* whose recipient – notably a young woman addressed as Perilla – is identified by name and, as others have noted, Ovid’s persona in this poem is atypically “defiant,” “confident” and “self-assertive.”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, it is possible to detect other reminiscences of *Tristia* 3.7 in *Constantina deum venerans*: Constantina’s clausula *victricis virginis Agnes*, for example, rhythmically and phonetically recalls Ovid’s *teneris in virginis annis* (3.7.17), which appears in the very couplet preceding that containing the clausula *vincet opus*; late in Ovid’s poem *Roma* is styled *victrix*, as would be Agnes in *Constantina deum venerans*.<sup>28</sup> Other apparent parallels are less convincing on their own, but their accumulation within a poem of only fourteen hexameters bolsters the argument that Constantina was meditating upon *Tristia* 3.7 at the time she composed her epigram for S. Agnese.<sup>29</sup> But why should Constantina have been drawn to *Tristia* 3.7?

Ovid addressed *Tristia* 3.7 to the young Roman poetess Perilla, probably his stepdaughter, and his elegy is primarily a poem about pedagogy, poetry, and immortality.<sup>30</sup> His manifest aim was to encourage Perilla to persist in the writing of poetry, for which she showed marked ability and in whose pursuit he

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- 25 Lissberger 1934: 177–79 for one list. For near contemporary poets see below. The shadow cast by Ovid’s exile poetry even into the twenty-first century is documented in Ingleheart 2011.
- 26 Evans 1983: 170–72; Green 1994: 241, making 3.7 the central poem of the collection, though this begs the question of the state of the *Tristia* in the early fourth century. On chronology of publication see Claassen 2009: 174.
- 27 Nagle 1980: 150; Evans 1983: 18 and 59; Green 1994: 241.
- 28 *Tristia* 3.7.51–52: *dumque suis victrix septem de montibus orbem / prospiciet domitum Martia Roma, legar*. Neither noted by Ihm.
- 29 Compare Constantina’s *nomen Adae referens* with the *singula ne referam* of *Tristia* 3.7.43, though *Aen.* 5.564, *nomen avi referens* (of the youth Priamus “renewing his grandsire’s name”), noted by Ihm, is first order. See also Constantina’s *caeca nocte levata* and Ovid’s *nostra levata mora* (3.7.8), though the combination of *caeca* and *nox* is not uncommon, e.g., *Cat.* 68.44: *caeca nocte* and Vergil, *Geo.* 3.260: *nocte natat caeca*, with only the latter noted by Ihm; both by Diehl at *ILCV* 1768.
- 30 On background and themes see Nagle 1980: 150–52; Evans 1983: 17–19; 58–59, 70–72; Green 1994: 241–42.

had once tutored her. In the tender years of her girlhood, Ovid reminded her, he had recognized her talent (*ingenium*) and had become her *dux* and *comes* in poetry's art.<sup>31</sup> Both Perilla's skill and her training, Ovid asserted, demanded that, despite the dangers exemplified by his exile, Perilla should continue to pursue the immortality due to a singer of (as he put it) *carmina docta* (3.7.12). In the end, he wrote, "we possess nothing that is not mortal except the blessings of heart (*pectus*) and mind (*ingenium*)."<sup>32</sup> From Tomis, therefore, Ovid offered himself as Perilla's model and inspiration: even should the sword cut me down, "when I'm gone, my fame (*fama*) will endure, / and while from her seven hills Mars' Rome in triumph (*victrix*) / still surveys a conquered world, I shall be read."<sup>33</sup> The whole poem, as Betty Rose Nagle has observed, "is based on the idea that Ovid is an *exemplum* for Perilla."<sup>34</sup>

Clearly he was for Constantina as well. Her epigram's undeniable tapestry of Ovidian echoes, woven from the *Metamorphoses* and *Amores* as well as the *Tristia*, leaves little doubt.<sup>35</sup> By gesturing specifically towards *Tristia* 3.7, however, Constantina could directly engage Ovid on those issues of poetry and immortality that were as thematically central to her epigram as they were to his elegy. Certainly her echo of *Tristia* 3.7.20 (*vincet opus*) could help readers to envision her *opera* – *carmen* and *templum* – as similarly unmatched by the work of rivals. Once the idiosyncratic *Tristia* 3.7 was invoked, however, the reader stepped upon a nearly unbounded field of play. Poets from a platonizing Prudentius to a wizened Bob Dylan, alienated yet committed to poetry's expressive power, have employed allusions to the *Tristia* in order to cast themselves "in the role" of the exiled Ovid.<sup>36</sup> By calling up *Tristia* 3.7 specifically, however, Constantina could also don the mask of the *doctissima* Perilla, intimating to her readers that she, too, had been a young woman schooled,

31 *Tristia* 3.7.13–18.

32 *Tristia* 3.7.43–44: *singula ne referam, nil non mortale tenemus / pectoris exceptis ingenique bonis*.

33 *Tristia* 3.7.50–53: *me tamen extincto fama superstes erit, / dumque suis victrix septem de montibus orbem / prospiciet domitum Martia Roma, legar*. Translation from Green 1994: 53. See Evans 1983: 17–19; Williams 2002: 240.

34 Nagle 1980: 150.

35 More parallels at Ihm 1895: 88; *ILCV* 1768; and Ferrua 1942: 249–50.

36 Malamud 2011: 190, by referencing *Tristia* 1.1.29–30 "in the final line of the *Hamartigenia* . . . Prudentius casts himself in the role of Ovid." For the many echoes of the *Tristia* in Dylan's *Modern Times* (2006) see Fell 2006 (for Dylan "in the mask of a new Ovid, a kind of modern exile in the modern world"); Thomas 2007: 35–38; and Harrison 2011: 218–22.

delighted, and inspired by Ovid to reach for literary *fama*.<sup>37</sup> Yet this sort of textual posturing, elegantly Ovidian in its own right,<sup>38</sup> could simultaneously be undercut by challenging Ovid's conception of the place and power of poetry in life and the afterlife. Constantina transferred the epithet *victrix* from Roma to the martyr Agnes and implicitly demoted the brand of immortality achieved on the tongues of men that was Ovid's final consolation in *Tristia* 3.7 – I shall be read. The centerpiece of her epigram was the far more palpable victory over oblivion won for all through Christ's resurrection. Constantina thus endorsed but subordinated Ovidian *ingenium* in a hierarchy of values revised under the pressure of imperial patronage for the cult of Christ and the martyrs, both honoring and trumping her Augustan master in poetry's art. The cultural capital inherited from so many generations of Latin poets was thus reinvested at higher interest rates.

This, or something like it, we are entitled to imagine. Certainly, Constantina did not tell Agnes's "story" in any obvious way. Yet by alluding to Vergil's Polyxena and Ovid's Perilla, Constantina gave learned readers access to a classical terrain upon which they could situate the Christian virgin martyr's tale as well as the persona of her poetic champion. Polyxena's ruthless murder at a hero's tomb had paradoxically preserved the sexual purity (and autonomy) stolen from so many other Trojan women who survived the city's fall; Ovid's exhortation to Perilla foregrounded the unassailable defenses of a mind dedicated to a higher calling (in her case poetic excellence), no less impervious to cruel sword than it might be to imperial edict. Both themes, set on display by Constantina, would become staples of the late empire's virgin martyr tales.

### Poetry and the Cityscape

Should we be surprised at such sophisticated literary "play" in a Constantinian court of the 340s?<sup>39</sup> Surely not. Other Latin poets and writers of the age were engaged in similar projects – some of them with connections to Constantine and members of his family. As Roger Green, Michael Roberts, and others have shown, Juvenecus' gospel epic on the *vitalia gesta* of Christ,

37 *Tristia* 3.7.31: *ergo desidia remove, doctissima, causas.*

38 Claassen 2008: 8–10.

39 For clever reading and writing as "play" see *carmen* 21 of Constantina's older contemporary Optatianus Porfyrius. Addressed to a certain Bassus, the piece contains an inner "visual figure" that reads "*Publius Optatianus Porfyrius haec lusi omne genus metri tibi pangens optume Basse.*" See Barnes 1975: 183; Levitan 1985: 265–66.



the *Evangeliorum libri quattuor*, appearing in the late 320s and perhaps familiar in court circles in Constantina's teenage years, anticipated clever readers.<sup>40</sup> "Already in Juvenecus," as Roberts has noted, "the distinctive possibilities of Christian-classical intertextuality are evident," including recourse to the *Tristia*.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the literary commitments of Constantine himself, who brought the rhetoricians Lactantius to Trier and Magnus Arborius to Constantinople to tutor his sons (and daughters?) are evident.<sup>42</sup> Lactantius was undeniably steeped in Latin poetry and has been suggested as the author of that curious poem of allusive elegiacs and hidden meanings, the *De Ave Phoenice* (ca. 303?).<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, Constantine, himself, was no bore. In a letter to Optatianus Porfyrius written soon after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, he issued what T.D. Barnes once called a "cultural manifesto" for his age: his times would nourish literary pursuits.<sup>44</sup> It was on this very promise, as Ray Van Dam has recently reiterated, that Porfyrius pinned his hopes for recall from exile, producing a corpus of ingenious *carmina figurata* that reveal, among other things, a fondness not only for acrostics and telestics but also, perhaps unsurprisingly, for Ovid's exile poetry, the *Epistulae ex Ponto* as well as the *Tristia*.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, *Constantina deum venerans* once seemed sufficiently Porfyrian that some scholars suspected, albeit wrongly, the latter's authorship of the piece – although Constantina's awareness of the poetry that Porfyrius sent to her father is likely, and even a personal acquaintanceship with the man who was urban prefect at Rome during her youth is not impossible.<sup>46</sup> Finally, if the learned speech now

40 *Praef.* 19: *nam mihi carmen erit Christi vitalia gesta*. Green 2006: 3–7 accepts Jerome's date of 329 for the *ELQ*, by which time Constantine was in the east, having visited Rome for what would be his last time in 326. The work closes with praise of Constantine: 4.806–12. Notably Juvenecus' "wider purpose" (Green 2006: 128) – to continue (in classicizing verse) the evangelizing commission given to the disciples so that people might have eternal life (4.799: *ut vitam possint agitare perennem*) – anticipates the central theme of Constantina's epigram.

41 Roberts 2004: 50. Vergil's presence is "substantial" in the *ELQ* but Ovid is evident as well. See Huemer 1891 with the *Tristia* at e.g., 2.62, 4.60, and 4.129.

42 Wlosok 1993: 429, on Lactantius as tutor of Crispus by 314/15. *PLRE* 1, 98–99, "Arborius 3."

43 Wlosok 1993: 429, crediting the poem to Lactantius and dating it ca. 303/04; with 452–55 on its "signification chrétienne cachée." See also Fitzpatrick 1933: 31–37, on Lactantian authorship.

44 Barnes 1975: 185.

45 Van Dam 2011: 163–70. Levitan 1985. Polara 1973: Vol. 1, *passim*, on the classical parallels.

46 For an attribution of *Constantina deum venerans* to Porfyrius see, e.g., C. Cavedoni, *Opuscoli di Modena* t. III: 333 cited at Ferrua *ICUR* 8, p. 13; Polara 1973 included the poem

known as the *Oration to the Saints* was indeed delivered by Constantine, then the intellectual buzz and hum of his court is as self-evident as the emperor's messianic exegesis of Vergil's fourth *Eclogue* was novel.<sup>47</sup> In short, there is no *a priori* impediment to the reading of *Constantina deum venerans* offered above.

What might give pause, however, is the unprecedented turn to epigraphic poetry as a medium of imperial self-representation in mid-fourth-century Rome, now represented not only by Constantina's verses at Sant'Agnese but also by her brother's twenty-four hexameters inscribed on the base of the titanic obelisk he erected a decade later in the Circus Maximus and by a series of metrical inscriptions laid out in mosaic on the walls of Old St. Peter's, almost surely in these same years.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, in the generation after Constantina, it would be Damasus who would literally surround the city with classicizing verse *elogia* installed at the tombs of the martyrs (including Agnes), while the final gasp of direct imperial sponsorship of a dedicatory *carmen epigraphicum* appears to be a two-hexameter text of the emperor Honorius at St. Paul's on the Ostian Way.<sup>49</sup> Thereafter it is the city's bishops (or their clerical representatives) who dominate the record, regularly adding their verses to new constructions both in the suburbs and within the walls.<sup>50</sup> The rising bulk of this material has the potential, therefore, to obscure the revolutionary character of the imperial "program" of the late Constantinian period. Indeed, when, nearly two centuries after Constantina had lavished her financial and literary capital on the promotion of Agnes, Pope Felix IV (526–530) dedicated a church to Cosmas and Damian on the edge of the Roman forum, it was only natural that he would announce his benefaction in classicizing verse. Only coincidence,

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in his edition of Porphyrius as *carmen* XXI but rejected Porphyrius' authorship (see 2:168–69). On chronology and career see *PLRE* 1, 69, "Publius Optatianus signo Porphyrius"; Barnes 1975. Porphyrius was urban prefect at Rome in 329 and again in 333, that is, a decade or so before the composition of *Constantina deum venerans*. It was probably in 325 that he was recalled to court; his date of death is not recorded.

47 The *Oration to the Saints* = Eus. *Vita Constantini* book 5 (see 4.32). In support of Constantinian authorship see, e. g., Edwards 1999 and 2003; Drake 2000, 292–93; Barnes 2001 and 2011: 113–20. Date and setting remain controversial. Edwards 1999: 268 favors Rome at Eastertide 314; Barnes 2011: 114–18 argues for Nicomedia in April 325. Exegesis: chs. 19–21. Benko 1980: 670–72.

48 On the obelisk of Constantius II see Grenier 1996, with bibliography. On Old St. Peter's see Carletti 2000: 440–42, a topic I will take up elsewhere.

49 On Damasus see Ferrua 1942; Carletti 2000: 444–47; Trout 2005. Honorius: *CLE* 314 = *ILCV* 1761a = *ICUR* 2.4780; Carletti 2000: 448.

50 Carletti 2000: 448–56.

however, accounts for the (distant) echo of Ovid's *Tristia* amid the couplets that Felix set into that odd structure's mosaicked apse.<sup>51</sup>

In sum, from our vantage point the revision of Rome's late antique cityscape seems almost everywhere accompanied by installations of inscribed verse. Like Constantina's hexameters at Sant'Agnese, these epigrams typically promoted the city's new image and its benefactors – bishops, clerics, and especially the martyrs themselves – by regularly appealing to Rome's pre-Christian literary and cultural traditions. To some extent, then, these texts offered knowing readers diverse means of linking contemporary Rome to earlier “Romes” that had not so much faded away as been updated for present needs. Moreover, that process of physical and textual remapping continued unabated over the centuries of late antiquity. Pope Honorius's construction of a new Sant'Agnese *ad corpus* in the seventh century, therefore, replete with the metrical dedication still visible in the church's apse, suggests the dilapidation but not irrelevance of Constantina's fourth-century basilica.<sup>52</sup> Constantina's dedicatory epigram, however, may have slipped from view even sooner, for no early medieval *sylloge* preserves it. Unfortunately, the most striking near-contemporary portrait of Constantina is the malicious one left by a scandalized Ammianus.<sup>53</sup> The empress would seem to deserve better – if, that is, we accept her composition of classicizing verse bent to novel Christian ends as a precocious foreshadowing of the sophisticated poetics credited to the later fourth century's better known poets.

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51 *ILCV* 1784.5–6: *optulit hoc domino Felix antistite dignum / munus, ut aetheria vivat in arce poli*. Diehl noted *Tristia* 4.3.5: *aetheriamque suis cingens amplexibus arcem*. The combination also appears more appropriately at *Tristia* 5.3.19 (of Bacchus): *ipse quoque aetherias meritis invectus es arces*. But see also, e.g., *App. Verg. Culex*, 42; Statius, *Theb.* 3.222; Valerius Flaccus, *Argo.* 2.119.

52 *ILCV* 1769A = *ICUR* 8.20757. See De Santis 2010: 226.

53 *Amm.* 14.1.2; 14.1.8; 14.7.4; 14.9.3; 14.11.22.

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