

PSEUDO-VOCONIUS AND THE SPEECH OF MAECIUS FALTONIUS NICOMACHUS (HA TAC. 6)

Abstract: The short speech attributed to Metius Voconius which survives in several fifteenth century manuscripts of the *Panegyrici Latini* is a forgery, plagiarised from the *Vita Taciti* in the *Historia Augusta*. This article examines the history of this speech in the context of the rediscovery and transmission of the *Panegyrici Latini* in fifteenth century Italy and offers some thoughts on the abilities and identity of the forger.

Keywords: *Historia Augusta*, *Panegyrici Latini*, forgery, quattrocento

Introduction

Inserted into a group of minor fifteenth century manuscripts of the *Panegyrici Latini* is a brief speech in praise of the ephemeral third century emperor M. Claudius Tacitus.¹ Terse and unadorned, the speech is considerably shorter than the other orations in the familiar corpus of Latin panegyrics which have been transmitted in the manuscript tradition. The title ascribes this undistinguished *oratiuncula* to an otherwise unknown orator, a certain Metius Voconius.² Both attribution and speech are bogus.

The eighteenth-century scholar Christian Gottlieb Schwarz recognised that the speech of Voconius, which he found in a manuscript of the *panegyrici* in his possession,³ was in fact a truncated version of a speech supplied in *Vita Taciti* (HA Tac. 6). Yet he encountered problems. In the *Historia Augusta* (hereafter *HA*) the speech is attributed

1) The best edition of the speech is that produced by Suster 1889, 248–250, which is based on his examination of three of the MSS: Caroliruhensis 457, Ottonianus lat. 1303 and Riccardianus 619. See also, Schwarz 1721, 126–128 for his transcription of the speech in Caroliruhensis 457.

2) Orthographically, Mettius is the more acceptable form, but Metius is a common variant spelling: Münzer 1932, 1498. The four MSS ascribe the oration to Metius Voconius.

3) Caroliruhensis 457.

to Maecius Faltonius Nicomachus (HA Tac. 5.3).⁴ Moreover, there was the problem of how he should account for the minor differences between the two speeches.⁵ Although there were some who were prepared to believe in the existence of Voconius,⁶ the speech has been rightly omitted from all modern editions of the *Panegyrici Latini*.

Indeed, the speech of Voconius is a near-verbatim paraphrase of the speech from the *Vita Taciti* and is almost certainly the work of a humanist scholar of the quattrocento.⁷ Even so, unanswered questions remain about its origins and its place within the textual history of the *Panegyrici Latini*. This brief study attempts to establish three things about the speech of Voconius (hereafter pseudo-Voconius): first, to clarify the place of the speech in the broader manuscript tradition of the *Panegyrici Latini*; second, to consider the aims and abilities of the author; and third, to contextualise the speech in the scholarly climate of fifteenth century Italy.

I

The textual tradition of the *Panegyrici Latini* has been established by the successive studies of Baehrens, Galletier, Mynors. With the exception of Pliny's *Panegyricus*, our text of the *Panegyrici Latini* stems from a now lost archetype, codex Moguntinus uncovered in 1433 by Giovanni Aurispa.⁸ The speech of pseudo-Voconius appears in four manuscripts belonging to the *X* family of Italian

4) The Palatine MS of the *HA* gives his name as Maecius Faltonius Nicomachus, the MSS of the Σ -group give it as Maecius Falconius Nicomachus. For a long time, editors preferred the more common 'Falconius', although it is now generally accepted that 'Faltonius' is more likely to be correct, thus Peter 1865, 2.174, Hohl 1971, 2.190; Paschoud 1996, 336 and 265; PIR2 M 52. Syme 1971, 8 n. 3, suggested the retention of 'Falconius' on the basis of CIL vi. 12533 and CIL viii. 5404.

5) Schwarz 1721, 125–131.

6) Following Schwarz, Friedrich Augustus Wolf 1832, 327 counted Voconius among the genuine panegyricists: "Von ihm [sc. Voconius] und den übrigen wissen wir nicht viele Lebensumstände [...]. Er lebte gegen 270 post Christum. Man hat von ihm eine Lobrede auf den Kaiser Tacitus."

7) Suster 1888, 519 n. 1: "Questa orazioncella, che per divergere assai dalla volgata quale leggiamo in Vopsico, è probabilmente un notevole rifacimento di qualche umanista..."; cf. Suster 1889.

8) See Aurispa Letters no. 66 = Sabbadini 1931, 81–82.

manuscripts: Caroliruhensis 457, Parisinus 7841, Riccardianus 619, Ottobonianus lat. 1303. These manuscripts appear to be descendants of codex Vaticanus lat. 1775, a manuscript dated to the mid-fifteenth century, which is ultimately a descendant of a copy of the *panegyrici* made by Aurispa.⁹ Yet the relationship between the four manuscripts in question is less clear-cut, and the traditional stemma is inadequate as it does not account for how the speech of pseudo-Voconius entered the tradition in the first place as the speech does not appear in the putative exemplar, Vaticanus lat. 1775 (Figure 1).

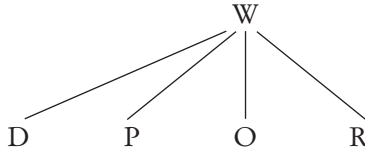


Figure 1: Standard stemma (Baehrens)

We know that pseudo-Voconius' speech entered this tradition early – an inscription on the endpaper of Caroliruhensis 457 gives the copying of that codex a *terminus ante quem* of 1454,¹⁰ perhaps less than a decade after the copying of Vaticanus lat. 1775,¹¹ and almost twenty years after the rediscovery of the *Panegyrici Latini*. The preservation of pseudo-Voconius' speech in the same position in all four of these manuscripts¹² suggests that either three of the

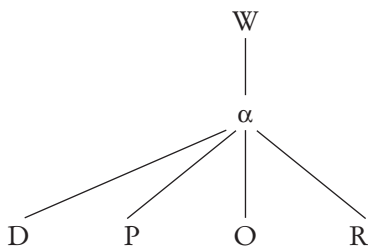
9) Mynors 1964, x; cf. Suster 1888, 522. Vaticanus lat. 1775 does not contain the speech of Voconius, a problem left unexplored by Mynors. It appears that the corrector of Vaticanus lat. 1775 was none other than Tommaso Parentucelli (the future Pope Nicholas V): Reeve 1996, 26. This suggests it was copied in the 1440s, if not earlier.

10) Brambach 1896, 85.

11) Vaticanus lat. 1775 was corrected by Tommaso Parentucelli (the future Pope Nicholas V): Reeve 1996, 26.

12) I. e. second, following Pliny's *Panegyricus*. This further indicates that the text is a deliberate intrusion into the established 'Gallic corpus' of the *Panegyrici Latini*. For the formation of the corpus, see in brief, Barnes 2011, 181–4. The decision to place the speech second may reflect a desire by the author to put the speech in its 'chronological' position, or to prioritise his own efforts, much in the same way as Pacatius who placed his panegyric to Theodosius second in his edition of the *Panegyrici Latini*: Barnes 2011, 181. Given that the other speeches are not reordered in the pseudo-Voconius MSS, the latter explanation is the more tempting.

manuscripts are dependent on the fourth, or that all four are copies of a now-lost exemplar (Figure 2). This may be narrowed further, as Riccardianus 619 is clearly the latest of the four, having been dated to the last quarter of the fifteenth century,¹³ and thus cannot be the exemplar. Until a fresh study of these minor and otherwise unexceptional manuscripts is conducted, their precise relationship will have to remain unresolved.¹⁴ What we can say for certain is that the mid-fifteenth century is the *terminus ante quem* for the creation of the speech of pseudo-Voconius.



W = Vaticanus lat. 1775

R = Riccardianus 619

D = Caroliruhensis 457

P = Parisinus 7841

O = Ottobonianus lat. 1303

α = hypothetical archetype of D, P, O, and R (with the possibility that α may be D, P, or O)

Figure 2: Alternative stemma

II

Any text, no matter how undistinguished or derivative, may yield clues to the capabilities of its author. We may guess that pseudo-Voconius was a man possessing a degree of deviousness, or playfulness. These characteristics may be inferred by the nature of his enterprise. If pseudo-Voconius were simply attempting to fill out

13) Paladini / Fedeli 1976, ix.

14) Suster 1889, 254 suggested that R and O may have been copies of D. However, Suster was apparently unaware of P.

the corpus of speeches, then it seems particularly obscure why he should not refer to its correct provenance and invent such a pseudonym. Attempted literary imposture may be suspected.

Something of our forger's abilities may be appraised from his engagement with his source text. On the face of it, the comparison is not flattering to pseudo-Voconius' skill. Take the following passages. Pseudo-Voconius writes:

si enim uobis placet recolere uetusta illa prodigia, Caios, Nerones, Commodos, Heliogabalos, non quidem homines, sed aetatum illarum uitia, omnes una uoce dicitis:

The corresponding section of his exemplar reads (HA Tac. 6.4):

enimvero si recolere uelitis uetusta illa prodigia, Nerones dico et Heliogabalos et Commodos, seu potius semper Incommodos, certe non hominum magis uitia illa quam aetatum fuerunt.

We may note that the *HA*'s characteristic pun on the name Commodus is elided from pseudo-Voconius' copy. Perhaps pseudo-Voconius thought it ill-fitting to the august register required of a panegyric – even though we may note that punning and word-play is not unknown in the genuine panegyrics.¹⁵ There is a curious sign of pedantry as well. The list of young emperors found in the *HA* is re-ordered by pseudo-Voconius so that the emperors are listed in their correct chronological order. The egregious Gaius is added to complete the list of imperial delinquents. Similarly, the *HA*'s list of exemplary older emperors later in the speech is augmented by pseudo-Voconius with the addition of Antoninus Pius.

More intriguing still is pseudo-Voconius' apparent transformation of HA Tac. 6.6. The *HA*'s illustration of the problems of immature *imperatores* is compressed into a single, simplified statement. The *HA*'s version reads (Tac. 6.6f.):

quae (malum) ratio est habere imperatorem, qui famam curare non nouerit, qui, quid sit res p., nesciat, nutritorem timeat, respiciat ad nutricem, uirgarum magistralium ictibus terrorique subiaceat, faciat eos consules, duces, iudices, quorum uitam, merita, aetates, familias, gesta non norit. sed quid diuitius, p.c. protrahor?

15) E. g. Pan. Lat. 3(11).1.5, with Nixon / Rodgers 1994, 394 n. 9; Pan. Lat. 12(9). 8.1, with Nixon / Rodgers 1994, 308 n. 56.

By contrast, Pseudo-Voconius states succinctly:

*quid miserius quam habere imperatores, qui respiciant ad nutricem ne-
scientes iudicare de fama.*

Rhetorically speaking, the inferiority of pseudo-Voconius' version is evident. Why the author should choose to expunge these successful rhetorical elements is inexplicable; except, perhaps, if it were politically inexpedient for him to dwell on the problems of immature rulership. Alternatively, we may regard the simplification of the text as being indicative of an author whose interests were in the compression of his source text.

Yet most interestingly of all is our forger's choice of name, Metius Voconius. No known orator from antiquity bore this name. How, we may ask, did pseudo-Voconius arrive at his alias? Metius was often taken (erroneously) as an alternative spelling of Maecius by Renaissance scholars and copyists, and so he might well have simply transposed the name Maecius found in his text as Metius.¹⁶ But there may be more to this name than meets the eye. A clue may be found from an unlikely quarter. In Ep. 1.5, Pliny addresses one of his less successful friends, Voconius Romanus.¹⁷ In that same missive Pliny names two other men, Mettius Carus and Mettius Modestus. Could it be that pseudo-Voconius created his pseudonym from a conflation of these individuals? If so, it follows that our man had read or had access to Pliny's *Epistulae*, the *HA*, and the *Panegyrici Latini*. Given the popularity of these texts in fifteenth century Italy, this is not implausible, especially if we accept that the forger was a man of some means and was capable of playing erudite games. Indeed, pseudo-Voconius' erudition may run deeper than is initially apparent. At any rate, we may note the choice of the name Voconius is a happy one, especially when it is recalled that it was to the studious Voconius Romanus that Pliny sent his *Panegyricus*.¹⁸ What could be more appropriate than a panegyric from another Voconius, inserted after the oration of Pliny?

16) E. g. the editor Bonus Accursius, in his editio princeps of the *Historiae Augustae* consistently changed any Maecius to Metius: Accursius 1475, fol. 239r.

17) For this man, see Syme 1960, 364–368.

18) Plin. Ep. 3.13. This letter appears to have been fairly well-known: Pier Candido Decembrio refers to this epistle (and Voconius Romanus) in a letter to Francesco Pizzolpasso (Suster 1888, 512 quoting Riccardianus 827, fol. 2).

III

As is well known, the humanist environment of the quattrocento was as conducive for would-be forgers as it was for scholars – two groups by no means mutually exclusive.¹⁹ The large number of manuscripts of both the *HA* and the *Panegyrici Latini* which were copied during the fifteenth century attests to the popularity and attention these texts received during that important age of classical scholarship.²⁰ It was in this world that pseudo-Voconius operated.

What can we conjecture about the person of pseudo-Voconius? It seems clear that he was a man who was familiar with the text of the *HA* and had a knowledge of Roman imperial history. At some point after 1433 he became aware of the newly discovered *Panegyrici Latini* and obtained a copy of the corrected Vaticanus lat. 1775, most likely in the 1440s or early 1450s, of which he made a copy of his own. Into this copy he inserted his own composition, the speech of Metius Voconius, which he had excerpted and reworked from his text of the *HA*. This copy then formed the basis of the contaminated tradition represented by the four Voconian manuscripts.

Beyond this sketch, the identity of pseudo-Voconius is ultimately elusive. However, we may narrow our quest for pseudo-Voconius by considering the career of a key figure in the history of this text: the cardinalitial secretary, humanist, and later Bishop of Urbino, Giovanni Pietro Arrivabene.

Prima facie, Arrivabene may seem to be an attractive candidate for being our forger. Born in 1439 and raised in Mantua, Arrivabene was an enthusiastic scholar, collector, and copyist of ancient texts.²¹ He had close connections to the ruling Gonzaga family, in particular to the marchioness, Barbara of Brandenburg, and her son, Francesco, who would later become the cardinal to whom Arrivabene was attached as secretary. He was interested in panegyrics. As a young man, Arrivabene had composed a (verse)

19) The most accessible overview of forgery in this period is Grafton 1990, 25–32.

20) For the reception of the *HA* during the fifteenth century, see Callu / Desbordes 1989.

21) For Arrivabene, see Chambers 1984.

panegyric for the redoubtable humanist Enea Silvio Piccolomini (Pope Pius II).²² Tantalisingly, Arrivabene had in his possession one of the four manuscripts which included the speech of pseudo-Voconius (Ottobonianus lat. 1303), which he copied out himself from a seemingly corrupt exemplar.²³ What is more, Arrivabene owned a manuscript containing the *HA* (Ottobonianus lat. 1304). If we lack a known motive, Arrivabene at least is a man who ostensibly possessed the means and the opportunity to carry out the imposture.

Mantua and the cities of Northern Italy provide a tantalising setting for the production of pseudo-Voconius. Just as Arrivabene's family worked for the Gonzagas, so too had Giovanni Aurispa, and it may have been through Aurispa that Arrivabene gained a text of the genuine Latin panegyrics.²⁴ Moreover, the city of Mantua, thanks to the patronage of the enlightened ruling family, had become a centre for classical study and the copying of manuscripts by the mid-fifteenth century. It is known that upon Aurispa's death in 1459, the Gonzaga family purchased a number of Aurispa's Greek manuscripts.²⁵

Yet there are problems with this thesis. If Arrivabene and pseudo-Voconius were indeed one and the same man, then the speech must be regarded as a product of juvenilia, produced anterior to 1454 (the date of the Karlsruhe manuscript). As such, the speech may even have started its life as a school exercise. It is just possible that Arrivabene's early copy of the text was the putative lost archetype described above in Section 1, and thus was the error-filled exemplar, which was later corrected by Arrivabene when he copied the (presumably) more mature Ottobonianus lat. 1303. Furthermore, one may doubt whether such a young man, even one as precocious as Arrivabene, would have been able to marshal the resources and erudition required to carry out the imposture.

It is more likely that pseudo-Voconius was a man who operated in the same circles as our one-time Bishop of Urbino. The humanist network was relatively small, and it is no surprise that Arrivabene was well connected. As a young man he was taught

22) Chambers 1984, 399.

23) Chambers 1984, 420; cf. Callu / Desbordes 1989, 270.

24) For Aurispa's work for the Gonzagas, note Bigi 1962, 593.

25) Signorini 1981.

by the great Francesco Filelfo in Milan.²⁶ It is the link with Filelfo that connects Arrivabene with the major humanists of the age, and in particular those who played a role in the dissemination of the *Panegyrici Latini*, not least Aurispa, and the corrector of Vaticanus lat. 1775, Tommaso Parentucelli. We may suspect that pseudo-Voconius was a man in the orbit of these luminaries, perhaps a few years senior to Arrivabene, if not a member of the generation of Aurispa.

Beyond these speculations, the question of this text's origins must remain unsolved. Even so, the foregoing discussion has demonstrated that the existing stemma for the *Panegyrici Latini* does not adequately account for the appearance of the speech of pseudo-Voconius. As for the author and the nature of his enterprise; if pseudo-Voconius were an early Renaissance forger, as seems certain, then his work presents an appropriately strange episode in the *Nachleben* of the *HA* and the formation of the corpus of the Latin panegyrics in the quattrocento. As a forger, our author was unambitious, preferring plagiarise his source text rather than compose afresh. He was (it must be admitted) a scholar of some intellectual pretence, pedantic and somewhat humourless. But above all, in pseudo-Voconius we find an individual whose evident delight in inventing names makes him a worthy successor to the 'rogue Verfasser' of the *HA* himself.²⁷

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26) Chambers 1984, 398–9.

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