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## SIGLE ȘI ABREVIERI / SIGLE E ABBREVIAZIONI\*

<i>AARMSI</i>	<i>Academia Română. Memoriile secțiunii istorice</i> , București.
<i>AIIA-Iași</i> Bailly 2020	<i>Anuarul Institutului de Istorie și Arheologie</i> , Iași. M. A. Bailly, <i>Dictionnaire Grec-Français</i> , nouvelle édition revue et corrigée, dite Bailly 2020, Gérard Gréco, 2020.
<i>BHAC</i>	<i>Bonner Historia-Augusta-Colloquium</i> , Bonn.
<i>CCSL</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina</i> , Turnhout.
<i>CCSG</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum. Series Graeca</i> , Turnhout.
<i>CI</i>	<i>Codex Iustinianus</i> .
<i>CSEL</i>	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i> , Wien.
<i>CTh</i>	<i>Codex Theodosianus</i> .
<i>Danubius</i>	<i>Danubius. Revista Muzeului de Istorie Galați</i> , Galați
<i>EAGLE</i>	<i>Electronic Archive for Greek and Latin Epigraphy</i> .
<i>EDR</i>	<i>Epigraphic Database Roma</i> ( <a href="http://www.edr-edr.it/default/index.php">http://www.edr-edr.it/default/index.php</a> ).
<i>EP</i>	<i>Epigraphy Packard Humanities Institute. Cornell University</i> .
<i>HGV</i>	<i>Heidelberger Gesamtverzeichnis der griechischen Papyrusurkunden Ägyptens</i> .
<i>Istros</i>	<i>Istros</i> , Muzeul Brăilei „Carol I”.
Lampe	<i>A Patristic Greek Lexicon</i> , edited by G. W. H. Lampe, Oxford, 1961.
<i>LIMC</i>	<i>Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae</i> , I-VIII, Zürich- München, 1981-1997.
<i>MGH</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i> .
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Graeca</i> , Paris.
<i>Phaos</i>	<i>Phaos. Revista de estudos clássicos</i> , Campinas
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina</i> , Paris.
<i>PLRE I</i>	<i>The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire</i> , I, A. D. 260-395, by A. H. M. Jones, J. R. Martindale, J. Morris, Cambridge, 2006.
<i>Pontica</i>	<i>Pontica</i> , Muzeul de Istorie Națională și Arheologie, Constanța.
<i>RE</i>	<i>Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> (Pauly-Wissowa-Kroll), Stuttgart-München.
<i>RT</i>	<i>Revista Teologică</i> , Sibiu.

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\* Cu excepția celor din *L'Année Philologique* și *L'Année Épigraphique* / Escluse quelle segnalate da *L'Année Philologique* e *L'Année Épigraphique*.

<i>SC</i>	<i>Sources Chrétiennes</i> , Lyon.
<i>SCIVA</i>	<i>Studii și cercetări de istorie veche și arheologie</i> , București.
<i>ThLL</i>	<i>Thesaurus linguae Latinae</i> .

## DRACONTIUS AND THE CROSSROAD OF RELIGIONS IN VANDAL AFRICA

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**Keywords:** *Vandal kingdom, Dracontius, conflict between Arianism and Nicene Creed, poetry as criticism and protest.*

**Summary:** *The North African territory under Vandal domination in the 5th century AD is a real laboratory of religious experiences that testifies the overlap and imposition of Arianism on a population largely converted to Catholic Christianity for several generations, while pagan beliefs, habits and customs still survive, especially in rural areas. Against this background, the orator and poet Dracontius tries to carry out a delicate mediation between subjects and power, with the ambition to play an educational role towards both (a failed attempt that costs him a long prison sentence). This paper focuses on some themes that cut across Dracontius' corpus (both mythological and Christian poems), witnessing to his commitment and efforts against Vandals' constrictive religious policy, in order to promote a peaceful coexistence between rulers and ruled, but without ever denying his Nicene Creed.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *regatul vandal, Dracontius, conflict între arianism și Crezul nicean, poezia ca critică și protest.*

**Rezumat:** *Dracontius și intersecția religiilor în Africa vandală.* Teritoriul nord-african sub dominația vandală în secolul al V-lea d.Hr. este un adevărat laborator de experiențe religioase care dovedește suprapunerea și impunerea arianismului asupra unei populații convertite în mare parte la creștinismul catolic de mai multe generații, în timp ce credințele, obiceiurile și obiceiurile păgâne încă supraviețuiesc în zonele rurale. În acest context, oratorul și poetul Dracontius încearcă să desfășoare o delicată mediere între supuși și putere, cu ambiția de a juca un rol educativ față de amândoi (o încercare eșuată, care îl costă o pedeapsă cu o lungă detenție). Această lucrare se concentrează asupra unor teme care traversează corpus-ul lui Dracontius (atât poezii mitologice, cât și creștine) și care mărturisind angajamentul și eforturile sale împotriva politicii religioase restrictive a vandalilor, pentru a promova o coexistență pașnică între conducători și guvernanți, dar fără a nega vreodată Crezul nicean.

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### ***The crossroad of religions***

The North African territory under Vandal domination in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD can be considered as a real laboratory of religious experiences, which testifies the overlap and imposition of Arianism on a population largely converted to Catholic Christianity for several generations<sup>1</sup>. At the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, indeed, the people of North Africa under Roman rule adhered to a great extent to Nicene Christianity<sup>2</sup>. This does not exclude, however, the presence of a pagan minority that continued to keep their beliefs and to practice their rituals, especially in peripheral and rural areas<sup>3</sup>. This caused, on the one side, the violent reaction of the Christian church and elite, which pushed the faithful to destroy the pagan objects and places of worship, as it happened on certain occasions<sup>4</sup>. Augustine, in one of his *Sermons*, encourages his audience to remove the traces of pagan religion persisting in that region, starting by the question: *si ergo dii Romani Romae defecerunt, hic quare remanserunt?* “So, if the Roman gods have disappeared from Rome, why do they still remain here?”<sup>5</sup> Sometimes, it was the civil authorities that carried out the destruction of pagan temples and idols, as Augustine himself testifies in his *De ciuitate Dei*: Gaudentius and Jovius, *comites imperatoris Honorii*, magistrates sent to Carthage by emperor Honorius in 399, *falsorum deorum templa euerterunt et simulacra fregerunt*, “destroyed the temples and broke the statues of the false gods”<sup>6</sup>. In the same year, Honorius sent a constitution to Apollodorus, proconsul of Africa, in order to restate the prohibition of pagan sacrifices, but also to prevent the destruction of the temples “where no wrongdoing was found”: *aedes illicitis rebus uacuas nostrarum beneficio sanctionum ne quis conetur euertere*<sup>7</sup>. These destructive actions were not rare, if the emperor had

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Pottier 2015; Whelan 2018, 29-54 and *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Leone 2011-2012; Rebillard 2012, 61-91.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Leone 2013, 6-26 and *passim*; Gassman 2018. The pagan presence is accentuated (maybe overestimated) by Isola 1990, 71-72.

<sup>4</sup> On the combative posture of the Christian church against pagans: Leone 2007. On the destruction of temples, smashing of statues and other acts of violence: Shaw 2011, 222-243 and *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> Aug. *Serm.* 24.6, to be read with Magalhães de Oliveira 2006 and Lomiento 2017. Cf. also Aug. *De cons. evang.* 1.16.34, with Stewart 1999, 179-180.

<sup>6</sup> Aug. *De ciu. Dei*, 18.54. Cf. Lander 2017, 192-202.

<sup>7</sup> *CTh.* 16.10.18. Cf. Leone 2013, 55-61.

to intervene to stop them with his constitution, despite reaffirming his support to Christianity<sup>8</sup>.

On the other side, pagan survivals were often mixed with the Christian religion, producing a kind of cultural blending and even a syncretism, as evidenced by Augustine, who harshly criticizes this social phenomenon in many points of his works. In his *Sermon* 62, for instance, he speaks of the Christians who come to the church, *cum recumbuerint in idolio*, “after attending a banquet in a pagan temple”<sup>9</sup>. In his *Sermon* 196 he challenges the mixture of Christian and pagan rites in occasion of the beginning of the new year, recounting that “Christians went to the sea and performed some ablutions according to the customs of pagan festivals” (*de solemnitate superstitiosa pagana*)<sup>10</sup>. In his letter 98, Augustine talks about the Christians who baptize their children, “while entrusting their health to the protection of the demons through sacrifices” (*cum eos daemoniorum sacrificiis sanare conantur*)<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, Augustine speaks of popular superstitions, such as witchcraft, dating back to pre-Roman times, as well<sup>12</sup>. This mixed picture of religion in North Africa, which is confirmed by other witnesses, such as the mysterious bishop of Carthage, Quodvultdeus (pupil of Augustine)<sup>13</sup>, by his sermon *De tempore barbarico*<sup>14</sup>, is further complicated by the arrival of the Vandals.

They crossed from Spain to Africa in 429, under the king Genseric, and advanced eastwards along the coast, first conquering the *Mauritania* and *Numidia*, then the *Africa proconsularis*: Genseric founded the kingdom of Vandals and Alans, and set up its capital at Carthage. According to literary sources, such as Quodvultdeus, Victor of Vita and Fulgentius of Ruspe, the advance of the Vandals led to wide-

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<sup>8</sup> An episcopal council of Carthage decreed in 401 (under the empire of Honorius himself) that pagan temples and statues had to be completely destroyed: *Concil. Carth.* 16 June 401 = *Reg. Eccl. Carth. Excerpt.* 58 (CCL 149 = Munier 1974, 196). Cf. Riggs 2001, 293; Cameron 2010, 784.

<sup>9</sup> Aug. *Serm.* 62.4. Cf. Rebillard 2012, 77-78.

<sup>10</sup> Aug. *Serm.* 196.4. Cf. Van Slyke 2005, *praes.* 64-66.

<sup>11</sup> Aug. *Epist.* 98.1-4. Cf. Nagel 1980, 133-144.

<sup>12</sup> *E.g.* Aug. *Serm.* 4.36; *Tr. in Ioh. eu.* 7.7. Cf. Brown 1972, 119-146.

<sup>13</sup> On this interesting and mysterious character: Finn 2004, 1-21; Vopřada 2019, 57-91 and *passim*.

<sup>14</sup> CCL 60 = Braun 1976, 423-437 (*sermo* I), 473-486 (*sermo* II). Cf. Isola 1990, 71-74.

spread destruction and all sorts of atrocities<sup>15</sup>; but archeological evidence does not confirm this version of events, which may be affected by the resentment against the invading people. Anyway, the kingdom of Vandals will turn out to be stable and relatively prosperous, especially on the cultural side. There was an intellectual and literary flourishing: yet it is disputed whether this blossoming was due to the resilience of local intellectuals, or to the foresight of Vandal leadership, which allowed and maybe even encouraged the survival and development of Roman cultural tradition, kept alive in the schools of rhetoric and put on display on public ceremonies and official showcases<sup>16</sup>.

On the other hand, the Vandals tried for several decades to impose Arianism on African people and persecuted the Nicene Christians<sup>17</sup>. Actually, there are contrasting opinions on this point: some literary sources underscore the violence and continuity of this persecution, since the conquest of North Africa. Victor of Vita, in his *History of the Vandal Persecution*, for instance, speaks of many attacks against “distinguished bishops and honest priests”, as well as “wicked ferocity” inflicted on Catholic churches and properties<sup>18</sup>. A recent trend of historical criticism recognizes the relative moderation of Genseric, who seems to have granted freedom of worship to his subjects, while

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<sup>15</sup> Victor of Vita (a fifth-century bishop of Byzacena) recorded the persecution of Nicene Christians by the Arian Vandals in his *Historia persecutionis Africanae prouinciae*, detailing the violent measures taken under the reigns of Genseric (429-477) and his son and successor Huneric (477-484) to repress the orthodox religion of the conquered, native majority: cf. Shanzer 2004; Howe 2007, 183-282 and *passim*. Conversely, Fournier 2019 offers an alternative reading of Victor’s work as tendentious propaganda (but this falls under the “revisionist interpretation” that I will say more about *infra*). The importance of Fulgentius, the exiled bishop of Ruspe (503-523), as “the spokesman of the orthodox African church against the Arian Vandals” (Stevens 1982, 327), has long been recognized: Modéran 1998. It is also worth recalling the evidence provided by the *Vita Fulgentii* (generally attributed to Ferrandus of Carthage, but more recently to Redemptus, a monk of Telepte): Modéran 1993.

<sup>16</sup> On the so-called “Vandal renaissance”: Hays 2004; Tommasi Moreschini 2008. On the (supposed) fruitful collaboration between Romans and Vandals: Clover 1993, 57-73 and *passim*.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Modéran 2004, as well as the bibliography just quoted (note 15).

<sup>18</sup> Vict. *Hist. pers. Afr. prou.* 1.4: the Vandals “gave vent to their wicked ferocity with great strength against the churches and basilicas of the saints, cemeteries and monasteries, so that they burned houses of prayer with fires greater than those they used against the cities and all the towns”.

imposing heavy taxes on Nicene clergy<sup>19</sup>. Then, his successors adopted stricter and harsher religious policies, reaching up to the prohibition and persecution<sup>20</sup>.

### ***The tamer of the Vandals***

*Blossius Aemilius Dracontius* flourished in the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century<sup>21</sup>: the little we know of his life is found in his works. Ten of his poems are handed down by a single manuscript (the *Neapolitanus* IV E 48) under the title *Romulea*, which clearly refers to the Roman cultural tradition<sup>22</sup>. They are declamations (that is fictitious judicial speeches) in poetic form<sup>23</sup>, mythological poems and epithalamia, which are more or less closely connected to the environment and practices of the school of rhetoric: they say a lot about the education and cultural background of their author<sup>24</sup>.

He addresses indeed two short poems to his teacher and head of the school, the grammarian Felicianus: *Romulea* 1 and 3. The first of these<sup>25</sup> offers a meaningful comparison between the beloved teacher and the legendary poet, singer and musician Orpheus, who charmed and tamed wild animals by playing his lyre and singing: Felicianus gathers Romans and Vandals in his school, keeping them in harmony with his fascinating teaching (lines 12-16), just like Orpheus brought together “domestic animals” and “wild beasts” (*benignus grex... cum cruenta bestia*), freeing the latter from their rage and the former from the fear (lines 1-11). This simile has been commonly seen as a pure encomiastic device, but maybe it tells something important about the social background and especially about the relationship between Romans and Vandals. Dracontius claims in fact that “the lyre of the Muses and Orpheus brought together those animals to which Mo-

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<sup>19</sup> For a reliable reconstruction of Genseric’s religious politics: Heather 2007. On the kingdom of Genseric in general cf. Vössing 2018, 53-88.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Merrills & Miles 2010, 184-196; Vössing 2018, 89-105.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Moussy & Camus 1985, 12; Luceri 2019, 26. On Dracontius’ biography: Díaz de Bustamante 1978, 33-96; Moussy & Camus 1985, 7-55.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Wolff 2001, 3. On Dracontius’ bond with Roman tradition: Wolff 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Thorough and detailed analysis by Stoehr-Monjou 2015 and Scafoglio 2019.

<sup>24</sup> On the scholastic and rhetorical dimension in Dracontius’ works: Bouquet 1996; De Gaetano 2009, 123-166 and *passim*.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Stoehr-Monjou 2005; Casamento 2017, 177-179.



ther Nature denies harmony”<sup>26</sup>. Then, he turns to Felicianus and praises him for two reasons. First, because he restores “the literary studies that had been driven away from the African city”, that is Carthage (lines 12-13):

*sancte pater, o magister, taliter canendus es,  
qui fugatas Africanae reddis urbi litteras.*

The poet speaks of *fugatae Africanae urbi litterae*: we know that Carthage enjoyed a long and strong (Roman) cultural tradition in Late Antiquity, up to the time of Augustin<sup>27</sup>, i.e. before the arrival of the Vandals. Who, if not the Vandals, “put to flight” the literary studies? Dracontius’ witness, albeit expressed in the foreshortened form of a poetical metaphor, goes just in the opposite direction to the current historiographic tendency asserting that the cultural flourishing under the reign of the Vandals was promoted and encouraged by the rulers<sup>28</sup>. Dracontius presents Felicianus’ teaching (that is to say, the survival and persistence of the school) rather as a kind of resistance of the subjects, who tried to keep alive their identity and conscience by means of the cultural heritage.

The second reason for which Felicianus is praised is that he “puts together the descendants of Romulus and the barbarians in the same classroom”, prompting them to wonder and fascinating them with “the great sweetness of his voice” (lines 14-16):

*barbaris qui Romulidas iungis auditorio,  
cuius ordines profecto semper obstupescimus,  
quos capit dulcedo uestri, doctor, oris maxima.*

In the intentions of Dracontius, and at least partly in historical reality, the school was the right place to preserve and promote the Roman cultural heritage, but also the place of coexistence and exchange between Romans and Vandals. School provides (or should provide) a model for a *modus uiuendi*: a social balance between rulers and sub-

<sup>26</sup> Lines 10-11: *artifex natura rerum quis negat concordiam, / hos chelys musea totos Orpheusque miscuit.*

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Aug. Conf.* 6.7.11; Gualandri 1989, 498; Sears 2017, 40-43.

<sup>28</sup> On the line of “revisionism” and reappraisal of Vandals’ politics: Clover 1993; Liebeschuetz 2003; Berndt 2007; Conant 2012. A more balanced approach is adopted by Vössing 2014.

jects. It seems therefore that the Vandals in a first time “put to flight” the literary studies, which were kept alive by Roman intellectuals as work of resistance; but in a second time they accepted and even appreciated the *Africananae litterae*, to such an extent that they also wanted their children to attend the (Roman) school of rhetoric. What emerges from Dracontius’ poem is consistent with the politics of recuperation and appropriation of Roman juridical heritage and administrative structure that Vandals carried on in North Africa.

Does religion have anything to do with the praise of Felicianus and (Roman) school as bulwark of civilization and factor of social cohesion? Of course it has, in so far as religion is an integral part of social life, and we know that it was the main reason for the conflict between the Arian conquerors and the largely Catholic people. Actually, religion is not explicitly mentioned in the poem, but many signs point in this direction. Orpheus is notoriously a Christological symbol in early Christian art: in paintings and mosaics dating back to centuries from 3<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup>, found throughout the imperial territory, including North Africa, he constitutes an “image” of Christ<sup>29</sup>. Orpheus’s capacity to charm and tame wild animals is compared to the latter’s power to persuade and soften human hearts, even the harder ones. In Christian iconography, the conventional scene of Orpheus followed by animals (especially sheep) represents the evangelical theme of the “good shepherd”<sup>30</sup>: we can recognize it in Dracontius’ description of Orpheus “followed by meek sheep” (line 4). Moreover, the poet calls Felicianus with the names *sancte pater* and *magister* (line 12), which recall respectively God and Jesus in Christian language<sup>31</sup>. Thus, he expresses his religious respect for his teacher, whom he will even gratify with a symbolic apotheosis by means of the Euhemerism (in the wake of Lucretius and Virgil) in the other eulogy that he addresses to him (*Romul. 3*)<sup>32</sup>. But he also expresses his joy, or rather the need, for a double reconciliation: on the one side, between classical heritage and Christia-

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Friedman 2000, 38-85; Stoehr-Monjou 2005, 195-197.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Henry 1992, 52-54 and *passim*; Jensen 2000, 41-42.

<sup>31</sup> The term *magister* is used in the *Vulgate* to translate the Hebrew *rabbi* (רַבִּי), speaking of Jesus Christ (e.g. *Mt* 8.19 and *passim*): cf. Stoehr-Monjou 2005, 195 and note 46.

<sup>32</sup> This poem reveals many reasons of interest, beginning with the expedient of Euhemerism; but it has been comparatively little investigated. Cf. Stoehr-Monjou 2019, 100-102.

nism; on the other side, between Romans and Vandals, in the sign of classical heritage and Christianity.

### ***The rich, the poor and the abuses of power***

The school of rhetoric bore good fruits. Dracontius practiced as an advocate in Carthage and attained a respected place in society. We learn it from the *subscriptio* we find with one of his poems, the *Controuersia de statua uiri fortis*, in the Neapolitan codex. As the title clearly indicates, this poem is a *controuersia*: a kind of declamation referred to a fictional legal controversy (a rhetorical exercise regularly practiced in Roman schools of oratory since the time of Augustus)<sup>33</sup>. The *subscriptio* calls the author “a most renowned lawyer” (*uir clarissimus et togatus*) and refers to a public recitation that was held in the forum of Carthage, in the presence of a proconsul, evidently on occasion of an official ceremony<sup>34</sup>. We may think of a cultural performance in front of an audience made up of the educated class of the city. This kind of events confirms the intellectual blossoming of North Africa, at least in the major cities, under the Vandals. It seems that the wishes once expressed by Dracontius as a young man, as a student in the school of Felicianus, have been fulfilled.

However, if we look more closely at the story told in this poem, something does not fit. The author impersonates a lawyer who defends a poor man from a rich and brave fellow citizen: the latter, after rendering a great service to his city in the war and deserving a reward, demands the life of the former, who sought refuge at the foot of a statue, calling for the right of asylum. Actually, the plot of the story is a little more complicated, since it was the rich man who wanted his citizens to build that monument in his honor and to recognize the right of asylum by the statue<sup>35</sup>. Thus, the poor man takes refuge at

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<sup>33</sup> On this poem cf. Bureau 2006; Michel d’Annoville & Stoehr-Monjou 2008; Casamento 2017; Scafoglio 2019, 14-20.

<sup>34</sup> *Exp. controuersia statuae uiri fortis quam dixit in Gargilianis thermis Blossus Emilius Dracontius uir clarissimus et togatus fori proconsulis almae Karthaginis apud proconsulem Pacideium.*

<sup>35</sup> Here is the *inscriptio* in prose that accompanies the poem and that summarizes its background: *Vir fortis optet praemium quod uolet. Pauper et diues inimici. Bellum incidit ciuitati. Diues fortiter fecit: reuersus praemii nomine statuam petiit et meruit. Secundo fortiter egit: reuersus petiit praemii nomine asylum fieri*

the statue built by and for his rich adversary, and invokes the right to the protection that the latter established in that place. The speech of the lawyer in defense of the poor man raises important issues, such as the need for mutual respect and solidarity with fellow citizens. But in the end it turns into a powerful indictment of injustice, arrogance and oppression of wealthy and important citizens on the poor and the weak<sup>36</sup>.

What is more, the rich and bad man seems to be backed by the official power. This is why the lawyer, at the climax of the speech, addresses an urgent appeal to the citizens and encourage them to take up arms to defend their rights and freedom (lines 249-253):

*quid, plebs nostra, taces? diues praeiudicat urbi  
et pariter tua iura negat. praescriptio surgit,  
quae populo uitam libertatemque negabit.  
non gemitis, non fletis adhuc, non arma paratis?  
laudis erit, fateor, pro libertate perire.*

“Why do you remain silent, our people? The rich man is harming our city and at the same time is denying your rights. Now comes out a new order that will take away life and freedom from people: aren’t you moaning? Aren’t you still crying? Aren’t you preparing weapons? To die for the fatherland – I shall admit it – is a great honor”.

It is tempting to read this appeal as a denouncement of the abuses and overbearingness of the (Vandal) ruling class on the African people.

And what about religion? Here too, religion is at issue. The poor man sought refuge at the feet of the statue of a highly deserving citizen who, ironically enough, is the same rich that wants to kill him: the former therefore invokes the right of asylum, which the latter had previously established at the statue, but now wishes to deny. The right of asylum at the statues of eminent citizens is otherwise unattested: it seems to be an invention of the poet; but it is attested, at least for the

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*statuam suam et meruit. Tertio fortiter fecit: reuersus petiit praemii nomine ca-  
put pauperis inimici. Pauper ad statuam diuitis confugit. Contradicit.*

<sup>36</sup> E.g. lines 222-223: *iam nemo quietus / diuitis insidiis durabit paupere caeso* (“no one will feel safe from now on, if the poor man is killed by the rich”); lines 233-234: *instar habent hostis quos sanctio nulla coerct. / condemnat solus ciuilia iura tyrannus* (“who has no respect for any law is considered as an enemy: only the tyrant erases the rights of the citizens”).

fugitive slaves, at the statues of the emperor since the time of Tiberius, although scholars do not agree on the nature and application of this legislative provision<sup>37</sup>. Seneca mentions it, for instance, in his treaty *De clementia*, notably 1.18: *seruis ad statuam licet confugere*. The Antonines restored the right of asylum *ad statuas principum* and extended it to the temples of the gods (*in fana deorum*), as we read in the *Institutes of Gaius* (1.53)<sup>38</sup>; and we also find it in the *Institutes of Justinian* (1.8.2) in a slightly different wording (*ad aedem sacram*)<sup>39</sup>. It goes without saying that, after the edict of Thessalonica, which made Nicene Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire (380 AD), the right of asylum was applied to Christian (Catholic) churches<sup>40</sup>.

Now, we might wonder about the meaning to be attributed to the right of asylum that the poet imaginatively attaches to the statue of the eminent citizen: despite the evident analogy with the statue of the emperor, it seems to me that Dracontius tacitly evokes the sacred right of asylum recognized for the places of worship. The destruction or the confiscation of Catholic churches perpetrated by the Vandals marked a complete break with this sacral and humanitarian tradition. We may suppose, then, that Dracontius outlines the weird and complicated story of conflict between the poor and the rich in order to refer, with due discretion and prudence, to highly topical issues.

### ***Shouting out the Nicene Creed from the prison***

But prudence was not enough to keep him safe: Dracontius was indeed sentenced to prison by the Vandal king Gunthamund in 484

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *CTh.* 9.44.1; Manfredini 1986; Gamauf 1999, 137-152.

<sup>38</sup> Gai. *Inst.* 1.53: *Nam consultus a quibusdam praesidibus prouinciarum de his seruis qui ad fana deorum uel ad statuas principum confugiunt, praecepit ut, si intolerabilius uideatur dominorum saeuitia, cogantur seruos suos uendere*. Cf. also *Digest* 1.6.2 (Ulpian).

<sup>39</sup> Giust. *Inst.* 1.8.2: "Having been consulted by certain governors of provinces with reference to slaves who flee for refuge to a sacred edifice or to the statues of the emperors, the divine Pius Antoninus decreed that if the barbarity of the masters appeared to be intolerable, they could be forced to sell their slaves under favorable conditions".

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *CTh.* 9.45.1-4, with the relevant *interpretatio (ecclesiae ac loca deo dicata reos, qui ibidem compulsi timore confugerint, ita tueantur, ut nulli locis sanctis ad direptionem reorum uim ac manus afferre praesumant)*; Barone Adesi 1990; Ducloux 1994; Hallebeek 2005.

and remained there for more than 10 years. In prison, he wrote his Christian works: the *Satisfactio*, an elegiac poem that he addressed to the king, asking forgiveness and pleading for release<sup>41</sup>; and the *De laudibus Dei*, an hexametrical poem in 3 books that celebrates God for the creation of the world, the redemption of humanity and the reward of eternal life illustrated through examples from both the sacred scripture and ancient history<sup>42</sup>.

The reason of his condemnation is not clear, but it is sure that it falls within the framework of the political and religious tension between Vandals and Africans<sup>43</sup>. Dracontius speaks vaguely of his fault in the *Satisfactio*, notably lines 93-96:

*culpa mihi fuerat dominos reticere modestos<sup>44</sup>  
ignotumque mihi scribere uel dominum<sup>45</sup>,  
qualis et ingratos sequitur qui mente profana,  
cum Dominum norunt, idola uana colunt.*

“My fault was to keep silent about forbearing lords and to write about another one, who was unknown to me, similarly to the evil committed by ungrateful men who, despite knowing God, worship vain idols with unholy heart”.

Dracontius admits that his fault was to address his praise to the wrong lord, neglecting the good ones, that is Gunthamund and his

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Schetter 1990; Galli Milić 2009; Goldlust 2015.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Speyer 1996; Arweiler 2007; Tommasi Moreschini 2010; Diederich 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Merrills 2004. Wolff 2004 assumes two different arrests, based on the evidence provided by the poet himself in his works: one on political grounds and the other for corruption (but I do not think so).

<sup>44</sup> On the meaning of the adjective *modestos* cf. Moussy & Camus 1985, 25, note 2. It is true that, on the part of Dracontius, it is “an improbable adjective for the kings who had imprisoned him”, as Fielding 2017, 94, puts it, recognizing an ironic intention. But maybe that adjective falls within the *captatio beneuolentiae*: far from representing reality, it suggests the interlocutors (*domini*) the right attitude to assume (*modestia*: “tactfulness”, “sense of opportunity”, but also “gentleness”, “mildness”, that is the quality leading to forgiveness).

<sup>45</sup> The phrase *ignotum... scribere... dominum* is not clear: some scholars interpret it as “to celebrate a foreign sovereign”, others as “to celebrate a foreigner as a sovereign”. I prefer to translate literally “an unknown lord”, i.e. a powerful person (maybe a king, but it is not sure) that the poet did not know in person. Cf. Merrills 2004, 156-157, “a long-forgotten lord”.

establishment. He compares his guilty behavior to the sinful attitude of pagans and/or heretics, who worship *idola uana* rather than God, even while knowing him. There is a heated and controversial debate on the identity of this *ignotus dominus*: some scholars suggest the eastern Roman emperor Zeno<sup>46</sup>; others think about Odoacer<sup>47</sup> or Theodoric<sup>48</sup>.

The poet admits his guilt: he turns to God as model of clemency, which he invites the emperor to follow. Dracontius seems, or rather pretends, to ignore the religious difference (between Arianism and the Nicene Creed) that separates him from his interlocutor. Yet this difference was a major reason for conflict or tension between the Vandal rulers and their subjects. Furthermore, it was this difference (in addition to political reasons, of course) that heated up a strong rivalry between Gunthamund and one of the just mentioned possible addressees of the unfortunate praise, namely the eastern emperor Zeno, who was invoked by a part of the African people as the legitimate emperor against the Arian invader<sup>49</sup>. How could Dracontius ignore or minimize a difference that was so important and fraught with consequences? How could he hope for forgiveness, without denying his Catholic faith, from an Arian king who was in struggle with the Nicene Creed?

The poet presents himself as a good Christian (without specifying his doctrinal position, as if there were no ongoing religious conflict), a loyal subject and honest citizen who made an involuntary mistake and who seeks forgiveness from both Gunthamund and God. He invites the Vandal sovereign to follow the example of the King of Heaven who forgives the sins of men, and to match his greatness as well as his goodness. He compares Gunthamund to God, or better, recognizes the

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. Clover 1993, 661-674; Schetter 1990, 91-94; De Gaetano 2009, 319.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Corsaro 1962, 7-17; Díaz de Bustamante 1978, 1978, 65-86.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Moussy & Camus 1985, 22-23. On the other hand, Wolff 1998, 383, and Merrills 2004, 156-157, shift the focus to the conflict within the ruling dynasty, the former suggesting that the mysterious addressee of the unfortunate praise was Hilderic (Gunthamund's cousin), the latter thinking of Huneric (uncle and predecessor of the king).

<sup>49</sup> Zeno played an important role in the religious policies of Gunthamund's predecessors: toward the end of his life (476-477), Genseric moderated his attitude toward the Catholics as a response to Zeno's solicitation of tolerance. In 477, at his accession, Huneric even allowed Nicene Christians to reclaim their churches and later, in 479, under pressure again from Zeno, he permitted the election of Eugenius as bishop of Carthage.

middle position that the king occupies between his subjects and God. But the poet also warns the sovereign that the judgment and punishment belong to God, to whom he is subjected and by whom he too will be judged, like any other man<sup>50</sup>. The plea of forgiveness becomes, thus, advice and warning. Gunthamund never forgave him, and this does not surprise at all.

Dracontius was still in prison, when he completed the composition of the other, wide-ranging poem, *De laudibus Dei*, where he celebrates the greatness of God that is reflected in the creation of the world, the Garden of Eden and the beauty of nature: the narration of exemplary episodes coming from the sacred writings and Roman cultural tradition alternates with instructions and meditations on moral themes (such as the original sin and the redemption of humanity, the divine mercy and the gift of eternal life) and with autobiographical hints (as when he laments his long permanence in jail), in a flexible structure that appears to proceed in a winding and almost arbitrary way<sup>51</sup>. The poet has now lost hope in an act of clemency: he speaks openly and even seems to challenge the Arian king, in so far as he expresses his Nicene faith and notably his belief about the trinity without fear<sup>52</sup>. He points out the mystery of the “unique and triple” nature of God in a passage of book 1 that is as short as deep in meaning and effective in style (lines 562-563):

*Solus in aeternum Deus est regnator et auctor,  
virtus trina Deus, triplex Deus omnis et unus.*

“Only God is the sovereign and creator for all eternity, God is three-fold strength, God is three and one at the same time”.

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<sup>50</sup> E.g. lines 305-306: *qui poscit hac lege Deum ut peccata relaxet, / debet et ipse suo parcere ubique reo*; “who asks God to mitigate the evil of the sins under this law, he too must forgive who is guilty towards him in all circumstances”.

<sup>51</sup> The poem is “one of the finest of the late antique biblical epics”, according to Nodes 1989, 282.

<sup>52</sup> About Dracontius’ “Konfrontation mit den arianischen Vandalen” in the *De laudibus Dei* cf. Diederich 2019, 261-264, reaching the conclusion that “deutlicher als auf kulturellem Gebiet tritt Dracontius in theologischen Fragen in Opposition zu den vandalischen Arianern”, and moreover “außer in seinen expliziten Bekenntnissen zum nicänischen Glauben zeigt sich Dracontius’ antivandalische Haltung auch in einzelnen kleinen Nadelstichen und Seitenhieben”.



Later, in book 2, Dracontius launches into a theological harangue of about fifty lines (namely 60-110) that sounds like a creedal statement, illustrating clearly and strongly the Nicene conception. Here is a little sample of his argument among the many possible ones (lines 67-69):

*corde sacer genitus mox constitit ipse parenti,  
et consors cum patre manens et spiritus unus,  
trina mente Deus, Deus auctor, temporis expers.*

“Created of a sacred nature, he (*scil.* Christ) was immediately one with his father: he remained united and unanimous with his father, God with a triple mind, God creator outside of time”.

Towards the end of the passage, Dracontius addresses to an imaginary interlocutor who does not share his conception and, in particular, does not understand the coexistence of God and Christ in only one substance, which is the central point of the Nicene Creed and the main difference with the Arianism (lines 100-106). It is clear that this interlocutor must be an Arian, whom the poet does not hesitate to call *insipiens omnis rationis egenus*, “stupid, completely devoid of understanding” (line 100), since he does not recognize that God is embodied in Christ who descends among men without leaving the heavens, given that father and son are only one substance (lines 101-103):

*nam quicumque sapit nouit quia sic tulit artus  
et fuit in terris, ut nec caeleste tribunal  
linqueret. [...]*

“Indeed anyone wise recognizes that God was incarnated and came down to earth, so that he never left his heavenly throne”.

It is no surprise, therefore, that Dracontius remained in prison. It was Thrasamund, the successor of Gunthamund, who set him free some years later, maybe around 496.

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