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Codacological Description: UTS MS 053

This manuscript of the *Aurora sive Biblia Versificata* by Peter Aurora was copied in Florence between the years 1300 and 1399. It contains 157 leaves of vellum; were the manuscript numbered like a modern text, it would contain 314 pages. Pencil markings added by modern scholars appear in the upper left hand corner of each leaf, creating the only system of reference visible to the modern observer. Though the leaves appear to vary slightly in size – due, perhaps, to the binding process or to the actual dimensions of the vellum – each leaf is approximately 240 x 40 mm. The texture of the vellum ranges from thick and stiff, like a piece of construction paper soaked and dried, to a membrane-like quality so delicate and thin that it is slightly transparent. The color of the vellum also varies. Some leaves are the off white of a modern textbook page (f.18v); others have yellowed the way one might expect in an ancient text, with darkened edges and curling corners (f.63). Some appear to be stained: the color is uneven and splotchy, ranging from off white to light brown (f.29). Perhaps most striking to the modern eye are those leaves that were not scraped thoroughly enough to remove the hair follicles of the animal skin, so that the leaves are speckled with black spots, no larger than pinpricks, so numerous and close together that the vellum appears to be solid gray from a few feet away (f.19v). On some leaves the spots are larger - around 2 mm – and therefore remain visible at a distance (f. 27v).

One might infer that the book has been well-loved at many points in its seven hundred year history: stains, tears, and worn corners abound. One mysterious irregularity is that of the semi-circular, round chunks missing from bottoms and edges of folios, ranging in size from about ½ to 3 inches in diameter (ff. 43, 48, 82v, 85v, 90v etc). Perhaps these are burns, due to contact with the flame or wax of a candle. Maybe these, like the many wormholes that appear throughout, are the doing of insects.

The damage sustained by this manuscript is also apparent in the binding, which has all but disconnected from the vellum leaves. The binding is crimson moroccan gilt with a gold border, and was added around 1810 by an unknown party, as knowledge of this manuscript's provenance begins in 1831 when it is catalogued in the collection of Count Michail Dmitrievitch Boutourline of Florence. Before delving into the provenance of the manuscript, let us first finish a visual exploration of the text from the perspective of a modern observer.

Forty one lines of rubricated Latin poetry, written in small, neat, gothic font, appear on every leaf in either brown or black ink, with rubrications in bright red ink. Each column of text is about 7.5 x 2 inches. Rather than appearing in the center of the page, the columns rest farther toward the inside and top of each folio, leaving a good three inches of space toward the lateral edge and bottom. It is not difficult to decipher the motive, here: many leaves are absolutely crammed with what appears to be some sort of commentary on the outer and bottom margins. Even the inside margins, much smaller and presumably more difficult to reach, are often filled with commentary (ff. 10v -11). The commentary is extremely small and neat, displaying a breathtaking degree of craftsmanship. The first nineteen folios contain a steady flow of commentary written in light brown ink, which abruptly switches to black on the left side of the 19th folio. This black ink is a bit thicker and the script is larger, less evenly spaced, and executed with a bit more flourish – particularly in the stems of the d's and f's. This is but the first of many apparent variations in handwriting throughout the commentary, which will switch again to brown, then to black, and continue to vary in style and shape. Perhaps this indicates a change of hand, a lapse in time, or, at the very least, an exchange of ink and/or writing instruments.

The variation within the commentary contrasts significantly with the verse itself, which maintains a uniform quality that could indicate that a single person – or a group of similarly trained individuals working in close collaboration - copied the entire work. The verse's uniformity is strikingly apparent deeper into the manuscript, where one discovers pages with absolutely no commentary,

rubrication, or decoration whatsoever (ff. 64v-65; 71v-72). When rubrications do indeed appear, they are noticeably fewer than in the first forty folios (96v-97). This leads a modern observer to infer that perhaps the verse itself was copied first, followed by commentary, rubrication, and further decoration. One wonders if, perhaps, some of the commentary is not an interpretation of Riga's text but directions to future copiers. In either case, this observer finds it quite unlikely that the verse itself was completed by many people over the span of many years, but much more possible that the commentary and rubrication were added later, perhaps over a long span of time, perhaps never finished.

This theory is further supported by the variations within the large, ornate letters that sporadically decorate the text. While it is obvious to a modern eye that these red and blue letters have aesthetic appeal, this observer acknowledges the likelihood that these letters contain greater significance. At the very least, they emphasize specific verses. Perhaps they are not meant as commentary but rather as reference points that mark the beginning of different passages or books. This could explain why the medieval reader did not require page numbers. Rather than further speculate on the significance of this system of letters, which would require a better understanding of medieval manuscript practices, this observer prefers to take a close look at the earliest and most striking examples: an F and a P, which appear on the first and second folios respectively. While most of the decorative letters border between three and five lines of verse, the F and the P each border twenty one; in other words, they are comparatively enormous. Both letters are outlined with a line of red ink so thick that it bleeds through the vellum. Various designs of blue and red ink fill the body both letters. These designs appear quite improvisational – indeed, almost whimsical. About three-quarters of the way down the stem of the F, the pattern switches from one of interchanging red and blue X's to horizontal red and blue stripes. The pattern inside the P is quite different: light, long strokes of exclusively blue ink form a sparse zig-zag pattern. One wonders if the switch between patterns – occurring both within the F and between the F and P - represents a change of heart in a solitary artist or

the collaboration of many. One also wonders how these copiers would conceive of their work. Were these designs improvised or carefully planned? Were the copiers anonymous or widely respected for their work? Was the creation of this manuscript a simple task among many or a sacred artform? From the perspective of a modern observer, it is difficult to tell. The meticulous, unchanging, and carefully placed gothic verse gives the impression of painstaking work; the care-free doodling in and around the ornate lettering lends a different mood entirely. Again, one wonders if these decorations were added at a later date than the verse itself.

In a way, the visual experience of the manuscript – uniformly crafted verse framed by sporadic, crammed lines of commentary and whimsical decoration– mirrors its content: a verse commentary on the Bible that was often expanded upon – both by the original author and by others. According to scholar Greti Dinkova-Bruun, Peter Riga constantly added more material to his poem, creating multiple archetypes from which different traditions of interpretation formed (*Liber Ecclesiastes* 160). Beichner, the first scholar to compile and translate a complete edition of *Aurora* in 1965, proposes that Riga's work can be categorized into three editions that he produced between 1170 and 1200, the longest of which included a whopping 15,000 lines (xvii). Two additional redactions of the work were then produced by Aegidius of Paris between 1200-1208 (Dinkova-Bruun 160). Many anonymous poets later added their own versifications (160). Therefore, many manuscripts contain unique versions of the text. One wonders what version is contained in this particular manuscript, copied approximately one century after Riga composes the earliest edition. This observer's calculation estimates that the manuscript in question contains about 12,700 lines of verse. Assuming the manuscript is complete, we can infer that it does not contain the longest version. There is no way for an untrained observer to decipher how much of this manuscript contains Riga's words versus later redactions. Regardless, it is fascinating indeed to consider that when this manuscript is copied, Peter Riga's *Aurora* is less a self-contained text than a living, breathing, expanding tradition. Were the copiers of this manuscript

attempting to contribute to this tradition, or were they simply copying a popular text?

This question leads to another rather fundamental one: what, exactly, *is* the tradition that Peter Riga's *Aurora* encapsulates, and what precisely does the text contain? According to Beichner, Peter Riga explains in his original preface that colleagues of his since childhood encouraged him to create a versified commentary on the five books of Moses (Beichner xvi). Beichner speculates that their encouragement was motivated by Riga's earlier work, *Floridus aspectus*, a collection of secular and religious poems that he dedicated to his patron, the archbishop of Reims. Though little is known about Riga, it is clear that these works were created during his religious life: he was the canon at the Cathedral of Notre Dame of Reims and later a member of the Order of St. Augustine at St. Denis in the same city (xv). His first edition of *Aurora* contained a preface, the pentateuch, and "Iosue, Iudicum, Ruth, I-IV Regum, Machabeorum, Evangelium" (xvi). Some of the more fascinating sections include an allegorical and moral commentary on the geneology of Christ and a lengthy poetic debate at the trial of Antipater (xvi). Equally fascinating to this observer are the conclusions that Riga adds later on. His second edition concludes with a section entitled *Recapitulationes*, which is lipogrammatic, or letter dropping: one letter of the alphabet is omitted in every part of the book (xvii). The third edition concludes with the *Cantica Canticorum*, which contains rhyming hexameters as opposed to the distichs featured by the rest of the work (xvii).

As Dinkova-Bruun points out, this massive, continuously expanding volume of elegaic verse commentary aligns with a trend of the period. The practice of cataloguing history is in vogue at the time: lots of anthologies, encyclopedias, and chronicles are being compiled (335). This could be due, in part, to a renewed interest in the historical significance of the Bible (334). Another reason may be the massive expansion of cathedral and monastic schools that occurs across Medieval Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (333). Suddenly, there is a need to organize vast fields of knowledge for a much larger student body (334). Indeed, in his preface, Riga urges that his commentary be used

as a schoolbook (Beichner xxx). There is evidence that it was used as such; for example, letters from students in France and England in the early thirteenth century reference *Aurora* as a lecture topic (xxii). There is also evidence that schoolmasters used it to teach metrics and ethics and that lexicographers also used it as a reference (xxxiii). Although it is unclear how often *Aurora* was used as an educational text, there is little to no doubt that it was widely circulated. According to Beichner, it was the most popular verse commentary on the Bible in the Middle Ages: “it seems that every monastic or cathedral library in England in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries possessed a copy” (Beichner vii). Even in the fourteenth century, when the manuscript in question is produced, *Aurora* is considered a “Christian classic,” a modern counter-balance to the classical poetry of Virgil and Ovid (xi). As such, it is widely read not only in convents and monasteries but also by the secular, educated elites (xii).

Aurora was also one of the most frequently copied texts in the Middle Ages. Beichner maintains that there are 250 extant manuscripts around the world when he writes the introduction to the Latin and English compilation of *Aurora* in 1965 (xi). By 2001, scholar Greti Dinkova-Bruun writes that *Aurora* was found in at least 400 medieval manuscripts (39). We can speculate that this larger number is due to the uncovering of further manuscripts. Indeed, Dinkova-Bruun's article contains an addendum announcing the discovery of two additional manuscripts. However, this observer wonders if the discrepancy is also due to different interpretations of what exactly constitutes an *Aurora* manuscript. Dinkova-Bruun's language does not clarify whether she includes excerpts or only complete manuscripts in her count. Beichner mentions in his preface, for example, that several thousand lines of the *Aurora* are accessible in Migne's *Patrologia Latina*, but that they are a “poor substitute” for the work in its entirety (xi). Would Migne's excerpt count as a manuscript by Dinkova-Bruun's standards? It is also unclear whether Dinkova-Bruun counts manuscripts that are known to have existed but are lost or destroyed. Regardless of how these historians have collected their data, their work confirms that Riga's *Aurora* was an important text in Medieval Europe, copied and utilized

for centuries.

It is not unusual, then, that a manuscript of the *Aurora* appears in fourteenth century Florence. Perhaps it was meant to be used as an educational tool in a monastic school or in the private home of a Florentine nobleman. Perhaps it was simply an item meant to be catalogued in a monastic or secular library, where a copy of the *Aurora* would have been a standard text. One can only wonder where this manuscript was kept until the first traces of its provenance appear in 1831, when it is catalogued in the collection of Conte Michail Dmitrievitch in Florence. An article published by Barzini Ludina in the *Corriere della Sera* in 2001 entitled “L' uomo che raccolse 80 mila libri” - the man that collected 80 thousand books – tells the story of this Russian bibliophile. Michail's father was a famous Moscovite bibliophile that housed over forty thousand precious manuscripts in his library, which was one of the largest in Europe until the Muscov fire of 1812 burned it to the ground. The Dmitireivitch family then left Russia for Italy, choosing Florence as the site for the new library because it was the most liberal kingdom at the time. Michail inherited and expanded his father's massive collection, to which he added the manuscript in question. The article in the *Corriere* gives one incredible detail that will serve as a fitting conclusion. Michail Dmitirievitch happened to have a best friend since childhood, a poet named Aleksander Puskin. At a meeting in Odessa in about 1810, Puskin entrusts Michail with a draft of a book he was working on. Inside the draft was a note that said: “You are Onegin.” How strange, how fascinating, how perfectly satisfying to discover a story like this at the end of a historical encounter like the one chronicled here. The man who first catalogues this manuscript is the same man who allegedly inspires another masterpiece of verse, one with an equally if not more pervasive influence spanning continents and centuries: Pushkin's *Onegin*. The “real” Onegin, in all likelihood, fingered these same vellum pages that I have explored.

Works Cited

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