

---

## Almatourism

Journal of Tourism, Culture and Territorial Development

---

### Basilicas in Venantius Fortunatus' *Miscellanea*

Orsini, I.\*  
Istituto per i beni artistici, culturali e naturali  
Emilia-Romagna Region (Italy)

---

#### ABSTRACT

The article deals with the basilicas in Venantius Fortunatus' *Miscellanea*. Indeed, the eleven books of *Carmina* by the italic poet who lived for many years in the merovingian France, describe several samples of such buildings dedicated to prayers and worship of God and saints. The attention is drawn not in particular to their architecture, but to the role and function they usually held in the frame of a society where Christianity attempted to overcome still notable opposition of unchristians. Artificer of these holy buildings was the bishop, whom Venantius gives a lot of praises to, seeking that same way of still and rich life which he could reach when probably he was no longer young.

---

**Keywords:** Venantius Fortunatus; Basilicas; Merovingian

L'articolo si occupa delle basiliche presenti nei *Miscellanea* di Venanzio Fortunato. Infatti, gli undici libri dei carmi del poeta italico che visse molti anni nella Francia dei Merovingi, descrivono diversi esempi di tali creazioni architettoniche dedicate alla preghiera e all'adorazione di Dio e dei santi. L'attenzione è rivolta in particolare non alla loro architettura, bensì al ruolo e alla funzione che di solito tennero nella cornice di una società in cui la Cristianità cercò di superare le resistenze ancora notevoli dei non-cristiani. Artefice di tali sante costruzioni era il vescovo, cui Venanzio rivolge numerose preghiere, alla ricerca di quello stesso stile di vita serena e confortevole che egli poté raggiungere solo in età avanzata.

---

**Keywords:** Venanzio Fortunato; Basiliche; Merovingi

---

\* E-mail address: [ivan.orsini@alice.it](mailto:ivan.orsini@alice.it)

“Certes, la Gaule du VI<sup>e</sup> siècle n'est pas un désert culturel: on y compte encore quelques versificateurs d'occasion. Mais pas un qui ait, comme Fortunat, construit une oeuvre et rencontré pareil succès.” With this “light portrait” dedicated to Venantius Honorius Clementianus Fortunatus by the scholar Marc Reydellet (1990) we decided to introduce that Venetian poet who, when he was still young, got over the Alps and, travelling through the central Europe, reached the territories of Gaul.

He was born in a year not yet precisely defined between 530 and 540; probably studied grammar and rhetoric in Ravenna and then, at a certain point of his life, he left Italy -we do not know exactly what was the reason of his departure from the homeland.

Therefore, he remained all his life in Gaul, staying in some towns (mainly Metz, Paris, Poitiers), always seeking protection and money help from the most important exponents of local aristocracy. Perhaps, after the bishop Plato's death, in 593 he was elected bishop in Poitiers, the same town whose bishop, two centuries before, Saint Martin had been. Venantius probably died in the first decade of the seventh century.

Here we are going to investigate the appearance and role of basilicas in Venantius' eleven books of *Miscellanea*.

First of all, it is important to remark that only a few among these books contain our matter.

The first book of Venantius Fortunatus' *Miscellanea* (or *Carmina*) opens the series of poems focused on basilicas with a text (*Carm.* I,1) dedicated to Vitalis, whose we do not know the identity, but some scholars supposed he was martyred, together with his fellow Agricola, in Bologna at the end of third century. Such a bishop is displayed like a priest, a man of faith beloved of God especially because of his will and attitude of building magnificent basilicas! As we will see, this feature of such bishop as church constructor involved, according to Venantius, many men who had been able to reach a very high position -bishop- inside the hierarchy of Church. Their desire of replacing old churches and shrines or, otherwise, building new sacred buildings in honour of God, the Virgin Mary and the saints was in many cases stimulated by the faith, but undoubtedly was also directed by a precise strategy of popular consent, by which those bishops got respect and obedience.

So, the first basilica we meet Vitalis got built; it was dedicated to Saint Andrew, but unfortunately we do not know where it was situated. Because at that time Venantius lived in Ravenna and Vitalis too, maybe this church was located at Ravenna. Besides, it has been supposed that Vitalis was the patron who, first, took care about Venantius' poetic talents. How does Venantius describe the church? He does not describe it, except for three characteristics: the extraordinary dimensions; the ornaments made, in- and outside, by massive gold; and, last but not least, the great everlasting light, even during the night. About the characteristic 1, very often our author refers to churches as very majestic: really, we cannot think such was the greatness of all the churches situated, at his times, in the south-west of nowadays called “France”. These basilicas (Venantius uses this term referring to Christian churches) did not stand in large towns, thus their measures maybe were not so big. About the characteristic 2, it is rather rare to find references to real features with respect to the structure of such basilicas. Our author usually does not pay attention to the materials, the architecture, the plan or the sculptures and pictures that -we presume- decorated these churches; he thought it was more important to draw attention to the spiritual features.

Characteristic 3 is surely the most important among the three ones. "Sine nocte manet continuata dies" is an expression which very clearly testifies that the most important thing in the church, able to pervade it and even move the worshippers to God, is the light. Such light spreads inside and outside, all around the basilica.

Let us read the verses 15-16:

"Qui loca das populis Dominum quo semper adorent, / ut capiant veniam te facis esse viam". Here we find the theology of search for God. The basilicas are not only examples of rich architecture, rather are places where people can worship God, and implied is the idea of walking, pilgrimage towards God. The divinity we meet here looks like the severe god of Ancient Testament, if people "need" to get close to him and beg and so receive forgiveness for a fault.

The poem ends with a beautiful wish: may Vitalis go on celebrating religious parties and joyously paying homage to God consecrating new churches (vv. 27-28, "Plurima divino celebres sollemnia dono / atque Dei florens templa locando colas"). So, devoting new churches means spread of faith in God, supporting the creation of a large net of buildings that let it.

Now we are moving to the second text (*Carm.* I,2). Its beginning is enough common in the sphere of Venantius' works: the poet or, more precisely, the "speaking voice" addresses a hypothetical pilgrim who may arrive at the basilica consecrated to Saint Andrew: if you get closer and pray, you will receive the help you need. Then, Venantius tells how the bishop Vitalis was able to raise the church, starting from the foundations, and devote it. We are meeting another element, typical of the Middle Ages: in the same church could be relics belonging to many saints (here S. Peter, S. Paul, S. Andrew, S. Laurence, S. Martin, S. Vigil, S. Martirius, S. Sisinnus, S. Alexandre, S. Cecil) and people used to address "saint objects" to live a real, touchable faith.

The third text (*Carm.* I,3) is focused on the martyr Saint Stephen, who died in the Middle East, got stones thrown against him. It is interesting see how the faith, almost like an ancient pilgrim, expressed itself in the East after S. Stephan's martyrdom and, then, travelled as far as the western Europe to establish churches in honour of this victim of paganism. Moreover, here is a lightning comparison between the fact that S. Stephen was stoned to death, and the fact that he considered Christus like the unique and most important stone for him. Christ looks to the saint the touchstone to judge everything, or even the material by which the Church-community of God stands. This basilica very probably stood in Saintes, as it is the same town whose Palladius -client of this church- was bishop.

The forth poem (*Carm.* I,4) examines the church dedicated to S. Martin. In this case, we are informed the hightness of this basilica was remarkable. Here also we are reading about a bishop, Faustus, who decided to edificate this sanctuary. As far as that place used to arrive many people to say to the Lord a prayer and ask for wealth and help. In order to do all this, a very hard trip was necessary: people usually left their birth- or usual places and travelled many days and months to find, if it was possible, remedies to their bad health-condition.

The poems 5, 6 and 7 (*Carmm.* I,5-6-7) deal with basilicas of Saint Martin, situated in various locations of the south-western Gaul.

In the fifth one, the main building is not a vast church, but a small cell, i.e. that place where he used to live, even when the authorities appointed him as new bishop of Tours, because he preferred living and praying apart from the magnificent places of the nearby cathedral, where he moved every time he had to celebrate mass. Here too, at the beginning, we are reading an invite to a wayfarer to stop and mind, praying, the places where Saint Martin had lived. As usual, seems very hard the tendency to a way of narration always based on hard oxymoron. An effort to increase the number of believers lay in presenting the scene by hard tones: small fire became a fire-sphere over the head of the priest and then vanished.

Interesting is the close: the text was dedicated to a specific and important client in the life and work of Venantius: the historian-bishop of Tours Gregorius; they were friends, and here Gregorius Turonensis required the Venantius to write poem, but why? It is reasonable thinking, that the historian wanted to celebrate such a small cell and its saint inhabitant, whose Gregorius wanted to present himself like a worthy heir.

The sixth text (*Carm.* I,6) provides further elements to reflect. Where was the S. Martin's basilica? According to the scholar Vieillard-Troiekouff (1977, p. 55), it was in Bordeaux, and concerned the basilica devoted to Saint Martin at Mont-Judaïque; according to Lombard-Jourdan (1981, p. 146), it was in Paris, close to Montmartre. For the first time, here we find a reference to the geographical environment where the basilica was located: an enough high hill, surrounded by strong light and visible and seemingly close from far places as well as nearby places. The pilgrim could be attracted by the beauty of such a nature and great light the landscape irradiated.

A last note on the cathedral: the bishop of Bordeaux, Leontius II (516-570), built it, while his wife<sup>1</sup>, Placidina, decorated it.

A third basilica to S. Martin, in *Carm.* I,7, was approximately located in Poitiers, and was edicated ab ovo, but renewed and restored by the bishop Basilius and his wife Baudegonda. In this case, there was a church that arose on a river. A new technique was found to get the flow of that river changed.

The texts 8 and 9 were dedicated to a saint, named Vincentius, whose identity about the scholars for long debated: what was the same saint about, or not? And where was this or were these two basilicas situated? According to De Maillé (1959, p. 90), it concerned the same saint, Vincent from Zaragoza; for De Gaiffier d'Hestroy (1953, pp. 127-134), the Vincent mentioned in the second poem was Vincent from Agen. Besides, the former scholar thought it concerned the same basilica, while the latter one concluded the eight poem refers to the basilica in Pompeiacum dedicated to Saint Vincent from Zaragoza, but the ninth poem refers to the basilica in Vernemetum built in honour of Saint Vincent from Vernemetum.

The considerations and conjectures to support the theory of two basilicas do not persuade us. It does not seem, that Venantius wrote about two different (in terms of geographical position, architecture, etc.) buildings: more exactly, we do not have any particular clue that let us choose the above mentioned theory. Rather, I completely

agree with De Maillé's stand based upon the relevance of the adverb "item": very probably, the author referred to the same saint and church.

Saint Vincent is shown as a man deeply devoted to God. Just when he was beheaded, he got the divine salvation and the real winner was not his executioner, because he was able to kill such a person beloved by God, but the saint indeed.

Leontius II from Bordeaux covered the church by tin-roof, but here the poet did not perceive as necessary to compare a new, metallic roof to the motif of light.

The following text involves the same argument: now we know the place of Saint Vincent's basilica, *Vernemetum*, that signified with regard to gaulic language "glade where is celebrated a worship". The high sanctuary stood at a quite upper hill, and the surroundings were beautiful. Besides, for the first time in *Carmina* the sanctuary becomes place hosting miracles: v. 16 "martyris adventu daemonis ira fugit" e vv. 17-18 "Redditur incolomis quidam de peste maligna, / cui vidisse pii templa medella fuit." We do not understand, why the two poems should not fit one to another.

In the tenth poem, dedicated to Saint Nazare, Leontius II, the bishop of Bordeaux, has the main role. It is important to observe that, for the first time, to the name of bishop who used to plan the construction of churches is associated the epithet "saint", as if the leading actors on our stage were two saints, instead of the one we get accustomed to. Leontius II is defined in these terms, because of all actions and works he paid to get churches restored and built ex novo, as well. Here and in the eleventh poem we can notice a new situation: the bishop (in both cases, Leontius II) decided to remove the actual basilica; in the first case (poem X) he destroyed the former one and manage its reconstruction according a bigger plan.

But, in the second case (poem XI) it is possible to attend to the chronological account of that place. There were not santuaries nearby to that place, and people did not know who they could address to. So, the bishop Amelius got, like present for his community, a small chapel raised, that for a few years could welcome many believers. After his death, the successor, Leontius II wanted to offer a bigger church, but until the more charming building was not performed, he used to celebrate Christian rites inside the small chapel.

The twelfth poem tells about the basilica devoted to the bishop Bibianus. The bishop Eusebius had started building the basilica, but unfortunately he died before completing the construction. The following bishop, Emerio, decided not to take care of it, so Leontius II and his wife Placidina wanted to end the work. She got Bibianus' grave decorated with a silver cover, and the internal walls of the basilica were covered by solid gold. Venantius seems to have had a keen interest to the artistic characteristics of this church: maybe its panels offered to the sight of many people charming scenes, where even chase situations let enjoy.

The poem XIII tells about Saint Eutropius (first bishop in Saintes)' basilica, which fell down in the ancient times. Nowadays, it was completely restored, thanks to the help of our famous Leontius II. The ceiling was made by wood, and this stuff seemingly was moving as if it were pictures painted; besides, the interior walls were all painted or decorated as we said above with regard to the wood.

The last text of our sequence shows the absolute protagonist of our pages: Leontius II (516 – 570), bishop in Bordeaux, who embellished his town: especially he got the baptister and the cathedral restored, and got the basilica built in honour of the Virgin Mary. Incredibly strong is the comparison between the Virgin Mary with her womb full of light, and the basilica that holds the great treasure of the divine light!

The second book offers some other examples of how basilicas were conceived by Venantius.

*Carm.* II, 10 compares the Solomon's temple and the church in Paris: as many precious stones and gold and cedar-wood adorned that, so Christ's Cross and Blood embellished our church, full of that light which we already referred to, and which entered through the round windows. This church was a gift by the king Childebert I.

We finish this excursus focusing on to the poem X,6. The cathedral of Tours, town whose was bishop in the fourth century Martinus, while Gregorius was such in the sixth one, was built in the fourth century; then, in 558 flames destroyed it and the bishop Gregorius got it rebuilt in 590, as he himself wrote in his historic work (*Historia Francorum* X,31). The cathedral stood upon a high hill; the inside was rich of light deriving from God: this is an image very popular in Venantius'poetics, as we often said. The new cathedral shew big round windows, and beautiful images painted on the walls, and probably on the ceiling of the building, but unfortunately we cannot image what kind of images appeared there.

Concluding, we can say that the real peculiarity of Venantius'basilicas, the aspect which was able to establish and mark them, was God's light, that fully filled the building and, thus, the believers'eyes and soul.

## References

### *Primary sources*

Text and commentary that we are heavily indebted to:

Venanzio Fortunato, *Opere/1 (Carmi. Spiegazione della preghiera del Signore. Spiegazione del Simbolo. Appendice ai Carmi)*, a cura di Stefano di Brazzano, in "Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiae Aquileiensis VIII/1", Città Nuova Editrice, Roma 2001.

### *Secondary sources*

Alfonsi, L. (1988b). *La letteratura latina medievale*, in "Le letterature del mondo", Edizioni Accademia. Milano.

Curtius, E. R. (1992). *Letteratura europea e Medio Evo latino*, a cura di Roberto Antonelli, La Nuova Italia Editrice. Scandicci (FI).

D'Elia, (1982). S. *Letteratura latina cristiana*, Società Editoriale Jouvence, Roma.

De Gaiffier d'Hestroy, B. (1953). *Les deux poèmes de Fortunat en l'honneur de saint Vincent*, in AA.VV. "Études mérovingiennes. Actes des journées de Poitiers 1952", Paris. pp. 127-134.

De Maillé, A. (1959). *Recherches sur les origines chrétiennes de Bordeaux*, Paris.

*Dizionario Bompiani degli autori di tutti i tempi e di tutte le letterature*. (1987) Bompiani, Milano.

Duby, G. (2014). *Storia della Francia. Nascita di una nazione, dinastie e rivoluzioni dalle origini al 1852*, Bompiani, Milano.

Edward, J. (2011). *I barbari*, Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna.

Edward, J. (1988). *I Franchi. Agli albori dell'Europa. Storia e mito*. Edizioni Culturali Internazionali Genova, Genova.

*Grande Dizionario Enciclopedico – GDE*. (1995). UTET, Torino.

La Rocca, C. (2002). *Venantio Fortunato e la società del VI secolo*, apparso in A.A.V.V., "Venanzio Fortunato e il suo tempo", Treviso. pp. 148-149.

Leonardi, C. (a cura di) (2002). *Letteratura latina medievale. Un manuale*, SISMEL Edizioni del Galluzzo, Firenze.

Leppin, H. (2012). *L'eredità del mondo antico*, Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna.

Lombard-Jourdan, A. (1981). *Du nouveau sur les origines chrétiennes de Paris. Une relecture de Fortunat*, "Paris et Ile-de-France". XXXII. pp. 125-160.

Paladini, V., De Marco, M. (1980b). *Lingua e letteratura mediolatina*, Patron, Bologna.

Pellegrino, M. (1984). *Letteratura latina cristiana*, Edizioni Studium, Roma.

Reydelle, M. (1993). *Tradition et nouveauté dans les <Carmina> de Fortunat*, in "Venanzio Fortunato tra Italia e Francia", atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Valdobbiadene 17 maggio 1990 e Treviso 18-19 maggio 1990, Provincia di Treviso.

Vecchi, G. (a cura di). (1982). *Poesia latina medievale*, Guanda, Parma.

Vieillard-Troiekouff, M. (1977). *Les monuments religieux de la Gaule d'après les oeuvres de Grégoire de Tours*, Université de Lille III.

---

<sup>1</sup> During the first centuries of Christianity priests and bishops could get married, but after wedding they could not longer have sexual relations.