Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2008.03.12


Reviewed by Vincent Hunink, Radboud University Nijmegen (v.hunink@let.ru.nl)

Word count: 2585 words

The early fourth century A.D. gave rise to a new phenomenon in Latin literature: Christian poetry. Although Christian Latin prose had already been flourishing for well over two centuries, the composition of literary poems had remained a cultural activity practiced only by non-Christians. However, this changed once Christianity had been officially allowed by the so called Edict of Milan issued by Constantine in 313. The new social and legal status of Christianity brought along many changes. Gradually, Christian authors felt free to write poems in Latin to celebrate their religion, to praise God, and even to expound Christian doctrine.

Some of the earliest specimens of this new type of poetry have now been collected by Aniello Salzano (University of Salerno, Italy). In a modest volume, he presents five anonymous poems, each counting about one hundred lines, with Italian prose translations facing the Latin originals. Every piece is preceded by a separate introduction and description of some ten pages, and there is also a general introduction. A small index of modern scholars concludes the volume.

The texts presented by Salzano are virtually unknown, even to many specialists in Christian literature. Some of them have not been edited after the Patrologia Latina, in which they lie buried and neglected, and their anonymous status has not contributed to improve their popularity either. However, as Salzano's book shows, these poems are highly interesting and deserve the serious attention of readers and scholars alike.

The Italian volume is helpful in providing the basic materials (texts, translations, general philological sketches) but also leaves work to be done by others. Notably, there seems to be room for further study of the place of these poems within Christian Latin poetry as a whole, for separate commentaries on the texts in question, and for some in-depth literary analysis, notably of the subtle fusion of Christian and non-Christian elements, both in language and in subject matter. Should a second version (or preferably an English version) of the volume see the light, as would be welcome, the introduction certainly qualifies for improvement, while some of the Latin texts deserve to be revised.

In the following detailed remarks, I will first discuss the introduction and the composition of the volume as a whole. Next I will deal with the five texts, focusing both on the poems themselves (so as to enable the reader to get an idea of their nature) and on Salzano's treatment of them.

The volume opens with a general introduction of 18 pages, which unfortunately seems the least useful part of the book. Salzano describes the historical and cultural developments in the third and fourth centuries which form the context of the earliest Christian Latin poetry. Only at the end of the introduction, does he touch upon the five poems in the volume: 'A quest' epoca appartenegono i componimenti poetici raccolti nella presente antologia' (p.27), but by then only four pages of the introduction are left. These
mostly deal with the dominant influence of Virgil on the style and form of the poems, and with Juvencus, whose epoch-making *Evangeliorum libri*, a daring paraphrase of the Gospels in four books of brilliant, Virgilian hexameters composed around 330, is surprisingly not included in the book.

Juvencus is not the only early poet of Christian Latin whose work is missing. The date of Commodian may be disputed, as Salzano remarks (p.25-26, note 33), but many scholars place him in the third century (at any rate well before the turning point of 313) and he is a serious candidate for the title of 'first ever Christian Latin poet'. The poems of Commodian present many difficulties, due to their often obscure style and irregular metre, but it is not easy to see why they have been excluded from a book of which the subtitle refers to 'the beginnings of Christian Latin poetry'. Other great names, such as Hilary of Poitiers (who died in 368), Ambrose or Prudentius, are equally not represented in this anthology, but here the chronological argument seems stronger: these authors clearly are no longer pioneers, but rather constitute the first generation of Christian poets with a serious claim of literary fame. Having said this, it must be noted that Salzano has included pieces ranging from 317 to well after 400.

It must be concluded, then, that Salzano does not limit himself to the earliest productions of Christian Latin poetry (especially with Commodian missing), as the title and subtitle suggest. Rather he has collected some neglected Christian poems from the fourth century, which mainly share their moderate length. This, of course, is perfectly justifiable and useful, but the general presentation of a book should be in accordance with its content. As it is, the introduction offers little help in understanding the working of Christian Latin poetry as a whole, the place of the five texts in it, or even the interrelation of those five texts.

Turning to the poems themselves, the reader may find some pleasant surprises, starting with the first piece entitled *Psalmus responsorius*. This is a fragment of 102 lines of an anonymous poem from the first half of the fourth century, found on a papyrus (Pap.Barcononensis 149b-153) discovered in Egypt in 1965. It is an abecedarian poem, preceded by a refrain of four lines (*pater qui omnia regis / peto Christi nos scias heredes. / Christus, verbo natus, per quem populus est liberatus*). Only 12 strophes have been preserved, the text suddenly breaking off at the end of the 'M' strophe. The length of the strophes varies (seven to eleven lines) and there is no clearly metrical form; Salzano speaks of 'prosa ritmica sostenuta da accenti, assonanze e rimi' (p.33). The poem seems to have been used for liturgical purposes. It celebrates Mary as the Mother of Christ, telling about her birth, her marriage to Joseph, the Annunciation by Gabriel, the birth of Christ and the veneration of Christ by the Magi, and ending with the first miracle performed by Christ during the wedding at Cana.

Even with only half of the poem still extant, it makes for interesting reading at all levels. The Latin of the poem is plain and simple, with some elements of Vulgar Latin and marked influences of Greek standing out. The author seems to have been familiar not only with the Bible, but also with apocryphal texts, even in Coptic.

It is surprising to find Salzano discussing the models and themes of the poem, but not entering upon matters of language and style, although the Latin of the poem clearly asks for further clarification, if only not to confuse readers accustomed to classical poets such as Virgil. Some vulgar forms (e.g. *illoc* in 55 and 96 or *vociti* in 65 and *vocitus* in 96) or rare words (*allentabit* in 81) surely should have been explained or at least indicated. Notably, the confusion of b and v, typical of vulgar and late Latin texts, is left entirely uncommented upon. Thus the reader finds forms like *audibit* (19 and 43), *requisibit* (25), *ibit* (55, 94 and 96), *demonstrabit* (73), *adoraberunt* (75) and *vocabit* (101). Less experienced readers will readily take most of these as forms of the grammatical future. Many of my students (for whom the Italian translation cannot easily remove all doubts), will certainly do so. One wonders what caused Salzano to remain silent here.

The second poem is one of the earliest in the collection; according to Salzano, it is to be dated between 317 and 323, and it therefore comes from the period immediately following the Edict of Milan. In 148 hexameters it gives what its title *Laudes Domini*
professes: praise of God. It does so on the occasion of a miracle in the city of Autun, which was an important centre in fourth century Gaul. During the burial of a Christian man, so the poem relates, the tomb where his wife was buried some years earlier is opened. The body of his wife stretches out its left hand, as if to welcome him. The poet then rhetorically asks who has made this happen. The answer is clear enough: 'Tu facis haec, tu Christe Deus, and for the next hundred lines or so this praise of God is amplified.

The poem has some nice, poetical passages referring to all the beauty of nature, the stars in the sky, and human culture. Influences of Virgil and, particularly, Lucretius, are easy to see. The poet asks Christ to conciliate Constantine for him. Of course the emperor is duly praised as the good ruler and father, but there follows an added remark addressed to Christ: 'You have given the earth nothing better than this fruit, nor will you do so. May his children become equal to their father!'3

In respectful terms, the poet makes the point that there is a universal hierarchy, according to which the Roman Emperor does stand exceedingly high, but also has been created himself by Christ as a gift to the world. This fundamental Christian thought is here put in poetical terms for the first time.

The Laudes Domini were also separately edited by Salzano in 2001 (see note 1), and his treatment of this text is therefore perhaps better. In the introduction, there is a useful section on the poetical elements in the text, and the Latin text has been handled with due care.

The third and fourth poems are of somewhat minor interest to the general reader on account of their theological content. The Sancti Paulini epigramma, a poem of 112 hexameters equally from Gaul but dating almost a century later (between 407 and 410), was perhaps written by bishop Paulinus of Beziers (that is, probably not the more famous Paulinus of Nola). It is a dialogue between an abbot and two monks, one of whom returns to his monastery after having traveled through Gaul, which by then had been laid waste by the Vandals and other barbarians. Regrettably, the poem does not give much detail about the barbaric invasions and their results, but the monks discuss what they deem far worse: the moral decline of the people, both men and women. Much of the poem takes up old, satirical themes about women (e.g. their various means of seducing men, and their lust for gold and luxury), but men too are said to be guilty. At the end, the abbot is asked to describe his happy, tranquil life in the monastery, but again the poet disappointingly leaves this out, ending the poem in traditional manner: it has become late and the conversation will be continued the next day.

The Latin text of the Epigramma Sancti Paulini as printed by Salzano leaves much to be desired. Most importantly, it remains unclear how the text is divided between the three interlocutors. The introduction (p.86-87) offers a fairly convincing reconstruction, but this is not reflected in the text, which has only a few indications of a change of speaker, at other places than suggested in the introduction, while no quotation marks are used at all, neither in the Latin nor in the translation. Even the line numbering does not match, and the Latin text shows some bad typos, perhaps the results of scanning the CSEL text.4 Even if many of the flaws are due to the edition which has been adopted, it may surely be required from an editor of a volume to take action and to harmonize the Latin texts so as to give them adequate and consistent spelling, punctuation, and numbering.

The most rhetorical poem in the collection is number four, De Iesu Christo Deo et Homine. In 137 hexameters it deals with the question that dominated Christian debate from the fourth century onward: the Catholic doctrine of the double nature (divine and human) of Christ. The text is difficult to date, but it seems to be earlier than the council of Ephesus in 431. It deals with the birth of Christ and some of his wonders, with his death and resurrection.

The poem does not allow for easy reading, and things are further complicated by Salzano's treatment of the Latin. The absence of quotation marks in this text (which is not a dialogue but does have some direct speech), is a serious obstacle to reading and
understanding it. The rest of the punctuation of the poem falls short of modern standards: regularly it does not become clear where sentences begin or end, mainly due to uses of commas instead of semicolons or full stops.

Finally, there is the *Triumphus Christi heroicus*, a fascinating and highly readable fourth century poem of 108 hexameters. Here the biblical story of Christ’s Crucifixion and Resurrection is amplified in a surprising manner with an account of his descent into the underworld. This is obviously based on non-biblical texts such as the apocryphal *Descensus ad inferos*. Not only does the poet easily fuse biblical and non-biblical elements into a harmonious composition, he also inserts pagan elements. For in the underworld, once called *Phlegethontis regna* (in 7), king Pluto fears the approach of Christ, and when Christ actually enters hell, Charon hides, Cerberus no longer barks, and the Gorgones and Harpyes are trembling. The list of names continues with Megaera, Tisiphone, Allecto, the Dirae, the Furiae, and the Parcae. Only a few lines later there follows a series of famous names from the Old Testament, of persons who will be saved by Christ: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Judas Maccabeus. The text thus also combines Christian and pagan elements. The climax of the poem is a final section where Christ erects a cross, as a sort of trophy to celebrate his victory. The cross becomes a symbol of salvation: all kinds of evil are described as ‘hanging from it’ (e.g. Pluto, death, the gates of hell, bad conscience, the world), and the poem ends on proud, triumphant notes.

This is a fine poem, obviously intended for didactic use by fourth century Christians and attempting to harmonize and fuse elements from all major traditions in late antiquity. In fact, it seems impossible to distinguish between pagan and Christian elements, as these have become a united whole. The absence of quotation marks is less troublesome here, and so the text will make good reading. It may prove useful even in teaching undergraduate students of classics.

To sum up: Salzano’s book has, on the one hand, the merit of presenting some badly neglected Christian Latin poems from the fourth century, which are united by their length, and to some extent, their subject matter (praise of God and Christ, and explanation of Christian doctrine). The reader will find useful basic material: Latin texts, Italian translations, and helpful philological analysis of the models, themes, and structure of the poems, even though a full bibliography, subject index, and index locorum are missing. On the other hand, the introduction is disappointing and the collection as a whole appears to be less coherent than it might have been, as it has left out the earliest Christian Latin poet, Commodian, and many others. In addition, the handling of the Latin texts is inconsistent, varying from good to outright careless.

But in the end, the positive aspects deserve to prevail here. This interesting volume reveals some unknown riches of early Christian Latin poetry, and it should be included in any serious library of Christian Latin texts. It is to be hoped that it will attract new readers, both students and scholars, to these texts and promote their further study.

Notes:

1. There are no separate modern editions or commentaries of the five pieces in this volume, with the exception of the *Laudes Domini*, which was edited by the author of the anthology: Aniello Salzano, *Laudes Domini*, introduzione, testo, traduzione e commento, Napoli 2001. The *Psalmus reperorius* is to be found only in specialized literature; Salzano has used the text of L.M. Peretto in *Marianum* 39,1967,258-260. For the *Sancti Paulini epigramma* there is only the edition of Schenkl in CSEL 16,1 (Leipzig 1888), for *De Iesu Christo Deo et Homine* only PL Suppl.3,1135-1139, and for *Triumphus Christi heroicus* only PL 19,385-388. I could not trace freely available Latin texts of these poems on the Internet, with the exception of the *Laudes Domini* (see note 3). Some of them, however, are available in specialised electronic corpora such as *Patrologia Latina Database* (poems 2, 3 (but in an outdated version attributed to Claudius Marius Victor), and 5) or *PoetriaNova* edited by Sismel (www.sismel.it) (poems
2, 3, and 4).


3. At nunc tu dominum meritis, pietate parentem, / imperio facilem, vivendi lege magistrum / edictisque parem, quae lex tibi condita sanxit, victorem laetum que pares mihi Constantinum! / Hoc melius fetu terris nil ante dedisti / nec dabis: exaequent utinam sua pignora patrem! (lines 143-148). A full Latin text may be found online.

4. The introduction describes a poem of 110 lines, but the printed text counts 112. After line 55, the references do no longer correspond. Among errors I noted furuis for furiis in 36 and iam for iam in 67. I cannot construct the Latin of line 122 with the added <ad>: (ex quo) te corde hinc gestans abii <ad> Tecumque resedi, and I do not understand why only one case of te in this line is capitalized. Initial capitalization is also used wrongly in lines 11 and 27. One indication of a change of speaker is not printed alongside the Latin, but in the upper margin of the page, an evident sign that things have gone wrong here.

5. For instance, from line 18 onward, on closer scrutiny there is God the Father addressing his Son in direct speech before He is born from Mary. But in a text without a colon at the end of 17 or quotation marks in 18, this is difficult to see (see also note 6 below). Moreover, it requires two or three readings to observe that this direct speech of God must end in the middle of 22, or perhaps 26. Likewise in 118, direct speech must be starting, but 117 ends on a comma and no quotation marks have been supplied. In 91 there is at least a colon pointing to direct speech, but here too, the reader can only guess where it ends. Elsewhere in the volume, quotation marks are actually used in the Latin text and the translation of the *Psalmus responsorius*.

6. The first 9 lines are given as one sentence, but even after rereading it many times, I cannot properly construct it as such; the Italian translation rather freely renders the Latin here and so does not give enough help in understanding the Latin. Possibly, the text should be split into various clauses. In other cases, full stops are represented by commas or even completely missing, or commas have been added where they should not stand (e.g. between the subject and the verb) or omitted where they should be (e.g. after a vocative, as in line 133). All of this results in considerable confusion. I give the passage 18-27 as an example, first in the version of Salzano, then in my tentative attempt at improving the readability: I hope the differences will show the point I am trying to make.

```
Nascere (namque placet, praeruptae carcere mortis eripiam mortale genus) spes gentibus esto,
principium sine fine, quod abstulit invidus error,
quod facinus commisit atrox, tolletur id omne
ad veniam venere homini. Stat fulmen et imber
ignis in obsequio: glacies, vapor, aestus et aerae,
conueniunt famulante Noto, terraque triumphant,
et coelum sublime tonat, pars ardua gaudet,
cum Domino venisse pio: tunc nascitur infans...
```

```
Nascere (namque placet praeruptae carcere mortis eripiam mortale genus). Spes gentibus esto,
principium sine fine. Quod abstulit inuidus error,
quod facinus commisit atrox, tolletur id omne:
ad ueniam uenere homini.
Stat fulmen et imber
ignis in obsequio. Glacies, vapor, aestus et aerae
conueniunt famulante Noto terraque triumphant
et coelum sublime tonat: pars ardua gaudet
cum Domino uenisse pio.
Tunc nascitur infans...
```

7. As Salzano remarks, this apocryphal text also influenced Commodian in part of his *Carmen apologeticum* (lines 313-334). Again one may regret the omission of texts by
Commodian in this volume.