

7-26-2016

Romans, barbarians, and Franks in the writings of Venantius Fortunatus

Erica Buchberger

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, erica.buchberger@utrgv.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/hist_fac



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Buchberger, E. (2016) Romans, barbarians, and Franks in the writings of Venantius Fortunatus. *Early Medieval Europe*, 24: 293– 307. doi: 10.1111/emed.12153.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts at ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact justin.white@utrgv.edu, william.flores01@utrgv.edu.

Romans, Barbarians, and Franks in the Writings of Venantius Fortunatus

Abstract: This paper aims to contribute to broader discussion of strategies of identification and of Romanness by exploring the changing meaning of Roman, barbarian, and Frankish identity through the ways Fortunatus wrote about these identities and related them to each other. A close examination of the nuances of these terms in Fortunatus' works will highlight the ways he used the resources available to him within his social context to promote Roman identity as still prestigious and as compatible with a barbarian-ruled society.

Studies of Venantius Fortunatus, an Italian-born poet writing in sixth-century Gaul, have historically understood him as a last bearer of traditional Roman rhetoric in an increasingly barbarian world or as the first medieval poet to turn traditional motifs into something new. Dill, for example, called him 'almost the last link between the classical and the medieval world', and Tardi 'a last representative of Latin poetry'.¹ Recent scholarship has

¹ D. Tardi, *Fortunatus: étude sur un dernier représentant de la poésie latine dans la Gaule mérovingienne* (Paris, 1927); S. Dill, *Roman Society in Gaul in the Merovingian Age* (London, 1926), p. 377. See also R. Koebner, *Venantius Fortunatus: Seine Persönlichkeit und seine Stellung in der geistigen Kultur des Merowingerreiches* (Leipzig, 1915), p. 1; L. Pietri, 'Venance Fortunat et ses commanditaires: un poète italien dans la société gallo-franque', in *Committenti e produzione artistico-letteraria nell'alto Medioevo occidentale*, vol. 2 (Spoleto, 1992), pp. 729-54, at p. 733, following Tardi; F. Pejenaute Rubio, 'En los confines de la Romanidad: Venancio Fortunato, un escritor de frontera', *Archivum: Revista de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras* 51 (2001), pp. 383-427; S. Heikkinen, 'The Poetry of Venantius Fortunatus: The Twilight of Roman Metre', in M. Gourdouba, L. Pietilä-Castrén, and E. Tikka (eds.), *The Eastern Mediterranean in the Late Antique and Byzantine Periods* (Helsinki, 2004), pp. 17-31.

become far more nuanced, seeing Fortunatus' time as simply one of 'rapid change'.² This is part of a broader trend among historians and literary scholars of viewing the late antique/early medieval era on its own terms and asking not whether any one author, text, or trait is essentially ancient or essentially medieval but instead how it draws on resources of the past to navigate a shifting landscape. Recent work has demonstrated that authors were bound by specific repertoires or discourses that determined the limits within which such navigation could occur within their societies and the degree of room for manoeuvre afforded them.³ In looking at the possibilities available to authors like Fortunatus, historians can see beyond the authors to the views and ideas of the whole society. In looking at the strategies authors used within these boundaries, we can see the creation of new visions of community that would stretch and reshape those very bounds. This paper aims to contribute to this broader discussion by exploring the changing meaning of Roman, barbarian, and Frankish identity

² Most recently: M. Roberts, *The Humblest Sparrow: The Poetry of Venantius Fortunatus* (Ann Arbor, 2009), esp. pp. 3-4; Venantius Fortunatus, *Poems to Friends*, ed. and trans. J. Pucci (Indianapolis, 2010), esp. p. ix.

³ See especially: C. Gantner, R. McKitterick, and S. Meeder (eds.), *The Resources of the Past in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 2015); *Being Roman After Rome*, themed edition of *Early Medieval Europe* (henceforth *EME*) 22, no. 4 (2014); H. Reimitz, 'The Historian as Cultural Broker in the Late and Post-Roman West', in A. Fischer and I. Wood (eds.), *Western Perspectives on the Mediterranean: Cultural Transfer in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, 400-800 AD* (London, 2014), pp. 41-54; W. Pohl and G. Heydemann (eds.), *Strategies of Identification* (henceforth *Sol*) (Turnhout, 2013), and *Post-Roman Transitions: Christian and Barbarian Identities in the Early Medieval West* (henceforth *PRT*) (Turnhout, 2013); W. Pohl, C. Gantner, and R. Payne (eds.), *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium, and the Islamic World, 300-1100* (Farnham, 2012).

through the ways Fortunatus wrote about these identities and related them to each other within the framework available to him in the social context of Merovingian Gaul.

When Fortunatus mentions peoples of the Merovingian kingdoms in his writing, it is usually as Romans and barbarians.⁴ Sometimes he specifies particular barbarian groups with ethnonyms like ‘Frank’, but only in specifically royal or international settings. This preference is part of the reason Fortunatus seems at first glance to be firmly situated in the classical rhetorical tradition. Pairing Romans and barbarians as opposites—one civilized and the other not, one a political grouping and the other seen as kin-based—was of course common in ancient Rome. Yet, as recent studies have shown, both terms could represent far more

⁴ For classical and late antique views of the Roman and the barbarian, see I. M. Ferris, *Enemies of Rome: Barbarians Through Roman Eyes* (Stroud, 2000); E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian* (Oxford, 1991); Greg Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians: Ethnography and Empire in the Roman West* (Oxford, 2011); Hugh Elton, ‘Defining Romans, Barbarians, and the Roman Frontier’, in R. Mathisen and H. Sivan (eds.), *Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity* (Aldershot, 1996), pp. 126-35; G.B. Ladner, ‘On Roman Attitudes toward Barbarians in Late Antiquity’, *Viator* 7 (1976), pp. 1–25; R.W. Mathisen and D. Shanzer (eds.), *Romans, Barbarians, and the Transformation of the Roman World: Cultural Interaction and the Creation of Identity in Late Antiquity* (Burlington, 2011); P. Heather, ‘The Barbarian in Late Antiquity: Image, Reality, and Transformation,’ in R. Miles (ed.), *Constructing Identities in Late Antiquity* (London, 1999), pp. 234-58; Andrew Gillett, ‘The Mirror of Jordanes: Concepts of “The Barbarian,” Then and Now’, in Philip Rousseau (ed.), *Companion to Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 392-408; David Lambert, ‘The Barbarians in Salvian’s *De gubernatione Dei*’, in S. Mitchell and G. Greatrex (eds.), *Ethnicity and Culture in Late Antiquity* (London, 2000), pp. 103–16; I. Wood, ‘The Term “barbarus” in Fifth-, Sixth-, and Seventh-Century Gaul’, *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 41 (2011), pp. 39-50, at pp. 39-42; J. Conant, *Staying Roman: Conquest and Identity in Africa and the Mediterranean, 439-700* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 3-9, 186-93; W.R. Jones, ‘The Image of the Barbarian in Medieval Europe’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13 (1971), pp. 376-407, at pp. 378-87.

variation, both in the imperial era and in the post-Roman West.⁵ A close examination of the nuances of these terms in Fortunatus' works will highlight the ways he used this variety to promote Roman identity as still prestigious and as compatible with a barbarian-ruled society. People in sixth-century Gaul were beginning to think about Roman and barbarian identity in new ways—though still grounded in the old—as they negotiated a new and swiftly changing environment. Fortunatus participated in this process with deliberate use of classical rhetoric and of the available repertoires of identification in his society. The survivals from Fortunatus' corpus of writings include a large number of poems mostly published in his lifetime and a few prose hagiographical Lives. Six of his poems show the process of identity negotiation especially clearly, so I shall focus on these in turn, with occasional reference to others as warranted.

Poem 7.7: Duke Lupus

Lupus, duke of Champagne, was among Fortunatus' first friends in Gaul; in later years, Fortunatus thanked him in poetry for aiding him as a new arrival in the Frankish kingdoms.⁶ He

⁵ W. Pohl, 'Romanness: A Multiple Identity and its Changes', *EME* 22, no. 4 (2014), pp. 406-18, at 412-13; W. Pohl, 'Christian and Barbarian Identities in the Early Medieval West: Introduction', in *PRT*, pp. 1-46, at p. 39; Maskarinec, 'Who Were the Romans? Shifting Scripts of Romanness in Early Medieval Italy', in *PRT*, pp. 297-363, at p. 310; G. Heydemann, 'Biblical Israel and the Christian *gentes*: Social Metaphors and the Language of Identity in Cassiodorus's *Expositio psalmodum*', in *Sol*, pp. 143-208, esp. p. 146.

⁶ Venantius Fortunatus, *Poèmes*, ed. and trans. M. Reydellet, 3 vols (Paris, 1994-2004), vol. 2, poem 7.8, p. 99, lines 49-50. All references in this paper are to Reydellet's edition. For more on Lupus, see A.H.M. Jones, J.R. Martindale, and J. Morris (eds.), *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1971-1992), vol. 3 (henceforth *PLRE* III), pp. 798-9 (Lupus 1); Koebner, *Venantius*

was probably a native of Champagne and his son, Romulf, also obtained an important position in the region as bishop of Reims. Fortunatus wrote poem 7.7, probably soon after they met, to celebrate Lupus' appointment as duke, a military position which was more likely to be held by barbarians than by Romans at this point in Gaul's history, though here held by a person of Roman background.⁷ The poem would have been read publicly, probably at a formal celebration attended by his new colleagues and subordinates, and Lupus would expect it to reflect well upon him to those among the audience who were both paying attention and could follow all of the enclosed allusions.⁸ In it Fortunatus extolled Lupus' Roman ancestry and

Fortunatus, pp. 30-31; and *Poems to Friends*, ed. Pucci, p. 51. Thorough information about Fortunatus' life and education can be found in M. Reydellet's introduction, vol. 1, pp. vii–xxviii.

⁷ K. Selle-Hosbach, *Prosopographie merowingischer Amtsträger in der Zeit von 511 bis 613* (Bonn, 1974), pp. 23–7, lists all dukes in this period by locale; and A.R. Lewis, 'The Dukes in the Regnum Francorum, A.D. 550-751', *Speculum* 51, no. 3 (1976), pp. 381–410, discusses dukes' roles. For general background, see P.J. Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (New York, 1988); E. James, *The Franks* (Oxford, 1988); I. Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450-751* (London, 1994). Another example of a duke of Roman descent is Gundulf, a relative of Gregory of Tours: *Historiae* VI.11, ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison, *MGH SRM I*, 1 (Hanover, 1951), p. 281.

⁸ On the reading of the poem, see J.W. George, 'Venantius Fortunatus: Panegyric in Merovingian Gaul', in M. Whitby (ed.), *The Propaganda of Power: The Role of Panegyric in Late Antiquity* (Leiden, 1998), p. 225–46, at p. 229; Koebner, *Venantius Fortunatus*, p. 27. How much people continued to follow classical allusions and understand tricks of rhyme and metre is uncertain: see Roberts, *The Humblest Sparrow*, p. 322; E. Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1993), p. 261.

virtues. Early lines conjure images of the splendour of ancient Rome and compare Lupus favourably with great figures from the Roman past, setting Lupus' public service within the traditions of this venerated society: 'Scipio was wise, Cato acted with maturity, Pompey was fortunate; only you have all of these traits. With these consuls, Rome's power shone forth, but with you as duke, Rome returns for us here and now'.⁹ Through these lines, he depicted Lupus as possessing the wisdom and fortune of great figures from the Roman past, which would assist him in governance and bring the best of Roman civilization back to Champagne. Their great virtues became Lupus' in this poetic construction, and his Roman identity was set within the realm of character.

Fortunatus was not, however, simply drawing a comparison to important ancient Romans; he was situating these traits deep in Lupus' being—'ethnicizing' his Romanness.¹⁰ He wrote: 'You inherited the venerable character of your Roman roots: you drive battles with the

⁹ Poem 7.7, vol. 2, p. 94, lines 3-6: 'Scipio quod sapiens, Cato quod maturus agebat, / Pompeius felix, omnia solus habes. / Illis consulibus Romana potentia fulsit, / te duce sed nobis hic modo Roma redit'. All references in this paper are to Reydellet's edition. George, 'Panegyric', p. 229, notes that this is part of the traditional sequence of topics in a eulogy.

¹⁰ Poem 7.7, vol. 2, p. 96, line 45: 'antiquos animos Romanae stirpis adeptus / bella moves armis, iura quiete regis'. On ethnicizing as an act by historical actors seeking to portray an identity as inherent, part of a deep structure that is thought—true or not—to be unmutable, see Pohl, 'Christian and Barbarian Identities', esp. p. 12; Pohl, 'Romanness', esp. 411. Further on ethnicity, see P.J. Geary, 'Ethnicity as a Situational Construct in the Early Middle Ages', *Mitteilungen der anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien* 113 (1983), pp. 15-26; F. Barth, 'Introduction', in F. Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (London, 1969), pp. 9-38, at p. 22; T.H. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London, 1993), p. 31; R. Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations*, 2nd edn (London, 2008), pp. 51-2.

force of arms, you govern with law peacefully'.¹¹ Here, Fortunatus evoked the image of a ruler able in both war and peace, a common device in Roman panegyric, in the context of Lupus' Roman heritage—his *stirps*, a word which originally referred to the stem or root of a plant but developed a figurative meaning of a biological 'stem' or 'roots', that is, family lineage.¹² By using *stirps*, Fortunatus implied permanence and an essential nature—that Lupus' Roman identity was an integral part of his self whence his virtue stemmed. This ancestry, in Fortunatus' depiction, was so deeply rooted that it both influenced Lupus' character and predisposed him to the venerable traits of Scipio and others.

We gain two particularly interesting insights into Fortunatus' mentality through this poem. First, he believed (or expected others to believe) that a person's character regularly stemmed from his or her ancestry; in other words, one's birth predisposed one to certain character traits. Second, Romanness was not just an acquired cultural trait in his view but could also be derived from one's family of birth. Being innate to Lupus' being in this way, his

¹¹ Poem 7.7, vol. 2, p. 96, line 45: 'antiquos animos Romanae stirpis adeptus / bella moves armis, iura quiete regis'.

¹² On panegyric, see S. MacCormack, 'Latin Prose Panegyrics', in T.A. Dorey (ed.), *Empire and Aftermath* (London, 1975), pp. 143-205, at p. 145; Menander Rhetor, *Division of Epideictic Speeches*, ed. D.A. Russell and N.G. Wilson in *Menander Rhetor* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 85–93, 179–81; *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini*, ed. C. E.V. Nixon, B. Saylor Rodgers, and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford, 1994), IV.16, p. 361. Fortunatus also used *stirps* along with the term *genus* in poem 2.8 for Launebod, vol. 1, p. 62, line 27. M.H. Hoeflich, 'Between Gothia and Romania: The Image of the King in the Poetry of Venantius Fortunatus', *Res publica litterarum: Studies in the Classical Tradition* 5 (1982), pp. 123-36, at p. 125, notes that he also often used it to describe royal lineage. For a definition, see C.T. Lewis and C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1933), p. 1761.

Romanness was not an aspect of his self that, in Fortunatus' view, could be changed completely; he thought it too essential—too integral to his very self—to be mutable.

In Lupus' case, we may actually be seeing the beginnings of a change in this Roman identity within his family via the names of his brother, Magnulf, and son, Romulf.¹³ Both of these names have Germanic endings and contain Lupus' name (meaning 'wolf') in this '-ulf' ending. His son is interestingly named 'Rome-wolf', continuing his father's Roman heritage within a Germanic name. Both Romulf and Magnulf came from the same Roman *stirps* as Lupus, but they adopted (or their parents adopted for them) names from the Frankish society around them.¹⁴ Whether done for personal advancement and identification with the Frankish political arena or out of a sense of connection to Frankish culture, this naming choice placed both men in both the Roman and the barbarian category; able to identify as either because of the multiple possible meanings each could have within contemporary social discourse. It would also probably cause them to be identified differently than if they had Roman names: someone coming across Magnulf outside of his family context might reasonably assume, based on his name, that he was not of Roman extraction, and treat him as if he were a Frank by birth. If the naming pattern continued in the next generations—as well as the associations with Frankish circles which the adoption of Frankish names hints at—his grandchildren and great-grandchildren might well come to feel more Frankish than Roman or to forget their Roman

¹³ For biography, see *PLRE* III, p. 804 (Magnulfus), and p. 1095 (Romulfus 2). Romulf also appears in Gregory of Tours, *Historiae* X.19, p. 513; and Flodoard of Reims, *Historia Remensis ecclesiae* II.4, ed. M. Stratmann, *MGH Scriptores XXXVI* (Hanover, 1998), pp. 140–41.

¹⁴ As Chris Wickham suggests in *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400-800* (Oxford, 2005), p. 176, Lupus may have been known by a different name (Wulf, perhaps?) in Frankish circles.

heritage altogether. Fortunatus, however, did not even hint at these naming patterns, let alone their implications; he found more descriptive power in images of the splendour and magnificence of Rome, and the lasting importance of Roman birth, than in the blending of contemporary cultures and ethnic groups.

Poem 4.10: Leontius II of Bordeaux

As with Lupus, Fortunatus found poetic inspiration for his praise of Bishop Leontius II of Bordeaux in his subject's Roman ancestry. Leontius was from a noble family in Aquitaine and served in the military before succeeding another Leontius (possibly his father) as bishop of Bordeaux in 549. His wife, Placidina, descended from Sidonius Apollinaris (d.489) and the emperor Avitus (d.457) and thus provided him with a connection to the highest echelon of Gallic society.¹⁵ Fortunatus praised both husband and wife for their nobility and for their construction of churches and villas in a full, traditional eulogy in poem 1.15, but it is the epitaph (poem 4.10) commissioned by Placidina after Leontius' death in 573 which explicitly brings Leontius' Roman background into play.¹⁶ The epitaph states that Leontius' 'nobility drew its lofty name from his origin, of the sort of *genus* the senate of Rome perhaps has. And however much may have flown from the prominent blood of his fathers, he by his own merits

¹⁵ PLRE III, p. 774 (Leontius 3), and p. 1042 (Placidina); K. Stroheker, *Der senatorische Adel im spätantiken Gallien* (Darmstadt, 1970), p. 188, no. 219.

¹⁶ Poem 1.15, vol. 1, p. 34, lines 15-18, 21-24, and 31-32. On the panegyric forms used, see J.W. George, 'Portraits of Two Merovingian Bishops in the Poetry of Venantius Fortunatus', *Journal of Medieval History* 13, no. 3 (1987), pp. 189–205, at pp. 191–4.

makes his forefathers grow [in prominence]'.¹⁷ The poet drew in this passage upon the image of the Roman senate, the most noble group in traditional imperial society, in order to associate Leontius with its prestige. Presumably he was related to his predecessor as bishop and to other *Leontii*, including Sidonius Apollinaris' contemporary Pontius Leontius and various members of the *Ruricii* family, but specific connection has not survived to modern times.¹⁸ Perhaps by this point in time, Leontius' connection to the senate was distant, aside from those connections made via his wife, and so Fortunatus instead suggested that Leontius' family name was of a senatorial sort, which allowed him still to incorporate the prestige of such families.¹⁹ The family nobility itself, however, was not the main source of Leontius' merit; rather, it served, as always in panegyric, as a benchmark from which to judge his even more remarkable good deeds.

¹⁷ Poem 4.10, vol. 1, p. 142, lines 7-8: 'Nobilitas altum ducens ab origine nomen, / quale genus Romae forte senatus habet; / et quamvis celso flueret de sanguine patrum, / hic propriis meritis crescere fecit avos'.

¹⁸ On Leontius' possible family connections, see B. Brennan, 'Senators and Social Mobility in Sixth-Century Gaul', *Journal of Medieval History* 11, no. 2 (1985), pp. 145–161, at pp. 152–3; M. Heinzelmann, *Bischofsherrschaft in Gallien: zur Kontinuität römischer Führungsschichten vom 4. bis zum 7. Jahrhundert: soziale, prosopographische und bildungsgeschichtliche Aspekte* (Munich, 1976), pp. 217–19; *Ruricius of Limoges and Friends: Collection of Letters from Visigothic Gaul*, ed. and trans. R.W. Mathisen (Liverpool, 1999), p. 24. I follow Brennan, who is more cautious than Heinzelmann.

¹⁹ Unlike in Italy, where 'senatorial' still required the holding of office, in Gaul it often referred to families. Wickham, *Framing*, p. 161; B. Näf, *Senatorisches Standesbewusstsein in Spätromischer Zeit* (Freiburg, 1995), p. 186–9, on Gregory of Tours' usage.

As in the poem to Lupus, Fortunatus emphasized multiple ways of identifying as Roman: by descent, by culture, and by connection to a civic institution—the senate. Here also, he found more value in an association with a grand Roman past than in the details of his individual relatives. This noble foundation was certainly important, but merely the foundation upon which Leontius built to earn greater nobility through merit.

Poem 4.26: Vilithuta

While some individuals, like Lupus and Leontius, were Romans through and through in Fortunatus' poetic portrayals, others shared both Roman and barbarian traits. An excellent example is poem 4.26, an epitaph for Vilithuta, a young wife who died in childbirth. The poem was commissioned by her husband, Dagaulf.²⁰ It describes her as 'begotten of noble blood in the city of Paris' and 'Roman by effort, barbarian by descent'.²¹ In Fortunatus' view, therefore, she was born a 'barbarian' but learned to be a Roman—one by nature, the other by nurture. Among his praises of her is that 'she drew out a gentle disposition from a fierce people: to conquer nature was her greater glory'.²² In this portrayal, Vilithuta's 'nature' was to be a fierce

²⁰ *PLRE* III, p. 380 (Dagaulfus), and p. 1377 (Vilithuta).

²¹ Poem 4.26, vol. 1, p. 156, lines 13-14: 'sanguine nobilium generata Parisius urbe / Romana studio, barbara prole fuit'. 'Parisius', while not classically correct, is indeed the form found in the manuscripts. Another example of non-Romans called 'noble' is poem 2.8, vol. 1, p. 62, line 38, for the duke Launebod and his wife Beretrude who built a church to St Saturninus in Toulouse.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 156, lines 15-16: 'ingenium mitem torva de gente trahebat: / vincere naturam gloria maior erat'. J. Szövérfy, 'À la source de l'humanisme chrétien medieval: Romanus et "Barbarus" chez Venance Fortunat', *Aevum* 45, no. 1 (1971), pp. 77-86, at p. 85, misses the point that this barbarian side of her is subordinated to the Roman.

barbarian, but she managed not to be ruled by this essential part of herself and wonderfully overcame this nature by ‘nurturing’ Romanness in herself. That barbarian tendency toward fierceness never ceased to be a part of her—she was not said to be ‘formerly barbarian’ but ‘barbarian’—but it had been forced to the background by the taming influences of Roman civilization. While still a barbarian by ancestry, she could be considered culturally Roman, and following good panegyric practice as with Leontius, Fortunatus gave greater weight to her earned merit (here the effort to adopt Roman character) than to her ancestry.

That Fortunatus saw this triumph as worthy of praise is unsurprising; he was, after all, of Roman upbringing in Italy, near the birthplace of Roman civilization and from an area of the peninsula ruled by the East Roman Empire for part of the time he lived there. However, it was not for himself alone that Fortunatus was writing but for Vilithuta’s grieving husband, Dagaulf, as well. Given his name, Dagaulf was probably of barbarian ancestry like his wife, yet Fortunatus clearly believed that he would not object to her being labelled a ‘barbarian’, showing evidence that the term could be regarded as fairly neutral. He also thought Dagaulf would take comfort in the idea that Vilithuta had attained a measure of Romanness through her manner of life, and that he valued Roman civility as Fortunatus himself did. He used the currency of this Roman ideal to engender feelings of pride in Vilithuta’s laudable attainment of it, against the difficult odds of her birth, in her husband and other readers or listeners of the epitaph, all through the judicious placement of a few very powerful words.

Poem 2.8: Duke Launebod

Calling a person ‘Roman’ was not the only way Fortunatus could associate him or her with ideal Roman traits; in the case of the duke Launebod, merely stating that he performed a task Romans ought to have done is enough to bring hints of Romanness to his character.

Launebod, the duke of Toulouse, and his wife, Berethrude, built a church to St Saturninus in the city in the late 560s or early 570s. As far as we know, Fortunatus did not regularly visit Toulouse, so he may have been invited specifically for the dedication of the new church, where he would have read this poem aloud to the assembled guests.²³ He used the opportunity not only to praise Launebod and his wife for their nobility and their generosity to the church but also to rebuke local Romans for not stepping forward to complete the task themselves, writing with a definite tone of chastisement: ‘This work, which no one coming from the Roman *gens* undertook, this man of barbarian descent completed’.²⁴ The poet clearly saw it as the Romans’ duty to build churches, and other important buildings in the community, just as they would have under the Roman Empire, and it reflected very poorly upon them that a barbarian was required to step forward to see the task completed.²⁵ For Launebod and his wife, however, doing so earned them even higher nobility than they already possessed and the favour of God, apparently in part because it was less expected from barbarians, even those in leadership roles.²⁶

Fortunatus expected a certain standard of behaviour from other upper-class Romans and felt perfectly justified in rebuking them for failing to meet his (and presumably others’)

²³ J.W. George, *Venantius Fortunatus: A Latin Poet in Merovingian Gaul* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 31–2; Reydellet (ed.), *Poèmes*, p. xxx; *PLRE* III p. 226 (Berethrude), and p. 765 (Launebodis).

²⁴ Poem 2.8, vol. 1, p. 62, lines 23-4: ‘quod nullus veniens Romana gente fabravit, / hoc vir barbarica prole peregit opus’.

²⁵ Brennan, ‘Senators and Social Mobility’, p. 157.

²⁶ On Romans in the south, see M. Rouche, *L’Aquitaine des Wisigoths aux Arabes, 418-781: Naissance d’une région* (Paris, 1979).

expectations. Romanness was not merely a state of being as he perceived the concept, but required those fortunate enough to be born 'Roman' to act like it—to show their Roman character through their actions by using their own funds to build churches and other grand edifices, by supporting the church and its saints, and by behaving in a civil and gentle manner as Vilihuta did. Just as Orosius could chastise his fellow Romans for behaving in a savage manner and portray the Goths who sacked Rome as less harsh and more likely to offer their subjects freedom, so Fortunatus reprimanded his fellow Romans, and lauded his patron, by comparing their behaviour unfavourably with that of a 'barbarian'.²⁷

Poem 6.2: King Charibert

'Barbarian' kings often drew on imperial Roman imagery in an attempt to earn for themselves its prestige.²⁸ Fortunatus' very presence at the courts of various Merovingian kings attests to their desire to be presented in the Roman terms and imagery which were so firmly associated in the minds of many of their subjects with a legitimate leader's authority to rule.²⁹ While, as the leading Franks of their respective kingdoms, they would always be identified as 'barbarian' in many ways, some of the trappings of Romanness were still available to them.

²⁷ Orosius, *Historiarum adversum paganos libri VII*.41-3, ed. M.P. Arnaud-Lindet in *Orose: Histoire contre les païens* (Paris, 1990), pp. 120-32. Similarly, Salvian of Marseilles, *De gubernatione Dei* V.5-11, ed. C. Halm, *MGH AA I* (Berlin, 1877), pp. 59–66.

²⁸ M. McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Early Medieval West* (New York, 1986), pp. 260–387.

²⁹ George, 'Panegyric', pp. 226–8; B. Brennan, 'The Image of the Frankish Kings in the Poetry of Venantius Fortunatus', *Journal of Medieval History* 10, no. 1 (1984), pp. 1–11, esp. pp. 1–3; J. Farrell, *Latin Language and Latin Culture: From Ancient to Modern Times* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 10–11.

Fortunatus' panegyric 6.2 to the Merovingian king Charibert manipulates both Roman and barbarian scripts of identity to portray him as a ruler suited for all his subjects. Charibert (561-567) was the eldest son of Clothar I and, after his father's death, split the kingdom with his three brothers, gaining control for himself of the portion ruled from Paris.³⁰ The poem, written for Charibert's *adventus* ceremony into Paris in 567, follows a traditional sequence from a fanfare and call for all to praise the king through to his lineage, youth, and virtues in both peace and war; it also expresses ties to both his Frankish ancestry and Roman culture. It addresses Charibert: 'Although you are a Sicamber, born of an illustrious people, the Latin language flourishes in your speech', and then wonders: 'How great must you be in learned speech in your own language, who conquers us Romans in eloquence?'.³¹

Eloquence was strongly associated with the ideal educated Roman, and being a professional poet, Fortunatus certainly would have valued eloquence especially highly, making this particularly effusive praise for his king.³² That he marked himself as one such eloquent Roman increases the flattery—Fortunatus being known to be a well-educated Roman who would definitely know eloquence when he saw it—and provides a glimpse into how Fortunatus saw his own identity: not just as an Italian and a foreigner in a new land, but also as a

³⁰ *PLRE* III, pp. 283-4 (Charibertus 1).

³¹ Poem 6.2, vol. 2, p. 56, lines 797-100: 'Cum sis progenitus clara de gente Sigamber / floret in eloquio lingua Latina tuo. / Qualis es in propria docto sermone loquella, / qui nos Romanos vincis in eloquio?' On the rhetorical sequence, see George, 'Panegyric', p. 231.

³² Roberts, *The Humblest Sparrow*, p. 20; Brennan, 'The Image of the Frankish Kings', p. 5. Gregory of Tours, *Historiae* V.44, p. 254, suggested this praise was false. For a similar praise of Arbogast's eloquence, see Sidonius Apollinarius, Poem IV.17, ed. and trans. W.B. Anderson in *Poems and Letters*, 2 vols. (London, 1936), vol. 2, pp. 126-9.

'Roman'.³³ That he chose to depict the king's Germanic language as capable of being spoken in a learned, eloquent, and dignified manner is interesting, as often these traits were reserved for Latin. Drawing on the traditional reverence for well-spoken Latin, he appropriated the concept of civilized language from the classical Roman context to serve a flattering role in a new, Frankish context, linking eloquence to political success and expanding the potential repertoire for identifying as a Frank.

Sicamber—a reference to the Sicambri tribe from whom legend said the Franks descended—serves as an especially poetic way of saying Charibert was of barbarian birth and of ascribing to him all the trappings of this ancestry in addition to the Roman eloquence. It may also be an allusion to Clovis, whom the bishop Remigius of Reims supposedly called a Sicamber upon his baptism, a story that survives in Gregory of Tours' *Histories*.³⁴ Such an allusion will have called on the symbolic power of the founder of the contemporary kingdom to fortify Charibert's image and paint him as made of the same core that made Clovis great, adding religious and political nuances to his Frankishness. It also reminded those in the probably quite public audience in Paris of the dual aspects—secular and religious—of their leader, mediating between ruler and ruled, as a good panegyrist would.³⁵ His acceptance by

³³ Poems 7.9, vol. 2, p. 101, line 7 and 8.1, vol. 2, p. 125, lines 11-14 on being Italian; Poem 7.8, vol.2, p. 99, line 49 on being a foreigner.

³⁴ Gregory of Tours, *Historiae* II.31, p. 77.

³⁵ *Venantius Fortunatus: Personal and Political Poems*, trans. J.W. George (Liverpool, 1995), p. 37 n. 63; J.W. George, 'Poet as Politician: Venantius Fortunatus' Panegyric to King Chilperic', *Journal of Medieval History* 15 (1989), pp. 5-18, at p. 8; Brennan, 'The Image of the Frankish Kings'; P. Godman, *Poets and Emperors: Frankish Politics and Carolingian Poetry* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 25-31. MacCormack,

both parties is illustrated in the line: ‘Here barbarian lands and there Romania applaud him, in different tongues rings out a single song of praise to this man’.³⁶ The barbarians and Romans form the *consensus omnium*, a potent traditional literary device for demonstrating the support of all (or at least everyone who mattered).³⁷ Yet the construction of Frankish kingship Fortunatus supports here is not a classicizing adoption of Romanness in all its aspects, but a borrowing of useful elements for a new, Frankish context.

Poem Appendix 1: Radegund³⁸

While Fortunatus clearly thought Roman traits superior, there is no hint that he held barbarian ancestry against anyone, and he became close friends with people of barbarian ancestry as well as with ‘Romans’. One of his closest friends in Gaul was Radegund, who was born into the Thuringian royal family and brought to the Frankish kingdoms in 531 when the

‘Latin Prose Panegyrics’, p. 187, recounts Cassiodorus’ panegyric sometimes serving a similar mediatory role.

³⁶ Poem 6.2, vol. 2, p. 53, lines 7-8: ‘hinc cui barbaries, illinc Romania plaudit: / diversis linguis laus sonat una viri’.

³⁷ George, *Latin Poet*, pp. 44, 48; Godman, *Poets and Emperors*, esp. pp. 25-6; contra Szövérfy, ‘À la source de l’humanisme’, p. 84. On his use of it in poem 5.3 for Gregory of Tours’ *adventus*, see B. Brennan, ‘The Image of the Merovingian Bishop in the Poetry of Venantius Fortunatus’, *Journal of Medieval History* 18, no. 2 (1992), pp. 115–39, at p. 132. The lands undoubtedly stand for the people in this passage.

³⁸ Appendix 1 is a collection of poems that were not included in Fortunatus’ original eleven books.

sons of Clovis conquered her uncle's kingdom and murdered most of her family.³⁹ King Clothar I claimed her as his bride, but after some time as a reluctant queen, she escaped to the monastery she established in Poitiers, where she remained until her death in 587.⁴⁰ It was there that Fortunatus first met her not long after his arrival in Gaul, ultimately settling in the same city.

Numerous poems in his collection are addressed to Radegund and her abbess Agnes, including one written in the voice of Radegund herself which tells the tale of the conquest of Thuringia through her eyes. In it, Fortunatus labelled her (in her own voice) 'the barbarian woman'.⁴¹ Similarly, in the hagiographical *Life* he wrote after her death, he called her 'most blessed Radegund of barbarian *natio* from the region of Thuringia ... born of royal seed'.⁴² In other poems, he commended her rejection of royal wealth for a religious life, her commitment

³⁹ On Fortunatus' concepts of friendship, see *Poems to Friends*, ed. Pucci, pp. xxxiii–xxxix; Koebner, *Venantius Fortunatus*, p. 31.

⁴⁰ Biographies of Radegund can be found in *PLRE* III, pp. 1072-4; Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, pp. 136–9; J. McNamara and J.E. Halborg (eds.), *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham, 1992), pp. 60–63; Gregory of Tours, *Gloria confessorum* 104, ed. B. Krusch, *MGH SRM* I, 2 (Hanover, 1885), pp. 364–6; and two contemporary *Vitae* of her by Venantius Fortunatus and Baudonivia, *Vitae sanctae Radegundis*, ed. B. Krusch, *MGH SRM* II (Hanover, 1888), pp. 364-77, and 377-95, respectively.

⁴¹ Poem Appendix 1, vol. 3, p. 134, line 31: 'barbara femina'. Some historians have suggested that Radegund herself was the author, but the style of the poem matches that of others by Fortunatus. See Tardi, *Fortunatus*, pp. 196-200; George (ed.), *Personal and Political Poems*, p. 116 n. 22.

⁴² Venantius Fortunatus, *Vita sanctae Radegundis* II, p. 365: 'Beatissima igitur Radegundis natione barbara de regione Thoringa ... regio de germine orta'.

to asceticism, and her hospitality, and he addressed her as a mother.⁴³ The division in Fortunatus' mental landscape between unavoidable barbarian birth and barbaric actions is apparent in her *Life*, which tells that her homeland was 'laid to waste by the barbaric storm of the victory of the Franks'.⁴⁴ The contrast between the kindly, devout Radegund and the Franks who destroyed her home is stark; while Radegund was of a barbarian people—and therefore, like Vilithuta, was predisposed to uncivilized behaviour—she did not behave in the barbaric, destructive, cruel manner that the Franks of Fortunatus' depiction did.

Although ostensibly written to Radegund's cousin in Constantinople, this poem was probably intended as part of an embassy to the East Roman emperor which requested a piece of the Holy Cross for Radegund's monastery. It would have accompanied a letter written by Radegund herself and two other poems introducing Radegund and her piety to the emperor, and this audience outside the Frankish kingdoms may account for his getting away with portraying the Franks in a negative light in the poem.⁴⁵ The depiction of Radegund as the last of a royal line, of noble birth, and as tremendously pious despite the wrongs done to her, was meant to prove her worthiness as a guardian of such a precious relic as a fragment of the Holy Cross. The label 'barbarian' was itself part of this rhetoric; 'Radegund' specified in the poem

⁴³ Poems 8.8, vol. 2, p. 151; 11.7, vol. 3, p. 125; and 11.9, vol. 3, p. 126.

⁴⁴ Venantius Fortunatus, *Vita sanctae Radegundis* II, p. 365: 'tempestate barbarica Francorum victoria regione vastata'. See also S. Coates, 'Venantius Fortunatus and the Image of Episcopal Authority in Late Antique and Early Merovingian Gaul', *EHR* 115, no. 464 (2000), pp. 1109-37, at p. 1110.

⁴⁵ George believes it was sent with Poem Appendix 3 (addressed to Radegund's cousin but perhaps meant for a wider audience) and Poem 8.1. Poem Appendix 2, addressed to Emperor Justin and Empress Sophia, was sent as thanks after the relic arrived in Gaul. On the intent of these poems, see George (ed.), *Personal and Political Poems*, pp. 111 n. 1, and 116 n. 21; George, *Latin Poet*, p. 164.

that 'even a barbarian woman' was able to cry enough tears at the destruction of her people to create a lake, showing she must have experienced particularly intense suffering.

This tale is one of the few instances of Fortunatus using the term 'Frank'. Most of these refer directly to the Merovingian royal family or, as here, to the Franks as an army interacting with others.⁴⁶ Later in this poem, 'Radegund' asks the recipient to please recommend her to the Franks who piously honoured her as a mother.⁴⁷ Poem 9.4, an epitaph for the young prince Chlodobert, states that by his birth he raised the hopes of 'the Franks'.⁴⁸ In both cases, Fortunatus is presenting the kings as the centre of the Frankish people, and probably for a partially foreign audience: Radegund's for the East Roman emperor and Chlodobert's for any representatives from other kingdoms who may have attended his funeral or visited the tomb to which the epitaph was affixed. Like Charibert, Chlodobert embodied royal Frankishness.

Clearly when writing about groups connected to the ruling family (as royals, as an army, or as subjects mourning a prince), Fortunatus was happy to call them Franks, with politicized overtones. However, he gave the label to only one individual in all his poems and

⁴⁶ The only one not mentioned below is Poem 7.20, vol. 2, pp. 117-18, wanting to know if the Franks go to battle in Italy.

⁴⁷ Poem Appendix 1, vol. 3, p. 139.

⁴⁸ Poem 9.4, vol. 3, p. 23.

hagiographical works: a ‘certain Frank (*quidam Francus*)’ named Chariulf.⁴⁹ Chariulf appears in the *Life* of Saint Germanus of Paris as a villain who seized possession of a villa owned by the local basilica and was duly punished by God for the deed. It might seem that such a barbaric act would merit the term ‘barbarian’. However, as is evident from the examples already shown, Fortunatus preferred to use ‘barbarian’ as a more neutral term for those who, while inferior to Romans, were not necessarily barbaric evil-doers. Nowhere in all his writings does Fortunatus use the term with such negative implications. ‘Frank’, therefore, may serve as a substitute when such negativity was required, as well as for distinguishing Frankish kings and armies from their neighbours.

Conclusion

Looking at Fortunatus’ use of the terms Roman and barbarian, one can see some clear patterns. The common theme throughout his works is a choice to describe individuals’ affiliations within a Roman-barbarian framework. The value he placed on traits he associated with Romanness—eloquence, polite manner, community leadership, philanthropy—matches traditional Roman values, as does the barbarian being not as well equipped with these traits. On close examination, however, Fortunatus’ language shows two innovations from the traditional construct. First, the strongly derogatory connotations of barbarians as destructive and terrifying seen in third- and fourth-century writing are absent. Fortunatus presents barbarian status as at best neutral and at worst a sign of handicap that may or may not be

⁴⁹ *Vita Germani episcopi Parisiaci*, ed. W. Levison, *MGH SRM VII* (Hanover, 1920), 5, p. 376. For more on his hagiography, see R. Collins, ‘Observations on the Form, Language, and Public of the Prose Biographies of Venantius Fortunatus in the Hagiography of Merovingian Gaul’, in H.B. Clarke and M. Brennan (eds.), *Columbanus and Merovingian Monasticism* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 105-31.

overcome. For truly derogatory emphasis, he preferred 'barbaric' or even 'Frank'. As Ian Wood has shown, this is consistent with other sources of the fifth and sixth centuries.⁵⁰

Second, Fortunatus used these two terms to describe multiple aspects of identity, particularly culture and descent. Descent from barbarians handicapped individuals with a predisposition to rude, uncivilized behaviour. Vilihuta, Launebod, and Radegund are particularly praiseworthy precisely because they overcome this handicap by adopting superior Roman cultural traits. Likewise, descent from Romans meant being born to privilege and to the expectation of upright, cultured behaviour. Lupus' greatness stems in part from his Roman birth and upbringing, Leontius is noble and praiseworthy not just because of his own merits but also because of his forefathers, and Launebod's Roman neighbours are particularly in need of chastisement for not building churches in their community as a properly civilized Roman would. An individual's descent and cultural traits are intrinsically linked in Fortunatus' view. Someone like Vilihuta (or Lupus) could adopt elements of another culture, but would still be judged based on the expectations of her barbarian (or his Roman) heritage. In a post-imperial West negotiating new conceptions of Romanness, descent became a more important facet.

Because Fortunatus, unlike his contemporary Gregory of Tours, used the term Roman, his works allow us a unique glimpse into its shifting meanings.⁵¹ We can see that it remained prestigious and available to all through education and culture, and that Fortunatus actively promoted these ways of being Roman. We can also see the relationship between Roman and barbarian identities as complex and flexible; Fortunatus, while using ancient language of a Roman-barbarian dichotomy, emphasized their compatibility and room for adaptation in a new

⁵⁰ Wood, 'The Term "barbarus"', esp. p. 50.

⁵¹ On how Fortunatus and Gregory fit together in context, see E. Buchberger, *Shifting Ethnic Identities in Spain and Gaul, 500-700: From Romans to Goths and Franks* (Amsterdam, 2017).

environment. Further, we see descent as a common way to claim Romanness, in addition to language, culture, education, and actions of positive character. That Fortunatus played on these aspects of Roman identity show how potent they were as tools in his available repertoire. Clearly his contemporaries valued such associations. The categories of Roman and barbarian were dynamic mirrors of their contemporary reality, both flexible for a changing environment and rooted in perceptions of permanence and certainty. Through Fortunatus' language, a clearer picture emerges of the ways early medieval people negotiated their own—and each other's—identities within the room for manoeuvre afforded by their society to suit their unique and quickly changing circumstances.

* Earlier versions of this article were presented at the International Medieval Congress in Leeds in July 2011, and at the Medieval Church and Culture Seminar in Oxford in November 2011, and I am grateful for all the comments I received there. Many of the ideas which sparked this investigation were developed during a stay at the Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften in the autumn of 2010, funded by the University of Oxford's Scatcherd European Scholarship. I am thankful to Walter Pohl and his colleagues for hosting me and for enlightening discussion. I would also like to thank Bryan Ward-Perkins and Chris Wickham for reading drafts and for their excellent feedback, as well as my anonymous reviewers.