

Potamius of Lisbon, “De Martyrio Isaiae Prophetæ” Again¹

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Recently an effort has been made to temper the wholesale condemnation of the literary style of Potamius of Lisbon, who is the earliest author of Christian prose to survive from the Iberian peninsula². The passage in question, which comes from the opening sentence of his *De martyrio Isaiae prophetæ*, reads as follows: *quasi parum fuerit si immanitate lymphatica martyrem dei acuto ense transfoderet, aut ipsa lamina insontis viri per iugerum fidiculae saevientis per costas stridente ictu sulcaret*³. Potamius’ latest editor and commentator repeats the view expressed in his dissertation that here *fidiculae* should be taken with *iugerum* to produce a collocation to which he gives the highly improbable rendering “an extremely long line of iron teeth”⁴; it has however been argued elsewhere by the present writer that *iugerum*

1 Works are cited according to *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae: Index librorum scriptorum inscriptionum*², Leipzig 1990.

2 Cf. the present writer, “Potamius of Lisbon, *De martyrio Isaiae prophetæ* 1: *Per iugerum fidiculae*”, *Euphrosyne* n.s. 28 (2000) 369-73, together with the approbatory comments on this article by A.A. Nascimento, *ibid.* 445 and *ibid.* n.s. 29 (2001) 426-7.

3 Text of A.C. VEGA, *Opuscula omnia Potamii Episcopi Olisiponensis*, Escorial (Script. Ecclesiast. Hispano-Lat. Vet. et Med. Aevi 2) 1934, 35.

4 M. CONTI, *The Life and Works of Potamius of Lisbon*, Steenbrugge (Instr. Patr. 32) 1998, 77, reproducing the translation in *id.*, *Potamii Olisiponensis opuscula omnia: Text,*

instead governs the preceding *insontis viri*, while *fidiculae* depends on the ensuing *ictu*⁵. Since Conti links *iugerum* to *fidiculae*, he is unable to accommodate *insontis viri*, which cannot be dependent on *lamina*⁶; his own edition accordingly replaces *ipsa lamina* with the variant reading *in ipsa laniena*⁷. There was however very good reason for a scribe to emend to the simplistic *in ipsa laniena insontis viri*, if like Conti he tried to construe *lamina* with the adjacent *insontis viri* and in consequence found the passage incomprehensible⁸; on the other hand there are no grounds whatsoever for the contrary substitution. It would accordingly appear necessary to retain the *lamina* of the β MSS⁹.

Conti's new edition also provides an *apparatus fontium* which identifies four imitations of classical literature in the *De martyrio Isaiae*¹⁰. The first of these formulations is located in the clause

Translation and Commentary with Introduction, diss. Leeds 1995, 181; cf. id., *Potamii Episcopi Olisiponensis opera omnia*, Turnhout (CCSL 69A) 1999, 198 ("a long line of teeth").

5 *Art. c.* (n. 2) 370, which was written when only Conti's dissertation was available.

6 Cf. his hopelessly garbled translation of Vega's text in *o.c.* (n. 4; 1998) 148: "that an innocent man should be split by the strident blade itself through his ribs and tortured by the long line of teeth". Here at least it is necessary to qualify the remark made in a review of this book by D.H. WILLIAMS, *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 51 (2000) 338: "students of the period can be grateful for the translation of these neglected texts".

7 *O.c.* (n. 4; 1999) 199, where his text reads: *aut in ipsa laniena insontis viri per iugerum fidiculae saevientis [per] costas stridente ictu sulcaret*. His facing translation omits *saevientis*.

8 With this sense of "laniatio" the term *laniena* enjoyed some currency in late antiquity in general and among Christian writers in particular; cf. *Thes. Ling. Lat.* 7, 2, 2 (1970-79) 929, 13-27 (s.v.; 2).

9 For the value of this branch of the tradition cf. B. LÖFSTEDT, *Zenonis Veronensis tractatus*, Turnhout (CCSL 22) 1971, 14* (erroneous attribution to Zeno accounts for the survival of the Potamian treatise). The reading *lamina* is also adopted by V. YARZA URKIOLA, *Potamio de Lisboa: Estudio, edición crítica y traducción de sus obras*, Vitoria-Gasteiz (Anej. de Veleia, Ser. Min. 14) 1999, 330: *aut ipsa lamina insontis viri per iugerum fidiculae saevientis per costas stridenti ictu sulcaret*. However he translates: "o bien con el mismo filo hacer un surco como por un campo de labranza a través de las costillas del inocente varón con chirriante tajo que provoca cruel tortura" (331). Such a rendering would appear to be similarly open to objection. In the first place it entails an intolerable hyperbaton that requires *insontis viri* to depend on the remote *per costas*, which is in any case firmly embedded in the syntactic unit *fidiculae saevientis per costas stridenti ictu*. Secondly this translation fails to accommodate *per iugerum* satisfactorily, since the phrase has to be prefaced with a "como" for which there is no warrant in the Latin. Finally the article on *fidicula* in *Thes. Ling. Lat.* (6, 1 [1912-26] 694, 12-56) provides no evidence that the term can be employed in such an abstract sense to denote simply "tortura".

10 *O.c.* (n. 4; 1999) 199-203. The echo of Tertullian, *Anim.* 28, 5 on p. 203 had already been registered by J. MADOZ, "Potamio de Lisboa", *Revista Española de Teología* 7 (1947) 105.

currently at issue: the Potamian *stridente ictu* is said to have been inspired by Lucretius' *serrae stridentis*¹¹. However these texts share only the everyday verb *stridere*¹², which is applied by Lucretius to *serra*¹³, whereas Potamius uses it of the quite different *fidicula*. In fact no source needs to be posited for the Potamian *stridente ictu*: the perfect naturalness of this juxtaposition is conveniently illustrated by the coeval Ausonius' *stridenti verber*¹⁴. Conti's next two classical borrowings allegedly derive from Apuleius. The first is Potamius' *callosae glutinum cutis*, which is supposedly indebted to the description of a boar as *toris callosae cutis obesus* at *Metamorphoses* 8, 4, 4; since however *callosus* in a literal sense is only ever used "de cute"¹⁵, such a debt is hardly probable. The other passage in which Conti postulates an echo of Apuleius is the Potamian *fidei comitium*, with which he compares *Apologia* 7, 5¹⁶: *cogitationum comitium*. However such figurative employment of *comitium* is not uncommon¹⁷. Conti's fourth and final text occurs in the last sentence of the *De martyrio Isaiiae (immobili inconcussi corporis... statu)*, where he believes that Potamius "probably had in mind" the *Hercules Oetaeus* ascribed to Seneca (1740-3: *inter vapores positus et flammae minas / immotus, inconcussus, in neutrum latus / correpta torquens membra adhortatur, monet, / gerit aliquid ardens*)¹⁸. However the collocation of *inconcussus* with *immobilis/immotus* can again be shown to have been merely conventional¹⁹.

11 2, 410. This Lucretian passage is cited as "2, 4, 10" in the "Index of Historical and Literary Sources" in Conti, *o.c.* (n. 4; 1998) 182.

12 There is no warrant for Conti's assertion (*o.c.* [n. 4; 1998] 76) that *stridens* is "poetical". Evidence to the contrary is provided by (e.g.) the notably prosaic Petronius 95, 8: *veru extis stridentibus plenum*.

13 *Stridere* is the proper term for use in conjunction with *serra*; cf. (e.g.) Augustine, *Nat. et grat.* 47, 55 *serrae stridor vel grunnitus suis* (ibid.: *quanta audiamus inviti*); Isidore, *Orig.* 19, 19, 9 *serrae... nomen de sono factum est, id est ab stridore*. Hence the Lucretian phrase cannot be supposed to have invited a reader's particular attention.

14 *Mos.* 255. For the synonymy of *verber* and *ictus* cf. *Thes. Ling. Lat.* 7, 1 (1934-64) 171, 73-4 (s.v. *ictus*).

15 So *Thes. Ling. Lat.* 3 (1906-12) 175, 61 and 84 (s.v.; 1 and 2).

16 The reference is wrongly given as "7, 15": CONTI, *o.c.* (n. 4; 1998) 82 and 181 ("*Apologia* [sic] 7, 15"); id., *o.c.* (n. 4; 1999) 203.

17 Cf. *Thes. Ling. Lat.* 3 (1906-12) 1802, 63-72 (s.v. "in imagine"; cf. also ibid. 1808, 41-51, s.v. *comitia* "in imagine").

18 CONTI, *o.c.* (n. 4; 1998) 82-3, where he simply registers that both passages share the adjective *inconcussus*, but fails to note that the juxtaposition of this epithet with *immobilis/immotus* is also common to each. The reference "1740" in CONTI, *o.c.* (n. 4; 1999) 203 should be "1741".

19 Cf. *Thes. Ling. Lat.* 7, 1 (1934-64) 999, 42; 46-7; 56-7; 82-4; 1000, 3-4; 8-9 (s.v. *inconcussus*), to which the following should be added: Cyprian, *Epist.* 28, 1, 1; Hilary, *In*

The conclusion must accordingly be drawn that every one of Conti's classical imitations is in fact illusory.

If it has been argued elsewhere that the introductory sentence of ch. 1 of the *De martyrio Isaiae* contains a good example of the *genus grande*²⁰, the same can hardly be said of the opening sentence of the second chapter, which is also the work's final one: *mox se ut ad cubile cordis concinentis nisus sector sollicitus defixisset <in> fontis fluenta purpurei, laxatis venarum lapsibus, ne venas vermiculatim pollice profanus intenderet, croceus se affatim imber infudit, ut tecta gurgite sanguinis venarum pictura non premeret*²¹. In his introduction to this new edition Conti ascribes the peculiarities of the Potamian style to "his personal spiritual experience which was particularly complicated and controversial"²². In Conti's view the language of Potamius accordingly reflects "the drama of a personality under an evident psychological pressure". In endeavouring to explain this aspect of Potamius' writing it would however appear more pertinent to compare the passage cited by Jerome from the opening of Jovinian's second book against over-rigorous asceticism: *satisfacio invitatis, non ut claro curram nomine, sed a rumore purgatus vivam vano. obsecro agrum, novella plantationum, arbusta teneritudinis, erepta de vitiorum gurgitibus, audientiam communitam agminibus. scimus ecclesiam, spe, fide, charitate, inaccessibleem, inexpugnabilem. non est in ea immaturus, omnis docibilis: impetu irrumperere, vel arte eludere potest nullus* (*Adv. Iovin.* 1, 2). Here the style is similar to that of the passage from the opening of Potamius' second chapter which was quoted above. However nobody has maintained that Jovinian was "a personality under an evident psychological pressure"; on the contrary a person who took a firm stand against the

psalm. 118 zade 1 p. 515, 4-5; id., *Trin.* 8, 10; Ambrose, *Epist.* 7, 36, 1; Augustine, *In Iob* p. 624, 3-5; id., *Serm.* 260C, 8 coll. Morin p. 339, 17-18; Ps.-Augustine, *Solut.* 77 l. 11.

20 Cf. the present writer, *art. c.* (n. 2).

21 Text of CONTI, *o.c.* (n. 4; 1999) 201, from which the chapter divisions in id., *o.c.* (n. 4; 1998) 149 and in Vega, *o.c.* (n. 3) 35-6 are absent. YARZA URKIOLA, *o.c.* (n. 9) 332 follows Vega in retaining the *tremere* of the MSS in place of *premeret*; he also reads *concinenti nisu* (here Vega adopted Ballerini's *concinamententi nisus*) and *profanatas* (Vega: *profanator*).

22 CONTI, *o.c.* (n. 4; 1999) 127, where he is referring to Potamius' entanglements with Arianism. J.C. SÁNCHEZ LEÓN, "Los sermones del obispo Potamio de Lisboa", *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma, Ser. 2, Historia Antigua* 11 (1998) 501-21, offers no explanation for Potamius' style, but attributes the anatomical contents of the *De Lazaro* and *De martyrio Isaiae* to a fusion of pagan medicine and Christian theology (on p. 509 he significantly mis-cites the *insontis viri* of the latter treatise's opening sentence as *insontes viri*).

excesses of ascetic self-abnegation would seem to have been possessed of exemplary mental balance²³. A more plausible explanation for the distinctive character of both passages would seem to be provided by the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*: *est autem cavendum, ne, dum haec genera (sc. grave, mediocre, extenuatum) consecremur, in finitima et propinqua vitia veniamus. nam gravi figurae, quae laudanda est, propinqua est ea, quae fugienda; quae recte videbitur appellari, si sufflata nominabitur. nam ita ut corporis bonam habitudinem tumos imitatur saepe, item gravis oratio saepe inperitis videtur ea, quae turget et inflata est, cum aut novis aut priscis verbis aut duriter aliunde translatis aut gravioribus, quam res postulat, aliquid dicitur; hoc modo: "nam qui perduellionibus venditat patriam, non satis subplicii dederit, si praeceps in Neptunias depultus erit lacunas. poenite igitur istum, qui montis belli fabricatus est, campos sustulit pacis". in hoc genus plerique cum declinantur et ab eo, quo profecti sunt, aberrarunt, specie gravitatis falluntur nec perspicere possunt orationis tumorem* (4, 10, 15). Both Potamius and Jovinian have failed to heed the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*'s caveat²⁴. It may accordingly be observed in conclusion that if the opening sentence of the first chapter of Potamius' *De martyrio Isaiæ prophetae* achieves a commendable success in the employment of the *genus grande*, the words that begin the opusculum's second and final chapter provide by contrast a good illustration of the pitfalls signalled by the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* in attempts to write in this style.

23 Cf. (e.g.) W. HALLER, *Jovinianus*, Leipzig (TU N.F. 2, 2) 1897, 115: "eine Reaktion des gesunden Christenverstandes".

24 Yarza URKIOLA, *o.c.* (n. 9) 122 merely revives the view of Madoz (*art. c.* [n. 10] 103) that Potamius' style is due to his Spanish extraction: "Hinchado, pomposo, de una grandilocuencia extravagante, lleva a la caricatura ciertas dotes características de la raza. Es español en estas mismas aberraciones literarias". However the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*'s strictures against "hinchazón" are not restricted to the prose of a particular province. While moreover Jovinian's place of birth is unknown, his sphere of activity was exclusively Italy, not Spain; cf. F. VALLI, *Gioviniano*, Urbino 1954, 11-13. The point may also be made in this connection that J.N.D. KELLY, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, London 1975 (repr. Peabody, Mass. 1998) 183, n. 17 (for "65" read "69"), cites with approval Valli's belief (*o.c.* 69) that Jovinian was a "prosatore esperto". However a writer who could perpetrate such a palmary instance of the "tumid" style condemned by the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* cannot be accorded such unqualified praise: like Potamius, he was an uneven stylist.

SUMARIO

El presente artículo presenta la nueva edición de Conti *De Martyrio Isaiae prophetae* de Potamius. En particular ofrece una corrección al texto de Conti y una interpretación de la sentencia inicial, para su identificación de las imitaciones clásicas en la obra, y desde el fundamento avanza hacia el estilo de Potamio en su conjunto.

ABSTRACT

The present article addresses Conti's new edition of Potamius' *De martyrio Isaiae prophetae*. In particular it offers a corrective to Conti's text and interpretation of the opening sentence, to his identification of classical imitations throughout the work, and to the rationale he advances for the Potamian style as a whole.