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# AUSONIUS

## VOLUME I


*Translated by*

HUGH G. EVELYN WHITE

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WITH AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION BY

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# AUSONIUS

# I

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# INTRODUCTION

THE works of Ausonius were held in high esteem by the poet's contemporaries: Symmachus protests that he classes the *Mosella* as equal with the poems of Virgil, and Paulinus of Nola has grave doubts as to whether "Tully and Maro" could have borne one yoke with his old master. Extravagant as such judgments may be,[1] they have their value as indicating wherein (from the modern point of view) the importance of Ausonius really lies. As poetry, in any high or imaginative sense of the word, the great mass of his verse is negligible; but the fact that in the later fourth century men of letters and of affairs thought otherwise, establishes it as an example and criterion of the literary culture of that age. The poems of Ausonius are in fact a series of documents from which we may gather in what poetry was then assumed to consist, what were the conditions which determined its character, and the models which influenced it.

In a definite sense, therefore, the chief value of the works of Ausonius is historical; but not for the history of intellectual culture alone. The poet does not, indeed, throw light on the economic fabric of

[1] *cp.* Gibbon's epigram "The poetical fame of Ausonius condemns the taste of his age" (*Decline and Fall*, ed. Bury, III. p. 134 note 1).

society and conditions of life in his day; but he reveals to us certain sides of social life which are at least curious—as in the picture which he draws of the typical agent who "managed" the estates of the Roman landowner of his day (*Epist.* xxvi.), or when he shows what manner of folk were the middle-class people, officials, doctors, professors and their womankind, amongst whom so large a part of his life was spent.

Both these aspects of Ausonius' work, the literary and the social, are explained by the facts of his life.

## Life of Ausonius

Decimus Magnus Ausonius was born about 310 A.D. His father, Julius Ausonius, a native of Bazas and the scion apparently of a race of yeomen (*Domestica* i. 2, *Grat. Act.* viii.), is introduced to us as a physician of remarkable skill and discreet character who had settled at Bordeaux, where he practised and where his son was born. Aemilia Aeonia, the mother of the future consul, was of mixed Aeduan and Aquitanian descent, the daughter of one Caecilius Argicius Arborius, who had fled to Dax in the anarchic days of Victorinus and the Tetrici and had married a native of that place. Whatever the reason, her son speaks of her in the coolest and most unimpassioned terms as if possessing no other virtues than conjugal fidelity and industry in wool-working (*Parent.* ii.). Though she seems to have lived until about

353 A.D., the upbringing of her son devolved upon various female connections of the family, notably upon Aemilia Corinthia Maura, of whose strict discipline the poet seems to have retained painful recollections (*Parent.* v. 7–8).

The boy's education was begun at Bordeaux; and amongst his early instructors in "grammar" (Greek and Latin language and literature) he mentions Macrinus, Sucuro, and Concordius, who taught him Latin (*Proff.* x. 11), and Romulus and Corinthius who were hard put to it to overcome his dislike for Greek (*Proff.* viii. 10 ff.). About 320 A.D. he was transferred to the care of his maternal uncle, Aemilius Magnus Arborius, then professor at Toulouse, where the lad resided until his relative was summoned (*c.* 328 A.D.) to Constantinople, to become tutor to one of the sons of Constantine. Ausonius then returned to Bordeaux and continued his studies in rhetoric under Minervius Alcimus and perhaps Delphidius, the ill-starred son of the ex-priest of Bellenus and a descendant of the old Druids (*Proff.* i., ii., v.).

Ausonius started on his own professional career about 334 A.D. as *grammaticus* at the University of Bordeaux (*Praef.* i. 20), and about the same time wedded Attusia Lucana Sabina, daughter of a leading citizen. By this marriage he had three children, Ausonius who died in infancy, Hesperius, and a daughter whose name is not mentioned. In due time he was promoted to a professorship in rhetoric, and though he practised for a while in the courts, his real

bent was towards teaching (*Praef.* i. 17). One event only, so far as we know, disturbed the monotonous but not wholly restful (*cp. Epist.* xxii. 77 ff.) course of his professional life—the death (*c.* 343 A.D.) of his wife, who had inspired the best of his shorter poems (*Epigram* xl.). How sorely he felt this loss is shown by the real though somewhat egotistical feeling with which he wrote of her more than thirty years later (*Parent.* ix.); and his words gain weight from the fact that he never married again.

It was in 364 A.D., or thereabouts, after thirty years of class teaching, that Ausonius was summoned to the "golden palace" to become tutor to the youthful Gratian (*Praef.* i. 24 ff.); and the next ten years were spent in guiding the prince through the orthodox courses of "grammar" and "rhetoric." On one occasion at least the monotony of such a life was relieved for both tutor and pupil by a change to more stirring scenes. For Ausonius and Gratian both accompanied Valentinian I. on the expedition of 368–9 A.D. against the Germans, when the former was commissioned to celebrate the more spectacular results of the campaign (*Epigr.* xxviii., xxxi.). The preface to the *Griphus* gives us a glimpse of the professor on active service, and the *Bissula* adds a singular detail to the same episode.

In 370 A.D. the title of *comes* was conferred upon him, and five years later he took the first step in his official career, becoming *quaestor sacri palatii.* When at the end of 375 A.D. his pupil Gratian ascended the throne,

his advancement became rapid and his influence very marked. His hand, for instance, has been traced in the legislation of this period (see Cod. Theod. xiii. 3. 11, xv. 1. 19 and *cp.* Seeck, *Symmachus*, p. lxxix.). In his rise the soaring professor drew a train of relatives after him. His father, then nearly 90 years of age, was granted the honorary rank of prefect of Illyricum in 375 A.D. (*Dom.* iv. 52); his son Hesperius was proconsul of Africa in 376 A.D. and *praefectus praetorio* of Italy, Illyricum and Africa in 377–380; his son-in-law, Thalassius, succeeded Hesperius in the proconsulship of Africa; while a nephew, Aemilius Magnus Arborius, was appointed *comes rerum privatarum* in 379 A.D. and promoted *praefectus urbi* in the year following. Ausonius himself was raised to the splendid post of *praefectus Galliarum* in 378, the office being united by special arrangement with the prefecture of Hesperius to enable father and son to share between them the toils and rewards of both posts. But the crowning honour was reserved for 379 A.D., when the ex-professor attained the consulship—an absorbing theme discussed from all its bearings in the *Gratiarum Actio*. At the close of 379 A.D. Ausonius retired to Bordeaux (*Domestica* i.: title), no doubt to take possession of the ancestral estate which had come to him on the death of his father in 378 A.D.

But in 383 the mainspring of the family fortunes was rudely broken. The army in Britain revolted with Maximus at its head: Trèves was occupied, Gratian slain at Lyons, Valentinian II. driven out of

Italy, and the usurper was master of the Western Empire. The prospects of the favourites of the old régime were definitely at an end. What Ausonius did during the domination of Maximus is unknown. From the explanatory note prefixed to *Epist.* xx. we learn that when the storm burst he was at Trèves (he had no doubt returned to the court there) and it is possible that his continued stay in the city was in fact a detention at the order of Maximus. But if this is so, it is likely that he was soon permitted to return to his native Bordeaux.

When at length Theodosius overthrew Maximus (388 A.D.) Ausonius may indeed have visited the court (*cp. Praef.* iii.), but was too old for public life. Henceforth his days were spent in his native province, where he lived chiefly on his own estates, paying occasional visits, which he disliked or affected to dislike, to Bordeaux (*Domest.* i. 29 ff., *Epist.* vi. 17 ff.). Here he passed his time in enjoyment of the sights and sounds of the country (*Epist.* xxvii. 90 ff.), in dallying with literary pursuits, and in the company of friends similarly disposed.

The date of his death is not definitely known, but may be presumed to have occurred at the close of 393 or in 394, since nothing from his hand can be assigned to a later year. He was then over eighty years of age.

In connection, however, with his life something must be said on his attitude towards Christianity.

When and how he adopted the new religion there is nothing to show; but certain of his poems make it clear that he professed and called himself a Christian, and such poems as the *Oratio* (*Ephemeris* iii.) and *Domestica* ii., which show a fairly extensive knowledge of the Scriptures, sometimes mislead the unwary to assume that Ausonius was a devout and pious soul. But in these poems he is deliberately airing his Christianity: he has, so to speak, dressed himself for church. His everyday attitude was clearly very different. When Paulinus began to conform his life to what he believed to be the demands of Christianity, Ausonius is totally unable to understand his friend's attitude and can only believe that he is crazed. A devout and pious Christian might have combated the course chosen by Paulinus, but he would certainly have sympathised with the principle which dictated it. Nor does Christianity enter directly or indirectly into the general body of his literary work (as distinguished from the few "set pieces"). In the *Parentalia* there is no trace of Christian sentiment—and this though he is writing of his nearest and dearest: the rite which gives a title to the book is pagan, the dead "rejoice to hear their names pronounced" (*Parent.* Pref. 11), they are in Elysium (*id.* iii. 23) or in Erebus (*id.* xxvii. 4) or amongst the Manes (*id.* xviii. 12) according to pagan orthodoxy; but in his own mind Ausonius certainly regards a future existence as problematical (*Parent.* xxii. 15 and especially *Proff.* i. 39 ff.).

Further, the conception of the Deity held by Ausonius was distinctly peculiar—as his less guarded references show. In the *Easter Verses* (*Domest.* ii. 24 ff.) the Trinity is a power transcending but not unlike the three Emperors; and in the *Griphus* (l. 88) the "tris deus unus" is advanced to enforce the maxim "ter bibe" in exactly the same tone as that in which the children of Rhea, or the three Gorgons are cited: for our author the Christian Deity was not essentially different from the old pagan gods.

There is a marked contrast, therefore, between Ausonius' formal professions and his actual beliefs. This is not to accuse him of hypocrisy. Conventional by nature, he accepted Christianity as the established religion, becoming a half-believer in his casual creed: it is not in the least likely that he ever set himself to realize either Christianity or Paganism.

## The Literary Work of Ausonius

The adult life of Ausonius may be divided into three periods: the first, extending from *c.* 334 to 364 A.D., covers the thirty years of professorial work at Bordeaux; the second (*c.* 364–383) includes the years spent first as Gratian's tutor and then as his minister; while the last ten years of his life constitute the third. His circumstances during each of these periods necessarily affected his literary work, which may therefore be correspondingly divided.

*The First Period.*—The first period in the career

of Ausonius is a long one, yet the output, so far as it can be identified, is small in the extreme; and since Ausonius was by no means the man to suppress anything which he had once written, we may believe that his professional duties left him little or no leisure for writing. Some of his extant work, however, can be identified as belonging to this period. Possibly his earliest work (since he seems to have married *c.* 334 A.D.) is the letter written to his father *On the Acknowledgment of his Son* (*Epist.* xix.)—a copy of forty elegiacs, very correct but very obvious and conventional in sentiment. To the first eight years of this period we must also assign the epigrams relating to his wife (*Epigr.* xxxix., xl., liii.–lv.), and those on certain "lascivae nomina famae" (*Epigr.* xxxviii. and lxv.), which seem to have caused Sabina some misgiving. It is also probable that a considerable number of the remaining epigrams—especially those dealing with academic persons or topics (*e.g. Epigr.* vi.–xiii., lx., lxi.)—were composed during this period; and it is at least a possible conjecture that some of the mnemonic verses on the Roman Calendar, the Greek Games, etc. (*Ecl.* ix.–xxvii.), were written by Ausonius when *grammaticus* to assist his pupils at Bordeaux,[1] though worked up for formal publication at a much later date.

*The Second Period.*—The years spent at the imperial court were more prolific. The *Easter Verses,* an

[1] Compare the mnemonics of some modern Latin Grammars.

imperial commission, were written in or after 368 A.D. (*Domestica* ii. 25), and were followed by three of Ausonius' most characteristic works, the *Griphus*, the *Cento Nuptialis*, and the *Bissula*.

The first of these, composed in 368 A.D.[1] while the poet was with the expedition against the Alamanni, celebrates the universality of the mystic number Three. Though so trivial a theme is no subject for poetry at all, it must be admitted that Ausonius here shows at his best as an ingenious versifier: partly by the immense range and skilful selection of his examples, partly by variety of rhythm, and partly by judicious use of assonance, the author succeeds in evading monotony—and this though ninety hexameters are devoted to so unpromising a topic.

The *Cento Nuptialis* was likewise compiled when Ausonius was on active service;[2] but neither that "military licence" of which he speaks elsewhere as permissible at such a period, nor the plea that he wrote at the direction of the Emperor, can excuse the publication of this work at a much later date. As its title implies, it is a description of a wedding festival made up of tags, whose length is determined by certain fixed rules, from the works of Virgil. In the nature of the case, the result is shambling and

[1] It was dedicated to Symmachus and published some years later, but before 383 A.D.

[2] If the words "sub imperatore meo tum merui" at the close of the preface are to be taken—as no doubt they are—in their strict military sense.

awkward as to sense, and disgraced by the crude and brutal coarseness of its closing episode. Neither the thorough knowledge of Virgil's text, nor the perverse ingenuity displayed in the compilation can redeem this literary outrage.

In the third work of this group, the *Bissula*, Ausonius sung the praises of a young German girl of that name, who had been assigned to him as his share in the spoils of the Alamannic War. Of the series of short poems or epigrams, which once constituted the work, only a brief preface addressed to Paulus, another to the reader, and the three opening poems have (perhaps fortunately: cp. *Biss.* II. 3 ff.) survived. Since the heroine is represented as already thoroughly Romanized, the composition cannot well be earlier than *c.* 371–2 A.D.

The poet's most ambitious and certainly his best work, the *Mosella*, is also loosely connected with the German War (see *Mosella* 423 ff.), which probably occasioned the journey described at the beginning of the poem (ll. 1–11). It was not finished before 371 A.D., the date of the consulship of Probus and Gratian and of the birth of Valentinian II., both of which events are alluded to (*Mosella* 409 ff., 450). After sketching his route from Bingen to Neumagen, Ausonius breaks into a eulogistic address to the Moselle, and settles to serious work with an exhaustive catalogue of the fish to be found in its waters. Next he sings of the vine-clad hills bordering the river valley and the general amenities of the stream, which make

it a favourite haunt of superhuman and human beings alike. The aquatic sports and pastimes to be seen upon the river having been described, the poet dilates upon the stately mansions which stud the banks and celebrates the numerous tributaries which swell its waters. After a promise to devote his future leisure to praise of the country through which the river flows, Ausonius commits the Moselle to the Rhine, closing his poem with an exaltation of the former above the streams of Gaul such as the Loire, the Aisne, and the Marne.

The years following 375 A.D. must have involved Ausonius in much public business, and this doubtless accounts for an interval of comparative barrenness. Except *Epist.* xiii., written in 377 when Ausonius was quaestor, and the *Epicedion*[1] (*Domest.* iv.) of 378, nothing noteworthy seems to have been produced during the busiest period of his official life. But the consulship of 379 A.D. brought leisure and revived the inspiration of the poet, who celebrates the beginning of his term of office with a prayer in trochaic septenarians and another in hexameters (*Domest.* v., vi.): both these are wholly pagan in sentiment; but the elect were doubtless propitiated by a third and portentous prayer in rhopalic hexameters, written (it seems) during the consulship itself, which is purely Christian in tone. At the close of his year of office Ausonius rendered thanks to the Emperor in an elaborate oration, the *Gratiarum Actio.* This, the only

[1] A second and enlarged edition was prepared later.

extant specimen of Ausonius' oratory, is of the class which must be read to be appreciated.

*The Third Period.*—After the consulship, Ausonius found himself free from the ties of public duties, and was able to devote himself wholly to his literary pursuits. In 379 or 380 he retired to Aquitaine to take possession of the estate left him by his father. The occasion is celebrated in a short poem *On his Patrimony* (*Domest.* i.). At the close of 379 A.D. he published the first edition of his *Fasti*, dedicated to his son Hesperius. Originally the main part of this work was a list of the kings and consuls of Rome from the foundation of the city down to the author's own consulate. The list however, is not extant,[1] and all that remains of this production are the short addresses in verse which accompanied it. A second edition brought up to date (and probably corrected) was issued in 383 A.D. with a new dedication to Gregorius.

Kinship of subject makes it probable that the *Caesares* was written at about the same time as the *Fasti*. In its first edition this book comprised only the Monosticha i.–iv. and the Tetrasticha on the Emperors from Nerva to Commodus; the second edition was enlarged by (*a*) a series of Tetrasticha on the twelve Caesars, and (*b*) new Tetrasticha bringing the list down to the times of Heliogabalus. Another work of about the same date is the

[1] It was apparently never included in the *Opuscula*.