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Cuprins

Recenzii şi note de lectură

The Poet Dracontius and his Satisfactio: Latin Poetry as an Instrument of Political Propaganda in the Vandal Kingdom*

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Abstract: *This article deals with the problem of representing the political ideology of the Vandal kingdom in North Africa (429-534) in the Latin literature of the second half of the 5th century, in particular, in the creative work of the Carthaginian poet Blossius Aemilius Dracontius. The panegyric that he wrote, known under the title* Satisfactio*, is a major source of studies on the political propaganda of that period, its content, origins and aims. The main conclusion is that, in shaping his own political doctrine Dracontius, while relying on the "Roman model" in building the image of an ideal ruler (Vandal king) after the fashion of the Late Antique tradition, did not copy it blindly; rather, he added to it some new elements not quite characteristic of it such as, in particular, references to Biblical personages—Old Testament kings, thus having become himself inscribed in that tradition as an independent unit and influenced its subsequent development. The article also offers a few remarks concerning the discussion about the time of appearance of this text, as well as another panegyric by Dracontius, which has not survived and which was dedicated to an "unknown ruler,"* dominus ignotus*, and their possible addressees.*

Keywords: *Dracontius, Vandals, Gunthamund, Thrasamund, Genseric, Huneric, Victor of Vita, Carthage, St. Ambrose of Milan*

The Vandal kingdom in North Africa (429-534) was one of the first barbarian kingdoms that arose against the background of the decline and beginning collapse of the Roman Empire. It stands apart among other similar state formations of the 5th century CE, standing out not only for its vast territorial acquisitions—in the early 6th century, as a result of their expansion, which began with the advent of the Vandals from Spain to Africa at the turn of the 420s and 430s, they gained control over lands along the African coast of the Mediterranean, from Caesarea in the west to Tripolis in the east, and also Sardinia, Corsica, Sicily and the Balearic Islands—but also on account of the political ambitions of the local rulers, which clearly went beyond plundering raids on neighbors.

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The Vandal rulers aimed to achieve, as a minimum, the recognition of their legitimacy and autonomy on the part of the empire, friendly relations both with the West and the East, the possibility to influence political processes both in the West and the East and, as a maximum, their recognition by the emperors as equals.

The kings used highly varied methods to put forward their corresponding claims. Genseric (428-477), who in fact founded the kingdom, married his son to Eudoxia, the daughter of Emperor Valentinian, and thus became a relative of Senator Olybrius, a claimant to the throne of the Western Roman Empire. His great-grandson Gelimer (king of the Vandals in 530-534 and their last ruler), in his correspondence with Emperor Justinian, pointedly addressed him as an equal to an equal, as a "king to a king" (*βασιλεὺς Γελίμερ Ἰουστινιανῷ βασιλεῖ* - Proc. Caes. *De Bellis*. III.9.20).

A substantial share of these claims was satisfied: the legitimacy of territorial acquisitions (conquests) was recognized by Valentinian and Zeno, the emperors of the West and the East, in 442 and 474, respectively; King Genseric, a key figure of the kingdom, was honored with the imperial title of "autocrator" in the work of Procopius of Caesarea *History of the Wars* (*De Bellis*. III.33.3).

The self-awareness of the Vandal rulers as figures practically equal in status to the Roman emperors was fully in line with propaganda whose traces are found in most diverse monuments. These are, for example, coins on which, since the period of the reign of King Gunthamund (484-496), Vandal kings clad in traditional imperial garments, a diadem and a cloak (paludamentum) began to appear in place of Roman emperors and a new legend, *dominus noster rex*, which was a combination of the term *rex* associated with royal power and the imperial title *dominus noster*, was minted.[1] In addition, a number of major literary works aimed, among other things, at shaping the image of an ideal ruler has survived.[2]

What is meant here in the first place is the creative work of the Carthaginian poet Blossius Aemilius Dracontius (mid-5th—early 6th centuries CE). A brilliant connoisseur of classical literature, who offered his own version of the myths of Orestes, Medea and the abduction of Helen, he went down in history, among other things, as the author of at least three panegyric messages to different rulers.

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[1] Warwick Wroth, *Catalogue of the Coins of the Vandals, Ostrogoths and Lombards, and of the Empires of Thessalonica, Nicaea and Trebizond in the British Museum* (London: Printed by order of the Trustees, 1911), 8-16; G. Berndt, R. Steinacher, "Minting in Vandal North Africa: Coins of the Vandal Period in the Coin Cabinet of Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum," *Early Medieval Europe*, 16/3 (2008), 262.

[2] On the so-called "Vandal Renaissance" see, e.g., G. Hays, "Romuleis Libicisque Litteris: Fulgentius and the 'Vandal Renaissance'," in *Vandals, Romans and Berbers: New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa*, ed. Andy Merrills. Aldershot (Ashgate, 2004), 101-132. Yitzhak Hen, *Roman Barbarians: The Royal Court and Culture in the Early Medieval West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 74-87.

Only one of them, which has come down to us under the title *Satisfactio*, has survived about which it is more or less reliably known that it was a second one and that it was written as an excuse for the first panegyric addressed to the "wrong" ruler: Dracontius described the latter one with the words *ignotus mihi dominus* (*Sat.* 93-94). As for the addressee of *Satisfactio*, the author named him using the (expression very similar to the one used as a legend on coins – *rex dominusque* (*Sat.* 107-108, 193-194).

These apologies were required for a reason: Dracontius had been taken into custody for his first panegyric and now expected that *Satisfactio*, in which he appealed to the ruler's benevolence and asked for his mercy, would be able to soften the heart of the king who had arrested him – true, to no avail. It was only after he composed a third similar writing (just like the first one, it has not survived) that the Carthaginian poet was able to gain liberty.

Researchers remain at odds over which it was that these panegyrics were addressed to. The figures of kings Huneric (477-484) and Gunthamund (484-496) are in the center of discussion. The key arguments on which adherents of one viewpoint or another rely are related to the tradition of using the above-mentioned expression, *dominus noster rex*, and the question of the time of its emergence may be regarded as determining both the periodization of the creative work of the Carthaginian poet and the periodization of the development of political ideology in Vandal Africa as a whole.

Initially, it was considered that the first writing was addressed to some foreign – Byzantine or Gothic – ruler (Anastasius, Zeno, or Theodoric), the second one – the already mentioned *Satisfactio* – to Gunthamund, and the third one, to the next Vandal king, Thrasamund (496-523).[3] In 2004, Andy Merrills made a revolutionary assumption that it was not a Byzantine or Gothic ruler but Huneric, the direct predecessor of Gunthamund, who went by the pseudonym *dominus ignotus*: the clans of these Vandal leaders were in a conflict with each other and, allegedly, Gunthamund could not forgive Dracontius for praising his adversary.[4]

Eight years later, Alberto González García proposed still another new interpretation, stating that *dominus ignotus* was nonetheless a foreign ruler, whereas *Satisfactio*, in turn, was addressed to Huneric, that is, it was written not in the days of Gunthamund, but earlier.[5]

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[3] Willy Schetter, "Zur 'Satisfactio' des Dracontius," *Hermes*, 118 Bd., H. 1 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1990), 90-117, here 90; Anita Obermeier, *The History and Anatomy of Auctorial Self-criticism in the European Middle Ages* (Amsterdam: Brill, 1999), 59-61; M. J. Edwards, "Dracontius the African and the Fate of Rome," *Latomus* 63 (2004), 151-160.

[4] Andy Merrills, "The Perils of Panegyric: Dracontius' lost poem and its consequences," in *Vandals, Romans and Berbers: New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa*, ed. Andy Merrills, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 145-162.

[5] Alberto González García, "Hunerico y Draconcio. La imperialización del reino vándalo y la represión de la disidencia," *Herakleion* 5 (2012), 71-83.

In both these works, the basic thesis is that the expression *dominus noster rex* became commonly used in the days of Huneric. The hypotheses of both scholars are based precisely on this premise: it makes it possible equally to attribute Huneric both as ***dominus*** *ignotus* (Merrills) and as *rex* ***dominusque*** (García).

Both Merrills and García are not the only ones who convincingly ascribe the emergence of the formula *dominus (noster) rex* to the days of Huneric; speaking about new works that express this idea, we can at least recall Jonathan Conant's monograph *Staying Roman: Conquest and Identity in Africa and the Mediterranean, 439-700*.[6] The adherents of this point of view usually refer to the work of Christian Courtois about the Vandals in North Africa, who in his turn refers to the *History of the Vandal Persecution* by Victor of Vita.[7]

As a matter of fact, in this work there are cases where the author, through the mouth of his characters, refers to Huneric as *dominus noster rex* (*Vict. Vit.* IV.4; IV.5). However, this fact alone can hardly automatically mean that this formula was indeed in use in the days of this king. Yet several details stand out which, although indirectly, may suggest the opposite.

Firstly, Victor of Vita, who wrote his *History* in the wake of the persecutions which Genseric and Huneric, Vandal kings who were Arians by religion, conducted in Africa against orthodox Christians, published it only under the next ruler, Gunthamund (484-496), and far from the first year of his rule.[8] There is no reason why one should not assume that Victor, in speaking about Huneric, could borrow certain phrases from the political vocabulary of the later period in which the *History of the Vandal Persecution* – that is, the period of Gunthamund's rule – was written and use them simply as formulas characterizing royal power.

Secondly, other sources from which the expression *dominus noster rex* is known – namely, coins and the famous archive of Vandal documents known as the Albertini Tablets – testify that it came into existence precisely in the days of Gunthamund, while no earlier cases are known to exist.[9]

Thirdly, Gunthamund and Huneric were too much of antagonists, and there is no reason to assume any continuity between them, including with respect to political ideology. Thus, whereas Huneric conducted a policy of repression against orthodox Christians, Gunthamund largely brought it to an end: he returned Catholic bishops

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[6] See, e.g., Jonathan Conant, *Staying Roman: Conquest and Identity in Africa and the Mediterranean, 439-700. Cambridge studies in medieval life and thought: fourth series*, 82 (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 44.

[7] Christian Courtois, *Les Vandales et l'Afrique* (Paris: Arts et Métiers Graphiques, 1955), 243, n. 5.

[8] The year 484 is considered to be the time of compiling the main part of the work and the year 489/90, the time of its publication. For more detail, see idem, *Victor de Vita et son œuvre: Étude crit.* (Alger: Imprimerie officielle, 1954), 5-11.

[9] Philip Grierson, "The Tablettes Albertini and the Value of the Solidus in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries A.D.," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 49/1-2 (1959), 73.

from exile and reopened churches closed by his predecessor.[10] Probably, the reason behind this was their personal opposition: Huneric tried to pass the throne to his son Hilderic, methodically removing his competitors, and only his death stopped this process and made it possible for Gunthamund to ascend the throne.[11] Somehow or other, while Huneric followed a certain political line, Gunthamund could hardly have reasons to support and develop it, including terminologically, and we would hardly have seen so many mentions of *dominus noster rex* in his own day, had it been put into circulation by his predecessor.

This provides arguments rather in favor of the traditional view of the periodization of Dracontius' creative work and the addressees of his panegyrics; in any case, it is Gunthamund who is seen as the most likely candidate for the main character of *Satisfactio*. The case with attributing *dominus ignotus* is more complicated; deciding whom the Carthaginian poet had in mind under this title is a problem which calls for a separate study. Its solution falls outside the scope of this article; however, in the context of the current discussion it may be stated that it was hardly Huneric.

As regards the text of *Satisfactio* itself, it may well be said that it has been rather thoroughly studied both in terms of structure and in terms of images.[12] The author opens his poetic monologue with words about how great his sins before God are, then he goes on to offer his apologies to the acting ruler (Gunthamund?), and finally pleads with the king for his clemency, appealing to the examples of various characters, including both Roman rulers (Julius Caesar, Octavian and Commodus – *Sat. 175-190*) and Biblical kings (Solomon and David – *Sat. 157-158*,[13] *169-170*[14]). All of them are shown to be models of mercy (*venia*, *clementia*), which, as Dracontius believes, is an integral trait of a respectable ruler.

The demonstration of all these examples introduces didactic elements into Dracontius' writing and willy-nilly turns it into a repeater of political propaganda. The definition of the essence and sources of the doctrine innate in it is essential for understanding Vandal statehood itself and the place that this North African kingdom occupied in the world after the fall of the Roman Empire.

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[10] *Cambridge Medieval History,* vol. 1, ed. H.M. Gwatkin, J.P. Whitney (Cambridge, 1936), 312; M. Frassetto, *Encyclopedia of Barbarian Europe: Society in Transformation* (Santa-Barbara, 2003), 352.

[11] Merrills, "The Perils of Panegyric: Dracontius' lost poem and its consequences," 145-162.

[12] Schetter, "Zur 'Satisfactio' des Dracontius"; Roswitha Simons, *Dracontius und der Mythos Christliche Weltsicht und pagane Kultur in der ausgehenden Spätantike* (Leipzig, 2005).

[13] *Rex inimicorum populis mucrone pepercit David* ("King David took mercy and saved the enemy people from the sword").

[14] *Exstitit hic prudens, quia noluit esse cruentus, / Pacificusque fuit, consiliique tenax* ("[Solomon] was distinguished by wisdom, not wanting to be stained with blood, he was peaceful and determined in his decisions").

The key points in research literature on this particular subject are formulated as follows: Dracontius was a successor to the traditions of classical Roman literature,[15] and the kingdom itself was an "empire simulator" (*imitatio imperii*) that had adopted all the basic principles of organizing the political, economic and social spheres of life from Rome.[16]

On the whole, it would be hard to argue with the thesis that the Vandal kingdom was modeled on the Roman model: after all, despite their Germanic origin, even the main language that the Vandals used was Latin.[17] However, whether and to what extent this was a mechanical borrowing or, on the contrary, conscious adaptation remains a question.

The image of a "merciful" ruler actually goes back to the antique tradition: it began to take shape as early as the time of Gaius Julius Caesar and was developed in detail by Seneca,[18] and Dracontius' references to the early Roman *principes* appeared to be its logical continuation. Laying emphasis on *clementia principis*, he in addition constructed the image of a Christian ruler, which was still relatively new for Roman literature but which nevertheless began to take root in it, for example, in writings by Eusebius of Caesarea (*Vita Constantini*), St. Augustin (*De Civitate Dei*), and Orosius (*Historiae Adversus Paganos*).

Dracontius' resorting to the images of Biblical kings, however, creates a substantial intrigue. This was a fundamentally new practice for the Roman literary tradition (if we are to consider his creative work in this context). For fairness' sake, it has to be said that similar practice had previously been used by St. Ambrose of Milan (ca. 340-397), who, in his letters to Emperor Theodosius I, compared him to the Old Testament's King David (*Ambr. Med. Epist. LI.7; LI.10; LXII.4*)[19]. The case with St. Ambrose, however, is not an example of a deep-rooted tradition, but rather an exception, a most singular phenomenon, where Dracontius claimed the role of innovator in the same way as his Milan predecessor did. It is interesting to note that certain direct parallels can be drawn between the Dracontius/Gunthamund and St. Ambrose/Theodosius literary cases.

St. Ambrose, just as the Carthaginian poet who lived a century later, appeals to the image of an Old Testament character, pursuing didactic goals: in this case, the author wants to achieve repentance from his respondent for the massacre carried out

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[15] M. L. Tizzoni, *The Poems of Dracontius in their Vandalic and Visigothic Contexts* (Leeds, 2012), 61.

[16] Berndt, Steinacher, "Minting in Vandal North Africa: Coins of the Vandal Period in the Coin Cabinet of Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum," 269.

[17] K. Stern, *Inscribing Devotion and Death*: *Archaeological Evidence for Jewish Populations of North Africa* (Boston: Leiden, 2008), 84.

[18] D. Konstan, "Clemency as a Virtue," *Classical Philology* 4/100 (2005), 337-346; Simons, *Dracontius und der Mythos Christliche Weltsicht und pagane Kultur in der ausgehenden Spätantike*, 65.

[19] For more detail about the character of Theodosius as presented by St. Ambrose, see, e.g., H. Campenhausen, *Ambrosius von Mailand als Kirchenpolitiker* (Berlin, Leipzig, 1929), 166, 238, 253.

in Thessalonica after an uprising in that city in 390. In addition, in both these cases, one can see an attempt to "inscribe" a trait of a Christian ruler (mercy in case of Dracontius and repentance in case of St. Ambrose) in the image of an Old Testament king and present him as an example to follow, referring the reader precisely to that trait.

It is by no means to be ruled out that Dracontius used St. Ambrose's writings as a source in developing his political doctrine: in any case, he was well acquainted with the creative work of the latter.[20] In his day, however, this literary device was an innovation and not a cliché or part of a set pattern. Interestingly enough, it became thus and even was incorporated in the official political doctrine of the empire (Byzantine Empire); only this was in the 7th century under Emperor Heraclius.[21] Later on, the image of an Old Testament king as the model of an ideal ruler gained popularity in the other kingdoms of the barbarian West – for example, in Visigothic Spain[22] or in the Frankish kingdom – as well as in the Empire of Charlemagne,[23] being implemented, in particular, through the rite of unction.

A direct impact of Dracontius' creative work on this course of development of political ideology trends on the successor states of the Roman Empire can at least be assumed. It was highly popular among representatives of the so-called 7th-century Visigothic Renaissance – Spanish writers belonging to the school of the famous encyclopedist St. Isidore of Seville[24]; in fact, the works of the Carthaginian poet have survived as retold by his disciple St. Eugene, Bishop of Toledo, whose disciple St. Julian of Toledo, in his turn, embodied the image of a Biblical king in the main character of his writing *Historia Wambae Regis* (The Story of King Wamba).[25]

Thus, it can be stated that, at least with respect to literature – if we consider it as a means of representing power and, accordingly, as one of the fundamentals of state-building – the Vandal kingdom in Africa was by no means a primitive mold

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[20] Tizzoni, *The Poems of Dracontius in their Vandalic and Visigothic Contexts*, 68.

[21] E. Bakalova, "King David as Model of the Christian Ruler: Some Visual Sources," in *The Biblical Models of Power and Law. Papers of the International Conference,* Bucharest, New Europe College, 2005, ed. I. Biliarsky, R. G. Păun (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Oxford, Wien, 2008), 93-131; M. Kuyumdzhieva, "David Rex Penitent. Some Notes on the Interpretation of King David in Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art," in *The Biblical Models of Power and Law*, 133-152.

[22] J. M. Pizzarro, trans. *Julian of Toledo Historia Wambae Regis* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 131 and, in particular, n. 119.

[23] Concerning the rite of unction and the image of an Old Testament king in the Frankish kingdom and in the Empire of Charlemagne in recent works see, e.g., Mayke de Jong, "Charlemagne's Church," in J. Story (ed.), *Charlemagne. Empire and Society* (Manchester, 2005), 103-135, at 131.

[24] The concept of "Visigothic" or "Isidorian" Renaissance was introduced by Jacques Fontaine (Fontaine 1959, pp. 863-866). It is related, above all, to the person of the encyclopedist St. Isidore of Seville and is used to characterize the culture and, in particular, literature of 7th-century Visigothic Spain.

[25] Pizzarro trans. *Julian of Toledo Historia Wambae Regis*, 131 and, in particular, n. 119.

from the Roman original. The fact is unquestioned that it was based on the antique tradition. This, however, did not prevent it from being a living continuation and development of the latter and introducing in it fundamentally new images and traits which would, in turn, become relevant 100-200 years later in other states – both those which directly described themselves as successors to the Roman Empire (Byzantium, the Empire of Charlemagne) and those which could be formally referred to as "barbarian" and yet which existed based on the antique background and essentially remained part of the Roman world (such as, for example, Visigothic Spain).