

# Corippus, In laudem Iustini Augusti minoris

Book III, lines 230–407 • The Avar Embassy to Justin II

Latin text from: *De laudibus Iustini Augusti minoris ex recensione P. F. Foggini cum notis variorum* (Rome, 1777)

## Introduction

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Flavius Cresconius Corippus was a Latin poet of African origin, probably a teacher of grammar and rhetoric in the province of Africa Proconsularis, who composed his first major work — the *Iohannis*, an eight-book epic on the campaigns of the Byzantine general John Troglita against the Berber confederacies of the 540s — around 548. He is the last significant Latin poet of late antiquity. Sometime after 565 he made his way to Constantinople, where he attached himself to the court of the newly crowned emperor Justin II and produced the poem presented here: the *In laudem Iustini Augusti minoris* (In Praise of Justin the Younger), a four-book panegyric in hexameters covering the accession of Justin in November 565 and his inauguration as consul on 1 January 566. The poem breaks off incomplete, but what survives constitutes an exceptionally valuable document: unlike the retrospective historical accounts of Menander Protector or John of Ephesus, Corippus was present at the events he describes and writes as a near-eyewitness to the ceremonies of the imperial court. His models are Virgil, Lucan, and above all Claudian, and his verse, while not without its longueurs, achieves at moments a real grandeur commensurate with its subject.

The passage translated here is Book III, lines 230–407, which forms the dramatic and historical centrepiece of the entire poem. Justin has taken his seat on the imperial throne in full regalia when the Avar embassy, led by the envoy Targetius, is admitted to the palace. The scene is constructed on two levels simultaneously: as spectacle and as argument. Corippus first depicts the overwhelming effect of Byzantine court ceremony on the barbarian visitors — the gold shields, the ranked guards, the diademed emperor blazing on his throne — before recording the diplomatic exchange itself. Targetius delivers a boast of extravagant ambition on behalf of the Chagan Baian, demanding the continuation of the annual subsidies paid by Justinian. Justin's reply — calm, measured, and ultimately dismissive — articulates a theology of Roman imperium as divinely ordained and self-sufficient, requiring neither barbarian alliance nor purchased peace. The encounter encapsulates the defining posture of Justin's early reign: the proud reassertion of Roman dignity after what the new emperor considered the humiliating appeasement policies of his predecessor. That the same emperor would within a decade be wheeled through the corridors of his own palace in the grip of madness, while his empress negotiated the very tributes he had so magnificently refused, gives the passage a retrospective irony that Corippus could not have anticipated.

The Latin text is taken from the editio princeps of Pierre-François Foggini: *Fl. Cresconius Corippus de laudibus Iustini Augusti minoris ex recensione P. F. Foggini cum notis variorum* (Rome, 1777), pp. 86–107, digitised at the Internet Archive ([https://archive.org/details/bub\\_gb\\_z2kO0PFk0N0C/page/86/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_z2kO0PFk0N0C/page/86/mode/2up)). The standard modern critical edition, with facing English translation and full commentary, remains Averil Cameron, ed. and trans., *Flavius Cresconius Corippus: In laudem Iustini Augusti minoris* (London: Athlone Press, 1976). The translation offered here is the present author's own, made directly from the Foggini text.

## I. The Stage is Set

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230. Vicinumque diem claro praenunciat igne.  
Ut laetus Princeps solium conscendit in altum,  
Membraque purpurea praecelsus veste locavit,  
Legatos Avarum, iussos intrare, Magister

235. Ante fores primus divinae nunciat aulae  
Orantes sese vestigia sacra videre  
Clementis Domini: quos voce, & mente benignus  
Imperat admitti. Miratur Barbara pubes  
Ingressus primos, immensaque atria lustrans

230. And the approaching day he heralds with bright fire.  
When the joyful Prince had ascended to his lofty throne  
and placed his limbs upon it, raised high in his purple  
robes, the Master of Offices first announces before the  
doors

235. of the divine hall that the envoys of the Avars, bidden  
to enter, beg to behold the sacred footsteps of their  
clement Lord. With voice and mind alike gracious, he  
commands them to be admitted. The barbarian company  
 marvels at their first steps inside, and gazing over the  
immense halls

## II. The Barbarians Enter

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240. Ingentes adstare viros, scuta aurea cernunt:  
Pilaque suspiciunt alto splendentia ferro  
Aurea, & auratos conos, cristasque rubentes:  
Horrescunt lanceas, saevasque instare secures:  
Ceteraque egregiae spectant miracula pompae.

245. Et credunt aliud Romana palatia caelum:  
Spectari gaudent, hilaresque intrare videri.  
Non secus Hircanae quoties spectacula tigres  
Dat populis nova Roma suis, ductore magistro  
Non solita feritate fremunt, sed margine toto  
Intrantes plenum populorum millia circum —

250. Suspiciunt, magnoque metu mitescere discunt,  
Deponunt rabiem, gaudent fera vincla subire.  
Per medios intrare locos, ipsumque superbae  
Quod spectantur amant, caveam, turbasque  
faventes  
Lustrant, & pronae solium regnantis adorant.

240. they see great men standing — they behold golden shields; they look up at spear-shafts gleaming with tall iron-tipped gold, and gilded helmets, and red-plumed crests. They shudder at the lances, and the savage axes threatening near; and they gaze upon the other wonders of that magnificent display.

245. They believe the Roman palace to be a second heaven. They rejoice to be looked upon, and appear happy to be seen entering. Not otherwise than when new Rome stages for her people the spectacle of Hyrcanian tigers, and under their trainer's guidance they do not roar with their accustomed ferocity, but as they enter along the whole edge of the arena, with thousands filling the circus —

250. They look up, and under great fear learn to grow tame, they lay aside their rage, and rejoice to submit to gentle chains. They love to pass through the midst of the space, and the very fact of being watched in the proud arena pleases them; they survey the favouring crowds, and with bowed heads adore the throne of the ruler.

## III. The Prostration

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255. Verum ut contracto patuerunt intima velo  
Ostia, & aurati micuerunt atria tecti,  
Caesareumque caput diademate fulgere sacro  
Targites suspexit Avar, ter poplite flexo  
Pronus adoravit, terraeque adfixus inhaesit.

260. Hunc Avaris alii simili terrore secuti  
In facies cecidere suas, stratosque tapetas  
Fronte terunt, longisque implent spaciosa capillis  
Atria, & Augustam membris immanibus aulam.  
Ut clemens Princeps legatos surgere iussit

265. Officio stratos: iussu, monituque iubentis  
Surrexere viri: Quod poscitis, ore sereno  
Clementer Regnator ait, memorate, docete,  
Et vestri Regis quae sit legatio, ferte.  
Haec postquam Princeps tranquilla voce profatus,

255. But when the innermost doors swung open with the curtain drawn back, and the gilded halls of the palace flashed into view, and the Avar Targetius looked up to behold the Caesar's head blazing with the sacred diadem, three times with bent knee he fell prostrate in adoration, and pressed to the earth he clung there.

260. The other Avars followed him in like terror, and fell upon their faces, and with their foreheads they grind the outspread carpets, and with their long hair fill the spacious halls and the Augustan chamber with their massive limbs. When the clement Prince commanded the envoys to rise

265. from the prostration required by ceremony, at his command and admonition the men rose. 'What you seek,' said the Ruler graciously with serene countenance, 'declare it, make it known, and bring whatever is the embassy of your King.' After the Prince had spoken these words in a calm voice,

## IV. The Avar Speech

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270. Crudus, & asper Avar dictis sic coepit acerbis:  
Rex Avarum Chagan, debellans intima mundi,  
Famosos stravit magna virtute tyrannos;  
Innumeros populos, & fortia regna subegit.  
Cuius Threicium potis est exercitus Hebrum

275. Exhausto siccare lacu, fluviumque bibendo  
Nudare, & nondum plene satiatum abire.  
Quem Persae timuere feri, genibusque minantis  
Admovere manus, pacem & meruere precando;  
Ni facerent, frustra celsas Babylonia muris

280. Cincta foret, dominos Avaris nunc ferre parata.  
Rupimus Euphratem, gelidos superavimus amnes  
Hiber— [text continues]

270. *the rough and savage Avar began thus, with bitter words: 'The King of the Avars, the Chagan, conquering the uttermost parts of the world, has laid low renowned tyrants with his great valour; he has subdued countless peoples and mighty kingdoms. His army has power to drain the Thracian Hebrus*

275. *dry as an emptied pool by drinking it, to lay bare the river by drinking, and depart not yet fully satisfied. The fierce Persians feared him, and to one who threatened them raised hands on bended knee, and earned their peace by prayer. Had they not done so, in vain would Babylon be girt*

280. *with its lofty walls, now ready to bear Avar masters. We have broken through the Euphrates, we have crossed the frozen rivers of Hiberia — 'When winter restrains the*

Hibernos cursus tum quando refrenat aquarum,  
Frigus, & omnigenis fit durior unda metallis.  
Vidimus & tectos vitrea testudine pontes

285. Stagna, lacus, fluviosque super, fontesque  
iacere.

In silicis morem, vel stratae marmore terrae,  
Cognatos latices laticum cum crusta tegebat,  
Plaustra super solidas stridentia duximus undas:  
Illic volventum vestigia nulla rotarum,

290. Aerea nec solitos labens dedit orbita sulcos,  
Nec fragilis potuit crystalli forma noceri  
Praesolido stringente gelu: fremusque sonorus  
Cornipedum liquidos ceu terruit ungula campos  
Insanum volvens strepitum. Calcavimus Imaum:

295. Ivimus in fluctus sicco pede: praebuit amplas  
Nix spaciosa vias: praeduris gentibus acre  
Intulimus bellum. Pars altera castra locavit,  
Miscuimus pugnas, munitas cepimus urbes,  
Firmaque disruptis deiecimus oppida muris.

300. Nunc ripas Scythici victor Rex contigit Istri,  
Densaue per latos figens tentoria campos,  
Ad tua nos, Princeps, haec splendida moenia  
misit.

Annua praelargi patris solatia vestri  
Sumere tempus adest: sancte quae praebuit ille,

305. Vos etiam praebere decet. Si foedera pacis  
Intemerata tibi, si mavis pacta manere,  
Debita quaerenti transmittite munera Regi.  
Talia iactantem, nulla commotus in ira  
Tranquillus Princeps, oculis pietate serenis

*flowing courses of the waters, and the cold makes the  
wave harder than any kind of metal, we have seen bridges  
roofed over with a glassy vault,*

285. *lying above pools, lakes, rivers, and springs. In the  
manner of flint, or of earth paved with marble, when a  
crust covered the kindred waters of the waters, we have  
driven creaking wagons across the solid waves. There the  
tracks of no rolling wheels were left behind,*

290. *nor did the bronze-shod rim leave its accustomed  
furrows as it slid, nor could the brittle form of crystal be  
damaged by the frost binding it solid. And the loud rumble  
of hooves, as if the horse's hoof had terrified the liquid  
plains, rolled its mad din along. We have trodden the  
Caucasus;*

295. *we have gone into the floods dry-shod; the broad  
snow has offered wide roads; upon hard-living peoples we  
have brought fierce war. One part pitched camp, we joined  
battle, we took fortified cities, and hurled down strong  
towns with their walls broken open.*

300. *Now the victorious King has reached the banks of  
the Scythian Danube, and pitching his crowded tents  
across the broad plains, he has sent us to you, Prince, to  
these splendid walls. The time has come to receive the  
yearly gifts of your most generous father. What he holy  
provided,*

305. *it is fitting that you too provide. If you prefer the  
treaty of peace to remain inviolate, the pacts intact, then  
send the gifts owed to a King who asks what is his due.'*  
*As he boasted thus, the tranquil Prince, stirred by no  
anger, looked upon the young man with eyes serene in  
piety,*

## V. Justin's Reply

310. Aspexit iuvenem, placidoque haec edidit ore:  
Quantum est legatis concessa licentia fandi,  
Tantum legatos animo decet esse modesto,  
Et vitae probitate graves: quique ordine possint  
Scire locis humiles quibus, & quibus ora superbi

315. Expediant: nostramque petant quod mitiget  
iram,  
Prospiciantque suae, poscentes foedera, vitae.  
Quod tua ventosis inflata superbia verbis  
lactitat, ignavae mentis deformia nudat.  
Quid profugos laudas, famaue adtollis inani

320. Extorrem populum? Quae fortia regna subegit  
Esfera gens Avarum? proprias defendere terras  
Non potuit, sedesque suas fugitiva reliquit.  
Tu velut ignarus, falsis rumoribus audes  
Vana loqui, turpique dolo nova somnia fingis?

325. Quod tibi nunc visum est vestro adsignare  
labori,  
Militibus nostris ludo solet esse diurno:  
Hoc studium dominis, ea sunt sua feria servis.  
Sanctum hoc imperium toto sic floruit orbe  
Bella gerens, pacemque tuens. Nos, more  
parentum,

330. Pacem diligimus, numquam fera bella timemus.  
Pax est subiectis, pereunt per bella superbi:  
Parcimus innocuis, sonti non parcimus ulli.

310. and from a calm mouth spoke these words: 'As great  
as is the freedom granted to envoys to speak, so greatly  
ought envoys to be of modest mind and weighty in the  
uprightness of their lives; able in due order to know in  
which places to be humble, and in which to advance

315. bold words; to seek that which may soften our anger,  
and, in asking for treaties, to look to their own lives. What  
your pride, puffed up with windy words, boasts of, exposes  
the ugly marks of a cowardly mind. Why do you praise  
fugitives, and raise up with empty fame

320. a people in exile? What mighty kingdoms has the  
savage race of the Avars subdued? They could not defend  
their own lands, and fled, abandoning their homes. Do  
you, as if ignorant, dare on the strength of false rumour to  
speak vain things, and invent new fictions with shameful  
deceit?

325. What you have now seen fit to assign to your own  
efforts is commonly the daily sport of our soldiers; this is  
the masters' pastime, this is servants' holiday. This sacred  
empire has flourished thus throughout the world, waging  
wars and preserving peace. We, in the custom of our  
fathers,

330. love peace, and never fear savage wars. Peace  
belongs to those who submit; the proud perish in wars. We  
spare the innocent; we spare no guilty man. The Roman

- Res Romana Dei est, terrenis non eget armis:  
lure pio vivit: bellum non ingerit ultro,
- 335.** *Suscipit illatum, vel si servire negabunt  
Ingratae gentes, primum tamen admonet hostes  
More gubernandi: monitus qui suscipit istos  
Vivit, & a nobis meritis expectat honores.  
Quisquis amat pacem, tutus sub pace manebit:*
- 340.** *Et qui bella volunt, bellorum clade peribunt.  
Gens quaecumque ausa est Romana lacescere  
signa,  
Horruit extinctas inopino fulmine turmas,  
Innumeros cecidisse suos, Regesque superbos  
Vidit sub nostris humiles, fractosque triumphis.*
- 345.** *Ergo signa meis Chagan contraria signis  
Ferre parat? lituosque mihi, camposque minatur  
Gens Avarum, ni pacta damus? Terrore putatis  
Id nostrum fecisse patrem, miseratus egenis,  
Et profugis quod dona dedit? Pietate regendi*
- 350.** *Hoc facimus, gratisque dari provisa iubemus.  
Nostra manus larga est, non prodiga: perdere  
nescit,  
lure suas dispensat opes, quo continet orbem.  
Sponte damus dignis, indignis sponte negamus.  
Tu numeros numeris, & vires viribus audes*
- 355.** *Exaequare meis. Nostris non fidimus armis.  
Quamquam ductores, numeri, fortesque tribuni,  
Subiecti Reges, & gentes subditae abundant,  
Quot caelum guttas mittit, quot littus arenas.  
Quod super est, unumque meum speciale  
levamen,*
- 360.** *Imperii Deus est virtus, & gloria nostri,  
A quo certa salus, sceptrum datur, atque  
potestas:  
Qui populos clemens super omnia regna Latinos  
Constituit, pacemque suam commendat amari:  
Cuius spe fruimur, cuius virtute superbos*
- 365.** *Deicimus, cuius populos pietate tuemur:  
Qui nostros auget mira virtute triumphos.  
Ipsius laudamus opus, solumque timemus:  
Hunc unum colimus Regem, Dominumque  
fatemur.  
Cognoscant Avars, quoniam Deus omnipotens  
est.*
- 370.** *Fastus non patimur, gentes servire volentes  
Suscipimus, donisque humiles, & honore  
levamus.  
Quisque suas mensaret opes, viresque suorum;  
Cum queis bella gerat; subqua spe sumpserit  
arma;  
Divinum, sibimet plus consulat, unde petatur*
- 375.** *Auxilium; poterint si numina vana potentem  
Oppugnare Deum; si possint sponte venire  
Persculpti lapides, surdae, mutaeque figurae,  
Monstraque, quae variis exstant conflata metallis.  
Si caelo tellus bellum movet, arma feretis*
- 380.** *Vos annis adversa meis. Si, Barbare, nescis  
Quid virtus Romana potest, antiqua require,  
Quae proavi, patres, & avi potuere Latini.  
Quid noster senior potuit pater, inscie, disce,  
Sub quo Vandalici ceciderunt strage tyranni,*
- state belongs to God; it does not need earthly arms. It lives by righteous law; it does not inflict war unprovoked,
- 335.** but takes up war when brought upon it. Or if ungrateful peoples refuse to submit, it first warns its enemies in the manner of governance; he who receives these warnings lives, and may expect well-deserved honours from us. Whoever loves peace shall remain secure beneath that peace;
- 340.** and those who desire war shall perish in war's destruction. Whatever people has dared to provoke the Roman standards has shuddered to see its squadrons destroyed by sudden lightning, has watched countless of its own men fall, and its proud Kings seen humbled beneath our feet and broken in our triumphs.
- 345.** So the Chagan prepares to carry standards against my standards? The Avar people threatens me with trumpets and with battlefields unless we give what was agreed? Do you think that our father did what he did out of fear, taking pity on the needy and fugitives when he gave them gifts? In the piety of governance
- 350.** we do this, and order what has been set aside to be given freely. Our hand is generous, not prodigal; it does not know how to squander, but by right dispenses its wealth, by which it holds the world. We give freely to the worthy; to the unworthy we freely refuse. You dare to match your numbers with my numbers, your forces
- 355.** with my forces. We do not trust in our arms alone — even though commanders, companies, and brave tribunes, subjected Kings and subject peoples abound, as many as the drops the sky sends down, as many as the sands on the shore. What remains — and this is my one especial comfort —
- 360.** God is the strength and glory of our empire, from whom sure salvation comes, and sceptre and power are given; who in his mercy has set the Latin peoples above all kingdoms and commends his peace to be loved; in whose hope we rejoice, by whose power we cast down the proud,
- 365.** by whose mercy we protect our peoples; who with wondrous power increases our triumphs. We praise his work, and him alone we fear; this one King we worship, and confess him our Lord. Let the Avars recognise that God is all-powerful.
- 370.** We do not endure arrogance; peoples willing to serve we receive, and with gifts and honour we lift up the humble. Let each man measure his own resources and the strength of his people, with whom he wages war, under what hope he has taken up arms, and, more to his own benefit, let him consider the divine source
- 375.** from which aid may be sought — whether idle divine powers can wage war on almighty God; whether carved stones can come of their own will, deaf and mute figures, and monstrous things fashioned from various metals. If earth wages war on heaven, then carry arms
- 380.** against me in my years. If, Barbarian, you do not know what Roman valour can do, enquire into antiquity, what our Latin great-grandfathers, fathers, and grandfathers could do. Learn, ignorant man, what our elder father could do, under whom the Vandal tyrants fell in slaughter,

385. Edomitique Getae, pubes Alamannica, Franci,  
Totque aliae gentes: famosaque regna per orbem  
Ardua sub nostris flectentia colla triumphis  
Suscepere iugum, mentes, animosque dedere  
Servitio, nobisque manent ex hoste fideles.

390. En Sultan nostrae servire paratus in aula,  
Legatos nobis, & plurima munera mittit.  
Quos contra ingratos defendimus, arma paramus.  
Obstamus dominis, profugis damus ostia servis:  
Legibus hoc nostris non convenit: arguo fastum:

395. Indigenis praebemas opem. Chaganque timeri  
Se putat, & bello mea signa lacescere tentat?  
Ite, licet; campos, acies, & castra parate,  
Signorumque duces certo sperate meorum.  
Contremuit stupefactus Avar, magnoque timore

400. Diriguit, siccis vox humida faucibus haesit,  
Turbatuque malis Augusta ab sede recessit.  
Cetera, consiliis quae princeps providus altis  
Disposuit, verbis fateor comprehendere nullus  
Sufficit, & pleni tenor est in fine libelli.

405. Haec dilata parum, non praetereunda relinquo  
Quaeque suis aptata locis, rerumque favorem,

407. In quantum potis est, devota mente notabo.

385. and the Goths were subdued, and the Alaman youth,  
and the Franks, and so many other peoples; and the  
famous kingdoms throughout the world, lofty ones bowing  
their necks beneath our triumphs, accepted the yoke,  
surrendered their minds and spirits to servitude, and  
remain loyal to us who were once enemies.

390. Behold, the Sultan is ready to serve in our court, and  
sends us envoys and many gifts. Those who oppose our  
ungrateful enemies, for them we prepare arms. We stand  
against their masters, and open our doors to their fugitive  
servants. This does not accord with our laws — I condemn  
this arrogance.

395. We give aid to our own subjects. And the Chagan  
thinks himself to be feared, and attempts to provoke my  
standards to war? Go, then; prepare your fields, your  
battlelines, your camps, and expect the certain coming of  
my standards' commanders.' The Avar trembled in  
stupefaction and with great fear

400. grew rigid; his moist voice stuck in his dry throat, and  
confused by his troubles he withdrew from the Augustan  
throne. The rest — what the far-sighted Prince has  
arranged with his deep counsels — I confess no man is  
able to contain in words; the fullness of the work lies in the  
end of this little book.

405. These things I leave aside briefly, not to be passed  
over, and whatever is fitted to its proper place and the  
favour of events,

407. I shall note, as best I can, with devoted mind.

*Latin text: Corippus, Flavius Cresconius. Fl. Cresconius Corippus de laudibus Iustini Augusti minoris ex recensione P. F. Foggini cum notis variorum. Rome, 1777, pp. 86–107. Available at: [https://archive.org/details/bub\\_gb\\_z2kO0PFk0N0C/page/86/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_z2kO0PFk0N0C/page/86/mode/2up). Translation by the present author.*