

# VIRGIL'S BIOGRAPHY BETWEEN REDISCOVERY AND REVISION



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*This article examines the Life of Virgil written by Laetus. For the text of the Life, the two manuscript versions of it and the Lives of Virgil written by some of Laetus's pupils (Cinthius of Ceneda, Petrus Marsus, and the anonymous compiler of the Vat. lat. 2739) have been collated. The sources of the Life and Laetus's preferences and objectives, connected with Rome's cultural milieu and with his personal experiences, are examined.*

## 1. The text of the *Vita Pomponiana*

Pomponius Laetus's interest in the biography of Virgil is shown by his *Vita Vergili*, which Dykmans called *Pomponiana*<sup>1</sup> (henceforth: VPomp.). It was copied in two manuscripts: the first is BAV Vat. lat. 3255 (= V), an illuminated codex containing the *Georgics*, the *Appendix Vergiliana* and some poetic compositions of Virgilian colour, with marginal and interlinear annotations.<sup>2</sup> VPomp., attributed to Laetus in the *inscriptio*, is copied (ff. 76v–78r) between the text of the *Priapea* and that of *Anthologia Latina* 672. The second manuscript containing VPomp. is Oxford, Bodleian Library, Canon. Class. lat. 54 (= C), a manuscript that Zabughin<sup>3</sup> believed to have been copied by Laetus himself, but which was probably transcribed by one of his pupils.<sup>4</sup> VPomp. is copied (ff. 177r–178v) without title and attribution between the commentary on the *Georgics* and that on the *Aeneid*.

As has already been pointed out by Dykmans,<sup>5</sup> the version of C shows additions and corrections and is therefore later than the version of V. I offer here a text based on C; the readings of V are recorded in the apparatus:

Iul. Pomponii de Vita P. Vir. Maronis succincta collectio

[1] Publius Virgilius Maro natus Idibus octobris M. Licinio Crasso et Gn. Pompeio Magno consulibus, patre Virgilio rustico matre Magia

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<sup>1</sup> Dykmans 1987, 93–98 published the *editio princeps*. Independently from Dykmans the text of the *Vita* was also published by Gioseffi 1991, 222–28.

<sup>2</sup> See Bianchi 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Zabughin 1918, 136–37.

<sup>4</sup> See Reeve 1976, 234.

<sup>5</sup> Dykmans 1987, 92: but the text provided by him is that of V.

Polla, vico Andico, qui abest a Mantua milibus passuum triginta. Tenui facultate nutritus puer Cremonae degit, in extrema pueritia Mediolani sub Grillo grammatico.

[2] Post Actiacam victoriam agrum amisit: nam volente Augusto veterani Cremonensium et Mantuanorum agros inter se divisere. [3] Romam inde se contulit et sub Marco Epidio rhetore, qui fuerat Augusti praeceptor, multum profecit eiusque industria in amicitiam Asinii Pollionis receptus est. Cuius beneficio et Alfeni Vari et Cornelii Galli, quem unice dilexit, heredium paternum occupatum a Milieno Torone primipilari recuperavit. [4] Deinde per Maecenatem Caesari Augusto cognitus, usus familiaritate Quintilii Tuccae et Sulpitii Vari, puerum amavit Alexandrum, a Pollione donatum, quem Alexim in Bucolicis appellat.

[5] Lydiam puer admodum in agris suis dilexit. [6] Plotiae, formosissimi scorti, domum aliquando adivit. Nec, ut Pedianus Asconius<sup>6</sup> refert, confitente illa, cum ea coivit. [7] Domum habuit in Exquilina regione prope Maecenatis hortos. [8] In Neapolitani sui, ad quod secedebat, hortulo, liberali in otio vixit, secutus Epicuri sententiam. [9] Parentes ipse tumulavit et ex tribus fratribus duos, Silonem pene infantem et Flaccum natum annos XX, quem in Bucolicis sub Daphnidis nomine deflevit.

[10] Bello Cantabrico cum cepisset scribere Aeneida, usque ad sestertium centies ab Augusto honestatus est et in summam gratiam venit, neque apud populum Romanum notitia caruit. Testes sunt Augusti epistolae ad eum scriptae, testis ipse populus, qui auditis in theatro Virgilii versibus, ut Cornelius Tacitus scribit, surrexit universus et forte praesentem spectantemque Virgilium veneratus est, sic quasi Augustum.<sup>7</sup> [11] Quinquagenarius Atticam rursus petiit gratia visendi Asiam. Ubi redeunti principi ex victoria occurrit orientis et aestu solis defatigatus in tertianam duplicem incidit neque voluit pati Megaris curari, quare fastidio navigationis gravius aegrotavit. [12] Decessit Brundusii annum agens quinquagesimum et primum Gn. Pontio Sextio et Q. Lucretio consulibus XI<sup>o</sup> Kal. Octobris, relictis heredibus Augusto et Mecenate et Virgilio Proculo minore fratre. Filium quem ex Galla susceperat, sibi ad omnia dissimilem, exheredavit: nam intemperatae libidinis fuit popinariusque et parum eruditus. [13] Sepultus fuit via Puteolana ad secundum lapidem ex sinistris. [14] In cuius monumento, referente Valerio Probo, tale legebatur epigramma: "Mantua me genuit, Calabri rapuere, tenet nunc / Parthenope, Cecini pascua, poma, duces".<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Asconius Pedianus, frg. 5 Funaioli *ap.* Suetonius-Donatus, *Vita Vergili* 21 (p. 22.5–7 Stok).

<sup>7</sup> Tacitus, *dial.* 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Vita Vergili Probiani* (p. 199. 5–6 Brugnoli).

[15] Statura fuit procera, colore subpallido, natura debili et imbecilla, praeter distillationem ad pectus dolore capitis laborabat, sanguinem frequenter sput, proclivis ad phtisim. Cibi ac vini continentissimus, amoris vero impensissimi usque ad suspitionem, sine avaritia, sine invidia: nam pollicenti Augusto cuiusdam proscripti agrum renuit. Aliorum bene scripta ita probavit, ut anteponeret suis et imitari minime negligeret. [16] Medicinae et magicae operam dedit. Plinius ait: “Cattulli apud nos” et “proxime Virgilio amatoria imitatio”.<sup>9</sup> [17] Scripsit eo stilo ut vetustate semper redoleret, cuius amantissimus erat. Curiosus, diligens, ingeniosus, eminens atque sublimis et prope divinus. [18] De eo sic Domitius Afer interroganti Quintiliano quem Homero crederet maxime accedere, respondit: “secundus est Virgilius, propior tamen primo quam tertio”.<sup>10</sup> [19] Aeneis admirationem omnibus fecit et si ipse in testamento damnavit, Augustus tamen contra testamenti verecundiam cremari vetuit maiusque ita vati testimonium contigit quam si ipse probasset. [20] Virgilio viventis opera primus publice legit Romae Quintus Caecilius Epirota, de quo Marsus poeta monostichon edidit: “Epirota tenellorum nutricula vatum”.<sup>11</sup> Nos ad Caecilio imitationem remotissimi a nostro saeculo Virgilio ingenium inspecturi antiquos imitabimur et incipiemus ab eo opere quod inscribitur Aeneis.

*inscriptio om. C.* [1] ublius C, P. V; octobribus V; et *om. C*; CN V; coss V; pass. mill. XXX V [3] M. V; Alpheni V [4] buccolicis C [5] Plociae V; famosissimi V; aliquando domum V; refert] ait V; eo C [7] prope] post V [8] hortulo ad quem secedebat V; ortulo C; liberali ocio V [9] annis V; quem in Bucolicis sub Daphnidis nomine deflevit *om. V*; buccolicis C; dampnidis C [10] sextertium C; notitia] industria V [11] Acticam V; rursus *om. V*; gratia] causa V; videndi V; orientis occurrit V; et aestu solis defatigatus in tercianam duplicem incidit neque voluit] aestu solis defatigatus in tercianam duplicem incidit et noluit V; quare fastidio navigationis] et dum in italiam navigat V [12] CN V; conss V; calennis C; fratre minore V; sibi] patri V; exeredavit C [13] fuit *om. C*; puttolana C [15] inbeccilla C; dolori V; proclivis ad phtisim *om. V*; temperantissimus V; vero *om. C*; vixit sine avaritia et V; cuiusdam] cuius V; probabat V [17] vetustatem V; et prope divinus *om. V* [18] apher V; respondit secundus est Virgilius, propior] secundum esse Virgilium respondit, propiorem V [20] opera primus publice legit Romae Quintus] publice primus opera legit Q. V; epyrota (bis) V; monasticon C; Nos ... Aeneis *om. V*.

(Iulius Pomponius, brief representation of the life of Virgil Maro.

[1] P. Virgil Maro was born on the Ides of October, during the consulship of M. Licinius Crassus and Gn. Pompeius the Great, in the village of Andes, thirty miles from Mantua; his father was Virgil, a peasant, and his mother Magia Polla. Raised in modest circumstances he spent

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<sup>9</sup> Plinius, *nat.* 28.19.

<sup>10</sup> Quintilianus, *inst.* 10.1.86.

<sup>11</sup> Suetonius, *gramm.* 16.3.

his childhood in Cremona. As a young boy he lived in Milan, studying with the grammarian Grillus.

[2] Virgil lost his farm after the victory of Actium, because Augustus distributed the farms of the Cremonese and the Mantuans among the veterans. [3] He then went to Rome and profited greatly from the teaching of the rhetor Marcus Epidius, who had been Augustus's tutor, and through whom he was received into the circle of Asinius Pollio. Thanks both to him and to Alfenus Varus and Cornelius Gallus, who was especially dear to him, Virgil recovered his father's farm, which had been expropriated by the primipilaris Milienus Toro. [4] He then came to the attention of Augustus, thanks to Maecenas. He was on intimate terms with Quintilius Tucca and Sulpitius Varus, and loved the boy Alexander, given him by Pollio, whom he calls Alexis in the *Bucolics*.

[5] He loved Lydia when he was still a boy, living on his farm. [6] He sometimes visited the home of Plotia, a most beautiful prostitute. But, as she admitted, according to Asconius Pedianus, he did not have sex with her. [7] He owned a house on the Esquiline, close to the gardens of Maecenas. [8] Whenever he withdrew to his garden in Naples, he lived in honorable leisure, following the teachings of Epicurus. [9] He buried his parents and two of his three brothers, Silo, still a boy, and Flaccus, at the age of twenty, whom he mourned in the *Bucolics* under the name of Daphnis.

[10] When he began to write the *Aeneid* at the time of the war in Cantabria, he was rewarded by Augustus with as much as hundred sesterces and exceptional favour, and he did not go uncelebrated by the citizens of Rome. We know this from Augustus's letters to him, and from the behaviour of the citizens themselves, for on hearing Virgil's verses in the theatre, as Cornelius Tacitus writes, they all rose and paid homage to the poet, who happened to be present at the play, almost as if he were Augustus himself. [11] At the age of fifty he went to Attica again, with the intention of visiting Asia. There he met the *princeps*, who was returning victoriously from the East, and weakened by the heat of the sun became ill with tertian malaria. He did not want to be treated in Megara and therefore grew worse because of the unpleasant sea voyage. [12] He passed away in Brindisi at the age of fifty-one, eleven days before the calends of October, during the consulship of Gn. Pontius Sextius and Q. Lucretius. He appointed as heirs Augustus, Maecenas, and his younger brother Virgil Proculus, and disinherited the son he had had from Galla, who was different from him in every respect: he was a poorly educated innkeeper of immoderate sexuality. [13] He was buried on the road to Pozzuoli, two miles from the town, on the left. [14] On the tomb, as Valerius Probus relates, there was this

epigram: “Mantua gave birth to me, the Calabrians snatched me away, Parthenope now holds me; I sang of pastures, orchards, and leaders”. [15] He was tall, pale of complexion, of weak and delicate constitution: as well as from phlegm in the chest he suffered from headaches. He often coughed up blood, and was prone to phthisis. He was very temperate with regard to wine and food, but his libido was suspiciously strong. He was neither mean nor envious: in fact when Augustus offered him the farm of an exile, he refused it. He so valued the well-written works of others that he put them before his own and eagerly imitated them. [16] He was interested in medicine and magic. Pliny said: “Catullus and quite recently Virgil, among us, have represented love charms in their poetry”. [17] He wrote in a style that exuded the antiquity he loved very much. He was curious, diligent, ingenious, distinguished, sublime, and almost divine. [18] Asked by Quintilian who came closest to Homer, Domitius Afer replied: “Virgil is second, but nearer to the first than to the third”. [19] The *Aeneid* was admired by all and, even though Virgil rejected it in his will. Augustus overrode his modesty and forbade its burning and thus paid the bard a greater tribute than if he himself had approved of the work. [20] Quintus Caecilius Epirota first gave a public reading of Virgil when the latter was still alive. Of him the poet Marsus wrote this verse: “Epirota, the dear nurse of delicate little bards”. Imitating Caecilius, so far from our time, we will look at Virgil’s genius, imitate the ancients and begin with the work entitled *Aeneid*.

**C** differs from **V** in adding:

[9] the identification of Flaccus with Daphnis: *quem in Bucolici sub nomine Daphnidis deflevit* (from Donatus); [11] *rursus* referring to Virgil’s departure for Greece. The version of **C** presupposes that Virgil had already travelled in Greece. In his commentary to the *Ciris Laetus* states that Virgil, before writing this work, was studying philosophy in Athens. That Virgil studied in Athens is declared by several medieval Lives, which drew this information from Horace, *Odes* 1.3.5–6;<sup>12</sup> [15] to the information on Virgil’s health that he was *proclivis ad phthisim*; [17] to the qualities of Virgil that he was also *prope divinus*; [20] that Caecilius Epirota worked in Rome; the final statement *Nos ... Aeneis* (in **C** VPomp. is copied before the commentary to the *Aeneid*)

In some cases **C** changes single words of **V**:

[5] *formosissimi* (*famosissimi* **V**); [11] *gratia visendi* (*causa videndi* **V**); [12] *sibi* (*patri* **V**); [15] *continentissimus* (*temperantissimus* **V**).

In other cases the changes of **C** concern several words or the syntactic structure:

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<sup>12</sup> See Brugnoli 1987.

[8] *Neapolitani sui ad quod secedebat ortulo liberali in otio* (*Neapolitani hortulo, ad quem secedebat, liberali otio V*); [11] *neque voluit pati Megaris curari, quare fastidio navigationis (et noluit pati Megaris curari et dum in Italiam navigat V)*; [12] *fratre minore* (*minore fratre V Vita Probiana*); [18] *respondit: secundus est Virgilius, proprior* (*secundum esse Virgilium respondit propriorem V*).

In addition to the above-mentioned manuscripts, VPomp. is partly copied in the Lives of Virgil compiled by some of Laetus's pupils:

1) the *Vita Virgili* of Cinthius of Ceneda (Piero Leoni), copied before his commentary on the *Aeneid* in Ms. Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, R 13 sup., ff. 1r–2r (a. 1478), published by Mai<sup>13</sup> and Dozio<sup>14</sup> (a more reliable transcription of the *Vita* is provided by Gioseffi<sup>15</sup>).

2) Petrus Marsus inserted large extracts of VPomp. in the inaugural lecture he held in Bologna around 1480 (copied in Ms. München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, lat. 414, ff. 111v–115r).<sup>16</sup>

3) a *Vita Vergili* based on VPomp. is copied twice in BAV Vat. lat. 2739 (ff. 1r–2r and 159r–160r.), which contains a commentary on Virgil.<sup>17</sup>

Marsus and the anonymous compiler of the Vat. lat. 2739 used the version of C, of which they reproduce the additions (and also some errors, such as *monasticon* in § 20). In some instances Cinthius seems to render the version of V (§ 6 *famosissimi; ait*; § 11 *petiit*; § 15 *probabat*; § 17 *vetustatem*); in other cases, and mainly in the second part of the Life, he reproduces the version of C (§ 8 *Neapolitani ... otio*; § 11 *neque ... navigationis*; § 15 *continentissimus*; § 20 *opera ... Romae*). Cinthius attended the school of Laetus at the beginning of the 1470s (in 1477 he was in Spilimbergo, in Friuli, and he wrote his commentary before 1478, the date of the manuscript of the Ambrosiana).<sup>18</sup> His *Vita Vergili* suggests the existence of a version of VPomp. intermediate between V and C, in which only part of the innovations in C were introduced. The version of C is however datable to the end of the 1470s: it was used, as we have seen, by Marsus around 1480.

## 2. The sources of the *Vita Pomponiana*

The main source of VPomp. is the so-called *Vita Probiana*, the Life of Virgil transmitted together with the commentary on the *Bucolics* and the *Georgics* attributed to Probus.<sup>19</sup> This commentary was first published in

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<sup>13</sup> Mai 1835, 321–94.

<sup>14</sup> Dozio 1845.

<sup>15</sup> Gioseffi 1991, 222–27.

<sup>16</sup> See Dykmans 1987, 100–04.

<sup>17</sup> See Dykmans 1987, 108–11.

<sup>18</sup> See Casarsa 2006.

<sup>19</sup> On the *Vita Probiana* see Deufert 2009.

Venice in 1507 by Johannes Baptista Egnatius who in his preface writes that he used a very old manuscript (*vetustissimus codex*) found in Bobbio by Giorgio Merula. Actually, in 1493 Merula had discovered several old manuscripts in the monastery of Saint Colomban.<sup>20</sup> But Laetus already knew this work around 1470: the *Vita Probiana* was first published by Sweynheim and Pannartz in their edition of Virgil printed in Rome in 1471.<sup>21</sup> In the preface of this edition Giovanni Andrea Bussi writes that he used a very old copy (*antiquissimum exemplar*) of Virgil that he knew thanks to Laetus: it was the manuscript known as *Mediceus* (today Plut. 39.1 of the Biblioteca Laurenziana in Florence), probably brought from Bobbio to Rome by Abbot Gregory of Crema, and then in 1467 transferred to the Basilica of Saint Paul's-Outside-the-Walls in Rome<sup>22</sup> (in 1461 the manuscript was still in Bobbio; it is registered in the catalogue of the library compiled in that year). Considering this event, it seems very probable that Laetus told Bussi not only about the *Mediceus* but also about the *Vita Probiana* published in the same edition. Gregory of Crema had therefore probably given him not only the *Mediceus*, but also a copy of Probus's commentary (in these years Laetus frequently used it in his own commentaries<sup>23</sup>). This commentary was moreover copied in Rome in the last decades of the fifteenth century.<sup>24</sup> It remains uncertain if the volume brought to Rome by Gregory was the manuscript subsequently used by Egnatius or a copy of it.

The name of Valerius Probus is mentioned by Laetus in VPomp. 14, with reference to Virgil's epitaph, for which the *Vita Probiana* gives a version that differs slightly from the traditional one, replacing *rura* with *poma* in the second line of the distich. As we saw, Laetus actually attributed the Life and the Commentary to Valerius Probus, a grammarian of the early imperial age (c. AD 35–100)<sup>25</sup> and therefore considered these texts much older than the homologous texts hitherto available in the fifteenth century, that is the *Vita Vergilii* by Aelius Donatus (fourth century) and the Virgil commentary written by Servius (late fourth-early fifth century). And because he believed it to be the oldest, Laetus reproduced almost the entire *Vita Probiana* in his VPomp. (the text reproduced is that published by Bussi in 1471; the bolded lines are in VPomp.):

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<sup>20</sup> See Ferrari 1979.

<sup>21</sup> On this edition see Venier 2001, 27–29.

<sup>22</sup> See Mercati 1937, 525–26 (and Buonocore 2012).

<sup>23</sup> See Zabughin 1910–1912, 30 (Lucanus), 38 (Statius), 71 (Virgil).

<sup>24</sup> See Wheelock 1935; Gioseffi 1991, 41–134.

<sup>25</sup> Angelo Poliziano expressed some doubts regarding Probus's authorship; later it was questioned by Stephanus (see Gioseffi 1991, 279).

[1] **P. Vergilius Maro natus Idibus octobr. Crasso et Pompeio cons. matre Magia Polla, patre Vergilio rustico vico Andico, qui abest a Mantua milia passuum XXX, tenui facultate nutritus** (V. Pomp. 1). [2] Sed cum iam summis eloquentiae doctoribus vacaret, in belli civilis tempora incidit, quod Augustus adversus Antonium gessit. Primumque bellum veteranis post Mutinense<sup>26</sup> **postea restitutus beneficio Alpheni Vari, Asinii Pollionis et Cornelii Galli quibus in Bucolicis adulatur, deinde per gratiam Maecenatis in amicitiam Caesari ductus est** (VPomp. 3–4). [3] **Vixit pluribus annis liberali in otio secutus Epicuri sectam, insigni concordia et familiaritate usus Quintilii, Tuccae et Vari.** (VPomp. 8 e 4) [4] Scripsit Bucolica annos natus octo et XX, Theocritum secutus; Georgica Hesiodum et Varonem. [5] **Aeneida ingressus bello Cantabrico – hoc quoque ingenti industria – ab Augusto usque ad sestertium centies honestatus est** (VPomp. 10) [6] **Decessit in Calabria annum agens quinquagesimum et primum heredibus Augusto et Maecenate cum Proculo minore fratre** (VPomp. 12) [7] **Cuius sepulcro, quod est in via Puteolana, hoc legitur epigramma: “Mantua me genuit, Calabri rapuere, tenent nunc / Parthenope: cecini pascua poma duces”** (VPomp. 14) [8] **Aeneis servata ab Augusto, quamvis ipse testamento damnat** (VPomp. 19) ne quid eorum, quae non edidisset, extaret, quod Servius Varus hoc testatur epigramma: “Iusserat haec rapidis aboleri carmina flammis / Vergilius, Phrygium quae cecinere ducem. / Tucca vetat Variusque simul, tu, maxime Caesar, / non sinis et Latiae consulis historiae”.

([1] P. Virgil Maro was born on the Ides of October during the consulship of Crasus and Pompeius, son of Magia Polla and the farmer Virgil, in the village Andes, which was thirty miles from Mantua. He was raised in modest circumstances. [2] But when he was already studying with the most prominent teachers of eloquence, the civil war, which Augustus waged against Antonius, impinged on his life. At first <after losing his father's farm > to the veterans after the first war of Modena and afterwards having recovered it through the kindness of Alfenus Varus, Asinius Pollio, and Cornelius Gallus, whom he praises in the *Bucolics*, he was then, by the favour of Maecenas, brought into the circle of Caesar's friends. [3] He lived many years in in honourable leisure, following the Epicurean creed, enjoying the remarkable friendship and intimacy of Quintilius, Tucca, and Varius. [4] He wrote the *Bucolics* when he was twenty-eight years old, and followed Theocritus. He wrote the *Georgics* in the manner of Hesiod and Varro. [5] Having begun the *Aeneid* during the war with the Cantabrians – and this also with great enterprise – he was honored by Augustus to

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<sup>26</sup> *Primumque post Mutinense bellum veteranis <agros cedere coactus> Brugnoli.*



the extent of ten million sesterces. [6] He died in Calabria in his fifty-first year; Augustus and Maecenas were his heirs, with Proculus, his younger brother. [7] This epigram is to be read on his tomb, which is along the road to Pozzuoli: “Mantua gave birth to me, the Calabrians snatched me away, Parthenope now holds me; I sang of pastures, orchards, and leaders”. [8] The *Aeneid* was saved by Augustus, although Virgil himself had stipulated in his will that nothing that he had not published should survive. Servius Varus also attests to this in the following epigram: “Virgil had ordered that those songs, which sang of the Phrygian leader, be destroyed in flames. Tucca and Varius both forbid it; you, greatest Caesar, do not allow it and you take heed of Latium’s history”.<sup>27</sup>)

In comparison with the Life of Donatus, the *Vita Probiana* gives the following original information on Virgil’s life: a) the name of Virgil’s mother, Magia Polla (it seems to have combined the name of Magia given by Servius with that of Polla in the *Vita Vergili* by the grammarian Phocas<sup>28</sup>); b) Virgil’s Epicureanism, omitted by Donatus but noticed by Servius in his Commentary<sup>29</sup> and confirmed by the papyrus of Herculaneum Paris 2<sup>30</sup>; c) the distance of Andes from Mantua, given generically by Donatus (*non procul*) and Hieronymus (*haut procul*). But the number of miles given by “Probus” is uncertain: in the manuscripts we read XXX, in the edition of Egnatius III (only the latter number is compatible with the medieval identification of Andes with Pietole).<sup>31</sup>

All this information is used by Laetus, who omits only a few parts of the *Vita Probiana*. Virgil’s age when he composed the *Bucolics* (§ 4) is omitted in VPomp., but included by Laetus in his Commentary<sup>32</sup>. The epigram by “Servius Varus” (§ 10) was probably considered doubtful by Laetus because a larger version of it, provided by Donatus, is attributed to Sulpicius Carthaginiensis.<sup>33</sup> The part of the *Vita Probiana* concerning civil wars and the confiscation of Virgil’s farm (§ 2) is omitted by Laetus because the text of this part is corrupt and quite unreadable (as in the reproduced edition of Bussi;

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<sup>27</sup> Translation by Danielle Joyner and Jan M. Ziolkowski, in Ziolkowski & Putnam 2007, 226–27; I have used their translation with a few modifications.

<sup>28</sup> That “Probus” used the Life of Phocas was shown by Brugnoli 1964; see also Stok 1996.

<sup>29</sup> See *ad ecl.* 6, 13 (a reference to Siron also in *ad Aen.* 6, 264).

<sup>30</sup> See Gigante 2004, 84–87 (the most recent edition of the papyrus is that provided by Delattre 2004).

<sup>31</sup> See Lehnus 1982, 196–201.

<sup>32</sup> Laetus’s commentary on the *Bucolics* is transmitted by C and by the edition published by Daniele Caetani around 1490 (see Abbamonte & Stok 2008, 139–44). I reproduce henceforth the text of Caetani’s edition.

<sup>33</sup> See Stok 2007–08.

modern editors correct it in various ways). Laetus replaced this part with the corresponding account provided by the preface of the Ps.-Probus Commentary:

quem [*scil.* Antonium] persecuturus Augustus exercitus in Orientem ducebat eumque superavit apud Actiacum Apollinem. Italiae ergo civitatibus diversas partes sequentibus Cremonenses et Mantuani neutri sunt auxiliati: sed hoc Augustus indignatus veteranis, quorum operam in bello habuerat, agros Cremonensium dividi iussit et, si non suffecissent, Mantuanos adiungi (p. 327, 28–33 Hagen).

(Augustus, about to pursue Antonius, led his armies to the East and overcame him near the temple of Apollo in Actium. While the Italian towns supported the one or the other part, the citizens of Cremona and Mantua did not help either one. Augustus, who was indignant, ordered that the veterans who had supported him in the war should be given the farms of the inhabitants of Cremona and, if they were not sufficient, also those of Mantua.)

From Probus's preface Laetus also derived the name of the veteran who took possession of Virgil's farm (VProb. 3): "concitaverat in se veteranos adeo, ut a Milieno Torone primipilari paene sit interfectus, nisi fugisset" (p. 328, 3–5 Hagen; he provoked the veterans and would have been killed by the primipilaris Milienus Toro if he had not escaped).

In addition to the *Vita Probiana* Laetus also uses two other Lives of Virgil, that of Donatus and the so-called *Vita Bernensis*. The use of the latter was probably suggested to Laetus by the reference in the *Vita Probiana* to some eminent masters of eloquence (*summi eloquentiae doctores*) with whom Virgil had studied before losing his father's farm. The only other ancient Life which refers to Virgil's oratorical studies is in fact the *Vita Bernensis*, according to which Virgil attended the Roman school of the rhetor Epidius together with the Emperor Augustus: "ut primum se contulit Romae studuit apud Epidium oratorem cum Augusto" (as soon as he betook himself to Rome, he studied under the orator Epidius with Augustus). That Augustus attended this school is also recounted by Suetonius *gramm.* 28 (probably the source of the *Vita Bernensis*), who however does not refer to Virgil: "M. Epidius [...] ludum dicendi aperuit docuitque M. Antonium et Augustum" (M. Epidius [...] opened a school of oratory and taught M. Antonius and Augustus). It is noteworthy that Laetus knew not only the *Vita Bernensis*, but also the work of Suetonius, because VPomp. 3 gives the first name of Epidius, omitted by the *Vita Bernensis*. Laetus furthermore does not present Octavian and Virgil as fellow students, like the *Vita Bernensis*, but makes a chronological mistake, attributing to Octavian an older age (*fuerat*); Augustus was actually seven years younger than Virgil.

Regarding Donatus, Laetus decidedly used the so-called *Donatus auctus*, that is the enlarged version compiled in the fifteenth century (in the milieu of Guarinus of Verona, as I have argued elsewhere<sup>34</sup>). But he knew not only this widespread version, but also the original version of the Donatian Life of Virgil, which had circulated, to a certain extent, in the first half of the fifteenth century. VPomp. 6 presupposes in fact the original Donatian Life<sup>35</sup>:

Vulgatum est consuesse eum et cum Plotia Hieria, sed Asconius Pedianus (= frg. 5 Funaioli) affirmat ipsam postea maiorem natu narrare solitam invitatum quidem a Vario ad communionem sui, verum pertinacissime recusasse

(it was commonly said that he also frequented Plotia Hieria. But Asconius Pedianus maintains that she herself in her maturity was accustomed to tell the story that Virgil had indeed been invited by Varius to share her but that he had obstinately refused).

In *Donatus auctus* 21, instead, it is Virgil himself who testifies to his own chastity, not the woman:

Asconius Pedianus affirmat ipsum postea maioribus natu narrare solitum invitatum quidem a Varo ad communionem mulieris, sed pertinacissime abstinuisse – where the replacement of ipsam with ipsum changes the identity of the witness heard by Asconius

(Asconius Padianus maintains that Virgil himself used to relate afterward to his elders that he had indeed been invited by Varus to share her but that he had obstinately refused).

Laetus also omits another piece of information given in *Donatus Auctus*, that Plotia was the wife of Varius Rufus, and instead presents the woman as a prostitute (*scortum*).

The story is also told by Laetus in his commentary on the *Bucolics* (on 2.14), where we read that Plotia appears in this work under the name of Amaryllis: “Amarillia fuisse volunt Plotiam Hieriam, cum qua vulgatum fuit poetam coisse. Sed Pedianus Asconius scribit illam affirmasse iuramento invitatum Virgilium ab Alphenio Varo ad talem libidinem pertinacissime recusasse” (Amarillia was Plotia Hieria, with whom it is circulated that the poet had a sexual relation. But Asconius Pedianus writes that she asserted upon oath that Virgil had been invited to this lust by Alphenius Varus, but that he had obstinately refused). In contrast to VPomp., where Laetus does not mention the name of Varius and presents Virgil as a brothel-goer, in the

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<sup>34</sup> See Stok *forthcoming*.

<sup>35</sup> Here and further on, I reproduce the Latin text of the Donatian Life and *Donatus auctus* by Brugnoli & Stok 1997 and the English translation by Ziolkowski & Putnam 2007.

commentary he mentions Varius as a partner of sexual adventures but identifies him not as Varius Rufus, but as Alfenus Varus, the dedicatee of *ecl.* 6. It is worth noticing that whereas in the version of V Plotia is a *famosissimum scortum* (very famous prostitute), in that of C she becomes *formosissimum* (very lovely), an appraisal perhaps more fitting to her profession.

Laetus also uses the interpolations of the *Donatus auctus* in some other cases. VPomp. 3, *quem* [scil. *Cornelium Gallum*] *unice dilexit*, echoes *Donatus auctus* 38, *miro amore dilexit* (whom he prized with a remarkable love).<sup>36</sup> VPomp. 15 “*Aliorum bene scripta ita probavit, ut anteponeret suis et imitari minime negligeret*”, summarizes *Donatus auctus* 65: “*refert etiam Asconius Pedianus benignum cultoremque omnium bonorum atque eruditorum fuisse et usque adeo invidiae expertem, ut, si quid erudite dictum inspiceret alterius, non minus gaudere ac suum fuisset*” (Pedianus also reports that he was kindly and devoted to all good and learned men, and that he was so free of envy that, if he beheld a well-educated phrase from another, he was no less happy that if had written it himself).<sup>37</sup>

In the other cases VPomp. uses topics in which *Donatus auctus* does not differ from the Donatian Life (I shall therefore simply speak of “Donatus”). VPomp. 1 integrates the *Vita Probiana* with Donatus 1, using the latter for the first names of the consuls and for Virgil’s studies in Cremona and Milan. VPomp. 4 takes the story of Alexander / Alexis from Donatus 9: “*maxime dilexit Cebetem et Alexandrum, quem secunda Bucolicorum ecloga Alexim appellat, donatum sibi ab Asinio Pollione*” (he loved Cebes and Alexander exceedingly. The latter, whom he calls Alexis in the second eclogue, was a gift to him from Asinius Pollio). The source of VPomp. 7 is Donatus 13: “*habuitque domum Romae in Esquilis iuxta hortos Maecenatianos*” (he owned a house in Rome on the Esquiline, next to the gardens of Maecenas). VPomp. 8 echoes Donatus 13: “*quamquam secessu Campaniae Siciliaeque plurimum uteretur*” (although he most often used a retreat in Campania and Sicily), but connects this source with the Epicurean persuasion of the poet, ignored by Donatus. In speaking of *hortulus*, Laetus was perhaps thinking of Ps.-Virgil *catalepton* 8, where the *villula* of Siron inherited by Virgil included a small field (*pauper agellus*): in his commentary on *Bucolics* 6.14, referring to Siron, Laetus says that the Epicureans lived in rustic simplicity and were satisfied with a small garden (*Epicurei hortulo*

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<sup>36</sup> Regarding C. Asinius Gallus, the son of Asinius Pollio (mentioned by Hieronymus, *chron. ad Ol.* 196.2), wrongly identified by the compiler of *Donatus auctus* with the author of the *Amores*, that is Cornelius Gallus.

<sup>37</sup> That the compiler of *Donatus auctus* knew an authentic work of Asconius Pedianus seems very doubtful; it is more probable that this is a case of forgery, as frequently happened in Humanistic culture.

*contenti vixerunt rusticana simplicitate*). VPomp. 9 echoes Donatus 14: “parentes iam grandis amisit, ex quibus patrem captum oculis et duos fratres germanos, Silonem impuberem, Flaccum iam adultum, cuius exitum sub nomine Daphnidis deflet” (Virgil lost his family when he was grown up, among them his father, who had lost his eyesight, and two full brothers: Silo, who was a boy, and Flaccus, an adult, whose passing he lamented under the name Daphnis). Laetus paraphrases *ipse tumulavit* (the expression does not necessarily refer to a funeral, to which there are no references in the sources), interprets *iam adultum* by assigning to Flaccus the age of 20, and adds to the two brothers mentioned by Donatus the third younger step-brother Valerius Proculus, mentioned by Donatus 37 as heir in Virgil’s will (see below). VPomp. 12 on Virgil’s death and will uses the *Vita Probiana* but has the names of the consuls from Donatus 37 (36: *Cn. Sentio Q. Lucretio cons.*): the name of Pontius Sextius seems to mirror variant readings found in manuscripts of *Donatus auctus*, where the original *Sentio* is corrupted in some manuscripts to *Sextio* or *Sestio*, in others to *Pontio*.<sup>38</sup> The location of Virgil’s tomb (VPomp. 13) is drawn from Donatus 36: “via Puteolana intra lapidem secundum” (on the road to Pozzuoli less than two miles out of the city). The portrait of Virgil (VPomp. 15) from Donatus 8–9:

corpore et statura fuit grandi, aquilo (*aquilino* Don. auct.) colore, facie rusticana, valetudine varia: nam plerumque a stomacho et a faucibus laborabat, sanguinem etiam saepe (*saepius* Don. auct.) reiecit. Cibi vinique minimi, libidinis in pueros pronioris.

(he was large in person and stature, with a swarthy complexion, the face of a peasant. His health was variable, for he often had stomach aches and pains in the throat, and he often spat up blood. He was most frugal with regard to food and wine, but given to erotic pleasures with boys).

Laetus omits in VPomp. the Donatian reference to Virgil’s pederasty, but mentions it in the *Commentary* to the *Bucolics*; the more generic *amoris impensissimi* echoes the expression *impenso amore* used by Virgil *Aen.* 4, 54 with regard to Dido (from *Lucr.* 5, 964; see also the *impensa libido* of Cicero *Sest.* 130). The source of VPomp. 15 is Donatus 12: “bona autem cuiusdam exsulantis offerente Augusto non sustinuit accipere” (when Augustus offered him the property of a certain exile, Virgil could not bear to accept it). VPomp. 16 echoes Donatus 15, “inter cetera studia medicinae quoque ac maxime mathematicae operam dedit” (among other studies, he devoted himself to medicine and especially to mathematics), but replaces mathematics with magic, introducing the following reference to Pliny the

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<sup>38</sup> See Brugnoli & Stok 1997, 100.

Elder, *nat.* 28.19: “hinc Theocriti apud Graecos, Catulli apud nos proximeque Vergili incantamentorum amatoria imitatio” (so Theocritus among the Greeks, Catullus and quite recently Vergil among ourselves, have represented love charms in their poems).<sup>39</sup>

As we have already seen, Laetus uses in VPomp. 3 the *De grammaticis* by Suetonius. This work had been rediscovered together with the minor works of Tacitus thanks to manuscripts of Hersfeld brought to Italy by Enoch of Ascoli, probably in the autumn of 1455.<sup>40</sup> Laetus uses Suetonius’s work also in VPomp. 20, on Caecilius Epirota and the epigram of Domitius Marsus (*gramm.* 16.3): “primusque Vergilium et alios poetas novos praelegere coepisse [scil. *Q. Caecilius Epirota*], quod etiam Domitii Marsi versiculis indicatur: Epirota tenellorum nutricula vatum” (and the first to begin lecturing on Virgil and other modern poets; the latter point is also suggested by Domitius Marsus’ line, Epirota: the dear nurse of delicate little bards [transl. by R. A. Kaster]). That Virgil was still alive (*Virgili viventis*) when Caecilius started lecturing on his work (obviously, the *Bucolics* and *Georgics*) in his own school was probably suggested to Laetus by Suetonius’s reference to the death of his patron Cornelius Gallus, after which Caecilius had opened his school.

Together with the *De grammaticis* the lost *Hersfeldensis* also contained the *Dialogus de oratoribus* by Tacitus. This work is used by Laetus in VPomp. 10:

malo securum et quietum Vergilii secessum, in quo tamen neque apud divum Augustum gratia caruit neque apud populum Romanum notitia. Testes Augusti epistulae, testis ipse populus, qui auditis in theatro Vergili versibus surrexit universus et forte praesentem spectantemque Vergilium veneratus est sic quasi Augustum (*dial.* 13).

(for my part I would rather have the seclusion in which Virgil lived, tranquil and serene, without forfeiting either the favour of the sainted Augustus, or popularity with the citizens of Rome. This is vouched for by the letters of Augustus, and by the behaviour of the citizens themselves; for on hearing a quotation from Virgil in the course of a theatrical performance, they rose to their feet as a man, and did homage to the poet, who happened to be present at the play, just as they would have done to the Emperor himself [transl. by W. Peterson]).

Pliny’s *Naturalis historia* is used by Laetus not only in the above-mentioned VPomp. 16, but also in VPomp. 19, to expand information from Ps.-Probus

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<sup>39</sup> Laetus mentions this passage of Pliny also in his commentary to *ecl.* 8.96: “apud Latinos duo fuerunt magici, Virgilius et Catullus, ut ait Plinius”.

<sup>40</sup> Kaster 1992, 1–2.

on Virgil's testamentary disposition concerning the burning of the *Aeneid*: "Divus Augustus carmina Vergilii cremari contra testamenti eius verecundiam vetuit, maiusque ita vati testimonium contigit quam si ipse sua probavisset" (*nat.* 7.114; the divine Augustus overrode the modesty of Virgil's will and forbade the burning of his poem, and thus the bard received a greater tribute than if he had commended his own works himself [transl. by H. Rackham]). It is noteworthy that Pliny and Ps.-Probus (and Macrobius *Sat.* 1.124.6) agree that Virgil ordered the burning of the *Aeneid* in his will; Donatus and the other sources relate that Virgil expressed his will orally, before his death.

VPomp. 17 echoes Quintilian, *inst.* 1.7.18 "Vergilius amantissimus vetustatis" (the antiquarian enthusiasm of Virgil). For Virgil's *curiositas* Laetus probably relies on Servius *ad Aen.* 1.44: "Italiae curiosissimum fuisse Vergilium" (Virgil cared intensely about Italy). The addition of C, *prope divinus*, was perhaps suggested by Macrobius, *Sat.* 5.1.18: "non mortali sed divino ingenio praevidissee" (with a prescience born of a disposition divine rather than mortal). Quintilian is also used in VPomp. 18: "utar enim verbis quae ex Afro Domitio iuvenis excepi: qui mihi interroganti quem Homero crederet maxime accedere, secundus, inquit, est Vergilius, propior tamen primo quam tertio" (let me quote the words I heard from Domitius Afer when I was a young man. I had asked who he thought came nearest to Homer; "Virgil is the second", he replied, "but nearer to the first than to the third," *inst.* 10.1.86).

Finally, another source used by Laetus is the grammarian Priscian, whose reference to Grillius: "Grillius ad Virgilium de accentibus scribens" (Grillius to Virgil on accents," *gramm.* 1.47), suggested to Laetus that he could have been a teacher of Virgil. But Priscian's Virgil is not the poet, because Grillius is a commentator of Cicero who lived in late antiquity. That "Grillius" taught in Milan was suggested by Donatus's information that Virgil studied in this city before going to Rome.

### 3. Laetus's innovations?

Some information provided by Laetus in VPomp. is not confirmed by known sources. In some cases Laetus may have taken suggestions from his sources and then arrived at his own conclusions. That Grillus was a teacher of Virgil (VPomp. 1) was probably suggested, as we have seen, by Priscian. The name of Galla, from whom Virgil had a degenerate son (VPomp. 12), was suggested perhaps by the *Epigrams* of Martial, where Galla is the name of a prostitute (e.g. 2.25; 3.51). It seems more difficult to understand why, for Laetus, Asinius Pollio was presented to Virgil by Epidius (VPomp. 3).

The name of a woman loved by Virgil in Mantua, Lydia (VPomp. 5), was certainly suggested by the *Dirae*, the work of the *Appendix Vergiliana* which is united in the manuscript tradition with the part published later as *Lydia*. In the commentary to the *Dirae* Laetus says that Virgil gave Lydia the name of the sister of Bianor, the founder of Mantua: another piece of information of unknown origin. In the commentary to the *Bucolics*, Lydia is identified with Galatea, a character of the first eclogue. That Galatea was a woman loved by Virgil is also stated by some medieval commentaries, e.g. by the one attributed to Philargyrius where we read that “Virgil had two women, Amaryllis and Galatea, the former from Rome, the latter from Gallia or another country in which he lived” (*ad ecl.* 1, 64, p. 60 Hagen), but this work was supposedly unknown to Laetus.

That Virgil suffered from phtysis (VPomp. 15) seems to be deduced from the symptoms described by Donatus (pain in the throat and hemoptysis). Another surprising diagnosis given by Laetus is that of the disease that caused the death of Virgil, a malaria fever (VPomp. 11).

#### 4. A Virgil without a Prince

The overall outline of VPomp. is roughly that of Suetonius, characterized by “biographical” chapters on the poet, his personality and his work. This is not surprising if we consider that Laetus uses not only the *Vita probiana* but also, as we have seen, that of Donatus, largely based on the lost biography of Suetonius.

In contrast to the Donatian Life, Laetus does not speak of Virgil’s works: in fact he does not mention the works of the *Appendix* (despite having written a commentary on them<sup>41</sup>) and he does not seem interested in the composition of the *Bucolics* and the *Georgics*. Only with regard to the *Aeneid* does he recall briefly that the poem was unfinished and that Virgil wanted to burn it. It is probable that Laetus intended to expound these topics in the commentary and deal with the life in the poet’s biography.

In order to see more accurately the objectives and peculiarities of VPomp. it is useful to compare it with the best known and most widespread of Virgil’s biographies in the Renaissance, that is, the already mentioned *Donatus auctus*<sup>42</sup>.

An important difference between VPomp. and the *Donatus auctus* regards the role of Virgil in the court of Augustus. Laetus omits the several

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<sup>41</sup> Laetus commented “Culex, Dirae, Copa, De est et non, De institutione viri boni, De rosis, Moretum, Elegiae in Maecenatem, Ciris”. Only of the *De est et non* he affirms that “these lines are not by Virgil” (*non sunt Virgilii hi versus*).

<sup>42</sup> From the time of the *editio princeps* of 1471 (in the Venice edition of the Commentary of Servius) the *Donatus auctus* was regularly printed in the editions of Virgil.



episodes in which Virgil is depicted as the Prince's confidant and adviser (he only mentions the information in the *Vita Probiana* about the money given to Virgil by Augustus). Laetus emphasizes instead Tacitus's episode about Virgil being applauded as if he were a prince by the Roman people: an episode that suggests an image of Virgil as an "independent" poet, different from the medieval and Renaissance tradition in which the prince is the only interlocutor of Virgil. It is not surprising that this image of Virgil was born not in a Renaissance court (like the *Donatus auctus*), but in the peculiar milieu of Papal Rome.

Another difference between VPomp. and the *Donatus auctus* regards Virgil's philosophical conviction. For Laetus, as we have seen, Virgil was Epicurean and VPomp. 8 connects this position with the poet's preference for a quiet life. According to *Donatus auctus*, Virgil was not an Epicurean but a Platonist: "audivit a Silone (sic) praecepta Epicuri, cuius doctrina socium habuit Varum, et quamvis diversorum philosophorum opiniones libris suis inseruisset, de animo maxime uideatur ipse Academicus: nam Platonis sententias omnibus aliis praetulit" (from Silo he heard the precepts of Epicurus, in whose doctrine he had a companion in Varus. And although he inserted into his books the opinions of different philosophers, on questions about the soul he most seems to be an Academic; for he preferred the opinions of Plato to that of all others).

A further difference between VPomp. and *Donatus auctus* (and the whole medieval tradition regarding the life of Virgil) is Laetus's interest in Virgil's sexual life. Donatus's embarrassing reference to Virgil's pederasty (*libido pronior in pueros*) had been censored as early as late antiquity: Servius omits the reference to boys (*pueri*) and presents Virgil's sexual impulse as a disease: "omni vita probatus uno tantum morbo laborabat, nam impatiens libidinis fuit" (excellent in all his life, he suffered from only one disease, namely, that he was not able to control his lust). The *Donatus auctus* considers Virgil's pederasty as gossip and interprets the *libido* in a Platonic sense desexualizing it: "fama fuit libidinis pronioris in pueros fuisse, sed boni ita eum pueros amare putaverunt, ut Socrates Alcibiadem et Plato τὰ παιδικά" (rumor had it that he had a strong sexual desire towards boys. But men of the good sort think he loved boys the way Socrates loved Alcibiades and Plato his favorites). Laetus omits the reference, in VPomp., to homosexuality, but presents Virgil as a man of surprising sexual activity (*amoris impensissimi usque ad suspicionem*) and confirms this portrait with the sexual relationships he attributes to the poet: with Lydia, Plotia, and Galla, and also with his competence in love potions. Regarding the affair with Plotia, Laetus accepts Plotia's exculpatory testimony related by Asconius Pedianus, but presents the woman as *scortum*, that is a prostitute (in the exegetical tra-

dition she is a friend or wife of Varius Rufus), and Virgil, as a visitor to his home, not behaving in a completely upright way. Moreover, the mysterious Galla does not seem to have been a gentlewoman, as we have seen, and is also the mother of a lustful son (*intemperans libidinis*).

Virgil's pederastic homosexuality is not censored by Laetus in his commentary to the *Bucolics*, where he develops the traditional identification of the character Alexis with the boy Alexander given to Virgil by Asinius Pollio:

Asinius Pollio, qui et propraetor fuit Galliae Cisalpinæ, puerum forma præstantem nomine Alexandrum habebat. Eum cum cognosceret amari vehementissime a Virgilio, poetæ dono dedit. Maecenas puerum habebat domi Cebetem natione Egyptium, ut scribit Apronianus, quem dono dedit Virgilio amanti eum. Virgilius nunc appellat Alexim et se ipsum appellat Coridonem, ut scribit Apulegius, ego tamen puto Alexim, ut videbimus paulo post, intelligi pro Alexandro Pollionis. Legimus Virgilium fuisse proclivem in amores puerorum: nam aiunt, cum recitaret quartum librum Aeneidos, non potuisse se continere ab osculo Marcelli nepotis Octavii (commentary on *ecl.* 2.1).

(Asinius Pollio, who was also propraetor of Gallia Cisalpina, had a very beautiful boy whose name was Alexander. Knowing that he was loved very passionately by Virgil, he gave him to the poet. Maecenas had in his home an Egyptian boy whose name was Cebes, as Apronianus writes, and gave him to Virgil, who loved him. Virgil names him Alexis and himself Coridon, as Apuleius writes: but I think that Alexis, as we will see a bit later, is to be identified as the Alexander given to him by Pollio. We read that Virgil was prone to love boys: in fact, it is said that when he recited the fourth Book of the *Aeneid* he could not stop himself from kissing Marcellus, the nephew of Augustus.)

The reported text is that of the 1490 edition. C (f. 33r) before *amores puerorum* adds *pios* (chaste): we read that Virgil's love for children was chaste (*pious*): for Dykmans this was Laetus's actual opinion,<sup>43</sup> but it seems more probable that *pious* was an addition by the pupil who wrote this manuscript, concerned about the morality of the poet. On the allegorical identifications of *ecl.* 2 Laetus quotes Apuleius *apol.* 10: "puerum amici sui Pollionis bucolico ludicro laudans et abstinens nominum sese quidem Corydonem, puerum vero Alexin vocat" (praising the slave-boy of his friend Pollio in playful pastoral song, and omitting their names, he calls himself Corydon but the boy Alexis). Laetus seems to correct Apuleius. He agrees, however, with Apuleius that Virgil in the *Bucolics* named the slave-boy of Pollio Alexis

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<sup>43</sup> Dykmans 1987, 94.

and himself Corydon. Cebes is mentioned by Servius, *ad ecl.* 2.15, who does not, however, speak of his ethnicity. Why does Laetus present him as Egyptian? We do not know the source quoted by Laetus as “Apronianus”: usually this name refers to Virgil’s *Mediceus*, but the first folios of this manuscript, containing the first *Bucolics*, are lost, and therefore we do not know where Laetus read this information. Servius identifies Cebes with Menalcas, and Virgil, *ecl.* 2.16, writes that Menalcas was black (*niger*). In his commentary on *Bucolics* 2.1 Laetus again mentions “Apronianus”, but he also quotes Martial 4.42.4, where the poet lusts after an Egyptian boy: “no land knows better how to bestow wantonness” (*nequitias tellus scit dare nulla magis*).

The statement about the young Marcellus, kissed by Virgil while Book 4 of the *Aeneid* was being read, is also surprising and enigmatic. The source should be the Life of Donatus 32, where we read that Virgil “tres omnino libros recitavit, secundum quartum et sextum; sed hunc notabili Octaviae adfectione, quae, cum recitationi interesset, ad illos de filio suo versus ‘Tu Marcellus eris’ [6.883], defecisse fertur atque aegre focolata” (Virgil recited three whole books for Augustus, the second, fourth, and sixth – but this last one to the evident distress of Octavia who, being present at the recitation, is said to have fainted at the lines about her son that begin “You shall be Marcellus”, and to have been revived only with difficulty). Laetus seems to imagine a previous reading of Book 4, before the composition of Book 6, where the death of Marcellus is mentioned.

This episode and several references to Virgil’s sexual life seem to contain some allusion to the experiences of Laetus himself, who had been accused in 1468 of homosexuality and paganism (also Epicureanism: another point of similarity with Virgil). For Zabughin, Laetus’s insistence on sexual matters intended to remove the last traces of the infamous accusation directed against himself, “I do not know if rightly or wrongly” (so Zabughin), by the Venetian Council of Ten.<sup>44</sup> In Venice, before his incarceration in Rome, Laetus was indeed accused of having sexually corrupted some of his pupils.

A similar allusion can also be read in the final part of VPomp., where Laetus identifies himself, as we have seen, with Cecilius Epirota. This grammarian, as we (and Laetus) read in the work of Suetonius, was a freedman of Atticus who had seduced the daughter of his master and the wife of Agrippa, entrusted to him as a student (*gramm.* 16, 1: “cum filiam patroni nuptam M. Agrippae doceret, suspectus in ea et ob hoc remotus”). Sent away by Agrippa, Caecilius was protected by Cornelius Gallus and lived familiarly with him. The event was one of the reasons for Gallus’s

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<sup>44</sup> Zabughin 1918, 142–43.

misfortune (“quod ipsi Gallo inter gravissima crimina ab Augusto obicitur”).<sup>45</sup> Proposing himself as a new Caecilius Epirota, the leader of a school devoted to Virgil, Laetus could hardly have been unaware of the similarity between his own Venetian experience and that of the freedman of Atticus.

Another self-identification is finally suggested by the portrait of Virgil depicted by Laetus: “amantissimus vetustatis, curiosus, diligens, ingeniosus, eminens” (great lover of antiquity, attentive, diligent, ingenious, distinguished). It is very probable that Laetus applied this portrait to himself, and to the image of himself he was giving his pupils.

### 5. Laetus's pupils rewriting the life of Virgil.

It is not surprising, considering the above-mentioned features, that Laetus did not publish VPomp., and that its circulation was limited to the milieu of his students. The biography was too innovative, for its risqué details and also in the new versions it gave of traditional features of the life of Virgil: a location of Andes incompatible with its traditional identification with Pietole and a modified version of the famous epitaph of Virgil.

Actually these parts of VPomp. were omitted or modified by the above-mentioned pupils of Laetus who wrote, like their master, Lives of Virgil. Petrus Marsus confirmed the identification of Andes with Pietole, ignoring the distance in miles stated by VPomp.: with good reason, as Dykmans observed,<sup>46</sup> because in those years Marsus worked under the patronage of Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga, a member of the family ruling Mantua. Probus's version of the Virgilian epitaph, *pascua poma duces*, is corrected both by Cynthius of Ceneda and by the compiler of the Vat. lat. 2739, who replace the traditional *pascua rura duces*.

Another topic of VPomp. modified by the pupils is the one regarding the sexual behaviour of Virgil. Petrus Marsus omits the words *amoris vero impensissimi*. The compiler of the Vat. lat. 2739 paraphrases *amoris impatientissimus* and replaces *cum ea coivit* (that is with Plotia) with the more chaste *cum qua numquam rem habuit*. Cynthius of Ceneda omits the information on the illegitimate son of Virgil and Galla, and the quotation of Pliny on the *Virgilii amatoria imitatio*.

Cynthius and Petrus Marsus furthermore add a section about Virgil's works (including the *Appendix*), a topic omitted, as we have seen, by VPomp. Petrus Marsus adds to the localisation of Virgil's house *prope hortos Maecenatis* a further piece of topographical information: “et aedes Corneliorum, quorum vestigia et conspicui fornices adhuc extant” (and the house of the Cornelii, of which there remain today ruins and monumental

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<sup>45</sup> See Kaster 1995, 183–86.

<sup>46</sup> See Dykmans 1987, 104–08.

archways). The *aedes Corneliarum* are probably the so-called “domus Corneliarum” already known to Biondo Flavio (*Roma instaurata* I 87) and identified by de Rossi with a church demolished in 1589.<sup>47</sup> It is interesting to observe that it was, as de Rossi himself states, very near to the house of Laetus.

We do not know if the manuscript used by Daniele Caetani for the edition printed in Brescia in 1490 included VPomp. or if Caetani himself, in editing the commentary, preferred to omit it. However, the non-inclusion of VPomp. in the printed edition of “Pomponius Sabinus” caused its disappearance, until its rediscovery thanks to Zabughin and Dykmans.

## 6. Conclusion.

As is the case with his work on other Latin authors, Laetus’s *Vita Virgilio* testifies to his efforts to identify the oldest sources and to compile a biography from which erroneous information from medieval sources is weeded out – information that is still present, for instance, in the Life compiled by Sicco Polenton (1437). Among the sources used by Laetus was Donatus’s Life, which in the fifteenth century circulated with later interpolations in the form now known as *Donatus auctus*.

To Laetus, the most authoritative version of Virgil’s Life was the one that preceded Ps.-Probus’s commentary. He was the first humanist to use it, believing it to be a genuine work of Valerius Probus. The information Laetus found in Ps.-Probus’s Life and in the commentary constitute the core of the Life he compiled.

Apart from the *Vita Probiana*, Laetus also used the Life of Donatus and the so-called *Vita Bernensis*, incorporating, however, only the most plausible information in his own text. Other authors quoted by him include Tacitus, Pliny, Suetonius and Quintilian. Laetus also made ample use of the allegorical interpretation found in Ps.-Probus’s commentary on the eclogues. And not only in the Life but also in own commentary on the works in the *Appendix Virgiliana*

Laetus’s work on the Life of Virgil is of considerable interest. It evokes an image of the poet that differs profoundly from that found in *Donatus auctus* or in other Lives circulating at the time. Some of the peculiarities of his Life may probably be explained by its very restricted circulation: it was used only by his students during his university lectures on Virgil.

Leto si interessò della Vita di Virgilio, come di quella di altri autori latini,

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<sup>47</sup> de Rossi 1890, 87–88.

ponendosi il problema di individuare le notizie più antiche ed autorevoli, e di costruire così una biografia depurata dalle notizie dubbie presenti nelle biografie ereditate dalla tradizione medievale e basate su essa (come quella di Polenton). Fra queste rientrava anche la Vita di Donato, che circolava nel secolo XV nella forma interpolata nota come *Donatus auctus*.

Leto individuò come fonte più autorevole della biografia di Virgilio la Vita egli leggeva in testa al commento pseudo-probiano, che egli utilizzò per primo fra gli Umanisti e che considerava ovviamente opera di Valerius Probus. Le notizie tratte da questa Vita ed anche dal commento costituiscono il nucleo centrale della Vita Pomponiana.

Oltre alla Vita Probiana Leto utilizzò anche quella La Vita di Donato e la cosiddetta Vita Bernensis, ma selezionando con attenzione le notizie sulla base della loro verosimiglianza. Egli inoltre inserì nella propria Vita notizie tratte da alcuni autori che fanno riferimento a Virgilio e alla sua opera (Tacito, Plinio, Suetonio, Quintiliano). Nella costruzione della biografia Leto si avvale largamente dell'interpretazione allegorica delle Bucoliche, che costituisce un tratto peculiare del commento pseudo-probiano, e che Leto estese anche alle opere dell'Appendix.

Il risultato della ricerca biografica di Leto è di notevole interesse, in quanto delinea un'immagine di Virgilio notevolmente diversa da quella che caratterizza il *Donatus auctus* e le altre biografie in circolazione in età umanistica. Alcuni tratti particolari di essa sono probabilmente riconducibili all'uso ristretto che Leto fece di questa Vita: la sua circolazione restò infatti limitata alla cerchia dei suoi allievi, quale sussidio nelle lezioni di esegesi virgiliana che egli teneva nello *Studium romano*.

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