

Response to *Il genere iconologico nella poesia latina fra fine IV e VI secolo: cenni preliminari (e un esempio)*

The genre of the *tituli* or verse captions is one of the mostly discussed literary genres of late antiquity but many of its aspects are still unclear. It is therefore most welcome that research into this enigmatic type of texts continues. Several problematic features of the *tituli* are addressed by Francesco Lubian in his well-documented and insightful contribution.

Lubian focuses on four series of *tituli*, three of which are indeed the most complete extant series of such texts. However, his choice for Claudian seems somewhat surprising. Claudian's much debated religious convictions<sup>1</sup> make it improbable – although not impossible – that some late antique churchman, probably a presbyter,<sup>2</sup> should have asked Claudian to compose captions for a cycle of images in a church.

In any investigation of the most important authors in the genre of (Christian) *tituli*, however, Paulinus of Nola seems to be a logical choice.<sup>3</sup> Lubian appropriately begins his article with Paulinus' important statement on *tituli* in *carmen* 27. It is not said explicitly – but the author has realised this without doubt – that this poem of Paulinus actually seems to be the most convincing argument for the notion that captions in verse were present in Christian churches around 400. Another important source for *tituli* is Paulinus' *epistula* 32 to his friend Sulpicius Severus, in which several captions are cited from Paulinus' churches. This letter is in prose; the *tituli* in verses are clearly distinguished from the rest of the text, which seems to point to their specific nature. The aspect of metre is otherwise lacking in the author's enumeration of criteria for defining whether a text is a *titulus* or not (page 2).

The *cenni preliminari* of the article cannot of course include all aspects of the *tituli*-debate. However, in my view, in every discussion of the *tituli* of late antiquity it is necessary to pay attention to their visibility. The fact that most scholars have doubted that it was possible to read the alleged verse captions highly influenced their opinion on the authenticity of the *tituli* as captions. Why would someone write *tituli* at all if they were invisible or if they were seen by people who were illiterate (the vast majority of people in late antiquity)? These questions also influence the interpretation of the *tituli* themselves. For example, why would

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<sup>1</sup> Claudian hardly ever refers to Christianity in his work. Only *Carmen minus* 32 is pro-Christian. *Carmen minus* 50 is a satirical poem mocking the cult of the saints (or at least someone who allegedly put too much trust in some of them). Claudian's authorship of the poems *Laus Christi* (c.m. app. 19) and *Miracula Christi* (c.m. app. 20) is disputed.

<sup>2</sup> A poet did not decide which scenes were depicted in a basilica, since this was the task of a presbyter, see Pillinger (1980), 18.

<sup>3</sup> This is reflected in the work of Arnulf – also cited by Lubian. Arnulf discusses Claudian's *tituli* in chapter 9 (“Zu den übrigen Tituluszyklen der Spätantike”, a very short section).

Prudentius have made ingenuous references to Vergil or Juvencus – as shown convincingly by Lubian in his commentary on *Dittochaeon* 27 – if they were not read?

Several answers are possible, some of which I mention here without pretending to be able to say which is best. First of all, the author might have had the idea of writing for a divine audience – i.e. for God.<sup>4</sup> The *tituli* might also have been exchanged among intellectuals as gifts in the way Paulinus of Nola did. The great reverence for the written word in late antiquity is another possible explanation: even if the *tituli* were not clearly visible, people (also the illiterate) recognised them as texts, and maybe even as hexameters.<sup>5</sup> Finally, priests or ‘guides’ in churches might have explained the content of the *tituli*.<sup>6</sup>

The analysis Lubian gives of *Dittochaeon* 27 is entirely convincing. The parallels are strong (except maybe for *dona ferunt*) and the erudition of Prudentius makes it plausible that he knew the literary tradition very well. Lubian may also be complimented for not using the Vulgate without discussion (as is often done, even for texts earlier than the *Dittochaeon*) but the *Vetus Latina*. I am not sure about the parallel between the amazement of Mary (*Ditt.* 27,106) and Sarah (*Ditt.* 4,15-6), since it seems to me that the incredulity of the latter would be offending for the mother of Christ. Moreover, a stronger parallel to the story of Sarah’s surprise would be the annunciation, which is already described by *titulus* 25. But if a parallel is to be assumed, it would be much more convincing if the images accompanying the *tituli* about the two women were related in their disposition. Prudentius’ *tituli* about Sarah are the fourth and fifth *titulus* in the Old Testament series. *Titulus* 27 is the third New Testament poem in the series, but Lavarenne points to the fact that it should perhaps be transposed to 28 if the images were to be shown in chronological order, thus making it the fourth New Testament *titulus*. If the *tituli* were depicted in the nave of a church (cf. the cycle of images in the Santa Maria Maggiore, built some decades after the publication of Prudentius oeuvre), *titulus* 27 (and its image) about Mary might have faced that about Sarah.<sup>7</sup>

The amazement of Mary might also be explained by the general tendency in late antiquity to emphasise emotions, which e.g. is clearly visible if one compares Juvencus’ epic with its Biblical sources.

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<sup>4</sup> Prudentius seems to hint at this in his praefatio: *Praef.* 35-6, cf. *Ep.* 1-10 and 33-5. Cf. Juvencus *Libri euangeliorum quattuor, praefatio* 22: *hoc (scil. opus) etenim forsan me subtrahet igni.*

<sup>5</sup> Paulinus’ *titulus* in the apse of his *Basilica noua* in Nola (modern Cimitile) was probably depicted in two rows of seven hexameters, see Lehmann (1992), 254-6.

<sup>6</sup> One is reminded of the guide mentioned by Prudentius himself in *Peristephanon* 9,17.

<sup>7</sup> Lavarenne (1951), 210 (note 5). However, Davis-Weyer (1986), who suggested a chronological and typological structure of the *Dittochaeon*, was not entirely convincing in my view.

Roald Dijkstra, Radboud University Nijmegen

r.dijkstra@let.ru.nl - <http://radboud.academia.edu/RoaldDijkstra>

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