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JOHANNES WIENAND

PUBLILIUS OPTATIANUS PORFYRIUS
The man and his book

In Optatian's life – as in his works – poetry and politics are inexorably intertwined: Optatian's highly artistic *carmina figurata* are key for understanding his role in the cultural transformation of the Constantinian age; likewise, Optatian's political career has ramifications for how we read the corpus of poems attributed to him. Only on the basis of a thorough reconstruction of Optatian's *curriculum vitae* can we convincingly assess the historical and literary impact of his 'morphogrammatic' creations – that is, the political significance of Optatian's innovative *carmina*, their impression upon the *apparatus imperii* and their role in mediating between the poetising ventures of a Roman senator and the Christianising endeavours of his emperor.[1]

Since the late nineteenth century scholars have repeatedly scrutinised the scant sources for Optatian's biography, and they have done so down to the last detail.[2] Little is known for sure. But the available

* The analysis in this chapter extends (and in part revises) my earlier treatments of Optatian's career in Wienand 2012a, esp. 355–361, 2012b and 2012c; it also conveys the preliminary results of an ongoing research for a commentary and German translation of Optatian's *carmina* (co-edited with John Noël Dillon, forthcoming in the *Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum* series by Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen).

1 The notion of *apparatus imperii* is used in *Pan. lat.* 5(8).2.1 to denote the inner echelons of the imperial administration under Constantine.

2 The most important previous attempts to make sense of Optatian's biography were made by Müller 1877, vi–xvi, Seeck 1908, Kluge 1922 and 1924, Groag 1926/1927 and 1946, 25–26, Helm 1959, Chastagnol 1962, 80–82, Jones, Martindale and Morris 1971, 649 (= PLRE 1, Optatianus 3) and 1006–1008 (= PLRE 1, Anonymus 12), Polara 1973 (in particular the extensive commentaries in the second volume), 1974 and 1975, Barnes 1975a and 1975b, Polara 2004, 9–24

evidence points to one of the most interesting as indeed perplexing senatorial careers in the age of Constantine.[3] Optatian seems to have been a senatorial newcomer, his background and family history being largely unknown to us.[4] He enters the historical record around AD 310/315 as a member of the senatorial aristocracy in Rome. But despite clear efforts to win Constantine's favour and further his career, Optatian remained politically insignificant throughout a vibrant decade in which numerous of his aristocratic peers were promoted to influential posts in the imperial administration. His own prospect of advancement went up in smoke when he was banished and sent to exile in the early 320s, serving one of the most severe sentences a Roman emperor could impose on a senator.[5]

Some time later, in the last years of his life,[6] we nonetheless see Optatian rising like a Phoenix from the ashes: a delegation of senatorial

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and Van Dam 2011, 155–170 (the first Constantine biography with a dedicated subchapter on the poet). Of particular importance is Marie-Odile Bruhat's unpublished 1999 doctoral thesis (henceforth cited as Bruhat 1999), esp. 2–31 on Optatian's career. On Van Dam's approach to Optatian, see my review in Wienand 2012d, 380–382.

3 For the details pertaining to the brief introductory overview that follows here, see the evidence and arguments presented below.

4 All conjectures regarding Optatian's date and place of birth (including his alleged 'African origin') and his family history are based on flimsy ground. Most importantly: the horoscope provided in Firm. *Math.* II 29.10–20 does not refer to Optatian; see n. 71 below.

5 Note the qualification here of Washburn 2013, 98: 'One shrinks from applying the term 'victims' for this group [i.e. the banished] because – despite the many disadvantages of their condition – in Roman legal thought, it signified the alternative to something worse. Thus we might just as appropriately speak of the 'privilege' of banishment as of those victimized by it'.

6 The last known event in Optatian's life dates to 333 (the second city prefecture), while none of Optatian's surviving poems refers to Constantine's *tricennalia* celebrations of AD 335/336, or to any later occasion. This is commonly taken as evidence that the poet had died between 333 and 335 (dementia or some similar ailment, is, of course, also conceivable). It is worth noting that we lack poems for other high festivities besides, such as the *quinquennalia* of Constantius Caesar in 328/329. Seeck 1908, 282 thinks that Optatian might have composed lost poems for such events. However, the fact that one poem at best can securely be dated to after 326 (*Carm.* 18: cf. Kluge 1924, 343–344 and Bruhat 1999, 501) might mean that with his anthology of 326 Optatian had achieved his aim (i.e. to further his career) and saw no reason for continuing the time-consuming artistic endeavour of composing yet more *carmina cancellata*.

supporters seems to have lobbied for the banished poet's release from exile during the festivities for Constantine's twentieth jubilee, delivering the emperor Optatian's formal petition for mercy along with a very special book designed to support his cause: a collection of innovative figure-poems. The mission turned into the linchpin of a most unlikely success story: Optatian was not only recalled from exile, he was quickly appointed governor of Achaea and, in the years 329 and 333, promoted on two occasions to the city prefecture of Rome;[7] even if only for a short term (in the first case for 31 days, in the second for 32), he thus held a post we know as one of the most prestigious offices in the career of a late Roman aristocrat.

With Optatian, it seems, a fairly unpromising candidate – known to posterity mainly as a 'hare-brained' versifier[8] – was thus promoted into the most distinguished circles of Rome's elite and endowed with offices otherwise reserved mainly for members of the oldest, wealthiest and most powerful aristocratic families in Rome.[9] This unexpected rise of so seemingly mediocre an aristocrat calls for explanation. Without imperial patronage, such a rapid advancement would have been inconceivable, and imperial promotion of this sort can in turn be viewed only as recognition for outstanding service to the Constantinian monarchy.[10] Besides Optatian's innovative poetic creations, however, we can identify nothing that would account for the emperor's sudden interest in the long-neglected senator.

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7 Chron. 354 (Chron. min. 1, ed. Mommsen, p. 68), a. 329: *vii idus Sept. Publilius Optatianus praefectus urbis d. XXXI*; a. 333: *vii idus April. Publilius Optatianus praefectus urbis item in dies XXXII.*

8 In his entry for *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Helm presented Optatian as a 'Verfasser hirnverbrannter Versspielereien' (Helm 1959, 1928). Indeed, even one of Optatian's most prominent defenders has called Optatian 'a madman or at least a neurotic of exceptional virtuosity' (Levitan 1985, 268). For an overview of the scholarly historiography here, and more detailed discussion of Helm's rhetoric, see Michael Squire's introduction to this volume (pp. 55–56).

9 On late Roman senatorial career patterns in general, see esp. Arnheim 1972, Matthews 1975, Kuhoff 1983, Schlinkert 1996, Salzman 2002 and Cameron 2011; see also the following note.

10 The most important contributions to our understanding of the late Roman senatorial aristocracy and the interaction between senators and emperors in the first half of the fourth century are now the PdD dissertations of Weisweiler 2011 and Moser 2013 (both forthcoming as books), with extensive discussion of earlier approaches.

The aim of this chapter is to make sense of this curious biography. This requires a careful revision of the historical sources and their modern interpretations. My analysis roughly proceeds in reverse chronological order from Optatian's exile and his revocation and late offices to his pre-exile career; for the sake of convenience, the conclusions are summarised in a final table (Table 2). As we shall see, even T.D. Barnes' highly influential analysis of Optatian's biography – a seemingly watertight prosopographical study – requires substantial revision.[11] We will need to re-examine what the medieval manuscripts can tell us about the form, contents and function of the anthology that secured Optatian's recall from exile; likewise, we shall want to explore what the pair of letters preserved along with Optatian's *carmina* can tell us about the poet's interaction with Constantine. Only if we understand the inner logic of the mutual dependence between Optatian's life and works can we fully appreciate what role the man and his art played in the cultural transformation that brought about the Christian monarchy of the later Roman empire.

OPTATIAN'S BANISHMENT AND RECALL FROM EXILE

Nothing certain is known about Optatian's place of exile or its conditions, apart from some topical allusions in the *carmina*.[12] In *Carm.* 1 and 2 in

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11 The reconstruction of Optatian's career presented in Barnes 1975b has been widely accepted: to name but a few examples, Levitan 1985, 245, Ernst 1991, 97–98, Rühl 2006, 75, Van Dam 2011, 158–170 and Salzman 2016 all largely rely on Barnes' analysis for biographical data. However, as Barnes expressly warned his readers, 'only the prefecture of the city of Rome ... is firmly dated by reliable evidence; the rest depends strictly and solely on hypothesis and conjecture' (186). This 'rest' consists of six hypothetically reconstructed biographical facts, each of them, as I will argue in this chapter, incorrect (cf. ibid.: 'born c. 260/270; proconsul of Achaea before 306; *Epistula ad Constantinum* November/December 312; exiled in or shortly after 315; presented poems I–XX to Constantine in autumn 324; recalled from exile early in 325').

12 Also in most other cases, the conditions of exile are unknown; see Washburn 2013, 126–127. In Optatian's case, even the location is unknown (cf. Kluge 1924, 326). Kluge briefly discusses the possibility that the *mare Sigaeum* of *Carm.* 19.23 refers to the Black Sea, but she rightly rejects the idea due to the fact that when Optatian was banished, the Black Sea was beyond the limits of Constantine's domain (1924, 344–345). According to Polara 1973, 2.122–123 (cf. also Polara 1974, 199) *Sigaeum* points to the town of Siga in Mauretania Caesariensis (Talbert

particular, Optatian laments the misery of exile (mentioning *squalor* and *sordes*, among other things), and mourns the loss of his home and the distance from his son.[13] Beyond such insinuations, clearly modelled on Ovid's *Tristia*, the poems composed in exile show that Optatian remained very well informed about the latest developments at court:[14] even under the adverse conditions of his exile, Optatian obviously maintained a brisk correspondence with *amici* in the emperor's retinue, who regularly provided him with news (and might also have lobbied for his rehabilitation).[15] Optatian also used his insights into court policy for the panegyrical passages of his *carmina*, which apart from their technical virtuosity also constitute highly political statements – a fact that in the end might have contributed to Optatian's recall from exile, as we shall see.

Various propositions have been made – mostly hypothetical – as for the reasons of Optatian's banishment.[16] The *carmina* themselves contain

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2000, map 29 D1), but this remains highly speculative. Washburn 2013, 134–137 has collected what can be said about places of exile in comparable cases.

13 On the conditions of his exile, cf. esp. *Carm.* 1.11–14 (addressing Thalia), with discussion by Marie-Odile Bruhat in this volume (pp. 258–261); compare also *Carm.* 2.5–8, 2.10–12 and 20a.22 (mentioning a *sors iniqua*). Optatian's exile is also attested by Jerome *Chron.* a. 329 (Helm, Euseb. VII 232). On the significance of exile as imperial punishment in late antiquity, see Braginton 1944, Stini 2011, Washburn 2013, esp. 65–68; on the Republican background, cf. Kelly 2006. On Optatian's clear modelling of *Carm.* 1 on Ovid's *Tristia*, see the discussions in this volume by Michael Squire, Marie-Odile Bruhat and John Henderson; more generally on 'the rhetorics of exile' in late antiquity, see also Washburn 2013, 127–131.

14 I have established this in my previous analyses of Optatian's *carmina*: see Wienand 2012a, 355–420, 2012b and 2012c.

15 It was by no means unusual for ambitious members of the elite to use various official and unofficial communication channels (even over long distances) in order to retrieve information about developments at court: for the collected evidence, see Millar 1977, 213–228, 259–272, Wiemer 1995, 134–135, Ando 2000, 126–128, Bradbury 2004 and Dillon 2012, 192–213. Washburn 2013, 137–141 underestimates the efficiency of such personal networks in cases of exile.

16 Seeck 1908, 273–274 saw a connection to *Cod. Theod.* XVI.2.5 and believed that Optatian was exiled due to overzealous paganism ('heidnischen Uebereifer': p. 274) – a notion partly accepted by Kluge 1922, 326. However, Seeck's suggestion is utterly unconvincing, not least because *Carm.* 8 (with its interwoved chi-rho and IESVS) was composed before Optatian's exile. Other scholars have suggested a connection with the fall of C. Ceionius Rufius Volusianus, or else have suspended judgement. The most plausible hypothesis, as argued here, can be deduced from *Carm.* 2.29–30; see also n. 18 and n. 19 below.

only vague indications. A passage in *Carm.* 2 suggest that Optatian had had to defend himself against a litany of accusations.[17] In this poem, Optatian also quite abruptly declares his allegiance to the emperor's marriage legislation – the rhetoric makes sense only if the allegations against Optatian mentioned in the following verse (but not specified further) were somehow connected.[18] Since Optatian was in Constantine's entourage in Illyricum when he was banished (a fact to which I return below), he was probably exiled by imperial decree.[19] It would not be unusual for a member of the Roman aristocracy to fall into the emperor's disgrace on account of *delatores*.[20] Of course, the poet emphasises that the accusations are untrue.[21]

In order better to understand the changing relation between poet and emperor, it is important to narrow down the basic dates of Optatian's exile. Evidence in *Carm.* 6 allows us to place Optatian in Constantine's entourage in 322, when the emperor was conducting a protracted campaign against the Sarmatians along the middle course of the Danube. This poem was composed to celebrate Constantine's victory, and it indicates how Optatian witnessed the expedition in person (although perhaps only the

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17 *Carm.* 2.32–35: *nam cetera causae | nunc obiecta mihi venia, venerabile numen, | vince pia et solito superans fatalia nutu | sancte, tui vatis, Caesar, miserere serenus.*

18 *Carm.* 2.29–30: *Solis iura suis fidissima dextra maritis | et sociale iugum praebet, consortia vitae.* On Constantine's marriage legislation, see Evans Grubbs 1995 and Schierl 2009, 143–146. The idea that Optatian was exiled on the charge of an *adulterii crimen* was proposed by Jones, Martindale and Morris 1971, 1006–1008 (= PLRE 1, Anonymus 12) and endorsed by Polara 1974, 112–114, 120–121; cf. Bruhat 1999, 16–20, who sees a connection between *Carm.* 2 and Constantine's marriage legislation, but who argues that this can be explained without reference to Optatian's personal situation. My reading of *Carm.* 2.29–30 is independent from the erroneous identification of Optatian with the Anonymus 12. It might be significant that Optatian laments only the loss of his son and home in *Carm.* 1.15–16 (*Cum dederit clemens veniam, natumque laremque | reddiderit ...*), making no mention of any wife. Kluge 1924, 324 assumes that Optatian's wife had already died.

19 Optatian's senatorial peer, C. Ceoinius Rufius Volusianus, for instance, was exiled by senatorial decree, while his son Albinus was exiled by the emperor. The case of Albinus is potentially comparable with Optatian's banishment, since both were apparently exiled by the emperor for *adulterium*: see Firm. *Math.* II 29.10–20, with Barnes 1975a, esp. 41, 47–49 and Washburn 2013, 30, 115–116. On a potential context for Optatian's banishment, see below on p. 156.

20 On the role of *delatores* and aristocratic rivals, cf. Washburn 2013, 115–117.

21 *Carm.* 2.31–32: *Respice me falso de crimine, maxime rector, | exulis afflictum poena ...*

profectio of the troops from Sirmium in the summer and their triumphal return in late autumn 322).[22] The triumphal celebrations for Constantine's Sarmatian victory were performed at Sirmium in 322, from 25. November to 1. December, so around this time the poem was composed.[23] However, the poem also indicates that Optatian was already in exile when he finished the piece.[24] The banishment can thus be dated quite precisely to the late autumn of 322 or the winter of 322/323.[25]

The date of Optatian's petition for clemency and his subsequent recall from exile can also be determined with some precision. Several of Optatian's *carmina cancellata* – especially those that express the poet's request for recall from exile – obviously focus on the celebration of Constantine's *vicennalia*: Constantine celebrated his *vicennalia incipientia* on his twentieth *dies imperii* (counting inclusively), namely on 25. July 325, in Nicomedia, and his *vicennalia perfecta* a year later, on 25. July 326, in Rome.[26] The fact that the verses of *Carm.* 5 (and to a lesser degree also

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22 As Seeck 1908, 272–273 has shown (followed by Kluge 1924, 325–326 and Polara 1974, 118, among others), *Carm.* 6 indicates Optatian's presence at the imperial court during Constantine's military campaign against the Sarmatians in 322 (esp. *Carm.* 6.17–18: *Factorum gnarum tam grandia dicere vatem | iam totiens, Auguste, licet*). Barnes 1975b, 179–180 rejects this interpretation, obviously because it contradicts his dating of Optatian's exile to 315, but the arguments he presents are weak. The fact that the earliest *carmina cancellata* stem from around 317/319 (on which, see below) supports a dating of Optatian's exile to the early 320s. On the Sarmatian campaign and the subsequent war against the Goths (with which the Sarmatian campaign is regularly confused), see Wienand 2012a, 335–338; on the *lector ludens* of *Carm.* 6, see Körfer's chapter.

23 The date (without a year) is given in the *Fasti Philocali* (CIL I.1, p. 276: *mensis November*, and 278: *mensis December*). The length of the *ludi* is unusual: Salzman 1990, 137–138 (following Acre 1982) assumes they were introduced in 334 for a joint victory of Constantine and Constantius II, whereas I think they were introduced with a regular length in 322 and later expanded (Wienand 2012a, 336 with n. 197).

24 According to Kluge 1924, 325–326 (accepted by Polara 1974, 118), the verses *cum munere sacro | mentis devotae placarint fata procellas* (*Carm.* 6.34–35) constitute the earliest reference to Optatian's exile.

25 Barnes assumes that Optatian's exile was connected to the fall and banishment of the two-time consul C. Ceionius Rufius Volusianus and accordingly should be dated to the year 315. The connection, however, is purely associative and should be dismissed.

26 Jerome *Chron.* a. 326 (Helm, Euseb. VII 231): *Vicennalia Constantini Nicomediae acta et sequenti anno Romae edita.*

Carm. 9 and 10) celebrate at length Constantine's son Crispus seems to speak in favour of the earlier date: by the time of the *vicennalia perfecta*, Crispus had already been deposed and executed on Constantine's orders and stricken with *damnatio memoriae*.[27] Nonetheless, there is ample evidence in the *carmina* that Optatian tailored the collection of poems accompanying his plea for mercy to fit the concluding ceremonies of Constantine's vicennial celebrations – and that his senatorial advocates accordingly did not present the poet's petition for clemency to the emperor until July 326. The relevant arguments were forcefully proposed by Otto Seeck already in 1908 and have lost nothing (or rather little) of their strength.[28]

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27 The idea that Crispus' death rules out the later option goes back to Müller 1877, viii and Kluge 1922, 90–96; it has been widely accepted – but erroneously, I think. On the date of Crispus' downfall and death: according to *Cons. Const.* a. 326 (*occisus est Crispus et edidit vicennalia Constantinus Aug. Romae*), Crispus was killed in 326, and Amm. XIV 11.20 relates that the Caesar died at Pola in Istria (Talbert 2000, map 20 A5). This can be matched with the imperial itinerary. Even if we drop the controversial dates in the *Codex Theodosianus*, Constantine was in Heraclea on 3. February (*Cod. Theod.* 9.3.2, 9.7.1), arrived in Aquileia in early April at the latest (*Cod. Theod.* 9.24.1, 9.8.1), and stayed in north Italy until early July (*Cod. Theod.* 9.21.3). Crispus may have met Constantine on his way to Aquileia or somewhere in north Italy, or else the Caesar may have been arrested in Gaul. But in all likelihood his downfall dates to March/April/May 326 (see Barnes 2011, 146–147 for more details). A reconstruction along these lines is almost universally accepted. However, on the basis of a recently discovered bronze coin struck in the name of Crispus (CNG 242, 13. October, 2010, no. 402), Ramskold 2013 attempted to redate Crispus' death to the days or weeks immediately after 25. July 326, which would mean that the Caesar was still alive when Optatian's book was given to Constantine. For reasons I present in more detail elsewhere, I am not convinced: if we add Rome to Ramskold's list of cities whose production schemes constitute exceptions, and fit the Caesars' proper *decennalia* (March 326) into the picture, the most plausible solution (and one that fits much better all other available evidence) would be to locate the SMRA-issue (to which the new Crispus coin belongs) in this slightly earlier context.

28 Seeck 1908. Elsa Kluge's attempt to refute Seeck (Kluge 1922 and 1924) suffers from a substantial lack of understanding regarding imperial jubilees and Roman numismatics. Nevertheless, Groag 1926–1927 and most scholars thereafter have followed Kluge and rejected Seeck's dating. Bruhat 1999, 13–16 is a noteworthy exception. On the date of 326 for Optatian's mission, see the discussion in Wienand 2012a, 355–356 with n. 1 and 360 with n. 12 and 366–369, and Wienand 2012b: 251–253.

Seeck's arguments need not to be repeated here in detail. It will perhaps suffice to re-examine the problem that three *carmina* praise Crispus, who was tried and executed most likely between mid-May and mid-June 326 and thus dead and damned by July 326.[29] One of these poems, *Carm.* 10, was composed before Optatian's exile and thus was certainly never intended for inclusion in the anthology bestowed upon Constantine,[30] while the other two were clearly tailored to fit the planned joint celebration of Constantine's *vicennalia* and the Caesars' *decennalia* in July 326 – at which point Crispus was dead for about two to three months. Most scholars who have sought a solution to this problem dated Optatian's plea for clemency to 325 (despite all the evidence to the contrary that Seeck assembled); alternatively, they have argued that Optatian ignored the fact or had the affected poems removed at the last minute (which remains hypothetical). The explanations proposed so far mainly proceed from the assumption that we know these two *carmina* precisely because they had been handed over to Constantine. But, as I shall argue in more detail below, we instead know these poems because they were included in some sort of *secondary* compilation published among a wider audience only after Optatian's return.[31] The problem, in short, needs to be framed in different terms.

When the poet prepared and published a collection of his works for a broader audience *after* his recall from exile, Optatian deliberately ignored the *damnatio memoriae* against Crispus and retained the questionable *carmina* – otherwise they would not have survived. In the whole history of Roman *damnatio memoriae* this is unparalleled. But Optatian's decision to publish *Carm.* 5 and 9 (and also *Carm.* 10, though this piece probably already circulated in the early 320s) without alteration after the fall of Crispus is understandable: in a hermetic configuration like Optatian's *carmina cancellata*, with their interwoven verses, it was simply impossible to remove or replace the references to Crispus after the fact. In *Carm.* 5, long passages celebrate Crispus' *decennalia* and praise his accomplishments,[32] and in v. 24 of *Carm.* 9, the *e* of the vocative *Crispe*

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29 See above, n. 27.

30 On the date of *Carm.* 10, see Kluge 1924, 325, Chastagnol 1962, 80 n. 66, Polara 1974, 285–286 and Bruhat 1999, 496. The argument proposed by Barnes 1975b, 180–181 for a hypothetical date of 324 is not convincing.

31 The fact that the two (pre-exile) letters are also known to us today strongly indicates that Optatian himself shortly after his return from exile published some sort of secondary edition of his anthology; for more details on this, see below.

32 E.g. *Carm.* 5.30–34.

even becomes part of the poem's interwoven text. In both poems, mention of Crispus could not be removed without affecting the *versus intexti*, which in turn would have had serious consequences for the entire arrangement of the main text. Adhering to the *damnatio memoriae* of Crispus would have entailed discarding the poems in question entirely. Unless he was willing to forgo publishing his *Carm.* 5 and 9 altogether, Optatian had no choice but to celebrate Crispus posthumously in politically sensitive fashion. Precisely those poems in which Optatian prominently lauds Crispus rank among his most elaborate compositions.

It is important to note that it was possible for Optatian to ignore the *damnatio memoriae* only in those editions of his book that were meant for circulation among his peers. In direct interaction with Constantine at court – that is, in a ceremoniously framed encounter with the *princeps* – the affected poems can have had no place whatsoever. Most likely, the problematic *paginae* were simply removed before the collection was bound to a codex and handed over to the emperor. The limited timeframe for these changes does not pose a serious problem. Most scholars seem to assume (on the basis of the formulaic laments of *Carm.* 1.1–12 and 2.3–12) that Optatian was utterly isolated and that he had prepared the codex himself in his place of exile.[33] However, the poet might well have continued (perhaps through intermediaries among his senatorial peers or else directly) to rely on artisans whom he had previously employed. The codex given to Constantine was probably produced in Rome, so after Crispus' fall there might well have been enough time for those involved to adapt the codex's composition to the changed conditions and remove the pages referring to the disgraced Caesar. Once a solution along these lines is accepted, there is no reason to reject dating Optatian's petition for clemency to 326: on the contrary, the *carmina* contain a number of indications that virtually impose this date.

At this point we may therefore reopen discussion of who might potentially have served as Optatian's spokesman, delivering Optatian's plea for mercy and presenting his *carmina* before Constantine. Elsa Kluge proposed Sex. Anicius Faustus Paulinus (consul in 325), but she worked on the assumption that Optatian had the corpus of poems delivered to Constantine on the occasion of his *vicennalia incipienta* in 325.[34] One might also consider M. Ceionius Iulianus (*signo* Kamenius),

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33 Thus, for instance, Seeck 1908, 275–278.

34 Kluge 1922, 91–92; cf. PLRE 1, Paulinus 15.

to whose family Optatian seems to have been related by marriage (the name Publilius turns up several times subsequently in the gens Ceionii).[35] Alternatively, perhaps Bassus, the addressee of *Carm.* 21, might be suggested – although it is not clear which 'Bassus' is meant here.[36] At any rate, Optatian's petition was a success, and the exiled poet was recalled: *Porfirius misso ad Constantinum insigni volumine exilio liberatur*, as Jerome puts it in his *Chronicle* ('Porfyrius was recalled from exile after an extraordinary book was sent to Constantine').[37] Jerome gives the year 329 as the date of Optatian's recall from exile, but such a three-year delay would require considerable explanation in light of the poet's complete rehabilitation, and Optatian's dramatic rise to the governorship of Achaea and the urban prefecture would not make sense if his recall was delayed. Quite reasonably, therefore, scholars unanimously assume that Optatian was recalled from exile immediately or shortly after his poem collection plus petition for mercy had been delivered.[38]

Optatian's recall from exile was predicated on a judicial reassessment of his case: apparently the court now accepted Optatian's argument that he had been exiled on the basis of false accusations.[39] But this alone does not explain how Optatian subsequently rose to become governor of Achaea and urban prefect so rapidly: the conferral of these prestigious offices must be viewed as a reward for exceptional service to the emperor. The historical record preserves nothing that could have been relevant other than Optatian's panegyrical figure-poems with which he commended

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35 This was noted by Groag 1926–1927, 104. On M. Ceionius Iulianus, cf. PLRE 1, Iulianus 26.

36 *Carm.* 21.14–15: *Sed rursum Bassus nunc prodere carmen | imperat.* The range of possibilities include Caesonius Bassus, consul in 317; Iunius Bassus, praetorian prefect in 318–331, and consul in 331; or Septimius Bassus, who was city prefect of Rome in 317–319; cf. PLRE 1, Bassus 12, 14 or 19 respectively.

37 Jerome *Chron.* a. 329 (Helm, Euseb. VII 232).

38 Cf. Seeck 1908, 281, Kluge 1924, 326–327, Polara 1974, 118–119, Barnes 1975b, 175 and Chastagnol 1960, 404. Imperial jubilees such as the *vicennalia* were ideal occasions not only for exiles to petition for clemency, but also for emperors to demonstrate *indulgentia*. Thus, Diocletian declared a general amnesty on his twentieth jubilee in order to show his imperial magnanimity (Euseb. *Mart. Pal.* 2.4; cf. Washburn 2013, 149–150). Maybe the case of Optatian was even prenegotiated, so that Constantine could immediately react to Optatian's petition with an act of clemency.

39 Optatian insists on this in *Carm.* 2.31–32. In general on recall from exile and return, see Washburn 2013, 144–160.

himself as an encomiastic court poet. It is therefore reasonable to take a closer look at the anthology presented to Constantine in 326.

THE POETRY BOOK OF 326

The poems chosen by Optatian as a supplement to his plea for mercy were bound in a codex.[40] Starting from the medieval manuscripts, scholars have variously attempted to reconstruct the 'Ur-codex',[41] trying to determine both the precise selection of poems and their order within the book. All in all, the manuscript tradition attributes 31 poems to Optatian,[42] but the evidence strongly suggests that only a minor portion of these poems were represented in the codex of 326: *Carm.* 31 was definitely not composed by Optatian, while *Carm.* 17, 22, 24 are thought at least by some scholars to be unauthentic;[43] *Carm.* 8, 10, 16, 21 and 23 most likely date prior to Optatian's exile, which renders it implausible to assume they were used again in 326, and *Carm.* 18 is probably a post-exile poem;[44] *Carm.* 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29 and 30 are not addressed to Constantine at all, while *Carm.* 11, 12, 13 and 16 are *carmina cancellata* addressed to Constantine, but may not have been sufficiently elaborate to be included in a gift collection composed to win the emperor's favour; *Carm.* 15 is addressed to Constantine, but not a *carmen cancellatum*; *Carm.* 5, 9 and 10 praise

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40 Jerome talks of a *volumen*, Optatian mentions *paginae* and (albeit referring to an earlier compilation) a *libellus* (cf. esp. *Carm.* 1). On the codex as medium, see Rühl 2006, 90–97 and Squire's discussion in this volume's introduction (pp. 71–73).

41 Seeck 1908, 272–273 introduced the notion of 'Urkodex' for investigating Optatian's manuscript tradition.

42 Polara 1973, 1.vii–xxxiv provides a general overview of the manuscripts and manuscript tradition; for an in-depth analysis, see Polara 1971, along with the bibliography cited in Squire's introduction, pp. 73–74, n. 51. Throughout this chapter, I refer to the manuscripts according to Polara's *conspectus siglorum*.

43 According to Squire and Whitton 2016, *Carm.* 24 (and possibly also *Carm.* 22) may also be authentically Optatianic, or at least fourth-century in date.

44 For *Carm.* 15, 17, 25, 27, 28, 29 and 30, no precise date can be given. On dating the *carmina*, see above all Kluge 1924, 336–348, Polara 1974, 284–288, Barnes 1975b, 177–183 and Bruhat 1999, 494–501; Edwards 2005 also sought to establish a sequential chronology of Optatian's *carmina*, but on the basis of their relative complexity, and largely ignoring the dates established by previous scholarship – the result is far from persuasive.

Crispus, who was subjected to a dishonourable *damnatio memoriae* shortly before Optatian's book was handed over to Constantine, and since *Carm.* 4 is closely linked to *Carm.* 5, it was also affected (if it was contemporary at all, which may very well be doubted). Thus only a limited number of highly elaborate figure-poems, panegyrical in character and politically unproblematic, fit the relevant time-frame (namely *Carm.* 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 14, 19 and 20): just two of these make explicit reference to the poet's call for mercy (*Carm.* 1 and 2), and one (or at most two) more *carmina* vaguely allude to the poet's state of exile (*Carm.* 6, maybe also 19).[45] With the exception of just a handful of poems, in other words, it is largely unclear which *carmina* formed Optatian's so-called *insigne volumen*, or indeed which poems were included within what later readers labelled his *panegyricus*.[46]

The most significant obstacle for reconstructing the poem collection of 326 is that the manuscript tradition certainly did not start with this 'Ur-codex'. The problem is not so much that the earliest manuscripts reach back only to the ninth or late eighth century (thereby leaving a gap in our records of half a millennium, during which time both the original selection and the order of poems might have changed).[47] Rather, we must recognise that the compilations preserved in the extant manuscripts merge various different traditions: instead of preserving any 'original' version handed to Constantine, they hark back to one or several *secondary* editions, which

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45 According to Kluge 1924, 344, *Carm.* 19.21–26 refers to the exile. Kluge also sees references to Optatian's exile in *Carm.* 22 (1922, 91–92, cf. 1924, 346), but this poem is not addressed to Constantine. For the suggestion of exile in *Carm.* 19, see e.g. Squire 2015: 110–111.

46 The title *panegyricus* (or *panegiricus*, *panagiricus*, *panigiricus*, *panagericus* and *panegricus*) appears in mss. **B**, **P**, **p**, **E**, **T**, **R**, **J**, **Q**, **W**, **F**, **H**, **A**, but nonetheless seems to postdate Optatian. Lukian Müller (in his 1877 edition) was the first modern scholar to use the title *panegyricus* exclusively for those poems he thought were handed over as a gift to Constantine: his 'Panegyricus Constantini' consists of *Carm.* 1–20, whereas he understood *carmina* 21 to 28 as 'Carmina reliqua'. It is worth noting that Müller's restrictive use of the title *panegyricus* – as well as the order of poems in his edition – proved deeply influential (especially on Helm's Optatian entry in the *Realencyclopädie*), but by no means represent the manuscript tradition. On the title *panegyricus*, see Kluge 1922, 90, Polara 1974, 283 n. 63, Bruhat 1999, 42 and Squire's introduction to this volume (p. 59).

47 For instance, it is not even clear whether we know all poems composed by Optatian; with some exceptions, the order of poems differs from manuscript to manuscript (for a helpful overview, see Polara 1973, 1.xix); and some or all of the scholia, as well as the very title of the collection, seem to have been added later.

must have been published by Optatian only after his recall from exile. For one thing, the emperor was certainly not responsible for publishing the artistic products of his subjects; for another, the presence of the two letters (to which I return below) itself testifies to at least one secondary edition.[48]

These considerations also help us to make sense of *Carm.* 1. In this poem, Optatian claims that due to his banishment the codex he sends to Constantine was executed on sallow paper adorned with simple black and red ink. This is certainly not a *captatio benevolentiae* or any other topos of modesty; if untrue, this statement would make little sense: the *carmina* repeatedly endorse the idea that the emperor's favour towards Optatian's muses constitutes an essential prerequisite for the unfolding of his art.[49] The poet's use of the most eminent materials and the most elaborate techniques – including purple, a dye highly reminiscent of the imperial colour porphyry – thus presupposes the emperor's consent, which Optatian sought to renew by way of his gift in the first place. We may conclude that the codex presented before Constantine has in fact *not* been manufactured on purple parchment with gold and silver ink, and adorned lavishly with ornamented page margins, as the poet claims to have produced his *carmina* prior to exile.[50]

Optatian seems to have delivered to Constantine only a collection of 'blueprints': they were written on simple paper, without (or with only minimal) ornamentation, using black ink for the base text and red ink for the *versus intexti*. The result might have roughly resembled what we see in *Cod. Bern.* 212 [Plates 1 and 6], albeit without the scholia.[51] Optatian also connected his humble gift with a vow: in *Carm.* 1.15–18, he promises to

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48 The manuscripts also entail prose scholia, which were certainly not included in the codex given to Constantine. But the idea of adding scholia explaining the interwoven verses of the *carmina cancellata* might go back to 'carmi speciali' (Pipitone 2012, 27) composed for secondary edition(s) of Optatian's poetry book, introducing in verse or prose the individual figure-poems. *Carm.* 4 (less likely also *Carm.* 17) is probably reminiscent of such original 'carmi speciali', or may even date back to Optatian's time. On the scholia in general, see the commentaries in Polara 1973 and Pipitone 2012. On the question of a secondary edition (or editions) of Optatian's poetry book, see also the preliminary considerations in Wienand 2012a, 368 with n. 32 and 2012b, 254.

49 See, for instance, *Carm.* 10.9–19.

50 See *Carm.* 1.1–8, with discussion in Squire's introduction.

51 Thus also Kluge 1924, 327. On *Cod. Bern.* 212, see Squire's introduction to this volume (p. 74).

deliver his poems in their full splendour after he is recalled from exile.[52] Within such a blueprint version of his anthology, a small number of poems composed in exile may well have sufficed to make Optatian's point (maybe just those examples mentioned above, namely *Carm.* 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 14, 19 and 20).[53] If we accept the idea of a draft codex, we also have to assume that, following his recall from exile, Optatian fulfilled his vow and presented Constantine (maybe now even in person) with a magnificently executed version of his poetry book, probably in amended or expanded form. This embellished *vota soluta* version may then have formed the core of the secondary edition(s) Optatian published for a wider audience (and from which the manuscript tradition proceeds), to which he now added some pre-exile poems,[54] the *carmina* praising Crispus and two letters.

I shall return to the manuscript tradition and its implications below, when discussing the two letters in more detail. But first, we have to take a closer look at Optatian's career in the time immediately after his recall from exile.

OPTATIAN AS GOVERNOR OF ACHAEA AND URBAN PREFECT

After his recall from exile, Optatian was quickly promoted and sent to Corinth to serve as governor of Achaea. Optatian's governorship is attested epigraphically on an inscribed statue base that was found in 1927 in the theatre of Sparta [Fig. 2.1], the statue itself is lost. The base is made of grey marble, irregularly worked, and varies from between 22 and 31 cm high, 84 cm wide and 47 cm deep; the letters range from 1.7 to 3.5 cm in height. The base bears an honorific inscription, celebrating Optatian as

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52 *Carm.* 1.15–18: *Cum dederit clemens veniam, natumque laremque | reddiderit, comptis ibis et ipsa comis, | purpureo fulgens habitu, radiantibus intus, | ut quondam, scriptis ambitiosa tuis.*

53 It is noteworthy, however, that *Carm.* 19 only appears in mss. **Q** and **W**; it is thus curiously *not* included in those manuscripts containing the common sequence of poems plus letters (on which see below). If we assume that Optatian originally planned to include also those *carmina* that praise Crispus, the collection of 'blueprints' might have been meant to comprise ten poems all in all (or *Carm.* 1 plus ten figure-poems, depending on inclusion/exclusion of *Carm.* 10, which was of earlier date and might not have been intended for use in the gift anthology): that would, of course, have been a fitting number for a decennial jubilee.

54 *Carm.* 18 might be a post-exile poem included in a secondary edition.

λαμπρότατος ἀνθύπατος, the Greek equivalent to *(vir) clarissimus proconsul*. The text reads as follows:[55]

Ἡ πόλις
τὸν διὰ πάντων εὐεργέτην καὶ σω-
τῆρα τῆς Λακεδαίμονος, τὸν λαμ(πρότατον) ἀνθ(ύπατον)
Πουβλίλ(ιον) Ὀπτατιανόν, Λυκούργῳ κατὰ τὸ ἦθος καὶ τὴν
5 πρᾶξιν ὁμοιοῦσα ἀπ' ἴσων, ἔστησεν παρὰ τῷ Λυκούργῳ,
προσδεξαμένου τὸ ἀνάλωμα Μάρ(κου) Αὐρ(ηλίου) Στεφάνου
τοῦ διασ(ημοτάτου) ἀρχιερέως τῶν Αὐγούστων, τοῦ
προστάτου τῆς πόλεως.

The city | has erected (a statue of) the benefactor in every way and saviour | of Lacedaimonia, the most glorious proconsul | Publilius Optatian, who resembles Lycurgus in manners and | deeds equally, next to (the statue of) Lycurgus; | the expense was guaranteed by Marcus Aurelius Stephanus, | most perfect high priest of the emperors, | chief of the city.

The inscription does not offer a precise date for Optatian's term in office. Accordingly, it is disputed at which point in his career his governorship should be placed. Scholars have proposed a wide range of dates, from before 306 to after 333.[56] But the *terminus ante quem* is certain: Optatian definitely held the office prior to his first urban prefecture in 329.[57] However,

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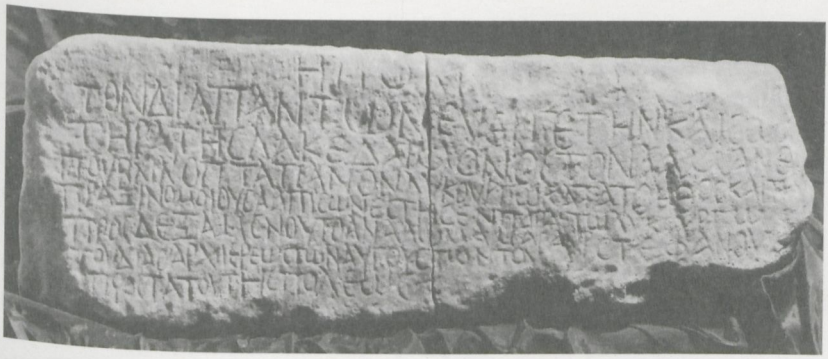
55 AE 1931, 6 = SEG 11 810. Editio princeps: Woodward 1927/1928, 35–37 (no. 58), with a rendering of the inscription at p. 35. Further discussions and analyses include: Roussel 1931, 216, Groag 1946, 25–26 and Feissel 1985, 284–285. The transcription of line 7 in *L'Année Philologique* incorrectly reads δις instead of διασ(ημοτάτου). The mistake has been copied and perpetuated elsewhere, including Groag 1946: 25, Chastagnol 1962, 81, Barnes 1975b: 175 and Bruhat 1999, 3 n. 6. In the translations and interpretations affected, the commissioner of the base is incorrectly interpreted as *twice* priest of the imperial cult, but SEG 11 810, Roussel 1931, 216, Robert 1948, 21 and Feissel 1985, 284 (no. 22) have the correct reading.

56 The most extreme positions are held by Barnes 1975b, 175–176 (who suggests Optatian was governor of Achaea 'before Maxentius began to rule Rome and Italy') and Woodward 1927/1928, 36 (who argues that Optatian was 'chosen *Proconsul Achaiae* in 330 or 334'). Even Groag 1946, 26 thought it possible that Optatian held the proconsulate after 329.

57 Barnes 1975b, 175 brings out the point: 'no man is likely to have been proconsul of Achaea after an urban prefecture'; cf. Chastagnol 1960, 409–411 and



2.1 Statue base with honorary inscription for Publilius Optatianus. Sparta, Archaeological Museum: inv. Wo. III 35/7, n. 58 (AE 1931, 6 = SEG 11 810). Photograph by Athanassios Themos, reproduced by kind permission of the Ephorate of Laconia.

thus far it has not been possible to rule out a date *prior* to his exile. The most convincing attempt to date the governorship was made only recently, in a 2013 article by Caillan Davenport.[58] Davenport notes that the sponsor of the honorific statue – a certain Marcus Aurelius Stephanus, high priest of the imperial cult – is not styled with the conventional title of ἀρχιερεὺς τῶν Σεβαστῶν, but rather with the words ἀρχιερεὺς τῶν Αὐγούστων. Davenport is right to connect this to a characteristic modification of Constantine's imperial titulature that Benet Salway first described and interpreted in 2007: when Constantine consolidated his hold over the Greek east, he was no longer addressed as Σεβαστός, but rather as Αὔγουστος – a characteristic shift in imperial titulature presumably meant to avoid the pagan implications of the traditional title.[59] Davenport inferred that Optatian therefore must have held the office of governor after his return from exile, when Constantine had already extended his rule over the east.

This argument seems compelling, and Davenport was confident he had solved the dating problem once and for all.[60] However, Salway's findings

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in particular Chastagnol 1962, 80–82 with n. 76 ('Le proconsulat d'Achaïe ne peut en effet, en aucun cas, venir après une préfecture urbaine').

58 Davenport 2013.

59 Salway 2007.

60 Cf. Davenport 2013, 233: 'the Spartan inscription may be confidently dated post-324, based on the titulature of the priest Aurelius Stephanus'.

do not rule out the possibility that the change in nomenclature from Σεβαστός to Αὔγουστος may have taken place prior to 324 in the Greek-speaking territories that Constantine controlled after the Peace of Serdica (1. March 317).[61] Achaea now belonged to Constantine's domain, and since Optatian was not exiled until 322/323, as argued above, he may have served as governor sometime between early 317 and late 322. Davenport does not take this scenario into account, since he assumes that Optatian was exiled already in 315 (relying on the erroneous dating of Barnes).

A definitive solution is only offered by the find-context of the statue base. The base was not found *in situ*, but rather in the orchestra of the theatre of Sparta in a layer above the ancient orchestra level.[62] These later structures belonged to houses from the Byzantine period built upon the eastern area of the *cavea*. The statue base was thus used as building material, which implies that it must have remained accessible prior to its reuse and may have potentially stood where it was originally erected. The inscription itself mentions that Optatian's statue was set up next to a statue of the Spartan legislator Lycurgus. The exact location is not specified further, and nothing has thus far been found of this statue of Lycurgus.[63] However, since the inscription of another statue base found *in situ* in the theatre likewise attests that it was erected 'near Lycurgus' (ἄγχι Λυκούργου),[64] it is certain that Optatian's statue also once stood

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61 Salway associates the change in titulature with the Council of Nicaea, but concedes in light of earlier evidence of the title Αὔγουστος (especially the documents quoted in Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 10.5.4 and 10.6.1) that the transition may have taken place earlier: see Salway 2007, 45 n. 44. Since Salway bases his interpretation primarily on Egyptian papyri, he relies on evidence from a territory that Constantine did not control until 324; as far as I can see, Salway did not cross-check Greek-speaking areas that were under Constantine's control prior to 324.

62 Woodward 1926–1927, 3–4; cf. also Woodward 1927–1928, 35; the report by Woodward and Hobling 1923/1925, 119–136 describes the state of the theatre before the statue base was found.

63 My thanks here to Eleni Zavvou, who is currently editing the inscriptions of Lakonia, for her first-hand confirmation.

64 The statue base in question is that of the proconsul Anatolius (PLRE 1, Anatolius 8; cf. Groag 1946, 57–58), published in Woodward 1925–1926, 245–247 no. 35 (AE 1929, 23 = SEG 11 773, cf. Robert 1948, 63, Feissel 1985, no. 26). On the location of the statue of Lycurgus, Woodward (1925–1926, 247) has the following to say in the excavation report: 'If, as seems probable, this inscription [i.e. the honorific inscription for Anatolius] is in its original position, there must have been a statue of Lycurgus adjacent'.

in the theatre – and obviously at least the statue base stood there until the stones were reused as building material. Now, it seems inconceivable that the inscription honouring Optatian would have still been standing in such a prominent place if the governor had been exiled only after the monument had been erected. We know from other cases that the statues of disgraced officials were removed from public places,[65] so we can securely presume that Optatian's statue was not erected until after his recall from exile – and that Optatian must have held the governorship of Achaea sometime between 326 and 329 accordingly.

The evidence available of course provides only scant information about how Optatian understood or filled his office as governor of Achaea. The inscription from Sparta shows that he had close ties to the imperial high priest of Achaea and that he must have been responsible for some sort of euergetic benefaction towards the city (perhaps he funded a public building or supported a petition to the emperor). The πόλις (which is to say the council) honoured him for his service by erecting a statue, at the expense of M. Aurelius Stephanus, in a prominent location in the theatre. In addition, as Giorgios Deligiannakis argues in a forthcoming article, Optatian himself may have sponsored a statue honouring Constantine in the city of Gytheum – a plausible suggestion based on an in-depth analysis of a late-antique marble head with radiant headgear excavated in the city's theatre.[66] Even if we do not know any details about the background of these interactions, the evidence shows that Optatian used his office to mediate between the various social and political strata of his province: these included the local councils in the cities of Achaea, the imperial cult, the provincial administration and the central imperial government.

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65 Modestinus D 48.19.24; see Washburn 2013, 104. Weisweiler 2011 shows that officials frequently displayed their loyalty to the ruling emperor by toppling statues of disgraced office holders.

66 Deligiannakis (forthcoming). Giorgios Deligiannakis has presented his thoughts about the 'Gytheum head' (local beige marble: h. 52 cm; w. 37 cm) in a lecture on 'Helios and the emperor Constantine in the Peloponnese' (Universität Gießen, May 2016). The Gytheum head is now in the storeroom of the Archaeological Service in Gytheum; it was first described by Giannakopoulos 1987, 189–191 (with fig. 56) as a head of Constantine. Deligiannakis sees the portrait as showing the god Helios, but the head perhaps blends aspects of the imperial portrait with solar imagery (as known from other instances of Constantinian portrait sculpture): cf. Preger 1901, Wallraff 2001a and 2001b, Matern 2002, Berrens 2004.

What then to make of Optatian's post-exile career? Taken together, the evidence discussed here suggests that, after his rehabilitation, Optatian was quickly promoted to the post of *proconsul provinciae Achaeae.* In the imperial administrative hierarchy, this office ranked directly beneath the great proconsulships of Africa and Asia, and the position satisfied the formal requirements for a subsequent promotion to the urban prefecture.[67] When he took over the post of urban prefect for the first time in 329, Optatian was installed by imperial will at the very top of the senatorial elite.[68] Optatian's advance to the urban prefecture is particularly remarkable in that Constantine had otherwise, especially after 326, appointed his urban prefects preferably from the most important, wealthiest and oldest senatorial families of Rome, as Michele Renee Salzman has emphasised anew only recently.[69] The fact that Optatian held the post twice for only a short tenure makes it clear that he had not become one of the emperor's most favoured administrators.[70] Rather, Optatian's meteoric rise was obviously meant to be seen by the Roman world's elite as Constantine's abiding ovation to the man and his art.

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67 On the late Roman governors of Achaea, see Groag 1946.

68 On the urban prefecture in general, see Chastagnol 1960 (discussing the Constantinian prefects specifically at 400–414) and 1962 (with reference to Optatian at 80–82). Chastagnol 1960, v sees in the urban prefect 'le plus haut fonctionnaire de l'ordre sénatorial', labelling his position 'le couronnement de la carrière sénatorial'. Salzman 2016 fittingly characterises the office as 'a highly prized position that made its recipient a mediator between emperor and senate'.

69 See Salzman 2016, with 33–35 on Optatian; cf. Chastagnol 1960, 404 ('de 326 à 337, tous les préfets urbains appartiennent aux grandes familles romaines, mis à part à deux reprises, pour un mois seulement, le poète Optatianus'). Locrius Verinus (PLRE 1, Verinus 2), urban prefect of 323–325, was also a senatorial newcomer; according to Salzman 2016, 28–29, 'his military experience made him the right choice to serve as urban prefect during the decisive struggle with Licinius'.

70 Before it became known in 1927 that Optatian had served as proconsul in Achaea prior to his urban prefecture, the brief tenures of Optatian's post in Rome were thought to indicate a conspicuous lack of imperial confidence in the poet's administrative abilities. Groag 1946, 26 n. 1 was the first to revise his earlier view. Nevertheless, Optatian's urban prefecture was presumably meant primarily as an imperial reward.

OPTATIAN'S SENATORIAL BEGINNINGS

The previous sections of this chapter have attempted to establish the various stages of Optatian's biography between his banishment in 322/323 and his death after 333. These include his governorship of Achaea and his two terms as urban prefect – the only offices that are directly attested for Optatian. The fact that both these offices can securely be dated to the period after his exile can lead us to two broader conclusions: first, that Optatian enjoyed a spectacular political career after his recall from exile; and second, that prior to his exile – and this is no less remarkable – he was quite insignificant in political terms.[71] For at least two reasons, that insignificance prior to exile calls for an explanation: on the on hand, an inscription from before 315 – potentially under Maxentius – places Optatian among the upper ranks of the senatorial aristocracy of Rome; and on the other, the two letters that have been transmitted alongside his figure-poems show that Optatian had attempted to win Constantine's favour before he was banished – apparently without much success. In order to understand these circumstances, I want to revisit here the evidence for Optatian's life before 322, returning to each testimony in turn.

Optatian is mentioned in a fragment of a list of names inscribed on marble, and discovered in 1917 during work on the foundation of the Galleria Colonna (now Galleria Alberto Sordi) in Rome. The fragment is 36 cm high and 33 cm wide, with a letter height of between 1.5 and 2 cm [Fig. 2.2]:[72]

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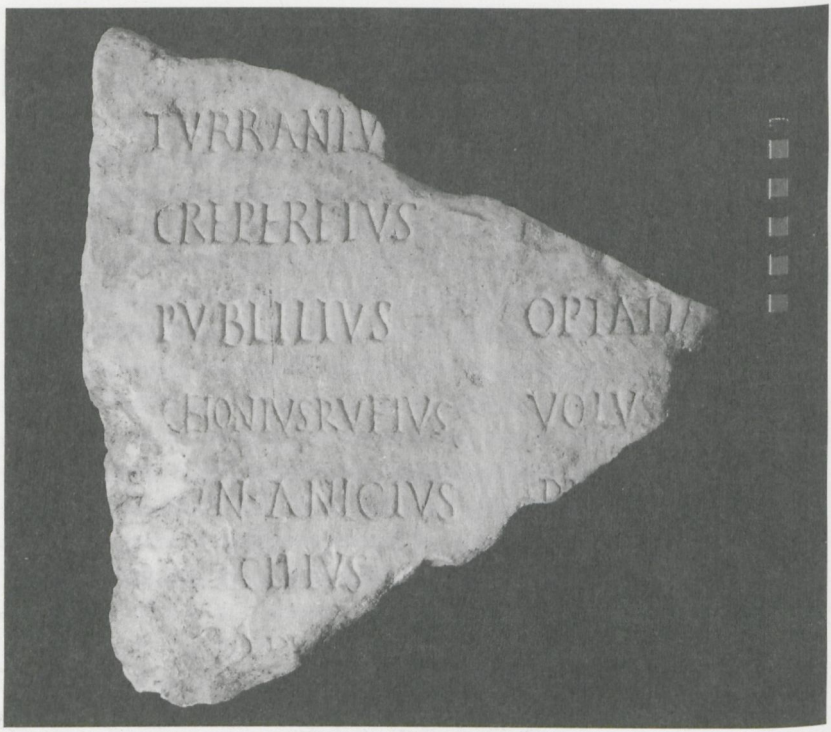
71 It is important to note that Optatian is not identical with the anonymous person to which the horoscope in Firm. *Math.* 2.29.10–20 belongs. PLRE 1, Optatianus 3 and Anonymus 12 (cf. Anonymus 1) erroneously proposed this connection – 'a grave disservice to scholarship', as Barnes 1975b, 174 has rightly put it. Polara (especially Polara 1973, 2.1–3 and 2004, 25–26) in particular has followed PLRE and reconstructed Optatian's background and origins in detail on the basis of the information provided in the horoscope (Polara's version has been taken for granted also by Perono Cacciafoco 2011 and Pipitone 2012). However, as Mommsen 1894, 471–472 has first shown – and Barnes 1975b, 41–43 cogently confirmed (cf. idem 1975a, 173–174, and discussion in Bruhat 1999, 4–7) – the horoscope must in fact refer to C. Ceionius Rufius Volusianus and his son Ceionius Rufius Albinus.

72 CIL VI 41314. The fragment is now in the Musei Capitolini (inv. NCE n. 63). Editio princeps: Fournari 1917, 22 (no. 1); see also Cantarelli 1917–1918, 224. Groag 1926–1927 was the first to grasp the value of the inscription for our knowledge of Optatian's *curriculum vitae*. I thank Francisca Feraudi-Gruénais



- - - - - -
Turraniu[s] *[- - -*
Crepereius *Ro[gatus - - -?]*
Publilius *Optatia[nus - - -?]*
Ceionius Rufius *Volusi[anus - - -?]*
[Iu]n(ius) Anicius *Pa[ulinus]*
[Ma]ecilius *[Hilarianus - - -?]*
- - -]pri[- - -] *[- - -]*
- - - - - -

2.2 Fragment of a monumental list of names mentioning Publilius Optatianus. Rome, Musei Capitolini: inv. NCE n. 63 (CIL VI 41314). Photo provided by the Epigraphic Database Heidelberg, reproduced by kind permission of the Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali – Musei Capitolini, Roma.

Optatian's name appears here among a series of illustrious senators – including C. Ceionius Rufius Volusianus, who was exiled in 315 – thus providing a secure *terminus ante quem* for the date of the inscription.[73] The

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from the Epigraphic Database project at Heidelberg for helpful information about the inscription.

73 On C. Ceionius Rufius Volusianus (inter alia *pontifex Solis*, *consul* 311–314, *praefectus urbis* 310–311, 313–315), see above all Barnes 1975a, esp. 43–49; cf.

reason for inscribing and displaying the list (the original length of which can no longer be determined) must be inferred. The eminent persons mentioned in the inscription – all of whom were prominent senators at the turn from the third to the fourth century[74] – were obviously honoured publicly in monumental form: the name *Publilius Optatia*[*nus* alone would have spanned more than 30 cm and would thus have been clearly recognisable from a distance (especially as the letters were coloured). The order in which the names appear is significant: it follows neither alphabetical order nor the age of the persons named or indeed their senatorial rank. Edmund Groag, who published the first comprehensive investigation of the text, has argued plausibly that the order must have something to do with membership in a priesthood.[75]

The exact purpose of the list can be determined by comparison with a fragment of an analogously structured marble inscription.[76] The two fragments do not belong to the same inscription: they differ in letter height, line spacing and artistic execution, and the names listed in the second fragment suggest a slightly earlier date. Nevertheless, the two inscriptions seem to have served a similar purpose. The second fragment measures 64 cm high and 51 cm wide, with a letter height of between 2.5 and 3.5 cm. It was reused in the cloister of the Basilica of S. Croce in Gerusalemme and discovered there in 1906 [Fig. 2.3]:[77]

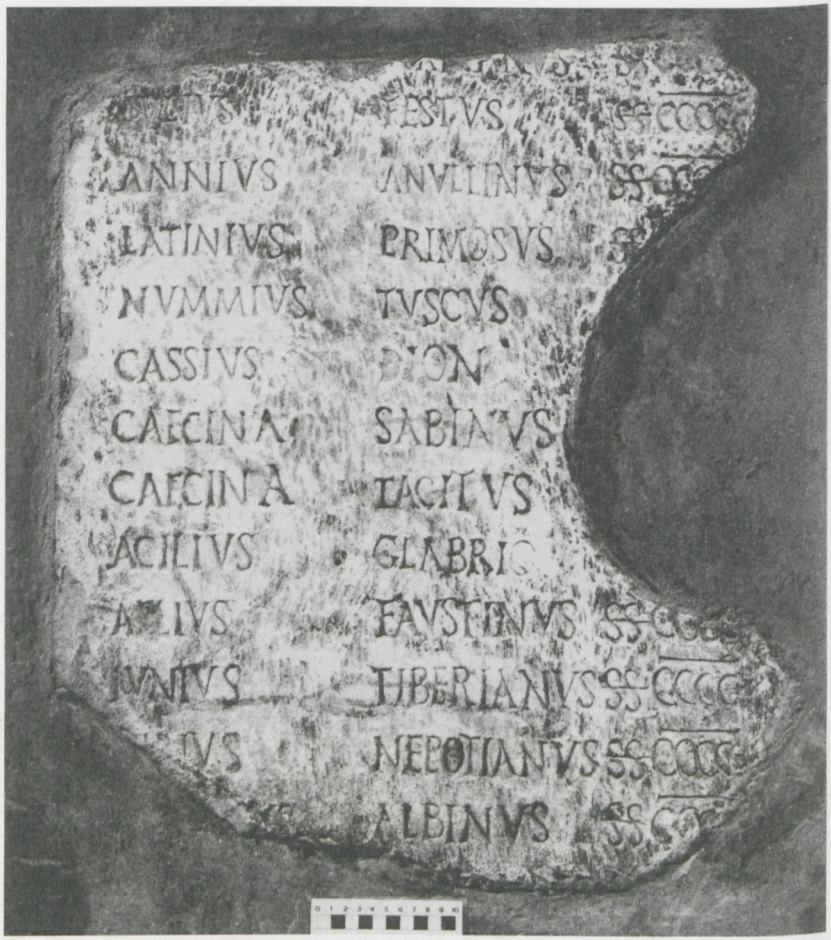
Rüpke and Glock 2005, vol. 2 no. 1129, Chenault 2008, 43, Cameron 2011, 138. The entries in PLRE 1, Volusianus 4 (cf. Anonymus 1 and Anonymus 12) and RE Ceionius 17 erroneously presume that Volusianus is not identical with PLRE 1, Anonymus 1, the father of Anonymus 12, for whom Firm. *Math.* II 29.10–20 provides a horoscope containing information about the exile.

74 Apart from Optatian, and apart from Volusianus, the following persons appear on the list: L. Turranius Gratianus (*praefectus urbis* 290–291: PLRE 1, Gratianus 3, probably identical with Gratianus 4); Crepereius Rogatus (*pontifex Solis*: PLRE 1, Rogatus 2); Iunius Anicius Paulinus (*consul* 325, *praefectus urbis* 333: PLRE 1, Paulinus 13, probably identical with Paulinus 14, 15 or 17); and Maecilius Hilarianus (*corrector Lucaniae et Bruttiorum* 316, *proconsul Africae* 324, *consul* 332: PLRE 1, Hilarianus 5). The last name on the list (- - -]*pri*[- - -] is uncertain.

75 Groag 1926–1927, 108–109, followed by Barnes 1975b, 177.

76 It was Groag 1926–1927, 104–106 who first pointed to the analogy. He assumed (erroneously) that the two fragments belonged to the same inscription.

77 CIL VI 37118, cf. p. 4819 = EDR072180 (AE 1907, 203). I thank Silvia Orlandi and again Francisca Feraudi-Gruénais for helpful information on this inscription.



	[---]	*Gordianus*	*((sestertium))* $\overline{CCCC}$
	Iulius	*Festus*	*((sestertium))* $\overline{CCCC}$
	Annius	*Anullinus*	*((sestertium))* $\overline{CCC}$*[-]*
	Latinius	*Primosus*	*((sestertium))* *[---]*
5	*Nummius*	*Tuscus*	*[---]*
	Cassius	*Dion*	*[---]*
	Caecina	*Sabinus*	*[---]*
	Caecina	*Tacitus*	*[---]*
	Acilius	*Glabrio*	*((sestertium))* *[---]*
10	*A[e]lius*	*Faustinus*	*((sestertium))* $\overline{CCCC}$
	Iunius	*Tiberianus*	*((sestertium))* $\overline{CCCC}$
	[V]irius	*Nepotianus*	*((sestertium))* $\overline{CCCC}$
	[---]ius	*Albinus*	*((sestertium))* $\overline{CCCC}$
	[---]iades	*[---]*	

2.3 Fragment of a monumental list of names of late Roman senators. Rome, S. Croce in Gerusalemme (EDR072180; cf. AE 1907, 203 = CIL VI 37118). Photo kindly provided by the Epigraphic Database Heidelberg.

In this second inscription, we can reconstruct the names of fourteen people who also were eminent members of the senatorial aristocracy, having held office at the turn of the fourth century.[78] Again, the order in which the persons are named cannot be explained by anything other than membership in a priesthood. Additionally – and this is particularly important also for interpreting the inscription that mentions Optatian – the amount of 400,000 sesterces is written next to each individual named, apparently recording a donation. Obviously, we have here a monumental building inscription honouring those who helped finance a public building project (whether construction or restoration) in Rome.[79] In all likelihood, we may assume that the list of names mentioning Optatian served the same purpose. In monumental fashion, the inscription seems to have honoured members of a priesthood that contributed to the erection or restoration of a public building in Rome, maybe a temple. The precise priesthood to which they belong remains unknown. Other epigraphic evidence attests that two persons named in the lists – Caecina Tacitus and Crepereius Rogatus – belonged to the college of *septemviri epulones* (the latter was also *pontifex dei Solis*, and Volusianus was *quindecemvir sacris*

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78 The fragment contains the names [G]ordianus (*senator*: PLRE 1, Gordianus 1), Iulius Festus (*praetor urbanus*: PLRE 1, Festus 9; presumably identical to the man named in CIL VI 314c), C. Annius Anullinus (*consul* 295, *praefectus urbis* 306–307 and 312: PLRE 1, Anullinus 3), Latinus Primosus (*praeses Syriae* 293–305: PLRE 1, Primosus), Nummius Tuscus (*consul* 295, *prafectus urbis* 302–303: PLRE 1, Tuscus 1), Cassius Dio (*consul* 291, *praefectus urbis* 296: PLRE 1, Dio), Antonius Caecina Sabinus (*consul* 316: PLRE 1, Sabinus 12), Caecina Tacitus (possibly *consul suffectus*, *praeses provinciae Baeticae*: PLRE 1, Tacitus 1, possibly identical with Tacitus 2), Acilius Glabrio (*senator*: PLRE 1, Glabrio 1), A[ci?]lius Faustinus (*senator*: PLRE 1, Faustinus 5), Iunius Tiberianus (*praefectus urbis* 303–304: PLRE 1, Tiberianus 7), [V]irius Nepotianus (*consul* 301: PLRE 1, Nepotianus 6), and M. Nummius Ceionius Annius Albinus (*praetor urbanus*: PLRE 1, Albinus 7; presumably identical with the man named in CIL VI 314b). The last name (.....*iades*) cannot securely be reconstructed. Gatti 1907, 119 conjectures that it may be a certain Asclepiades attested as *praefectus (?praetorio)* in 303. The editors of PLRE consider this identification possible; cf. PLRE 1, Asclepiades 1 und Asclepiades 2.

79 This was argued already by Vaglieri 1906, 430; cf. Gatti 1907, 116 and Hülsen's commentary on CIL VI 37118. Gatti assumes that the total amount originally documented by the inscription was no less than twelve million sesterces; Groag 1926–1927, 106 considers this too low ('entschieden zu niedrige Schätzung'). The building in question was presumably near the Sessorian Palace, but the relocation of the inscription makes it impossible to say anything more specific.

faciundis).[80] Groag has raised the possibility that also Optatian belonged to the college of *quindecemviri sacris faciundis*, but in the end the question must remain open.[81]

It is also uncertain whether the inscription mentioning Optatian can be dated more precisely beyond the *terminus ante quem* of 315. It would be particularly interesting to know whether Optatian held the status attested by the inscription under the reign of Maxentius or that of Constantine – that is, whether the inscription dates to before or after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in October 312. The offices held by the persons mentioned in the first inscription (CIL VI 41314) fall within the period 209–333, with most of them in the years 310–325. The known public functions of the persons named in the second inscription (CIL VI 37118) fall predominantly in the years 275–306. None of the senators mentioned in the latter inscription are known to have held office under Maxentius, with the exception of C. Annius Anullinus, whom Maxentius named *praefectus urbis* on 27. October 312, one day before his death in the Battle of the Milvian Bridge; we should not talk of some 'ordinary' career move here.[82] Two of the people mentioned, Iulius Festus and M. Nummius Ceionius Annius Albinus, were responsible for a dedication to Hercules under Diocletian and Maximian, as is known from other epigraphic evidence.[83] We can thus establish a certain connection between the office-holders and the

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80 Rüpke and Glock 2005, vol. 2 nos. 995, 1408, 1129, respectively (with references to the epigraphical sources).

81 Groag 1926–1927, 108–109 n. 7. Volusianus' priestly office is attested by CIL VI 2153. On the topic in general, see also Rüpke and Glock 2005, vol. 2 no. 2105, who likewise interpret the inscription mentioning Optatian as a list probably reflecting 'eine gemeinsame Dedikation eines Zirkels von sieben hochgestellten Priestern,' but the authors also correctly concede (ibid. n. 1) that the inscription 'keinerlei Rückschlüsse auf das Kollegium zulässt'. The authors (ibid., 868–869 n. 4) refer to epigraphic evidence attesting circles of priests belonging to various different colleges.

82 Vaglieri 1906, 431, Gatti 1907, 119–120.

83 CIL VI 314: *Herculi invicto | T(itus) Flavius Iulianius | Quadratianus v(ir) c(larissimus) | pr(aetor) urb(anus) XVvir s(acris) f(aciundis) | donum dedi(t) || Deo Herculi | M(arco) Nummio Ceionio | Annio Albino | praetor(i) urban(o) v(iro) c(larissimo) | dedicante || Deo Herculi | Iul(ius) Festus v(ir) c(larissimus) | pr(aetor) urban(us) d(onum) d(edit) || Herculi Invicto | Pompeius Appius | Faustinus v(ir) c(larissimus) | pr(aetor) urb[a]n(us) d(onum) d(edit) | feliciter.* Pompeius Appius Faustinus is not identical with A[ci?]lius Faustinus, as Gatti 1907, 117 believed; see PLRE 1, Faustinus 5 and Faustinus 7.

Tetrarchy, whereas the opposite is true for Maxentius. Vaglieri and Gatti have explicitly rejected a dating of the second inscription to the reign of Maxentius. The most probable date is the period from the dyarchy of Diocletian and Maximian to the end of the Second Tetrarchy – roughly between the years 285 and 306.

Only two of the twenty-one senators named in the inscriptions demonstrably held office under Maxentius. For three reasons, this would not speak against dating the inscription that mentions Optatian to before 312: first, Maxentius initially relied heavily on the equestrian class to carry out his usurpation and gave important government posts to senators only late in his reign;[84] second, since the other territorial rulers refused to recognise Maxentius, his options for promoting ambitious senators to responsible administrative positions were generally limited (the usurpation of Domitius Alexander had temporarily exacerbated the situation); third, some of the offices held by senators under Maxentius are unknown to us precisely because they were intentionally omitted in cursus inscriptions erected in the post-Maxentian era.[85] Once all three aspects are taken into account, there seem good reasons for dating at least the first inscription to the years 306–312, maybe even more specifically to around 310/312: large scale elite euergetism in Rome was not the rule before the reign of Maxentius, as the emperor held a monopoly on building activity and infrastructure projects. But precisely for Maxentius' reign, financial expenses on the part of senators are particularly well-attested, and senators' monetary support made it possible for Maxentius to carry out a substantial building program in the city of Rome.[86] The degree to which these contributions were voluntary was presumably higher than

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84 On the supporters of Maxentius' usurpation, see Groag 1930, Cullhed 1994, Leppin and Ziemssen 2007 and Lenski 2008.

85 This can be seen, for instance, in the case of C. Ceionius Rufius Volusianus: CIL VI 1707, dated to after 312, omits three highly prestigious offices (the praetorian prefecture, the urban prefecture and the consulate), precisely because they were held under Maxentius.

86 This was already noted by Groag 1926–1927, 102–109, at 104–107: Groag cites Aur. Vict. 40.24, Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 8.14, *Vit. Const.* 1.35, *Pan. lat.* 12(9).3.5–7, 4(10).33.6–7 and Zonar. 12.33. Drost 2013, 50–52 has identified numismatic evidence for the financial burdens of the senatorial class under Maxentius. On the building program in particular, see Coarelli 1986, 1–58 and Valenzani 2000, 41–44. The fact that Maecilius Hilarianus (*consul* 332, *praefectus urbis* 332–338, *praefectus praetorio* 354) is mentioned in the list speaks for a dating late in the reign of Maxentius.

the sources suggest: our (mostly posthumous) evidence for the reign of Maxentius is saturated with anti-tyrannical rhetoric, but the senatorial class did not seem to have had interest in a permanently cool relationship with their emperor. There is hence no reason not to date the inscription – and thus the beginning of Optatian's career – to Maxentius' reign.[87]

We can therefore conclude that already before 315, and most likely already under Maxentius, Optatian moved among eminent members of the Roman senatorial aristocracy – an essential prerequisite being that he had already held one or more senatorial entry offices (for instance, the quaestorship or aedileship). But he also apparently belonged to a prestigious priestly college already, and must have been wealthy enough to engage in considerable euergetic activity – ideal prerequisites for ascending to high-flying offices in the imperial administration. Other members of the senatorial aristocracy successfully won Constantine's favour and held high administrative positions in the years after Maxentius' fall, which was even true of the most important senatorial supporters of Maxentius – ironically, the most prominent example being C. Ceionius Rufius Volusianus, who appears right next to Optatian in CIL VI 41314. Optatian's career, in contrast, stalled for years: no office is known for him until after his exile.

THE CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN OPTATIAN UND CONSTANTINE

The two letters that survive together with Optatian's *carmina* show how, prior to his exile, Optatian endeavoured to win the emperor's favour. In a number of manuscripts, we find both a letter from Constantine to Optatian (*Epistula Constantini*) and a letter from the poet to the emperor (*Epistula Porfyrii*). The authenticity of both letters has been questioned on various grounds. But – for reasons that I will set out elsewhere – I consider it relatively clear that they are reliable historical witnesses.[88]

Those manuscripts that contain these two letters (**B**[1], **P**, **E**, **T**, **R**, **J**, **Q**, **W**) always include them both, and always in the same order: first

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87 Most scholars have followed Groag's view (mainly via Barnes 1975b) that the inscription was published under Maxentius. On Constantine and the Roman senate after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, see Lenski 2008.

88 The most extensive treatment of the letters is provided by Polara 1973, 2.19–27 and Bruhat 1999, 23–31, although both scholars argued they were later forgeries.

Ep. Porf., then *Ep. Const.*[89] It is clear, however, that Optatian's letter was originally written as a direct response to Constantine's letter: that is, there must have been a first letter, now lost, written by Optatian to Constantine, to which *Ep. Const.* responds.[90] The letters have nothing to do with Optatian's petition for clemency and his recall from exile, as is sometimes assumed. They date instead to the period before Optatian's exile, and they can clearly be attributed to the earliest phase of Optatian's efforts to win the emperor's favour by sending him samples of his innovative poetry, commending himself to Constantine as a loyal subject.[91] From indications in *Ep. Const.* we know that Optatian's lost first letter was accompanied by one of his *carmina cancellata*, which seems to have been the poet's very first dedication of a figure-poem to Constantine.[92] Optatian

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89 See the tabular overview in Polara 1973, 1.xix.

90 Both letters refer to a single *carmen* dedicated by Optatian to Constantine (*Ep. Const.* 1 and 10–11, *Ep. Porf.* 1), and they both imply that this *carmen* was the poet's first poetic dedication of this kind to the emperor (esp. *Ep. Const.* 10–14 and *Ep. Porf.* 1–2). *Ep. Const.* 12–14 approves of the gift, while *Ep. Porf.* 1, 6–8 replies to Constantine's approval; see also Van Dam 2011, 158–161. Some scholars (in particular, Polara 1974, 295 and Bruhat 1999, 24–25) have seen insufficient indications within the letters to retrace their relative chronology. On the basis of the order in the manuscripts (or rather, in the modern editions), some scholars seem to presume erroneously that *Ep. Const.* responds to *Ep. Porf.* (e.g. Barnes 1975b: 'Constantine's reply').

91 *Ep. Const.* does not indicate any contact between poet and emperor prior to the dedication to which it replies. *Ep. Porf.* 8 suggests Optatian had only received one single reply to his poetry by Constantine at the time he wrote the letter (*Etenim si, ita ut sapientibus placuit, maxime imperator, aestimanda sunt, non numeranda iudicia, qui huiusmodi testimonium consecutus sum pietatis tuae dignatione caelesti, iam licet Parnasi iuga securus ingrediar et ab ipsis Aonii verticis adytis deducere audeam Musas* ...). The implications were already noticed by Müller 1877, ix; cf. Kluge 1924, 347 and Barnes 1975b, 185.

92 *Ep. Const.* 9–14. According to Kluge 1924, 325, *Carm.* 10 might have been the first figure-poem and was probably related to the letter exchange between Optatian and Constantine. A better guess is probably *Carm.* 16: the poem seems to date to before Optatian's exile, is quite elaborately composed, and with its interwoven text in the dative nicely aligns with what Optatian writes about the *praefatio* of his poem in *Ep. Porf.* 3; the latter passage evidently alludes to a coloured woven verse invoking the name of the emperor, as can be found in *Carm.* 16, but later also in *Carm.* 11 and 13. Seeck 1908, 270–271 argues on the basis of *Carm.* 21 and 22 that Septimius Bassus (*praefectus urbis* 317–319) may have inspired Optatian to write his first panegyric *carmen cancellatum*,

also attached one or more figure-poems when he replied with his *Ep. Porf.* to Constantine's *Ep. Const.*[93] Moreover, in *Carm.* 1, composed in exile in 326, Optatian refers to a *libellus* he had sent Constantine before he was banished (vv. 1–2: *Quae quondam sueras pulchro decorata libello | carmen in Augusti ferre Thalia manus*). This *libellus* seems to have been a compilation of a small number of magnificently designed *carmina cancellata* bound within a codex, and this codex is probably identical with the attachment to *Ep. Porf.* (or alternatively, perhaps, it was sent to Constantine at a later stage during the letter exchange).

Most scholars date the letters to the period immediately after Constantine's victory over Maxentius, hence to the months after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (in around 312/313).[94] The basic idea is that Optatian and his senatorial peers attempted to win the new emperor's favour in the months following Maxentius' defeat, when Constantine was still residing in Rome.[95] Both the efforts and success of various senators are well documented in the sources. The problem is only that the early date for the letters is not supported by any evidence. A simple observation militates against it: no figure-poem survives that can be dated securely

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which may or may not be the case, but the context suggested by Seeck (early 317, celebrating the elevation of Constantine's two oldest sons to the rank of Caesar) is certainly too early for Optatian's first dedication of a figure-poem to Constantine (on which see the following sections of this chapter). Maybe Optatian's self-description as *ruris vates* in *Carm.* 15.15 (*ista canit ruris tibi vates ardua metra*) tells us something about the early stages of his development as a poet: many scholars assume he wrote bucolic verses before turning to picture-poetry, but perhaps the allusion refers to his more conservative *technopaegnia*, as Kluge 1924, 325 argues (with reference specifically to *Carm.* 20, 26 and 27); following Smolak 1989, 241, alternatively, we might read this talk as simply a literary topos. For more detailed discussion of Optatian's *technopaegnia*, see Jan Kwapisz's chapter in this volume.

93 *Ep. Porf.* 9: *Denique oratus, Augustissime domine, temeritati meae da veniam, et quae nunc quoque pietatis tuae favore ausus sum inligare, dignanter admitte: audaciae meae fomitem aeternitatis tuae clementia suscitavit.*

94 While for Barnes 1975b, 185, the date is merely a 'conjecture', Van Dam 2011, 158–170 takes the date for granted. I also tentatively accepted the dating of the letters to after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in Wienand 2012a, 358 with n. 6 (cf. also Wienand 2012b, 230): in light of the arguments presented here, however, my earlier opinion must now be revised.

95 Constantine's presence in Rome can be dated quite precisely to the months from his triumphal *adventus* on 29. October 312 to January 313; cf. the evidence provided in Barnes 1982, 71.

prior to *c.* 317/319. The prerequisite for Optatian's ability to dedicate a figure-poem to the emperor, however, would of course be simple: already by this time he possessed the skill to produce such 'laboriously contrived affectations'.[96]

In order to narrow down the date of the letters, we might first ask why they have survived at all. To tackle this question, it is necessary to take another look at the manuscripts. In one manuscript alone (**W**), the letters precede the poems. In all other seven manuscripts that contain the letters, they show up somewhere in between the poems (though never at the end). In five of the eight manuscripts (**B^1, P, E, T, R**), we find always the same sequence of poems (*Carm.* 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 20), and always preceding the letters. In these manuscripts, the letters are likewise consistently followed by *Carm.* 10. Beyond *Carm.* 10, no coherent order of poems can be found in a significant number of manuscripts. The common sequence of the first items in these manuscripts is thus as follows:

	DATE OF COMPOSITION AND CONTEXT	INTEXT DESIGN OR SHAPE
Carm. 1	326 (*vicennalia* / petition for mercy)	*none*
Carm. 2	326 (*vicennalia* / petition for mercy)	symmetrical cruciform
Carm. 3	324/325 (victory over Licinius)	'face of Augustus' (*vultus imperii*)
Carm. 5	326 (*vicennalia*)	AVG | XX | CAE|S X
Carm. 6	322/323 (Sarmatian victory)	Quincunx army formation
Carm. 7	323 (Sarmatian victory)	Trophy (shield with spears crossed)
Carm. 8	*c.* 317/321 (Crispus' victories) [pre-exile]	Chi-rho and IESVS
Carm. 9	325/326 (*vicennalia*)	'palm of virtue' (*palma virtutum*)
Carm. 20	326 (*vicennalia*)	organ
Ep. Porf.	*c.* 319/322 [pre-exile]	*none*
Ep. Const.	*c.* 319/322 [pre-exile]	*none*
Carm. 10	*c.* 320/321 (Crispus' victories) [pre-exile]	cruciform

Table 1 The recurring sequence of poems/letters in mansucripts **B^1, P, E, T, R**

This recurring sequence of poems – ranging from *Carm.* 1 to the two letters or even to *Carm.* 10 – does *not* go back to the codex given to Constantine in 326. As argued above, *Carm.* 5, 9 and 10 contain references to Crispus and thus cannot have been part of the version presented before Constantine; furthermore, *Carm.* 8 and 10 were composed before Optatian was banished (in *c.* 317/321 and *c.* 320/321 respectively), which renders it

96 Helm 1959, 1928: 'derartig mühselig ausgetüftelte Künsteleien'.

highly unlikely that he used them again in 326. Likewise, we can be sanguine that Optatian did not include the letters in the collection of poems he sent to Constantine: the publication of the letters only makes sense as a medium of aristocratic self-display *vis-à-vis* the author's senatorial peers. For Optatian, the letters served as a token of imperial favour, and their display was meant to vindicate the poet's closeness to the emperor. Making use of imperial letters in such a way was highly functional only within the framework of a senatorial aristocracy that strove to adapt to the changing rules of an increasingly decentralised empire.[97]

The sequence of poems and letters in these five manuscripts cannot therefore be explained as representing the layout of the 326 codex given to Constantine. But it might very well reflect the internal order of the postulated secondary edition that Optatian published after his return from exile. The fact that after the letters (or else after *Carm.* 10) we encounter various disparate sequences of further poems might reflect later additions of single poems or further poem collections published in various other contexts. Yet a series of important questions ensue. After all, why should Optatian use two pre-exile letters in a post-exile compilation? Why should he put them at (or towards) the end of a certain sequence of poems? And why should he do so even at the cost of inverting their chronological order?

The issue is complex, some brief remarks must therefore suffice. Most importantly, this single sequence of poems and letters does not seem to have come about merely by chance. *Carm.* 1 and 2 open the compilation by introducing an exiled poet pleading for mercy, while the following *Carm.* 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 20 perform, from shifting angles, a dazzling display of the panegyrical powers and abilities inherent in Optatian's inspired muses. *Carm.* 20 in particular – 'comme un écho de poème I' (Bruhat 1999, 12) – provides a fitting counterpart to the poem that opens the sequence, and the letter exchange with its august conversation between poet and emperor dignifies the whole endeavour, signalling the ultimate imperial approval. Within this composition, and seen from the

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97 John Weisweiler rightly makes the point in view of senatorial strategies for displaying imperial letters in public: 'as emperors moved further away, in Rome closeness to imperial power became a more precious commodity'; 'senators advertised their intimate links with the emperors in the same striking ways which formerly had been employed exclusively in the provinces' (Weisweiler 2012, 322–323). On senators, absent emperors and the transregional aristocracy, see also Humphries 2003, Chenault 2008 and Weisweiler 2011.

perspective of its poetic logic, the inversion of the letters makes perfect sense: *Ep. Const.* now appeared as reacting to *Ep. Porf.*, creating the fiction of an interplay between devotion and grace. *Carm.* 10 might then have been added as some sort of punch line, or else (probably more likely) it was perhaps attached only at a later stage.

For our reconstruction of the interaction between Optatian and Constantine, it is illuminating that after his return from exile, Optatian specifically selected these two pre-exile letters for inclusion in his secondary edition. On the one hand, he had good reason for his choice, as we have seen. On the other, the letters only reflect the tentative beginning of a relationship between the poet and the emperor: Constantine's response to Optatian's lost letter reveals a certain distance from the poet and his works; the letter merely praises – with some rhetorical embellishments – the fact that the composition was technically correct despite the daunting complexity of interweaving the base text and interwoven verses.[98] Importantly, Constantine makes no mention here of Optatian's programmatic amalgamation of traditional panegyric with Christian concepts. This is significant, since in the end Optatian's chief achievement might be said to lie in his establishing a religiously integrative foundation for the ideology of the Constantinian monarchy – and indeed it was perhaps this that secured him his recall from exile and his astonishingly steep career thereafter.[99] *Ep. Const.* contains absolutely no reference to such considerations, and apart from praising Optatian's technical skill (especially in *Ep. Const.* 9–11), Constantine offered the poet no prospect of reevaluating his status. In fact, Constantine gave Optatian nothing more in his letter than an opportunity to continue his arduous efforts to

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98 See esp. *Ep. Const.* 9–11: *Gratum mihi est studiorum tuorum facilitatem in illud exisse, ut in pangendis versibus dum antiqua servaret etiam nova iura sibi conderet. Vix hoc custoditum pluribus fuit, ut nodis quibusdam artis innexi citra interventum vitii inculpatum carmen effunderent; tibi nominum difficultate proposita, numero litterarum, distinctionibus versuum, qui ita medium corpus propositi operis intermeant, ut oculorum sensus interstincta colorum pigmenta delectent, hoc tenuere propositum, ut haesitantiam carmini multiplex legis observantia non repararet.* Cf. Polara 1974, 295 n. 126: '*Ep. Const.* 9; 11; 14 parlano di un primo invio di carmi da parte di O.' and n. 127: '*ep. Porf.* 2 vuole riferirsi evidentemente ai primi approcci di O. verso l'imperatore'. See also Barnes 1975b, 185.

99 On this, see Wienand 2012a, esp. 373–420 and Wienand 2012c, esp. 434–444. On the Optatianic treatment of Christian symbolism, see the contributions by Michael Squire, Thomas Habinek, Sophie Lunn-Rockliffe, Jesús Hernández Lobato and Jaś Elsner in this volume.

secure and prolong the emperor's favour by composing and dedicating further figure-poems.

In the end, then, *Ep. Const.* is not a particularly advantageous token of imperial favour for a poet who was held in the highest esteem after his return from exile. In light of the intensive imperial patronage Optatian enjoyed after his recall, and given his prestigious positions as governor of Achaea and urban prefect, we may safely assume that from 326 onwards he received a number of other imperial letters, all today lost, in which his artistry was probably praised more effusively than in the somewhat reserved pre-exile *Epistula Constantini*. These considerations suggest that Optatian published the letters – and thus also the (earliest) secondary edition of his poetry book – rather soon after his recall from exile; at a time, that is, when the only suitable letters Optatian had at hand stemmed from the earlier letter exchange with Constantine.[100] We can only speculate here why Optatian made no use of the letter in which he framed his plea for mercy, and of the imperial reply granting his recall from exile (or an imperial letter responding to the *vota soluta* edition of his poetry book). Most likely, these documents did not entail a comparably fitting poetic conversation between Optatian and Constantine.

A reconstruction along these lines also has consequences for understanding Optatian's interaction with Constantine prior to his exile. We can clearly see how Optatian anticipated that the exchange of *munus* and *gratia*, so emphasised in the two letters, would gradually take on a more definite shape: Optatian certainly intended to work toward the emperor's growing interest in the poet and his art – indeed, toward a possible subsequent conferral of some office or other. Of course, no such development can be identified (not even in the fact that Constantine addresses Optatian as *frater carissime*).[101] As a result, we must assume that

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100 I think this reasoning also rules out the possibility that the letters were published only posthumously: Optatian's heirs certainly had several imperial letters written to Optatian after his recall from exile, which would make our *Ep. Const.* a pretty odd choice.

101 *Ep. Const.* 1. Seeck 1908, 272–273 (followed by most scholars) has inferred from Constantine's choice of words that Optatian must have had 'a very high rank', and probably even belonged to the *comites*. I suggest we should rather interpret this as a poetic formula of respect shown to an honourable member of the Roman aristocracy, modelled on Mart. 9.pr. and Fronto *Ad amic.* 1.8, 1.9, 1.27 and 2.4. All other indications speak against a high degree of closeness between Optatian and Constantine: apart from the poet's stagnating career

the slowly intensifying interaction between Optatian and Constantine was soon interrupted by the poet's exile. This, again, allows us to date the correspondence to the period before Optatian's exile rather than to the period immediately after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. The course of the early phase of Optatian and Constantine's relations may thus be schematically laid out as follows:

c. 319/322: Exchange of Letters

<Ep. P.*> [lost first letter to the emperor with dedication of a figure-poem];

- *Epistula Constantini* (in praise of Optatian's technique);
- *Epistula Porfyrii* (letter of thanks, dedication of a new figure-poem or a *libellus* of several poems);

<Potentially further letters [not preserved], but communication seems to have been interrupted shortly after the *Epistula Porfyrii*, most likely by the accusations against Optatian, resulting in a trial and his exile >

322/323–326: Exile

CONCLUSIONS

The considerations presented above have some notable consequences (cf. Table 2). In 315 at the latest, and presumably already under Maxentius, Optatian moved in high circles among the senatorial aristocracy of Rome. At that time he belonged to a prestigious priestly college and was wealthy enough to engage in euergetic activities. But he nonetheless remained politically insignificant for up to ten years after the regime change in 312, while many of his aristocratic peers were endowed with prestigious offices. Only after about eight years does he seem to have found a way to present himself to Constantine convincingly as an obedient supporter of the emperor's policy, viewing his *carmina cancellata*

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and the reserved approval by Constantine of Optatian's technical skill, there is the conspicuous fact that the poet delivered his very first poems, and even the *libellus* mentioned in *Carm.* 1, via mail (that is to say, via intermediaries) and not in person. We may assume that the dedication was then briefly presented and explained to the emperor, who merely signed a reply (i.e., the *Epistula Constantini*) largely drafted in the imperial chancellery; on imperial rescripts in general, see Millar 1977 and Corcoran 1996.

as an individual reference point for his declarations of loyalty. Optatian seems to have developed this new technique of figurative poetry around 317/319 (his earliest securely datable figure-poems date to *c.* 319). It is likely that Optatian first refined his technique for some time and produced several poems before he ventured to approach the emperor with his artistry: the poet's communication strategy, as can be determined in the two letters, suggests he intended to have further *carmina cancellata* up his sleeve in order to continue his fictional poetic conversation with the emperor. We may thus assume that Optatian began to use his figure-poems only in the early 320s as a way of interacting with the emperor. This roughly corresponds to the time when we can plausibly locate Optatian in Constantine's entourage in Illyricum.

The emperor's initial reaction to Optatian's advances, however, was notably reserved. The people involved at court apparently recognised the innovative potential of Optatian's poetic techniques, but they may have wanted to see whether the poet was capable of producing more than a single encomiastic figure-poem. In the beginning, nobody at court seems to have realised the wider political implications of Optatian's poems either: perhaps they did not see their intrinsic value for supporting the integrative religious policy required to buttress the cultural transformation towards a Christian monarchy. Optatian, though, did not yet receive the opportunity to demonstrate more substantially his extraordinary talents; the allegations against him and his ensuing exile apparently came in the way. Optatian's banishment may ultimately have come about precisely because the poet began to step up his efforts for imperial promotion, coming into the crossfire of his aristocratic rivals.

We can only guess at the reasons why Optatian's early career – for between eight and ten years – all but stalled. We know just as little about Optatian's background as we do about the date of his birth and his family history: he seems to have been the first member of his *gens* to rise to the upper ranks of the senatorial aristocracy and to hold prestigious offices (albeit late in life). As a senatorial newcomer, perhaps he simply lacked the support of a powerful and influential family clan and a corresponding network of clients and connections inside the elite to claim a place for himself in the inner ranks of the aristocracy after the regime change of 312. Even with regards to his standing in the early 320s, when Optatian was part of the emperor's entourage and addressed by him as *frater carissime*, the evidence suggest that he may have hoped to win the emperor's favour with his figure-poems precisely because he had no other compelling options for furthering his career.

The codex that the poet sent the emperor from exile in 326 furnished the ultimate proof of his abilities. It was clear now for the policy-makers at court that Optatian's poems provided an attractive vision of a harmonious interplay between Roman traditional values and Christian innovations – a vision particularly attractive to elite members of a society affected by one of the most profound cultural transformations in Roman history, seeking a plausible answer to the existential question of how the deeply ingrained nexus of power, religion and *paideia* could prevail under Christian auspices. With his collection of panegyrical *carmina cancellata*, Optatian impressively illustrated both the political importance of his artistry and its value for the representation of Constantine's rule: the codex with which Optatian bestowed Constantine, and the subsequent editions of his poems, were composed as a manifesto for the Constantinian 'revolution'. The poetry book(s) celebrated the harmonious, integrative transformation of the Roman monarchy into the *aureum saeculum* of a Christian empire, governed peacefully and justly by a potent new dynasty under the aegis of Constantine, sole ruler of the world.

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KEY POINTS	SOURCES
Unknown: date and place of birth, ancestors	—
Before 315 (most likely 310/312): Optatian in the upper ranks of the senatorial aristocracy of Rome, probably a member of a priesthood	CIL VI 41314
c. 317/319: Optatian composes the first *carmina cancellata*	cf. Kluge 1924, 336–348, Polara 1974, 284–288, Barnes 1975b, 177–183, Bruhat 1999, 494–501
Most likely between 319 and 322: exchange of letters with emperor, dedication of individual *carmina cancellata* and probably a first *libellus*	*Ep. Const.*, *Ep. Porf.*, *Carm.* 1.1–2
322: Optatian seems to have been in Constantine's entourage during the Sarmatian campaign	*Carm.* 6
c. 322: accusations against Optatian	*Carm.* 2.31–34 (dating inferred from *Carm.* 6)
322/323: Optatian is exiled	dating inferred from *Carm.* 6
326 (25. July): petition for mercy (with *insigne volumen* sent to Constantine)	in particular *Carm.* 1, 2, 5
Soon afterwards: revocation of exile	Jerome *Chron.*, a. 329 (year certainly wrong)
Soon afterwards: publication of a reworked and expanded version of the poetry book	inferred on the basis of manuscript tradition
Between 326 and 329: *Proconsul provinciae Achaeae*	AE 1931, 6 = SEG 11 810 (dating inferred from the epigraphic formula and find context of the statue base)
329 (7. October – 7. November.): *Praefectus urbis*	*Chron. 354*, a. 329
333 (7. April – 9. May): *Praefectus urbis*	*Chron. 354*, a. 333
Optatian died after 333 (probably before 335)	No offices known after 333 (and no extant *carmina* celebrating Constantine's *tricennalia* of 335/336)

Table 2 Key points in Optatian's career

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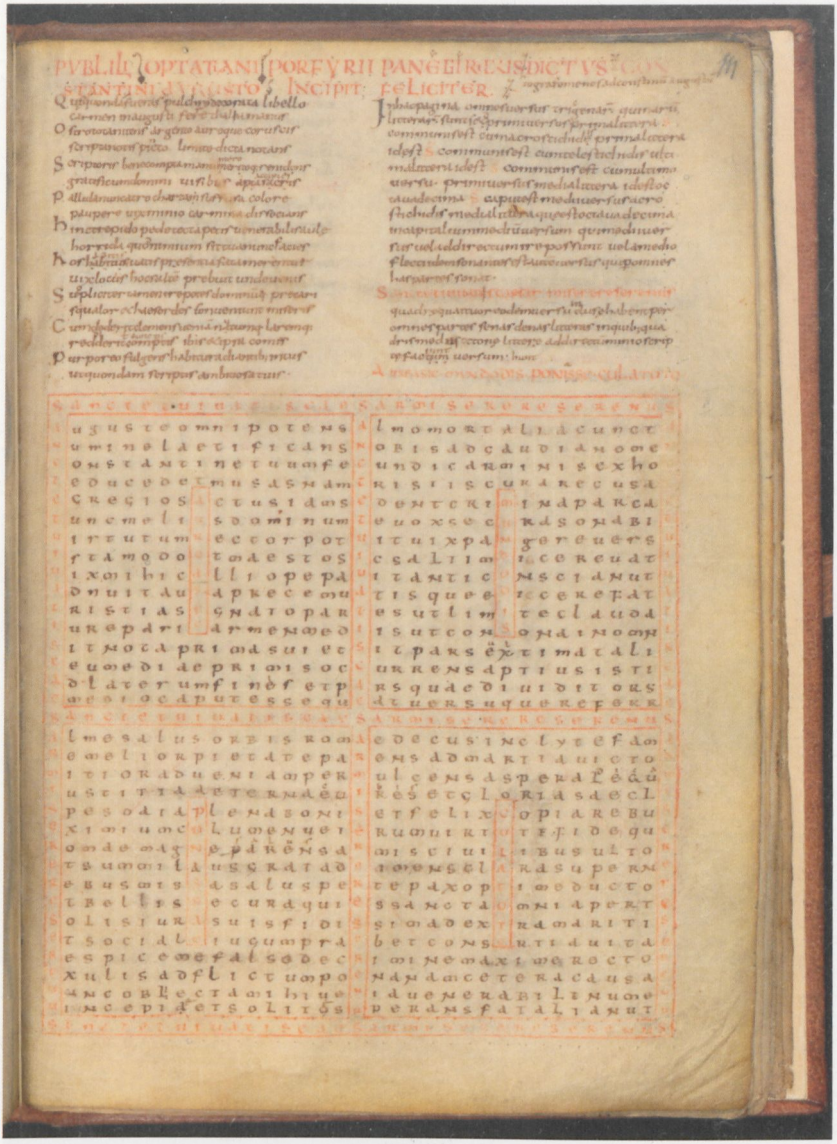
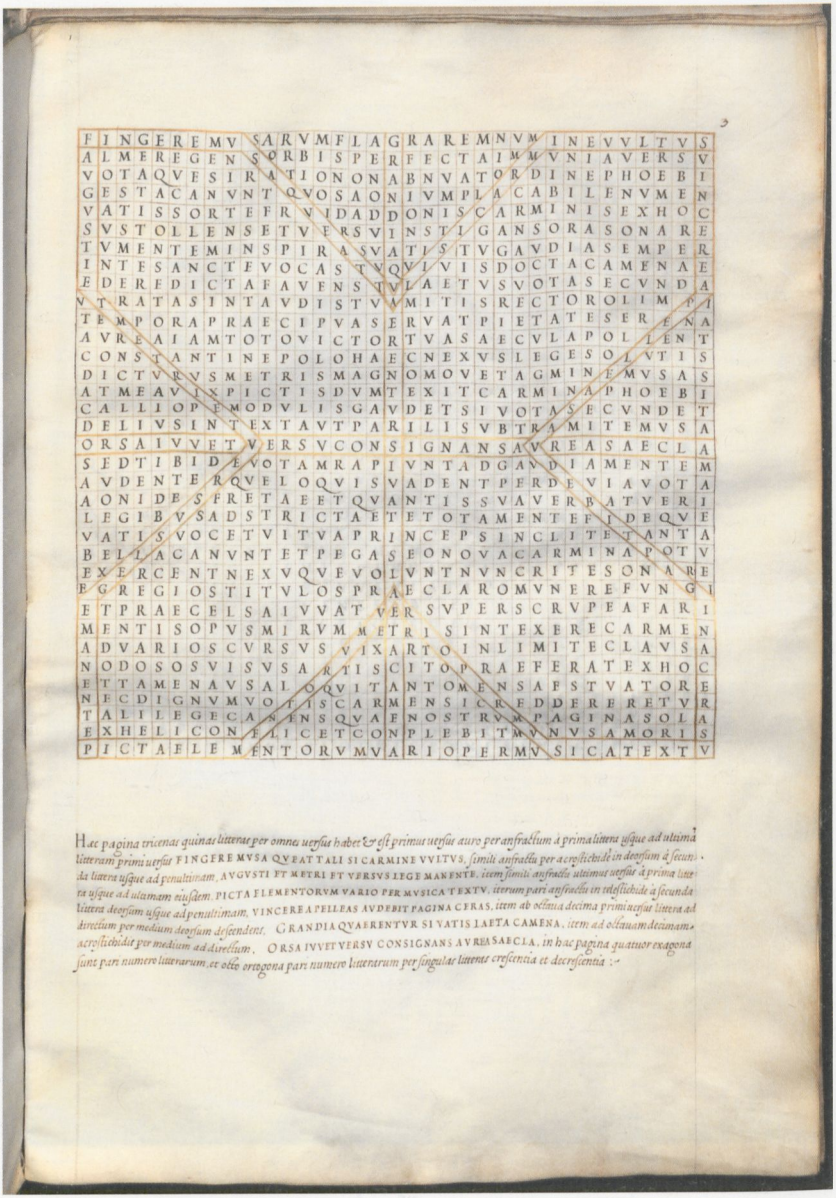
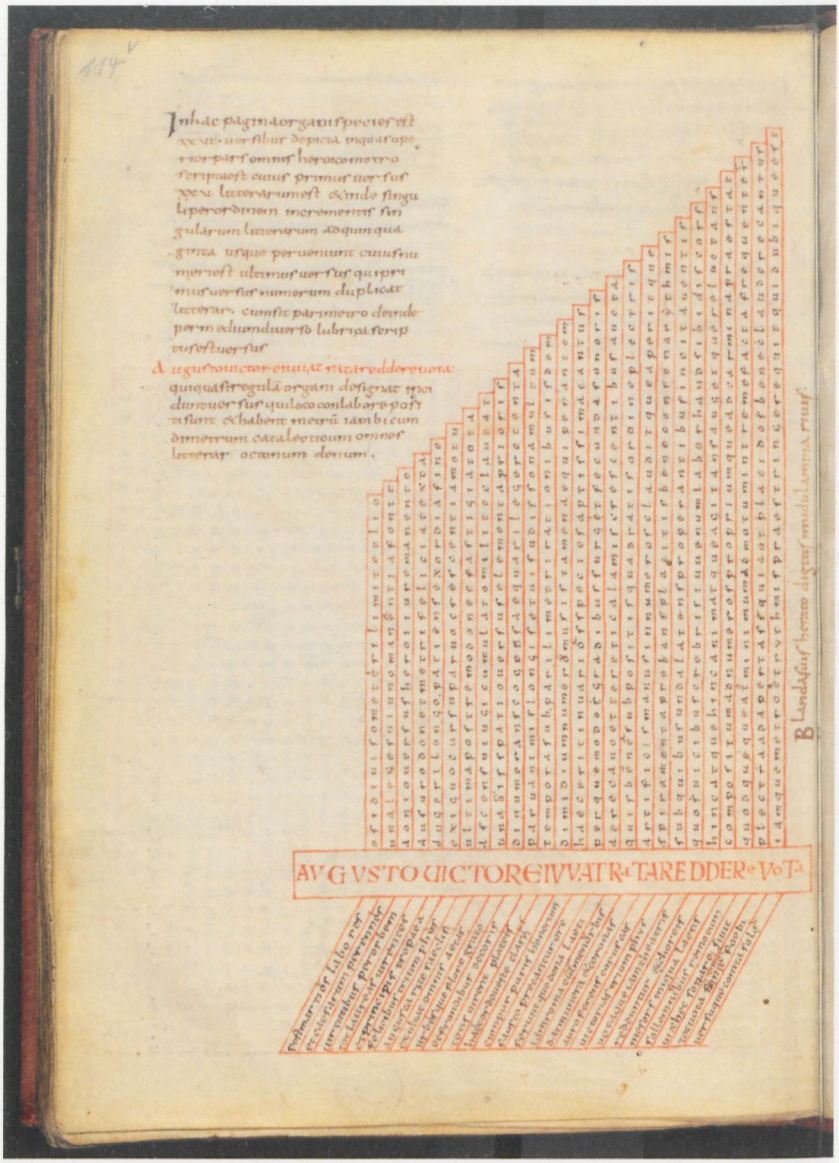


1 Optatian *Carm.* 1, schol. 2 and *Carm.* 2, as presented in Codex Bernensis 212, folio 111r (Bern, Burgerbibliothek; labelled ms. **B** by Giovanni Polara); ninth century. © Burgerbibliothek Bern.



2 Optatian *Carm.* 3 and schol. 3, as presented in Codex Monacensis Latinus 706[a], folio 3r (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek: labelled ms. **M** by Giovanni Polara); sixteenth century. © Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, München.



6 Optatian *Carm.* 20a and 20b, with schol., as presented in Codex Bernensis 212, folio 114v (Bern, Burgerbibliothek; labelled ms. **B** by Giovanni Polara); ninth century. © Burgerbibliothek Bern.