

Orfitus and Constantius: a note on Roman gold-glasses

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Until 1943, Memmius Vitrasius Orfitus had two claims to a minor place in the wider history of late 4th-c. Rome. He was the father-in-law of Q. Aurelius Symmachus, consul in 391 and author of a celebrated plea for the restoration of the altar of Victory to the senate house in Rome; and he was the subject of Ammianus's celebrated 'put down', *splendore liberalium artium minus quam nobilem decuerat institutus* (14.6.1) — implicitly included among that deplorable band of senators who (as the historian put it elsewhere) 'hated learning like poison' (28.4.14). But in 1943 A. Alföldi claimed that Orfitus was the pagan mastermind who launched what he claimed to be the "pagan propaganda" of the long series of contorniate medallions.

I have indicated elsewhere that I am not persuaded by this interpretation of the contorniates.¹ All that concerns us here is the rôle Alföldi attributed to Orfitus. For he argued that the contorniates were produced at the mint of Rome by the prefect of Rome. J. M. C. Toynbee was reluctant to accept the first point,² but a die link between one of the earliest contorniate types and a coin produced at the Roman mint between 354 and 360³ would seem to prove the point. The contorniates may indeed have been first struck at the Roman mint between 354 and 360, possibly (as Alföldi argued) as New Year's gifts, and it is true that Orfitus, a known pagan, was prefect of Rome in every January but that of 357 between 354 and 359.

But although the urban prefect had police jurisdiction over mintworkers accused of counterfeiting, the procurator of the mint was answerable to the *comes sacrarum largitionum* at court, not to the urban prefect.⁴ It is difficult to believe that a senator dared to dictate to the mint policies that would have been disapproved of at court. Indeed, if the contorniates were struck at the mint, it surely follows⁵ that court officials, well aware of the Emperor Constantius's attitude to paganism, did *not* see them as anti-Christian.

Two further qualifications might be added. Though Orfitus was certainly a pagan (holder of several priesthoods and restorer of a temple of Apollo), the man so memorably characterized by Ammianus is a distinctly unlikely candidate for the brainwave of using Greco-Roman cultural heroes as pagan propaganda. More important still, everything else we know of Orfitus suggests a man conspicuously loyal to Constantius — and a man who profited from his loyalty. The fact that his career was later ruined by the charge of embezzlement of public funds does not suggest a willingness to jeopardize worldly success for his principles.

More surprising than Orfitus's desire to succeed was Constantius's eagerness to gratify that desire. He was sent to Constantius's court as ambassador on behalf of the senate 'at a most delicate moment' during the crisis of Magnentius's rebellion, and beginning in 352 received a series of appointments at court, which he lists down to the last detail in a series of boastful inscriptions: *comes ordinis secundi*, then *comes ordinis primi*, *item comes intra consistorium ordinis primi* and finally *comes ordinis primi iterum intra consistorium*, before obtaining the plum appointment for an ambitious aristocrat, the proconsulate of Africa in late 352 or 353.⁶ After a

1 See my section in the new edition of Alföldi's work, A. and E. Alföldi, *Die Kontorniat-Medaillons II* (Berlin 1990) 63-74; see too now D. G. Wigg, *JRA* 8 (1995) 527-29.

2 *JRS* 35 (1945) 116.

3 Alföldi, *Die Kontorniaten* (Budapest 1943) 12; Wigg (supra n.1) 527.

4 A. Chastagnol, *La préfecture urbaine à Rome sous le Bas-Empire* (Paris 1960) 98, 332.

5 As Mazzarino saw, *Doxa* 4 (1951) 135.

6 For the sources, *PLRE* i (1971) 651-53; A. Chastagnol, *Les fastes de la préfecture de Rome au Bas-Empire* (Paris 1962) 139-47; C. Vogler, *Constance II et l'administration impériale* (Strasbourg 1979) 218; Barnes,