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Vivit et astra tenet: Epitaphs, Elogia, and Astral Immortality

"He lives and possesses the stars." Such was the assertion boldly stated in the verse epitaph of the Roman noble, Petronius Probus (*CLE* 1347.A12; ca. 390). It was a claim made in heavy traffic, for the souls of many late antique men and women were bound, it would seem, *ad* (or even *super*) *astra*. The idea of astral ascent was hardly new by the fourth century, but amid late antiquity's welter of competing cultural and religious forces it seems to have assumed new urgency. Pagans and Christians may have shared one benefit of this rising tide of claims, whose effect would have been to reduce the distance between the old pagan heroes and the Christian martyrs already enjoying celestial bliss and such living contemporaries as might now anticipate similar reward. But the prominence awarded astral ascent in fourth- and fifth-century epitaphs and *elogia* also positioned contemporary pagans and Christians as rivals in their astral aspirations.

An epigram of Ennius (Courtney, *FLP*, 44) had imagined Scipio Africanus ascending *endo plagas caelestum*; and in the *Aeneid* Apollo informed the young Iulus that it was through the acquisition and display of *virtus* that men might reach the stars (9.641: "*sic itur ad astra*"). It is not surprising, then, that Christian poets eventually offered the same reward to the martyrs. Pope Damasus' saints seem to be the first to flock to the *regia caeli* (Ferrua, 16) or, like Peter and Paul, to follow Christ *per astra* to reach the *aetherios sinus* (Ferrua, 20). But Damasus' lead was readily picked, for example, up by the poet (Florus perhaps) whose *elogium* celebrated the martyr Liberalis, sent *ad astra* by *furor* (*CLE* 904), and by Paulinus of Nola, who envisioned the day of St. Felix's death as the day that *animam dedit astris* (*carm.* 18.87). Starry heaven may have been expansive enough to accommodate so many and such varied heroes. What of earth?

In the temporal realm competition may have been more acute. Ennius' epigram finds its echo in the epitaph of the leading late-fourth-century, pagan luminary, Vettius Agorius Praetextatus (*CLE* 111.9: *porta quis caeli patet*), wherein heaven's gate swings upon for the (pagan) "wise man" (*sofus*). And while the identity of the figure represented on the so-called "*consecratio* diptych" in the British Museum (Volbach, 56) is debated, it is generally agreed that this panel depicts the heavenly ascension of a notable contemporary pagan. It is against this background that we should read the contemporary epitaph of the Christian noble, Petronius Probus, who not only "*vivit et astra tenet*," but also "*vivit in aeterna paradisi sede*," (*CLE* 1347. B23-30). This paper, then, argues that the claims and counter-claims of "commemoration," specifically those deploying astral imagery, provide another valuable index to the competitive realignments reshaping Roman culture in the fourth and fifth centuries.