

Arenberg-Coimbra Group Laureate 2011 – Francesco LUBIAN

My name is Francesco Lubian, and I studied Classics at the University of Padua. During my first Master year I applied for an Erasmus exchange at Heidelberg University, where I spent seven months between September 2009 and March 2010, both to improve my German and to start writing my thesis in an international and stimulating University. I decided the topic of my thesis in August 2009, before leaving for Heidelberg, together with my Italian supervisors: my aim was to write the first linguistic and exegetical commentary on the shortest poem by the Late Antique Latin poet Prudentius, named Dittochaeon.

I can say that my Erasmus exchange has been very important for my thesis, mainly because of the many stimulating conversations I could have with German professors. Also the richness of Heidelberg University Library turned out to be very important for my work: I am quite sure that I could not have reached such a bibliographical completeness if I had stayed in Italy.

*I returned to Italy in March 2010, and I continued writing my thesis with the fundamental support of my Italian supervisors; the work, with the title “*Omnia conveniunt Christo. A translation and commentary of Prudentius’ Dittochaeon*”, was defended on July, 7th 2010.*

I am convinced that my Erasmus stay has been more than an enriching experience: it really opened my mind; it gave me an international outlook that I did not have before, and changed the way I think of myself as a young post-graduate.

I am very happy and honoured of having being awarded the Arenberg Prize 2011, because it is an important confirmation that international experiences are really precious for both personal and academic growth, and it also encourages me to further my international approach to my PhD research activity I am now beginning.

PRUDENTIUS’ DITTOCHAEON: AN OUTLOOK ON ITS GENRE AND STRUCTURE

(This brief paper is based on my Master thesis *Omnia conveniunt Christo. A translation and commentary of Prudentius’ Dittochaeon*).

The *Dittochaeon* by Prudentius (348 – 410) consists of a series of 48 *tituli* or tetrastichs, that is to say epigrams of four hexameters, which describe lost figurative representations of biblical episodes, 24 from the Old and 24 from the New Testament. This work was very popular in the Middle Ages, when it was probably used as a short summary of the Bible, but since Humanism it had been forgotten until the end of the XIXth century, when a few articles by German philologists and critics rediscovered Prudentius’ work¹. After that discovery, some minor contributions have been written in the XXth century, and an important archaeological commentary by R. Pillinger appeared in 1980²; then the work was again practically forgotten.

¹ A. RÖSLER, *Der katholischer Dichter Prudentius. Ein Beitrag zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte des vierten und fünften Jahrhunderts*, Freiburg 1886; G. SIXT, *Des Prudentius Buch Dittochaeon*, in «Korrespondenz-Blatt für die Gelehrten- und Realschulen Württenbergs» XXXVII (1890), pp. 420-29 and 458-64; S. MERKLE, *Prudentius’ Dittochaeum*, in AA. VV., *Festschrift zum elfhundertjährigen Jubiläum des Deutschen Campo Santo in Rom*, Freiburg 1897, pp. 33-45; J.P. KIRSCH, *Le Dittochaeum de Prudence et les monuments de l’antiquité chrétienne*, in AA. VV., *Atti del II° Congresso Internazionale di Archeologia Cristiana tenuto in Roma nell’aprile 1900*, Roma 1902, pp. 127-31.

² R. PILLINGER, *Die tituli historiarum oder das sogenannte Dittochaeon des Prudentius. Versuch eines philologischarchäologischen Kommentars*, Wien 1980.

A study of the *Dittochaeon* is impossible without placing it in the context of the literary genre defined by A. Quacquarelli "iconological"³, a genre that has not yet received, in my opinion, a satisfactory attention from the scholars. The iconological genre appeared at the end of the IVth century⁴, together with the diffusion of big worship buildings and of their decoration systems, which were constituted also by series of images from the Old and the New Testament. In the historical context of the IVth and Vth centuries, the series of images and their captions were a fundamental support to the catechetical message, doubtlessly comparable to the one provided by the contemporary great sermon cycles, as it is attested by Gregory the Great (late VIth century):

*Idcirco enim pictura in ecclesiis adhibetur, ut hi qui litteras nesciunt saltem in parietibus videndo legant, quae legere in codicibus non valent*⁵.

The didactic aim is, as it clearly emerges from our testimonies, one of the main characteristics of the Christian art of the first centuries; the new art develops its language in a condition of multiple and mutual relationships with other forms of catechesis: «Christian iconography expresses, with the means of a *genus dicendi simplex*, all the spirituality and the historicity of the first communities, and transmits the same principles of the ancient Fathers of the Church, for whom Christian art, biblical exegesis and catechesis spoke the same language⁶». For this reason the iconological genre gained a popularity that, even if not particularly evident to us due to the probable lost of many witnesses, was doubtlessly remarkable, and lasted till the Carolingian period, with the *tituli* attributed to Walahfridus Strabo and Ekkehard IV Sangallensis.

The literary works that belong to this genre consist of a series of short poetical texts associated to depictions of biblical episodes, situated in places of worship. So the iconological genre is, due to its formal characteristics, an example of *forma brevis*; the themes are the same as in the poetical paraphrases of the Bible⁷ (having as a distinctive feature the use of a short epigrammatic form), but with specific peculiarities, since *tituli*'s aim is to describe art objects⁸: for this aspect they should be framed in the broader group of the so-called "Bildertituli"⁹. The works usually numbered among the iconological genre,

³ A. QUACQUARELLI, *Reazione pagana e trasformazione della cultura*, Bari 1986, pp. 166-71; see also D. MAZZOLENI, *Patristica ed epigrafia*, in A. QUACQUARELLI (ed.), *Complementi interdisciplinari di patrologia*, Roma 1989, pp. 326-32.

⁴ A. QUACQUARELLI, *Reazione pagana cit.*, p. 168. For testimonies about the first iconological series, see F. X. KRAUS, *Geschichte der christlichen Kunst*, Freiburg 1985, pp. 381-4; A. GRABAR, *Sujets bibliques au service de l'iconographie*, in AA. VV., *La Bibbia nell'alto Medioevo*, «Settimane del centro italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo di Spoleto», X (1963), pp. 387-90.

⁵ GREG. MAGN. *reg. epist.* 9, 209 l. 3

⁶ M. PERRYMOND, *Paradigmi di esegesi figurale nell'arte paleocristiana*, Roma 2007, p. 124. See also F. BISCONTI, *Letteratura patristica ed iconografia paleocristiana*, in *Complementi interdisciplinari cit.*, p. 379.

⁷ About biblical paraphrase see A. NAZZARO, *Motivi e forme della poesia cristiana antica tra scrittura e tradizione classica*, in AA. VV., *Motivi e forme della poesia cristiana antica tra scrittura e tradizione classica*, Roma 2008, pp. 38-50 and J.-L. CHARLET, *L'inspiration et la forme bibliques dans la poésie latine chrétienne du III^e au VI^e siècle*, in *Le monde latin antique cit.*, pp. 631-43; Charlet also underlines the specific nature, in this context, of the Biblical paraphrase offered by the *Dittochaeon*: «Cette série d'épigrammes narratives constitue une espèce d'anthologie poétique de la Bible (peut-être d'intention simplement didactique?) Elle crée en tout cas une forme nouvelle de paraphrase poétique du texte sacré» (p. 636).

⁸ For an operative analysis of the forms of *descriptio* in Latin poetry see among others G. RAVENNA, *Ekphrasis, descriptio*, Padova 1980, pp. 3-14.

⁹ G. BERNT, *Das lateinische Epigramm im Übergang von der Spätantike zum frühen Mittelalter*, München 1968, p. 21: «Bilder aller Art, also Skulpturen, Malereien, Miniaturen, Darstellungen auf Zier- und Gebrauchsgegenständen, besonders auf Gefäßen, bieten der Erklärung, Deutung und wiederum der poetischen Repräsentation durch Tituli weitere sehr verschiedene Gegenstände. Bilder aus dem Gebiet der

in the period from the IVth to the VIth century, are, besides the *Dittochaeon*, Ambrose's *Disticha*, the epigram *Miracula Christi* by Ps. Claudian, and finally Elpidius Rusticus' *Tristicha*.

Anyhow, it has to be admitted that Prudentius' *Dittochaeon* really stands out among this general outlook, due to some individual characteristics: first of all his length, both as a whole and relatively to every single epigram (48 episodes, each of them described in 4 verses, for an overall length of 192 verses); therefore the author had the chance to describe the biblical episodes with wealth of details. I don't think that it should imply the pre-eminence of the narrative aim over the exegetical one. In fact, even without considering that Prudentius' vocabulary is (as it is shown in detail in the commentary) very similar to the one employed by preachers, and, in general terms, by Western Patristic, and that the typological interpretation that shapes the whole poem emerges sometimes from the use of single words like *crux* for Moses' stick (v. 48) or *signum sanguinis* for Rahab's red rope (v. 64), there are also a lot of explicit interventions, both exegetical (vv. 7-8; 55-6; 58-9; 77-9) and moral (v. 33; 71-2; 159-60; 163-4). So the exceptional length of this poem corresponds also to the exceptional nature of an iconological program which (in contrast with all the other works belonging to the iconological genre) is composed by two parallel series of 24 tetrastichs each, and which shows a great complexity in its internal geometry.

Exceptional is also the structure of this poetic work. Fundamental for the structure of the *Dittochaeon*, as well as for the whole poetic world of Prudentius, is in fact the role of "Figuraldeutung" or typology¹⁰. I think that in the *Dittochaeon* a typological organization is evident since from the choice of a parallel number of old- and new-testamentarian episodes, but, being aware that "in the paleochristian iconological syntax we have no fixed rules"¹¹, I am not sure that here could be found a simple, 1:1 correspondence between the tetrastichs: the search for a rigorous binary correspondence, in my opinion, could sometimes lead to force the author's willing with unlikely parallels.

I rather think that Prudentius here activated less strict, though not unintelligible¹², correspondences between narrative macro-sequences of the two series: 1 - 7 and 25 - 31 (the origins and the patriarchs; the childhood of Christ), 8 - 14 and 32 - 38 (the core sequence of the both series, with the miracles of Moses and Christ), and finally 15 - 24 and 39 - 48 (the last episodes of the Old Testament; the realization of the Divine redemption).

If we adopt this schema, which we could call of "variable geometry typology", we can detect numerous typological relationships, all well attested by Patristic authors. Here we can only nominate some tendency lines which operate through the whole work:

- Christological typology (Joseph; Moses; Samson; David; Salomon);
- Sacramental typology, both baptismal (Deluge; Red Sea crossing; the miracle of Siloah) and eucharistic (Manna; the wedding at Cana; the multiplication of bread);

Mythologie einerseits, christliche religiöse Darstellungen andererseits haben tituli angeregt»; see also M. LAUSBERG, *Das Einzeldistichon*, München 1982, pp. 191-2 and 219-23.

¹⁰ On the role of typology in Prudentius' poetry see L. PADOVESE, *La cristologia di Aurelio Prudenzio Clemente*, Roma 1980, pp. 75 - 90 and R. PALLA, *L'interpretazione figurale nelle opera di Prudenzio*, in «La Scuola Cattolica» 1978, pp. 143 - 168.

¹¹ A. QUACQUARELLI, *Ut rhetorica pictura nella sequenza degli schemi*, in AA. VV., *Filologia e forme letterarie. Studi offerti a Francesco Della Corte*, Urbino 1987, IV, p. 340.

¹² On the absence of direct, binary correspondences in the oldest iconographical cycles see A. GRABAR, *Sujets bibliques cit.*, pp. 395-8.

- Staurological typology (the bronze serpent; Moses' stick; the piece of wood threw by Eliseus in the Jordan);
- Apostolic and ecclesiological typology (Noah's Ark; the twelve springs at Elim; the twelve stones in the Jordan; the massacre of the Innocents; the miracle at the "Beautiful Gate").

To sum up, the *Dittochaeon* shows to have a refined structure, innervated by a multiplicity of typological lines, and oriented in christological sense: an unmistakable hallmark of Prudentius' personality and poetry.