



Ovid

Summary :

The renowned Latin poet Ovid was born in 43 BC and belonged to an equestrian family. He was sent to Rome for his education, but despite the opposition of his father, he renounced a political career and chose poetry. An extraordinary talent, he was famous in the elite circles of the Roman society. Ovid had just completed the 15 books of *Metamorphoses* and the first books of *Fasti* when he was banished from his beloved Rome to the west coast of the Black Sea. His works *Tristia* and *Pontica/Epistulae ex Ponto* offer valuable information about the Black Sea region. We do not know much about the end of his life in 17 AD (as recorded by the *Chronicle* of Jerome, year 2033).

Other Names

Publius Ovidius Naso

Date and Place of Birth

20 March 43 BC at Sulmo (modern Sulmona - Abruzzo, Italy)

Date and Place of Death

about 17 AD at Tomis (modern Constanța, Romania)

Main Role

Poet

1. Life

As he has written himself in his “autobiographical” exile elegy (*Tristia* 4.10), Ovid, “that playful poet of tender loves” was born in 43 BC (the year “when both consuls”- Aulus Hirtius¹ and C. Vibius Pansa Caetronianus² - “fell under stress of same fate”, in the battles near Mutina),³ on the 20th of March (“that day among the five sacred to armed Minerva, which is wont to be the first blooded by combat”). Sulmo, his native country (*patria*), a Paelignian city situated in the Apennines, “a land rich in ice-cold streams”,⁴ at 90 miles from Rome on the road going to Corfinium,⁵ had been among the Italic *socii* defeated in 90 BC.⁶

Belonging to an equestrian family, Ovid and his older brother were sent at Rome for their education: a schoolmate of his, the father of Stoic philosopher Seneca,⁷ recorded in his anthology of rhetorical exercises (*Controversiae* 2.2.8) the *comptum et decens et amabile* talent of the future poet, disciple of Arellius Fuscus⁸ and M. Porcius Latro.⁹ The last years of his adolescence brought him, like all young people who belonged to the Roman elite, in Athens, Asia Minor (*Tristia* 1.2.77-78) and Sicily (*Pontica* 2.10.21-29) and presented him with the first honours of a Roman political career (*cursus honorum*).¹⁰

Despite the opposition of his father, Ovid renounced a political career and chose poetry. His extraordinary talent (“which made verse whatever I tried to write”) ensured the introduction of the Sulmonese to the circle of M. Valerius Messalla Corvinus¹¹ and recommended him among the greatest Latin poets of the time: the elegiac C. Cornelius Gallus,¹² Sextus Propertius¹³ and Albius Tibullus,¹⁴ the already famous P. Vergilius Maro and Q. Horatius Flaccus, but also the lesser known to modern readers poets Aemilius Macer,¹⁵ Ponticus¹⁶ or Bassus¹⁷ are mentioned in Ovidian verses. Already famous in the elite circles of the Roman society for his erotic **elegiac poems** (*Amores*, *Ars amandi*, *Remedia amoris*, *Medicamina faciei feminae*), Ovid had just completed the 15 books of *Metamorphoses* and the first books of *Fasti* when he was banished from his beloved Rome. His third wife¹⁸ and several named and unnamed friends or enemies are the addressees of the elegiac letters sent from Tomis and regrouped under unknown circumstances in the five books of *Tristia* and four books of *Pontica*.

The reasons for the poet’s banishment on the left coast of the Euxine are one of the most debated subjects in the history of classical scholarship: a plethora of explanations have been formulated since the Middle Ages¹⁹ to our times, going from the simple citation of the *carmen* (*Ars amandi*, already published in 1 BC – AD 1) and *error* (an involuntary indiscretion, *non scelus*, which affected



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Augustus),²⁰ to pretended adulteries, political conspiracies and murders, or, most recently, to fanciful theories arguing the “imaginary exile” of a poet who never left Rome.²¹ *Relegatus* (and thus maintaining his citizenship and property) in Tomis, in 8 AD, he will continue to write his elegiac letters at least till 16 AD. We do not know much about the end of his life, in 17 AD (as recorded by the *Chronicle* of Jerome, year 2033); in fact, except Seneca the Elder and his son, [Pliny the Elder](#), Martial and Quintilian are the first to allude to Ovid’s work, only several decades after his death.²²

2. Work

MEDEA, lost tragedy written in the early years of his poetic career, mentioned by Cornelius Tacitus (*Dialogus de oratoribus* 12), M. Fabius Quintilianus (*Institutio oratoria* 10.1.98), and alluded by the poet himself (*Amores* 2.18.13-14; 3.1). Many aspects of this fascinating personage can be found in *Heroides* (6 and 12), *Metamorphoses* (book 7) and *Tristia* (3.8.3-4; 3.9).

AMORES, “Loves”, second edition, in three books (of 15, 20, and 15 poems respectively), of an autobiographical, elegiac anthology in five volumes, elaborated between 25-16 BC.²³ Seduction, love, friendship are the main themes of these poems which promote the tradition of the Latin erotic elegy, leading even to the parody of motifs, situations, genres. Corinna, the pseudonym of the poet’s mistress, recalls the famous Boeotian poetess. However, it is quite obvious that we do not have here just a poetic pseudonym and a pretext for erotic inspiration, as it was broadly the case of Catullus’ Lesbia (=Claudia), Tibullus’ Delia, or Propertius’ Cynthia: more than a loving/sexual partner, Ovidian Corinna functions as a vehicle of countless sentimental and literary games in which the young innovative poet excels.

EPISTULAE HEROIDUM, “Heroines’ Letters”, 15 feminine epistolary discourses in which the sensitive poet lends his voice to mythological (Penelope, Briseis, Dido, Hermione, Ariadne, *etc.*) and historical (Sappho) figures; the authenticity of the five “double Heroides” (*e.g.* [Paris](#) – Helen) which completed the anthology has been contested for a long time, but the most recent critics consider them as authentic. Presented by Ovid as a new literary genre (*Ars* 3.346), these erotic letters have a direct Latin precedent in Propertius (4.3) and evoke literary inspirations as different as the Hesiodic catalogues, the Euripidean tragic monologues, and the *suasoriae* of the contemporary rhetorical schools.

ARS AMANDI, “Art of love”, has transformed the erotic precepts of some elegiac figures (*e.g.* Tibullus 1.4.75-80; 1.5.47sq.; Propertius 4.5; Ovidius, *Amores* 1.8) in textbook (recalling, for its contents, the “pornographic” Philaenis, *POxy* 39.2891, but for its form all the didactic tradition of Hesiod, of erudite Hellenistic poets like Nicander and Aratos, of Roman predecessors like Lucretius and Virgil); the “loving” poet is now a “go-between” (1.7, *ego sum praeceptor Amoris*) who teaches love just like some other didactic poet would teach fighting, hunting or cropping. Numerous mythological allusions and references to the City’s pleasing monuments embellish the advice given to men (book 1-2) and women (book 3).

REMEDIA AMORIS, “Remedies for love”, pretends to be an official *retractatio* of the *Ars*; in fact, it is a second *Ars*, enhanced, in the same Ovidian subtle style of an ambiguous parody.

MEDICAMINA FACIEI FEMINAE, “Cosmetics for the Female Face”, is a didactic poem recalling the erudite virtuosity of Hellenistic poets like Nicander (and his *Alexipharmaca*).

METAMORPHOSES, “Transformations”, use the epic hexameter for narrating the nature, in 15 books, of the ever-changing world, since its creation, through its ages and uncounted mythical episodes, to its Pythagorean comprehension and to the *apotheosis* of its Roman ruler, Caius Iulius Caesar. Close to Callimachus’ *Aetia*, Ovid plays once again with mythological variations and symbols, artistic impressions, Augustan literary traditions and political meanings. From the *c.* 250 episodes narrated through the various books of the work, adventures such as those of Deucalion, Daphne, Phaethon, Cadmus, Narcissus, Pyramus and Thisbe have been forever imprinted upon the *psychè* of generations of artists.

FASTI, “Calendar”, present in six books the Roman traditions connected with the first six months of the year. Using the elegiac distich for an epic that would have to praise the magnificence of an Augustan / traditional Rome, Ovid continued Propertius’ intentions



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(book 4) to combine Roman antique customs (traditions about festivals, cults, places) and Hellenistic scientific enquiry (recalling, yet once more, Callimachus' *Aetia*). The composition of this work (of particular importance for historians of religion) was interrupted by the "unexpected" *relegatio*.

TRISTIA, "Sorrows" (five books), enumerate the physical and emotional inconvenience of the *relegatio*, in letters addressed to Augustus (book 2), to the poet's wife and to unnamed friends, between 9-12 AD. From an historical point of view, Ovid left us the first and unique description of a voyage from Rome to Tomis, in poems (scattered through the first book) which combine poetic and mythological allusion to epic heroes as Odysseus, [Aeneas](#) and Jason with a quite accurate geographical knowledge (e.g. the Pontic periplus, 1.10.33-42).²⁴ A century before Dio Chrysostomus' exile at [Olbia/Borysthenes](#), Ovid is also the first certain resident of the western coast of the Black Sea whose direct testimony survives. The date of this relegation, 9 AD, constitutes a **terminus ante quem** for the beginning of the Roman control over the Greek cities of the coast: following the poet's statements about "this land, to the very edge of the empire, came last of all beneath the Ausonian law" (2.199-200; 3.13.28), modern historians recall the role of the military campaigns of M. Licinius Crassus²⁵ (29-28 BC) and P. Vicinius (c. 3-2 BC) in this process.²⁶ In an attempt to determine in detail the political and ethnic situation of the Pontic region, numerous scholars working on this subject during the 20th c. recognized the difficulty of uncovering historical truth from these poetical lamentations, full of antithesis, metaphors, mythical parallels and catalogues, and exaggerated "common ideas" (*loci communes*) about a "Barbarian periphery", so much hated by the relegated elegiac.²⁷ In the Ovidian picture of Tomis, it is a barbaric city (5.7.9sq.) where "the Barbarian lives together with us" (5.10.29-30), in the middle of a savage country, where Getai, Sarmatians, [Scythians](#), and barbarized Greeks suffer the attacks of other ferocious Getai, Sarmatians, and Bessi (3.10).²⁸ On the left (significantly, in Latin "*sinister*") side of the not Euxine but "Axen" ("inhospitable") sea (4.4.56), where [Medea](#) cut in pieces her own brother Absyrtos (3.9.5-34), not far away from the place where strangers were sacrificed to the Tauric Virgin (4.4.63-64), near the Hister/Danubius (e.g. 2.189, 203, 416, 444; 3.10.7, 29, 53; etc.) flowing in the extreme North (2.190; 3.2.2; 3.4b.[47]; 3.11.8; 4.8.41-42; etc.), Ovid feels like he was placed in Hell,²⁹ at the edge of the world (2.194; 3.4b.52; 3.13.12; 4.9.9; etc.); it is an endless, terrible winter (3.10), opposed to the eternal Italic springtime (3.12), and a deadly desert (for its infertility and continuous war) where even [Homer](#) would give up poetry (1.1.47-48).

PONTICA/EPISTULAE EX PONTO, "Epistles from Pontus" (four books), have been addressed openly to named friends and to his wife, between c. 13 AD (probably the year when the first three books were compiled, cf. 3.9.51-54, and published) and 16 AD (for 4.9). While in the first years of relegation Ovid continuously refused to know and to get used to Tomis, in the third year, at the beginning of the fourth book of *Tristia*, he already pretends to "have drunk the cup of Lethe" and forgotten Rome (*Tristia* 4.1.47-48); he proclaims himself the "gifted poet of the Sarmatians" (*Tristia* 5.1.73-74), in *Pontica* even honored by the inhabitants of Tomis (1.5.69), after having learned the Getic and Sarmatian languages! (*Tristia* 5.12.55-58). Even if his hope to go back to Rome or to a place in the Aegean never dies (still continuing to write after Augustus' death), his wife and his beloved Rome are less and less present in the last books. He is old, sick, and cold (*Pontica* 3.1), alone (*Pontica* 3.8), as Vestalis (*Pontica* 4.7) and L. Pomponius Flaccus (*Pontica* 4.9.75-80), the only Romans mentioned throughout all the aforementioned books, could testify.

UNCERTAIN WORKS: *Ibis* (curse-poem in elegiac verses, against an enemy hidden under the name of a bird);³⁰ *Halieutica* (fragmentary poem about fish and fishing); *Nux*; ³¹*ad Liviam*.³²

1. See V. Mühlh, s.u. Aulus Hirtius (2), *RE* 8 (1913), col. 1956-1962.

2. See R. Hanslik, s.u. Vibius Pansa (16), *RE* II.8 (1958), col. 1953-1965.

3. Modern Modena; see A. Cardarelli et al., *Modena dale origini all'anno mille*, Modena 1989.

4. *Tristia* 4.10.3, but also *Amores* 2.1.1; *Amores* 2.16.1-10; *Fasti* 4.79-82, for the opposition with the Scythian place of relegation.

5. Modern Corfinio; see Caesar, *Bellum ciuile* 1.18.1.



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6. *Amores* 3.15.8-10: "I shall be called the glory of the Paelignians, race whom their love of freedom compelled to honourable arms when anxious Rome was in fear of the allied bands".
7. See J.A. Fairweather, *The Elder Seneca*, (Cambridge 1981).
8. Cf. Brzoska, s.u. Arellius Fuscus (3), *RE* 3 (1895), col. 635-637; *PIR*² A 1030.
9. See R. Helm, s.u. Porcius Latro (49), *RE* 34 (1953), col. 233-235.
10. Triumvir capitalis (*Tristia* 4.10.33-34) and vigintivir (*Fasti* 4.383-384).
11. *Pontica* 1.7.27-30; 2.2 ; etc. See R. Syme, *The Augustan Aristocracy*, Oxford 1986, p. 200-226.
12. Cf. *PIR*² C 1369; L. Nicastrì, *Cornelio Gallo e l'elegia ellenistico-romana*, (Napoli 1984).
13. Cf., e.g., T.D. Papanghelis, *Propertius: A Hellenistic Poet on Love and Death*, (Cambridge 1987).
14. For who he wrote *Amores* 3.9. Cf., e.g., F. Cairns, *Tibullus : A Hellenistic Poet at Rome*, (Cambridge 1979).
15. *PIR*² A 378; J.P. Néraudau, "Aemilius Macer ou la gloire du second rang", dans *ANRW* 2.30.3 (1983), p. 1708-1731.
16. *PIR*² P 785.
17. *PIR*² B 82.
18. *Tristia* 4.10.69-74; Ovid also had a daughter and two grandchildren (*Tristia* 4.10.75-76).
19. See., R. Hexter, "Ovid in the Middle Ages : Exile, Mythographer, and Lover", in B. Weiden Boyd, *Brill's Companion to Ovid*, Leiden 2002, p. 413-442.
20. Cf. *Tristia* 4.1.23-24, and especially *Tristia* 2.103-108.
21. See the bibliography in J.-M. Claassen, *Displaced Persons : the Literature of Exile from Cicero to Boethius*, Duckworth 1999, p. 62 n. 90.
22. Cf. M. Dewar, "*Siquid habent ueri uatum praesagia* : Ovid in the 1st-5th Centuries AD", in B. Weiden Boyd, *Brill's Companion to Ovid*, Leiden 2002, p. 383-412.
23. See further R. Syme, *History in Ovid*, Oxford 1987.
24. See A. Dan, "De Rome à Tomes au début de notre ère: réflexions historiques, poétiques et géographiques sur le premier périple latin du Pont-Euxin (*Tristia* 1.10)", *Eirene* 43 (2007), p. 87-103.
25. *PIR*² L 0186.
26. Cf. D.M. Pippidi, "Les premiers rapports de Rome et des cités de l'Euxin", *Scythica Minora. Recherches sur les colonies grecques du littoral roumain de la mer Noire*, Bucureşti-Amsterdam 1975, p. 159-171; A. Avram, "P. Vinicius und Kallatis. Zum Beginn der römischen Kontrolle der griechischen Städte an der Westküste des Pontos Euxeinos", *The Greek Colonisation of the Black Sea Area. Historical Interpretation of Archaeology*, G.R. Tsatskheladze (ed.), Stuttgart 1998, p. 115-129; *Idem, Inscriptions de Scythie Mineure III* (Kallatis), Bucarest-Paris 1999, p. 44sq.
27. The most important study is A. Podossinov, *Ovids Dichtung als Quelle für die Geschichte des Schwarzmeergebiets*, Konstanz 1987.



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28. For the military situation of Tomis at the time, cf. I. Stoian, *Tomitana. Contribuții epigrafice la istoria cetății Tomis*, București 1962, p. 78sq.; A. Avram, "La défense des cités en mer Noire à la basse époque hellénistique", *Citoyenneté et participation à la basse époque hellénistique*, P. Fröhlich, Ch. Müller (eds.), Paris 2005, p. 163-182 (p. 167-168).
29. Literally in *Pontica* 1.8.27; 3.5.56. This is why modern scholars speak about "katabasis" ("descent to the underworld"), cf., e.g., S.J. Huskey, *Ovid's Tristia I and III: an intertextual katabasis*, Diss. University of Iowa, 2002.
30. See G.D. Williams, *The Curse of Exile: A Study of Ovid's Ibis*, (Cambridge 1996).
31. See M. Pulbrook (ed.), *Publii Ovidi Nasonis Nux elegia*, Maynooth 1985.
32. See H. Schoonhoven, *The Pseudo-Ovidian "Ad Liviam de morte Drusi"*, Groningen 1992.

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Glossary :

	elegy, the
Poetical type originating from laments. It was escorted by aulos while being sung. Its metrical system was the so-called elegiac couplet.	
	terminus ante quem (λατ.)
Χρονικό όριο πριν από το οποίο συνέβη κάτι (ορολογία των ιστορικών επιστημών).	

Quotations

Tristia 3.10.9-24

at cum tristis hiems squalentia protulit ora,
terraque marmoreo est candida facta gelu,
~dum patet et Boreas et nix habitare sub Arcto,
tum patet has gentes axe tremente premi~
nix iacet, et iactam ne sol pluuiasque resoluant,
indurat Boreas perpetuamque facit.
ergo ubi delicit nondum prior, altera uenit,
et solet in multis bima manere locis.
tantaque commoti uis est Aquilonis, ut altas
aequet humo turres tectaque rapta ferat.
pellibus et sutis arcent mala frigora braxis,
oraque de toto corpore sola patent.
saepe sonant moti glacie pendente capilli,
et nitet inducto candida barba gelu;
nudaque consistunt, formam seruantia testae,
uina, nec hausta meri, sed data frustra bibunt.

Tristia 5.7.9-18

turba Tomitanae quae sit regionis et inter
quos habitem mores, discere cura tibi est?
mixta sit haec quamuis inter Graecosque Getasque,
a male pacatis plus trahit ora Getis.
Sarmaticae maior Geticaeque frequentia gentis
per medias in equis itque reditque uias.
in quibus est nemo, qui non coryton et arcum
telaque uipereo lurida felle gerat.
uox fera, trux uultus, uerissima Martis imago,



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non coma, non ulla barba resecta manu.