FULCENIUS
THE MYTHOGRAPHER
Of the five works translated here, the first three share strong internal similarities and may be considered to belong securely to one author, named, in most early manuscripts, Fabius Planciades Fulgentius. The remaining two texts are *On the Ages of the World and of Man*, assigned in early copies to a Fabius Claudius Gordianus Fulgentius, and *On the Thebaid*, almost certainly a later work, which in the one copy known is assigned to a *sanctus Fulgentius episcopus*, presumably the sixth-century saint Fulgentius, bishop of Ruspe in modern Tunisia, whose family names included Claudius and Gordianus.

The identity of this Bishop Fulgentius with our author has been much debated, but appears to rest on somewhat flimsy evidence. Our author was clearly a Christian, familiar with the Bible and with apologist attitudes, introducing Adam and Antichrist into his account of classical mythology, directing his explanation of Virgil to a *levita* or deacon, and mentioning Tertullian among the authorities for obscure Latin words. But in attempting to decide his period, his cultural and geographical background, and details of his career, we are entirely dependent on the incidental references provided in his own works; these give some light, though its focus is far from full or precisely defined. The general flamboyance and decadence of his Latin, the reasonably accurate knowledge he shows of Greek, and his view of classical authors and cults as already receding into antiquity, would suit what is known in general of the state of education, learning, and religion in colonial North Africa of the fifth and sixth centuries; and these are his most likely bounds of place and time. African interests are apparent in Fulgentius’s mention in the prologue to the *Ages* of Libyan as “our own language,” that is, the language of himself and the unnamed patron he is addressing. In chapter 10 of the *Ages*, Fulgentius repeats a legend, attached to the birth of Alexander the Great, elsewhere found in Egyptian sources. In the opening prologue to the *Mythologies*, he makes a point of describing the medical school and the “narrow streets” of the city of Alexandria; he goes on, 1.1, to an Egyptian story of the first idol; later, 1.20,
he stresses that "as you certainly know for a fact, the Egyptians worship the barge of Isis"; and further on, 2.12, he alludes to the strong wine of Merœ in upper Egypt, a detail repeated in the Ages, chapter 10, along with the cataracts of the Nile. Several copies of the Mythologies and the Content of Virgil are addressed to a priest of Carthage. The circumstantial, if graphic, account of his country estate just recovered from the assaults of barbarian "Galagetici," as set out in the opening of the Mythologies, most obviously fits the encroachments of the Vandals into North Africa during the century beginning in 439, though neither the Galagetici nor the king whose return he welcomes are known. One may, of course, add that Fulgentius clearly belongs to an age prior to the overrunning of North Africa by the Mohammedans in the century following the death of the Prophet in 632. Fulgentius's literary affinities are most obviously with the Greek and Latin writers of the later Alexandrian age: in the Mythologies and the Content he is reminiscent of African authors like Apuleius of Madaura (Mdaurusch in Algeria) and of Christian apologists such as Tertullian of Carthage and Lactantius; and for the Ages he leans heavily on the Histories of Orosius, the Iberian disciple of St. Augustine of Hippo.

Many of these circumstances also fit St. Fulgentius the bishop, the year of whose death is established as 532 or 533. The main drawback to identification is that the bishop emerges from his surviving Latin theological tracts and letters as an orthodox opponent of Arianism and Pelagianism who has little in common, except some resemblance of style and a knowledge of Greek, with the interests of our author; and these are features of the age rather than the individual. That the two shared the same age and culture, even family relationship, seems very possible. If they are one person, it would seem logical to take the mythographical works as more youthful productions, though in that event one would have to dismiss as a conventional pose the apparent reference to great age with which the Content of Virgil begins.

Our Fulgentius does not regard himself as a Roman, for in the Content 5, he tells Virgil to "keep such things for your Romans." In the Mythologies 2.14, he subscribes to the Roman ideals of stability, truth, and honor, as against Greek fiction and fantasy; but in the Ages 11, he takes a disparaging view of Roman history and historians. His own age is materialistic, witness the prologues to the Mythologies and the Ages, but it has emerged from pagan idolatry and superstition; and he is aware of a "new threshold of knowledge"—that is, Christianity—denied to the ancients. His Christian
attitudes, particularly in the *Content* and the *Ages*, seem to be orthodox Ro-
man Catholic and opposed to the backsliding of a *hereticus* neglectful of
"Mother Church"; see especially his interpretation of the story of Noah
and the two birds in the *Ages*, chapter 2. As well as the Bible—mainly, the
Old Testament, the Gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles—he is acquainted
with such early Christian historians as Eusebius; and the *Ages* regularly
reveals a strong anti-Jewish prejudice.

The earliest surviving Fulgentian manuscripts date from the eighth cen-
tury, and the latest authentic borrowings from other authors include the *De
nuptiis Philologiae* of Martianus Capella in the earlier fifth century and the
*Historiae adversum paganos* of Orosius, who died ca. 430. The history of the
Roman emperors with which the *Ages* closes goes as far as a Valentinian,
for whom the likeliest identification from the vaguely worded context would
seem to be Valentinian III, who died in 455. In chapter 13 of the same work
there is a significant allusion, taken from Eusebius, to the letters that passed
between Jesus and King Abgar of Edessa: these documents appear to have
been condemned as spurious by Pope Gelasius I in 495, and it seems un-
likely that within the sphere of the Roman church such an uncritical allu-
sion as that of Fulgentius would have been made to them long after that
year. If, then, our Fulgentius was not the bishop-saint who died in 532-33,
he was at least an approximate contemporary and most likely a fellow coun-
tryman. The first evident borrowings from our author are details from the
*Mythologies* taken by the anonymous writer usually known as Vatican My-
thographer I, who also takes details from Isidore of Seville (died 636) and
is therefore usually assigned to the later seventh century.

For further personal details of Fulgentius and his career we are depen-
dent on scattered references in the opening prologue to the *Mythologies* and
on a few allusions in the *Content of Virgil*. In the first, Fulgentius refers to
earlier poems of a satirical nature (a single line seems to be quoted in *Myth.*
2.13); and in the second, he mentions his work on physiology; but none of
this survives. In the first prologue to the *Mythologies*, he also speaks of a
wife who would be jealous of sharing him with the Muses, but the jesting
nature of the passage leaves it open whether a real wife or a metaphorical
one—that is, the highly serious purpose of his work—is intended. To judge
by other allusions in this prologue, he had considerable experience of city
affairs and commercial undertakings, though he does not mention public of-
face. Regrettably, no later commentator provides the least scrap of addi-
tional biography; and for this discursive first prologue to the *Mythologies*,

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in particular, it must remain a question how much is genuine autobiography and how much is a fictional contribution to the writer's persona.

In sum, there seems little reason to quarrel with the regular assignment of our Fulgentius to the later fifth or earlier sixth century and to a professional career in North Africa. The evidence of the *Content of Virgil* strongly suggests that the career was that of a *grammaticus* or *rhetor*, a teacher of grammar and letters, whose attitudes and interests serve as a complement to the hostile picture of African culture and education given by St. Augustine in his *Confessions*, written ca. 400. Not that the mantle of Augustine descended upon Fulgentius, but that Fulgentius seems to be a representative of that "traditional education," as Augustine calls it (*Conf.* 1.16), at once heavily classical and eager for novelties, from which Augustine suffered and later broke away. At one place (1.13), Augustine rather sardonically says that the typical North African school in which literature was taught had curtains across the door, not as a sign of honor but to conceal the errors being perpetrated within; it is tempting to place Fulgentius's astonishing performances behind the same veil. Here is Augustine on his school days:

> And yet human children are pitched into this hellish torment, together with the fees which are paid to have them taught lessons like these [he has just mentioned having been told about Homer and his wicked gods]. Much business is at stake, too, when these matters are publicly debated, because the law decrees that teachers should be paid a salary in addition to the fees paid by their pupils. And the roar of the torrent beating upon its boulders seems to say "This is the school where men are made masters of words. This is where they learn the art of persuasion, so necessary in business and debate."

He also speaks of having endured "ordeal of martyrdom" at the hands of his schoolmasters (1.14), and of the parents who "willingly allow their children to be flogged if they are distracted . . . from the studies which are supposed to fit them to grow rich" (1.10).

The references to hidebound methods, harsh discipline, and mercenary concerns find strong echoes in Fulgentius's *Content of Virgil*. He says to Virgil, when the poet appears before him (para. 3), "I want from you only the slight things that schoolmasters (*grammatici*) expound, for monthly fees, to boyish ears." In the context of educating the young he has the somewhat sinister comparison with gold, improved by hammering (para. 10). In his interpretation of the boxing match between Entellus and Dares (para. 17), he says that these two illustrate the habit, in academies, of learning by disciplining and cudgelling. The death of the nurse Caieta (para. 24) he ex-
plains as the end of the strict supervision of teachers, for she is *coactrix aetatis*, "compeller of youth," the ogress of the primary grades.

Two further passages in Augustine's *Confessions* show the importance of Virgil to the school curriculum.

In the later lessons I was obliged to memorize the wanderings of a hero named Aeneas, while in the meantime I failed to remember my own erratic ways.

and

Let me tell you, my God, how I squandered the brains you gave me on foolish delusions. I was set a task which troubled me greatly, for if I were successful, I might win some praise: if not, I was afraid of disgrace or a beating. I had to recite the speech of Juno (in Virgil's book I), who was pained and angry because she could not prevent Aeneas from sailing to Italy. I had been told that Juno never really spoke the words, but we were compelled to make believe and follow the flight of the poet's fancy by repeating in prose what he had said in verse.

Similarly in Fulgentius: before Virgil is prepared to begin his allegorical explanation, he says (para. 10):

But to make sure I am not explaining my fable to ignorant ears, describe the contents of my first book, and then if it is accurate I will explain it to you.

The persona of Fulgentius obliges with a summary of book one in short simple sentences which run like a simplified school reader, the sort of paraphrasing that, for instance, Tiberius Donatus provided in his Virgil commentary for his son, apparently a schoolboy.

From the separate introductions and notes which follow, some impressions may be gained of Fulgentius's lively professional interest in the processes of learning. He ranges, more widely than deeply or accurately, over the liberal arts, leaving a trail of rote erudition: in the *Mythologies*, scraps of astronomy (1.18; 2.14), music and mathematics (2.9, 10), natural history (1.16; 2.16; 3.8), and the like; in the *Content of Virgil*, dialectic and rhetoric; in the *Explanation of Obsolete Words*, bits of assorted folklore and philology; and everywhere a Joycean fascination with words, puns, etymologies, tags from Homer and Virgil, the jargon of physiology, philosophy, and the occult, colloquialisms, antique forms, stylistic devices, and so on, a fascination as exuberant as it is uncontrolled. It is difficult to write in temperate terms of so intemperate a writer as Fulgentius.

In Helm's text of Fulgentius (1898), the only critical edition to have
appeared, the mythographer is credited with five separate works, the last of them only with strong reservations. They comprise, by the English titles adopted here, the Mythologies, the Content of Virgil, the Explanation of Obsolete Words, On the Ages of the World and of Man, and On the Thebaid, printed in that order. This sequence is assumed to be the likely chronological one, based on internal considerations, but while there is no overwhelming reason to disagree with it, not every link in the chain is equally firm.

The Content is clearly later than the Mythologies. As a specific case history of a pagan work, with mythological elements in need of allegorical interpretation, it follows naturally after a comprehensive treatment of pagan myths in similar terms. The appearance of Virgil's shade to assist the interpreter parallels, and occasionally echoes, the appearance of Calliope: Fulgentius is addressed by both as homunculus, "little man"—that is, a beginning schoolboy—and like a schoolboy he is told firmly by both to keep his ears open. The Content opens with an unexplained allusion to the "three natural lives" as dealt with by Virgil in Eclogues 1-3; these have already been explained at length as the "contemplative, active, and voluptuary" in the Mythologies 2.1. Calliope assists with the Mythologies, but in the Content not Calliope alone but all the Muses are invoked for what is called a "greater task." Virgil's Eclogue 8 deals with "the interpretative aspect of music," and in Georgics 4, "he is to the fullest a musician, with the interpretative associations of the subject stated in the final words of the poem"; for a fuller explanation of what is meant by the uncommon term apotelesmatice used in these two contexts, we must go back to the Mythologies 3.10, where the Orpheus story is being explained in terms of the aesthetic appeal of music and apotelesmatice is twice found. Near the close of the Content, though Virgil is nominally the speaker, Fulgentius says, "I explained the fable of three-headed Cerberus in my previous work, as an allegory of brawling and legal contention." Here Fulgentius's own Mythologies 1.6, with Cerberus explained as quarrelsome in three ways, "by nature, cause, and accident," is clearly meant.

Thus the priority of the Mythologies over the Content of Virgil is well established. The priority of the Content over the Ages has to be based on only one passage. As the Ages opens, Fulgentius is presenting his work to his unnamed patron in these words:

Be therefore satisfied with this load, which I have garnered for you from the flowery gardens of the Muses, and like Eurystheus you have taken upon yourself the task of making me sweat like Hercules.
This somewhat gauche attempt at elegance seems to be repeated, or adapted, with the Muses confused for the Hesperides, from the opening of the Content:

Be satisfied then, my master, with the very slight posy which I have gathered for you from the flowery gardens of the Hesperides; if you are looking for golden apples, be a Eurystheus to some stronger man who will risk his life like Alcides (Hercules).

The Explanation of Obsolete Words may, or may not, have been produced before the Ages. One section, 58, makes a brief allusion to Mettenia:

Abstemius is a word for cautious, as Rabirius says in his satire: "The strong wine of Mettenia shuns the label of being abstemious."

In the Ages 11, the reference is fuller:

I say nothing of Fabius, murderer rather than husband of Mettenia, he who slew his wife when she was affected by a little strong wine, and did sacrifice with her blood within his own family because of an opened wine-store.

It is at least possible, though far from conclusive, that the fuller reference of the Ages came before the brief one of the Explanation.

As for the fifth work, On the Thebaid, Helm's doubts of its authenticity in the Fulgentian canon are taken up in its separate introduction below and seem to be well founded. Its only obvious link with the other works is that, once Virgil's Aeneid is satisfactorily disposed of as an allegorical poem in the Content, the way is open for Virgil's successor, Statius in the Thebaid, to receive the same treatment; and in the opening of On the Thebaid, such a sequence is in fact hinted at. Statius, "a man of admirable activity, has pre-eminentely distinguished himself, for in his composing of the Thebaid he is the faithful emulator of Virgil's Aeneid." The work is thus later than the Content. In fact, as will be seen below, it is likely to be an imitation, by a pseudo-Fulgentius who belongs well after Fulgentius's own day.

Bibliographical Note

Modern criticism of Fulgentius, his canon and background, begins with M. Zink, Der Mytholog Fulgentius, Beitrag zur römischen Literaturgeschichte und zur Grammatik des afrikanischen Lateins (Würzburg, 1867). Other early studies include E. Jungmann's series, Quaestiones Fulgentianae (Leipzig, 1870), Coniectanea Fulgentiana (1872), and Die Zeit des Fulgentius (1877); A. Reifferscheid, Anecdota Fulgentianum (Bratislava, 1883); R. Helm, "Der Bischof Fulgentius und der Mytho-
Fulgentius the Mythographer


Fulgentian studies are recorded in the annual *L’Année Philologique, Bibliographie Critique et Analytique de l’Antiquité Gréco-Laïne* (Paris, 1924—).

1. Abbreviated reference is made here and in subsequent notes to authors and titles listed more fully in the bibliographical note appended to this introduction. Among modern critics, Helm (1899), Friebel (1911), Courcelle (1948-69), and Langlois (1964) favor the identification. P. de Labriolle (transl. H. Wilson, *History
and Literature of Christianity [London, 1924; repr., New York, 1968], p. 496) calls the supporting arguments "specious"; Laistner (1928–57) dismisses the identification as "unlikely"; and G. Pennisi (Fulgentio e la "Expositio sermonum antiquorum" [Florence, 1963], pp. 11–61, especially pp. 11–15) preferring to place the mythographer in the fifth century, argues strongly against it.


3. The restoration of Huneric to the Vandalic kingdom in 528 was an early guess of critics; but it lacks proof, and other candidates are available. The pro-Arian persecution of Catholics by an earlier Huneric (died 484) was eventually followed by the rule of King Thrasamund (496–523), which was comparatively moderate but marked by the exile of certain African bishops and priests, and was relieved by the more liberal reign of Hilderic. Under both these kings the Moorish factions gave the sort of militant opposition which may be implied by Fulgentius when he says a little later on: "The footprints of the soldiers, as they call them, still mark our walled paths" — with mauricatos for the usual muricatos and a possible punning allusion to the Mauri or Moors. The reading Galagetici is puzzling; for suggested emendations, see Helm's edition, p. 4; also F. Skutsch in Pauly-Wissowa-Kroll, 13 (1910): 217; Pennisi, as above (1963), pp. 28–30. As a further possibility, something like Galig(a)etuli might be read, a made-up name having reference to both Gaetalia, the part of North Africa bordering on Mauretania and Numidia, and the Galicia in Spain where some of the (Gothic) Vandals had settled before they penetrated to Africa in 429. A convenient survey of the Vandal rule in Africa, based on Victor of Vita and Procopius, is provided by M. Deanesly, A History of Early Medieval Europe (New York, 1956), pp. 75–92.

4. The writings of St. Fulgentius are printed in Migne's Patrologia Latina 65 (from the early edition of L. Mangeant, Paris, 1684), and in J. Fraipont's Sancti Fulgentii episcopi Ruspensis opera, Corpus Christianorum, 91 (Turnhout, 1968). The contemporary life by his deacon Ferrandus is available in an edition and French translation by G. G. Lapeyre (Paris, 1932), and the same author has a full study of his career, Saint Fulgence de Ruspe (Paris, 1929).

5. The authenticity of the Gelasian decretal, De recipiendis et non recipiendis libris, is disputed; see P. de Labriolle, as above (1924), p. 443.

6. If a flesh and blood wife is meant, one may note that in the period in question marriage was considered a matter of conscience and would not have constituted a bar to a subsequent priestly vocation; see H. C. Lea, The History of Sacerdotal Celibacy in the Christian Church (Philadelphia, 1867; repr., New York, 1957), pp. 52–53. In Mythologies 2.1, Fulgentius says that bishops, priests, and monks have replaced philosophers in the noblest kind of life, the contemplative; but, aside from this oblique hint, there seems to be no specific evidence for his having been a priest or monk. If he had been either one when he wrote the Mythologies, he would hardly have owned a country estate or been involved in commerce.


