



TYCHE

Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte Papyrologie und Epigraphik

Herausgegeben von

Gerhard Dobesch, Hermann Härrauer
Peter Siewert und Ekkehard Weber

Band 7, 1992





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I N H A L T

Andrik A b r a m e n k o (Frankfurt/M.), Die Verschwörung des Alexander Lyncestes und die „μήτηρ τοῦ βασιλέως“. Zu Diodor XVII 32, 1	1
Roger S. B a g n a l l (New York), Count Ausonius (Tafel 1)	9
Roger S. B a g n a l l (New York), The Periodicity and Collection of the Chrysargyron	15
Marco B u o n o c o r e (Città del Vaticano), C. Herennius Lupercus patronus Larinatium (Tafel 2)	19
Angelos C h a n i o t i s (Heidelberg) und Giorgos Rethemiotakis (Herakleion), Neue Inschriften aus dem kaiserzeitlichen Lyttos, Kreta (Tafel 3–7)	27
Hermann Harrauer (Wien), ΣΟΥΒΡΟΜ, Abrasax, Jahwe u. a. aus Syrien. Mit einer Einleitung von Jawdat C h e h a d e (Damaskus) (Tafel 8, 9)	39
Edward D a b r o w a (Krakau), Könige Syriens in der Gefangenschaft der Parther. Zwei Episoden aus der Geschichte der Beziehungen der Seleukiden zu den Arsakiden	45
P. Th. J. d e W i t (Amsterdam) und Pieter J. Sijpesteijn (Amsterdam), Fragment einer spätbyzantinischen Emphyteusisurkunde (Tafel 10)	55
Johannes D i e t h a r t (Wien) und Ewald Kislinger (Wien), Σιγελλᾶτος — Μειζόκρουστος. Zu P.Vindob. G 16.846	61
Gerhard D o b e s c h (Wien), John Kevin Newman und „Catull der Römer“. Ein Beitrag zur Kulturgeschichte der ausgehenden Republik	65
M. Serena F u n g h i (Pisa) e Gabriella Messeri Savorelli (Florenz), Note papirologiche e paleografiche (Tafel 11, 12)	75
Linda-Marie G ü n t h e r (München), <i>Gallicus sive Anticus</i> . Zu einem Triumphaltitel Justinians I.	89
Hermann H a r r a u e r (Wien), ΣΟΥΒΡΟΜ, Abrasax, Jahwe u. a. aus Syrien. Mit einer Einleitung von Jawdat Chehade (Damaskus) (Tafel 8, 9)	39
Peter H e r z (Frankfurt/M.), Asiarchen und Archiereiai. Zum Provinzialkult der Provinz Asia	93
Günther H ö l b l (Wien), Bemerkungen zur frühptolemäischen Chronologie	117
C. P. J o n e s (Cambridge, Mass.), Foreigners in a Hellenistic Inscription of Rhodes .	123
István K e r t é s z (Budapest), Zur Sozialpolitik der Attaliden	133
Ewald K i s l i n g e r (Wien) und Johannes Diethart (Wien), Σιγελλᾶτος — Μειζόκρουστος. Zu P.Vindob. G 16.846	61
Heikki K o s k e n n i e m i (Turku), Einige Papyri wirtschaftlichen Inhalts aus Turku (Tafel 13–18)	143
Johannes K r a m e r (Siegen), Schreiben der Prätorialpräfekten des Jahres 399 an den <i>praeses provinciae Arcadiae</i> in lateinischer und griechischer Version (Tafel 19, 20) ..	157
Wolfgang L u p e (Halle/Saale), Philoktets Aufenthalt unmittelbar nach seiner Verwundung. Euripides' Φιλοκτήτης (Hypothesis P.Oxy. 2455)	163
Gabriella M e s s e r i S a v o r e l l i (Florenz) e M. Serena Funghi (Pisa), Note papirologiche e paleografiche (Tafel 11, 12)	75

Victor P a r k e r (Heidelberg), The Dates of the Orthagorids of Sicyon	165
Heinz-Dietmar R i c h t e r (Bamberg), Verwaltungswiderstand gegen ein Prostagma Ptolemaios' II. Philadelphos? (P.Cairo Zen. 59021)	177
Giorgos R e t h e m i o t a k i s (Herakleion) und Angelos Chaniotis (Heidelberg), Neue Inschriften aus dem kaiserzeitlichen Lyttos, Kreta (Tafel 3–7)	27
Mustafa H. S a y a r (Wien), Der thrakische König Mostis (Tafel 21)	187
Ralf S c h a r f (Heidelberg), Germaniciani und Secundani — ein spätrömisches Trup- penpaar	197
Pieter J. S i j p e s t e i j n (Amsterdam), Byzantinischer Geschäftsbrief in Geldangele- genheiten (P.Lond. III 1019) (Tafel 22)	203
Pieter J. S i j p e s t e i j n (Amsterdam) und P. Th. J. de Wit (Amsterdam), Fragment einer spätbyzantinischen Emphyteusisurkunde (Tafel 10)	55
Holger S o n n a b e n d (Stuttgart), Polybios, die Attaliden und die Griechen	207
Michael P. S p e i d e l (Honolulu), Ala Celerum Philippiana (Tafel 23)	217
Bemerkungen zu Papyri V <Korr. Tyche 52–75> (Tafel 24)	221
Buchbesprechungen.....	231

Pontica I. Recherches sur l'histoire du Pont dans l'antiquité. Istanbul 1991 (231: Klaus Belke) — Gerhard RADKE, *Fasti Romani*. Betrachtungen zur Frühgeschichte des römischen Kalenders. Münster 1990 (232) — Marcus Tullius CICERO, *Brutus*. Lateinisch-deutsch ed. Bernhard Kytzler. München, Zürich 1990 (233) — Hermann STRASBURGER, *Studien zur Alten Geschichte*. Hrsg. v. Walter Schmitt-henner und Renate Zoepffel. Hildesheim, New York 1982–1990 (234) — Pedro DE PALOL, Gisela RIPOLL, *Die Goten. Geschichte und Kunst in Westeuropa*. Stuttgart, Zürich 1990 (239) — Marcus Tullius CICERO, *Über die Weissagung – De divinatione*. Lateinisch-deutsch. Hrsg., übers. u. erl. von Christoph Schäublin. München, Zürich 1991 (240) — Barthel HROUDA, *Der Alte Orient. Geschichte und Kultur des alten Vorderasien*. Mit Beiträgen von Jean Bottéro, Peter Calmeyer [u. a.]. München 1991 (241) — Dieter FLACH, *Römische Agrargeschichte*. München 1990 (242) — Erik HORNING, *The Tomb of Pharaoh Seti I / Das Grab Sethos' I*. Englisch und deutsch. Zürich, München 1991 (243: Gerhard Dobesch) — Donata BACCANI, *Oroscopi greci*. Messina 1992 (244) — John C. SHELTON, *Greek and Latin Papyri, Ostraca, and Wooden Tablets in the Collection of the Brooklyn Museum*. Firenze 1992 (244: Hermann Harrauer) — *Proceedings of the XVIII International Congress of Papyrology, Athen 25–31 May 1886*. Athen 1988 (245: Bernhard Palme) — Binyamin SHIMRON, *Politics and Belief in Herodotus*. Stuttgart 1989 (247: Robert Rollinger) — Gabriele WESCH-KLEIN, *Liberalitas in rem publicam. Private Aufwendungen zugunsten von Gemeinden im römischen Afrika bis 284 n. Chr.* Bonn 1990 (249: Walter Scheidel) — James H. OLIVER, *Greek Constitutions of Early Roman Emperors from Inscriptions and Papyri*. Philadelphia 1989 (251: Reinhard Selinger) — Hansjörg FROMMER, *Die Illyrer. Viertausend Jahre europäischer Geschichte ...* Karlsruhe 1988 (252) — Arne EGGBRECHT (Hrsg.), *Albanien. Schätze aus dem Land der Skipetaren. Katalog zur Ausstellung im Roemer- u. Pelizaeusmuseum Hildesheim*. Mainz 1988 (254: Peter Siewert) — *Comptes et inventaires dans la cité grecque*. Actes du colloque intern. d'épigraphie ... Neuchâtel, Genève 1988 (255: Hans Taeuber) — Peter HERRMANN, *Hilferufe aus römischen Provinzen*. Hamburg 1990 (256) — Stefan LINK, *Konzepte der Privilegierung römischer Veteranen*. Stuttgart 1989 (257) — Heidrun SCHULZE-OBEN, *Freigelassene in den Städten des römischen Hispanien*. Bonn 1989 (258: Ekkehard Weber) — K. BURASELIS, *Θεία Δωρεά. Μελέτες πάνω στην πολιτική της δυναστείας τῶν Σεβήρων καὶ τὴν Constitutio Antoniniana*. Athen 1989 (259: Sophia Zoumbaki)

Indices (J. Diethart)	263
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ROGER S. BAGNALL

Count Ausonius

(Tafel 1)

In PLRE I 622 there is recorded under the rubric “Ausonius Nemesianus 3, comes (East) IV/V”, a figure whose entry reads as follows: “κόμης, landowner in Egypt Stud. Pal. XX 111 Hermopolis Magna. His brother, also a land-owner, was Heraclides”. Virtually every element of this description is in need of correction. The net result is the disappearance of this entry and serious questions about another.

The papyrus in question, today inventory G 2110 in the Vienna collection, is a letter addressed “to the master of my soul¹ Ausonius Nemesianus” from Aet², a *phrontistes*, or estate-manager. He tells him the following: οἱ διαφέροντες τῷ δεσπότη μου Αὐσονίῳ τῷ κόμῃ ἀπέλυσαν τὰς ἀρούρας τὰς διαφερούσας τῇ ἡμῶν (read ὑμῶν) θαυ[μα]σιότητι τὰς τε γεωργηθείσας καὶ τὰς μήπω γεωργηθείσας, καὶ [πρ]ὸς τὸ εἶδέναι τὴν ὑμῶν ἀρετὴν γράφω, δέσποτα πάτρων: “The dependents of my master Ausonius the count released the *arouras* belonging to your Excellency, both those already leased³ and those not yet leased, and I am writing to you, lord patron, for your information”. It is at once apparent that there are two men named Ausonius involved, whom the writer carefully distinguishes: Ausonius Nemesianus, the writer’s employer, who is referred to in the body of the letter as ἡ σὴ θαυμασιότης and (later) as ἡ σὴ ἀρετή, and Ausonius the κόμης. It would make no sense for the latter to be used as a third-person description of the addressee within the letter, nor yet would it make sense to tell Ausonius that Ausonius’ men had released Ausonius’ land, if only one Ausonius were involved.

As it happens, a landowner of this name is elsewhere attested, in P.NYU 11 a. 201, an entry on the verso of a long collection of receipts for grain taxes paid by Karanis residents. It is a summary notation of 400 artabas of wheat paid on Mechir 21 of the 9th indiction, which is almost certainly 16 February 336⁴. He is described there as Αὐσονίου Νεμεσίου δι(ὸ)

¹ On this phrase see G. H. R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* 4 (1987) 144 no. 46, who does not know this instance. His argument there for a late date and Christian milieu for P. Stras. III 286 on the basis of this idiom is refuted by P. Bruggisser, *L'appellation δεσπότης μου τῆς ψυχῆς dans la lettre P. Strasb. III 286*, *MusHelv* 46 (1989) 231–236. See also P.Neph. 9. 1–2n. The date suggested here for SPP XX 111 would help to confirm Bruggisser’s argument about the date (though not the religious milieu).

² Aetios? Αελ in the edition, but as Hermann Harrauer pointed out to me on the original, the third letter is certainly tau. It is not certain if the name is abbreviated.

³ It seems more likely that γεωργηθείσας here means ‘farmed’ in the sense of ‘leased to a tenant farmer’, the normal meaning of γεωργός in the papyri of this period, than that it refers to actual cultivation.

⁴ See P.Col. VII p. 76 no. 13. It is apparently a retrospective notation, since the receipts in this roll are from the 11th to 15th indictions. It is far less likely that this note dates from the next 9th indiction, 351, since no entries were made in the preceding eight years.

Καλωσίρεως υἱοῦ βουλ(ευτοῦ) ἐπιμελ(ητοῦ) σίτου ἀποστελλομένων (read -ένου) ἐν Ἀλεξανδρίᾳ, to be rendered “Ausonius Nemesinus, through his son Kalosiris, councillor and superintendent of grain sent to Alexandria”. The words ‘councillor’ and *epimeletes* are certainly to be attributed to the father, not the son, despite the word order⁵. Only the omission of an alpha in the second name might evoke doubt about identity, but interchanges of -ινοσ and -ιανος are common enough in the papyri⁶, and the writer of the Karanis text, no expert, makes other errors⁷. Both Nemesianos and Nemesinos are fairly common in the papyri and would have been familiar to him. Nemesianos is undoubtedly correct⁸. Herakleides, clearly, is the brother of the landowner, as can be seen from the form of the reference to him: τοῦ δεσπότου μου Ἡρακλείδου τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ τῆς ὑμῶν θαυμασιότητος (lines 6–7), and has nothing to do with the *comes*. The letter ends in mid-sentence with plenty of room left on the sheet.

The provenance of P. NYU 11a, Karanis, points to the Arsinoite, not the Hermopolite, as the provenance also of the Vienna text. Despite PLRE, there is no indication of the provenance in the edition in SPP. The adjacent papyri in the inventory (mainly nearby in the volume, too) are of diverse provenances, including Arsinoite, Hermopolite, and Herakleopolite. They thus form no argument in the matter⁹.

What then is left of Ausonius the *comes*? To what office is this likely to refer in this period, and is he known? As it happens, one Flavius Iulius Ausonius, *vir perfectissimus*, was *praeses Augustamnicae*, almost certainly the first to hold that office, “between at least 13 November 341 and 1 July 342”¹⁰. The title of *comes* is not attested for him so far, but it is still possible that he held it. Fl. Strategius, *praeses* of the Thebaid in 349, was a *comes*¹¹. Whether the writer is using the term with technical correctness or as a general term for a high official cannot be determined on present evidence. The Arsinoite Nome was part of Augustamnica, making an identification that much more attractive. If it is right, the date of the papyrus would be 341–343, the outside limits of Ausonius’ governorship¹². The role of his *διαφέροντες* — probably *officiales* — here would fit well enough with the identification. The *praeses* would have the power to put a freeze on transactions involving the land of a *bouleutes*, who probably once again held some liturgical office, and his agents could well have released it for the year’s leasing.

If, then, the *comes* and the *praeses* are one and the same, one may reasonably go a step further and wonder whether Flavius Iulius Ausonius is identical to the only other Iulius Ausonius of high rank known from the fourth century, namely the father of the well-known

⁵ If they concerned the son, the father’s name with the *διά* would not figure at all.

⁶ E. g., Προβιανοῦ for Προβίνου in P.Flor. I 17. 21.

⁷ Καλωσίρεως is presumably an error for Καλασίρεως.

⁸ The heading of SPP XX 111, written in a fast, expert hand by the man’s steward, must certainly be better evidence than a copy of a receipt written by someone who did not know him. It makes a striking contrast to the slow, clumsy hand, with awkwardnesses and corrections, that wrote the body of the letter (and failed to finish the sentence).

⁹ Dr. Harrauer confirms for me that there is no evidence for the provenance, which is not discussed in *Führer* PER no. 325.

¹⁰ P.Oxy. LV 3774. 11–14n., with references, especially to P.Oxy. L 3576. 10–12n. His successor, Fl. Olympius, is attested first on 14 March 343. For a supplementary list of *praesides*, cf. Tyche 1 (1986) 192–194 (194 on Ausonius).

¹¹ J. Lallemand, *L’administration civile de l’Égypte de l’avènement de Dioclétien à la création du diocèse (284–382)*. (Mémoires de l’Académie royale de Belgique, Cl. des Lettres 57. 2, Brussels 1964) 251; PLRE I 858–859.

¹² The handwriting, as can be seen from the plate below, is certainly compatible with a date as early as the 340s.

professor, poet, praetorian prefect, and consul¹³. The 'Flavius' in the nomenclature of the *praeses* is certainly no obstacle. That name was attached routinely, virtually systematically, to the names of high officials in the eastern provinces from Constantine's time on¹⁴. Both men would thus, outside of eastern official duties, have been known as 'Iulius Ausonius'. The poet's father was born around 288 (and the poet ca 310), and would thus have been about 53 when the *praeses* took office in 341: an appropriate enough age for such an official. And, Ausonius claims, his father spoke Greek better than Latin. Even if the claim is exaggerated, high competence in Greek will have been a useful attribute. The governor's Greek handwriting survives in the subscription to P. Oxy. L 3577 (plate XVII), an official letter. There, however, he seems almost to be trying to imitate the archaizing chancery style in which the body of the letter is written¹⁵, and it would be too much to claim that this was the man's normal Greek handwriting. Perhaps more intriguing is P. Lond. VI 1924, a private letter from one Ausonius to Apa Papnouthios, the anchorite. Citing the superiority of the language and style of this letter compared to the rest of Papnouthios' correspondence, and the rather official character of the main hand, Bell argued (p. 100) that this Ausonius might well be the *praeses*. From the plate (Pl. IV), one can see that the close in the sender's own hand is a rapid, 'important' cursive, with (to my eye) rather a Latin character. This, then, could well be the governor's real style when writing a private, rather than chancery, letter. It must be remembered, however, that the identification with the governor is in this case anything but assured¹⁶.

If it is the governor, however, another interesting linkage deserves mention. Papnouthios, the addressee of this letter and others published with it, seems likely to have been a Melitian monk, perhaps connected with the monastery of Phathor located near the border of the Herakleopolite and Kynopolite Nomes, on the East bank of the Nile¹⁷. If this Ausonius is in fact the governor, and the date falls during his term in office, it comes also during Athanasius' exile and the ascendancy of his enemy, the *dux* Valacius. The Melitians had, for reasons of ecclesiastical politics rather than theology, aligned themselves with the Arians in the controversies of this period, and were thus the enemies of Athanasius. Nothing would therefore be more natural than for a governor appointed by Constantius in the early 340s, during Valacius' tenure, to be on warm terms with a senior Melitian monastic¹⁸. That would not necessarily make Ausonius an Arian, but it certainly would suggest something less than zealous support of the Athanasian position¹⁹.

¹³ Father is PLRE I 139 Ausonius 5; son is PLRE I 140–141 Ausonius 7.

¹⁴ See R. S. Bagnall, A. Cameron, S. R. Schwartz, K. A. Worp, *Consuls of the Later Roman Empire*, Atlanta 1987, 36–40.

¹⁵ A curious fact; Ausonius had been in office at least two and a half months at the date of this papyrus, so he cannot have been seeing (and gently mocking?) the pompous official hand for the first time.

¹⁶ That he is clearly a Christian poses no problem to the identification with the father of the poet. The latter is known to have been a Christian, and that his father should have been already in the early 340s will hardly occasion surprise. Two aunts, one on each side, were consecrated virgins. There is no cause to see Ausonius' Christianity as 'nominal' or 'tepid'. See G. W. Bowersock, *Symmachus and Ausonius*, in: F. Paschoud (Ed.), *Colloque genevois sur Symmaque*, Paris 1986, 1–15.

¹⁷ See P.Neph. pp. 21 and 23 n. 7, arguing for the connection.

¹⁸ Cf. T. D. Barnes, *The Career of Abinnaeus*, Phoenix 39 (1985) 368–374, at 372–373, on Abinnaeus' problems with Valacius; he speculates that Abinnaeus' troubles in the early 340s were a product of his alignment with the Athanasian party. His recovery of his position in 346 would coincide with Athanasius' return.

¹⁹ R. Étienne, *Bordeaux antique* (Histoire de Bordeaux 1, Bordeaux 1962) 278 characterizes the family as moderately orthodox.

The externals, then — names, linguistic competence, age — are compatible with an identification. But is such an identification plausible in terms of what is known about Iulius Ausonius? Very little is in fact known of the father's career: a doctor, a *curialis* of Vasates (Bazas) and Burdigala (Bordeaux) in Gaul²⁰, presumably with at least part of the series of liturgical offices such status entailed²¹; a moderately large landowner²²; but not known as an imperial official until his son's ascendancy in the late 370s brought him the position of *praefectus praetorio* for Illyricum in the last year of his very long life (he seems to have died in 378). The pattern of the 370s, however, is suggestive. "On Valentinian's death in 375, and the accession of Gratian, his pupil, Ausonius rose to be praetorian prefect. The family did not lose by it. Ausonius secured the praetorian prefecture for his aged father and his son at the same time, while his son-in-law was made proconsular of Africa. The Ausonian family for a short time ruled the whole of the western world²³". Though their success was extraordinary in scale, it was not unusual in kind. Professionals would grab whatever opportunities they had to parlay a well-placed pupil or patient into high office and greater wealth. Another imperial tutor, Exuperius, parlayed his teaching of the sons of Dalmatius into a governorship and wealth²⁴.

There is no reason to doubt, then, that the family would have seized any earlier opportunity for wealth and power through imperial connections. As it happens, there was an earlier period of family influence at court at precisely the right time, the 330s, not long before the appointment of our *praeses*. Iulius Ausonius' brother-in-law, the maternal uncle of the poet, Aemilius Magnus Arborius, was a rhetor in Constantinople, friend of Constantine's brothers, and tutor of one of the Caesars. Along the way, he served as governor of Narbonensis (*Par.* 3. 12, "te Narbonensis Gallia praeposuit") and became wealthy²⁵. An Arborius who was probably his son rose to high office as well, during the Ausonian heyday of 379–380 (*comes sacrarum largitionum* and *praefectus urbis Romae*) (PLRE I 97–98 Arborius 3). Aemilius Magnus Arborius died while Constantine was still alive, but possibly not without a promise of an office for his brother-in-law; or perhaps a few years later, after Constantine's death, the affectionate remembrance of a former tutor to one of the then Caesars, now Augusti, helped his

²⁰ Such dual membership is likely to imply landholdings or residences in both cities, but above all the means to support the costs of the various liturgical offices in both places. Keith Hopkins' hypothesis (*Social Mobility in the Later Roman Empire: the Evidence of Ausonius*, CQ 11 [1961] 239–249 at 241) that Iulius Ausonius' father had been manumitted in Bazas, which was thus his *origo*, though perhaps not disprovable, is simply unnecessary. Hopkins (244) rather takes too much at face value Ausonius' depreciatory remarks about his origins, especially *ex qua mediocritate*. Such terms were relative. The Greek equivalents, *μετριότης* and *μέτριος*, are stock terms of petitions submitted by the propertied, even by members of the bouletic class. (Examples: P.Oxy. I 71 [cf. BL 1. 314, 3. 129], a petition of 303 to the prefect Clodius Culcianus from a former *archiereus* of Arsinoe who thinks of himself as a *metrios*; and P.Panop. 27, a petition of 323 to the *praeses* from a couple of which the woman is the daughter of a former magistrate, in which the same self-description is used.) No doubt Ausonius was of 'modest' origins compared to the heights he attained in the 370s, but on a local scale the family can quite well have been among the leading lights.

²¹ Étienne (above, n. 19) 217 supposes that he had complete immunity from taxes, but his membership in the councils suggests that he at least discharged some of the normal offices.

²² Étienne (above, n. 19) 223 calculates the estate at 264 ha. in all, including 50 ha. of arable land and 25 ha. of vines.

²³ Hopkins (above, n. 20) 243.

²⁴ See the discussion of Hopkins (above, n. 20) 244–248, who documents the phenomenon from precisely the circle mentioned in Ausonius' poetry. Cf. also R. Kaster, *Guardians of Language*, Berkeley 1988, 100–106.

²⁵ J. Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court A. D. 364–425*, Oxford 1975, 81–82: "Arborius had also won for himself the governorship of Narbonensis". For the poet's prefecture cf. 70 ("inert occupant of the prefecture of Gaul"). Cf. on Arborius also Hopkins (above, n. 20) 242.

brother-in-law to a governorship, especially he had tutored the right Caesar – Constantius, in this case. Robert Étienne has in fact argued that it was Constantius whom Arborius tutored, but certainty is unobtainable²⁶.

None of this constitutes proof, and a skeptic can reasonably point out that Ausonius nowhere mentions any earlier governorship held by his father. But this may not signify very much; why, in the brief series of allusions consecrated to each family member in the *Parentalia*, should Ausonius mention such a relatively lowly position, when he could stress instead a praetorian prefecture? At all events, what is known of career and family connections is at the very least eminently compatible with the identification. Indeed, the appointment would fit admirably into typical patterns of behavior for ambitious professionals of the period²⁷.

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²⁶ Étienne (above, n. 19) 340–341. He argues that Constantine II would have received a tutor already in 317 when he became Caesar, and that this is too early for Arborius. He assigns the tutorship for Constantius to ca 324–330 and Arborius' death to the end of this period, but there is no evidence for either claim, and a tutorial period in the 330s when Constantius (b. 317) was in his teens seems much more likely.

²⁷ I am indebted to Alan Cameron and Klaas Worp for helpful comments and references, and to Hermann Harrauer for looking at the papyrus with me and providing me with the photograph reproduced here.

