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The Ruler's Virtues in the *Ekthesis* of Agapetus Diaconus

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Abstract

Agapetus' *Ekthesis* belongs to a distinct rhetorical tradition in which the text falls within the larger context of Greek and Christian discourse on kingship and the *speculum principis* tradition. The paraenesis written by the deacon Agapetus, around 530 A.D. is part of a larger historical and cultural process and must be read as "evidence for opinions about the emperor and his role that were current in the sixth century"¹. The present work aims to trace the development of the imperial image of the emperor Justinian as it has been "shaped" by Agapetus in his *Advisory Chapters to the emperor Justinian*.

Keywords

paraenesis, image, moral, religious, virtues

I. Introduction

The treatise of the Deacon Agapetus, *Ἐκθεσις Κεφαλαίων Παραινετικῶν, καλεινοθεΐσα παρὰ ΑΓΑΠΗΤΟΥ Διακονου τῆς ἀγιωτάτης τοῦ Θεοῦ Μεγάλης*

¹ Patrick HENRY III, "A Mirror for Iustinian: The Ekthesis of Agapetus Diaconus", in: *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, Cambridge, Mass., etc. Vol. 8, Iss. 4, (Winter 1967), p. 281 <https://grbs.library.duke.edu/article/viewFile/11081/4227>

*Ἐκκλησίας, Πρὸς Βασιλέα ΙΟΥΣΤΙΝΙΑΝΟΝ*², written around 527 A.D., consists of a series of seventy-two chapters of advice addressed to the emperor Justinian (527-565) in which the moral, political, and religious duties that a leader must fulfill are presented. In this text, as in most of other didactic writings, Agapetus seeks to present a monarchical model and, simultaneously, an anti-model that the emperor must imitate and, respectively, avoid. Of the two types of advisory literature³, the practical type, addressing the internal or the external problems of the state, and the one made up of chapters, i.e., a series of paragraphs in which moral and religious themes are presented, the later is preferred by Agapetus, who structures his text in fragments consisting of only a few lines.

II. The paraenesis – an essential component of the “imperial liturgy”

Belonging to the hortative-persuasive language, the Byzantine paraenesis should be perceived as a culturally constructed and empowered discourse. Intended for publication, with a pronounced propagandistic character, Agapetus' paraenesis remains in the sphere of rhetorical abstractions. However, Agapetus' *Advisory Chapters to the emperor Justinian* cannot be reduced to simple traditional precepts thrown together with no relation to each other, but rather it should be approached as “a discursive form capable of constructing a coherent model of the world in its own image⁴”.

F. H. Marshall begins his article⁵ with the assertion about Byzantine literature:

² PG 86a, 1164-1186 (*Exposition of Advisory Chapters composed by Agapetus, Deacon of the Holy Great Church of God for the Emperor Justinian*).

³ Nicolae-Șerban TANAȘOCA, *Byzantine Literary Creation and Tradition: Studies and Texts*, UNARTE Publishing House, Bucharest, 2009, p. 147. The author classifies the literature of advice or guidance as follows: paraenesis that have as their theme “the kingdom” and collections of “short apothegms”, meaning advice and exhortations structured in chapters, composed in such a way that an acrostic can be obtained with the author's signature and the addressee's name.

⁴ Gian Biagio CONTE and Glenn W. MOST, “«Rhetoric of Imitation» as Rhetoric of Culture: Some New Thoughts”, in: *Vergilius* (1959-), Vol. 38 (1992), pp. 45-55; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40076170>

⁵ Frederick Henry MARSHALL, “Byzantine literature”, in: Norman H. BAYNES and H. St. L. B. MOSS (eds.), *Byzantium, An Introduction to East Roman Civilization*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1948, pp. 221-251.

“Byzantine literature as a whole is not a great literature [...]. Yet, as a mirror of Byzantine civilisation this literature can claim permanent significance. It is not on purely aesthetic or literary standards that it must be judged. The Byzantine writers can never forget that they are the heirs of a great past which has created the literary moulds to which they must to the best of their ability loyally adhere”⁶.

In all aspects of their culture and civilisation, Byzantines cherished the glory of the classical Greek past. The type of advice literature, made up of a set of precepts, has its source in various sources⁷, which we mention only in passing: pre-Christian literature: Isocrates with the speech *Ad Nicocles* (II)⁸, addressed to the king of Cyprus; Hellenistic sources: Plato, “the motive of the philosopher emperor”⁹; pagan sources: Philo of Alexandria; Judeo-Christian literature, *the Wisdom of Solomon, the Proverbs of Solomon*; Christian literature: Dio Chrysostom, with four speeches addressed to the emperor Trajan about the duties of a monarch, and Synesios of Cyrene with the speech *On Imperial Rule* or *On Monarchy* addressed to Emperor Arcadius (r.395-408). In the following centuries, in the mentioned tradition, numerous Byzantine authors will cultivate this type of advice or guidance literature: Basil I the Macedonian (867-886), the author of an important Byzantine paraenesis¹⁰, Katakalon Kekaumenos (11th century), the author a collection of advice and stories, including a part entitled *Advice to the Emperor*¹¹, Theophylact, Archbishop of Ochrid (1090-1108) who, while

⁶ F. H. MARSHALL, “Byzantine literature”.

⁷ See Marius VASILEANU, “Despre pareneza bizantină”, in: *Convorbiri literare*, Ediția 200: “From the perspective of other researchers such as Dan Horia Mazilu, Demostene Russo, Ariadna Camariano Cioran and Cornelia Papacostea-Danielopolu, this literary genre has its roots precisely in the Greeks through Hesiod (Works and Days) and Phocylides”.

⁸ Cf. ISOCRATES, *Orations* Vol. I, translated by J. H. Freese, George Bell & Sons, London, 1894.

⁹ PLATON, *Opere*, V (*Republica*, 1-7), edited by Constantin Noica and Petru Creția, Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 1986.

¹⁰ See “Ale împăratului Vasile Macedoneanul Capitole povățuitoare pentru fiul său Leon”, in: N.-Ș. TANAȘOCA, *Creation and literary tradition...*, pp. 214-235.

¹¹ Gabriela BISTRICEANU (RADU), “Kekaumenos, *Advice to the Emperor*”, in: *Altarul Banatului*, Year VIII (XLVII), new series, no. 10 – 12, October – December 1997, pp. 92 – 101.

tutor to Constantine Doukas, son of Emperor Michael VII Doukas, writes the treatise *The Education of Monarchs (Paideia basilike*¹²), Nichifor Blemmydes (1197-1272), representative of Nicene humanism after the fall of Constantinople to the Latins, author of a work¹³ containing advice to the future emperor Theodore II Laskaris, Thomas Magistros (ca 1270-1325) which addresses a collection of stories to Constantine the Palaeologus, his disciple, and Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus (1391-1425), the author of an imperial guide, Βασιλέως ἀρετή, i.e. a teaching to his son, the future emperor John VIII Paleologus.

In Nicolae-Șerban Tanașoca's opinion,

“paraenetic and encomiastic words represent more than samples of literature or rhetoric. They are essential components of the «imperial liturgy», of that show carried out according to a scholarly script, which accompanies the public appearances of the monarch, a show meant to reveal to the participants, through rites and symbols, through words and gestures, through acclamations, and signifies the greatness of imperial power, its divine origin, the political and religious significance of the emperor's acts”¹⁴.

III. Imperial virtues – philanthropy, piety, justice, charity, humility, gratitude, steadiness

The treatment of the virtues, a common place in the advice literature, is a fundamental aspect to configure the monarchical model. Most of the virtues mentioned by Agapetus Diaconus are part of the common cluster of imperial features used by rhetors on various occasions. Of this set of standard virtues, a few received greater attention from Agapetus.

The virtue with the greatest weight in Agapetus's *Advisory Chapters to the emperor Justinian* is *philanthropy* or doing good (εὐποιία): “Alone, the wealth of doing good remains the wealth of those who have agonized

¹² PG 126, 257-86.

¹³ Blemmydes' paraenesis bears the title *Basilikos andrias* or *Regia statua* (Imperial statues).

¹⁴ Nicolae-Șerban TANAȘOCA, *Creation and literary tradition...*, p. 143.

over it” (chap. 7), “More than gold and precious stones, let us agonize the treasure of doing good” (chap. 38), “The wealth of the good doers is inexhaustible, because by giving you receive and by wasting you agonize”. (chap. 44), “God has allowed you to become king, be sure to imitate him by doing good deeds. Because by birth you are meant to be able to pity, not to be pitied. Wealth enables you to use your wealth unhindered for good deeds for the benefit of the needy”. (chap. 45) “And if no one’s wrongdoing brings security, much more will doing good” (chap. 47), “May you be, dear king, feared by your subjects, for your power, but also loved, for your good deeds” (ch. 48), “In order to be crowned by God with the crown of the invincible kingdom, you need to acquire the crown of doing good for the needy” (chap. 53), “Chimation never outdated is the garment of doing good” (chap. 60). In the next fragment, the deep Christian spirit that emerges from the parenthetical formulation should be pointed out: “And for Him, the greatest honor is to see Himself in all those created by Him, and in doing good the payment of a debt” (ch. 61). The king, although he is placed by God higher than others, must “see” in each of them, God himself.

By contrast, Agapetus outlines, in some places, the anti-monarchical model, declaring: “the disobedience of the ruler lies in the failure to perform good and salvific acts” (ch. 66). Obviously, these ideas constitute classic moral themes, but they are accomplished by authors of paraenetic writings with personal accents and tones. In the *Advisory Chapters to the emperor Justinian*, the theme of performing good deeds is present in the form of a constant exhortation to fulfill them.

The second important virtue in the hierarchy of Agapetus is *piety* (ευσεβεία). An important aspect addressed by Agapetus in his paraenesis concerns the sacredness of governance, a fundamental idea in Byzantine ideology, having a tradition that went back to Late Antiquity and the Hellenistic period. The emperor, Agapetus points out, receives power directly from God: “God allowed you to become emperor...” (ch. 45). In the vision of the deacon Agapetus, the emperor, in the person of Justinian I, was “lord of all men”, and his duties were clearly defined, as follows: “By body, the emperor is like any other man, by the power of his office, he is but like almighty God, for there is no one above him on earth” (chap. 21), “King, although you have a higher rank than any other, you honor, above

all, God” (chap. 1). Agapetus identify the emperor clearly and without doubt in the next chapter:

“We, humans, learn the first law, the divine law of knowing ourselves. The man who has known himself will know God, and he who has known God will end up being like Him. God-like will become he who has become worthy of God. Worthy of God is the one who does nothing unworthy of God, the one who thinks about God’s things, who says what he thinks and who does what he says” (chap. 3).

Moreover, Agapetus uses a rhetorical device and says: “Know, O divine ornament of *piety*, that you owe a reward all the greater, as you were worthy of God with such great gifts” (chap. 5).

The metaphorical register is used in the next formulation:

“Above all royal honors, the emperor has as an ornament, the diadem of *piety*. Wealth passes and fame follows, but the glory of the divine City extends beyond the ages, imperishable, and places the one who owns it, beyond oblivion” (ch. 16).

Every human being is unique, unrepeatable and of inestimable value, since everyone is created like God, is loved, and appreciated by God: “All people who crave salvation must run after heavenly help, and before all the king, who takes care of them all” (ch. 62).

The third virtue, which must be counted among the imperial qualities, is *justice* (δικαιοσύνη) and, as a natural consequence, good legislation: “... teach men the observance of justice and teach them to disregard it, ruled by the laws of justice and over subjects according to the law reigning” (chap. 1), “...mastering the helm of good laws and unflinchingly bypassing the currents of iniquity...” (chap. 2), “force yourself to respect the laws” (chap. 27). Agapetus warns about the danger the emperor can fall into: “The man who rules the city according to the laws, but he allows others to disregard them, he is counted by God as a sharer in evil” (chap. 28),

“Judge things with the same measure whether it is about friends or whether it is about enemies, without favoring the well-wishers

because of goodwill and without persecuting the enemies because of hatred, because it is equally improper to give justice to the unjust, even if he is your friend, and to wrong the just, even if he is your enemy” (chap. 41).

In the above chapter the author borrows a motif often found in other writers, either from the same period or from later, a motif that can be found in Antiquity: the impartiality of the one who rules, “father of all subjects”, merciful in equal measure, both towards the little ones and towards the big ones. Agapetus underline the idea of justice, again and again: “Know that the strongest pillar of your salvation is that you never wrong any of your subjects” (ch. 47), “Before commanding what you will, remember to command what is right” (ch. 54), “Let him not seek, therefore, only to abstain from injustice, but to strive, above all, to uphold justice” (ch. 66).

Charity (ἔλεος) represents, in the *Advisory Chapters to the emperor Justinian*, not only some virtue among so many others, but a “mission”, the calling that the ruler must follow and fulfill: “The mission of the sun is to illuminate with its rays all the creature, the king’s mission to have mercy on the needy” (ch. 51).

Mercy is the purpose for which God allowed the king to reign: “For by birth you are meant to be able to show mercy, not to be shown mercy” (chap. 45), “Let us, therefore, give in abundance to the merciful, so that we may be given what is similar to what we give” (ch. 23), “...nothing is more precious than *mercy*” (chap. 36),

Agapetus uses the reservoir of common metaphors to emphasize the idea of mercy: “all those thirsty for *mercy* rush to the harbor of your serenity and, saved from the waves of poverty, sing hymns of thanks to you” (chap. 52). And again: “For it is much better to have mercy together with the worthy and unworthy, than together with the unworthy and to miss those worthy of mercy” (ch. 63).

The humble and respectful attitude that the emperor must show in numerous circumstances is reflected, in paraenesis, by a fifth virtue, *humility*:

“Whoever has a conscience unsullied by human deception and sees the insignificance of his nature, the brevity and transience of life here and the filth that accompanies the flesh will not fall

into the abyss of pride, even if he finds himself on a special step of tall" (chap. 15).

The exhortation to humility is clearly formulated in the next chapter: "Therefore, he must not be proud like a mortal and not upset the Lord" (chap. 22). Agapetus underlines the idea of humility using a plane comparison: "A fierce and proud man should not be angry like a bull with high horns, but at his carnal being let him think and calm the haughtiness of his heart" (ch. 71). It is observed that, in the paragraphs mentioned above, the virtue of "humility" results from a prohibitive wording identifiable in the mentioned text: "not to be proud", "the proud man...not to get angry", etc.

Gratitude (εὐχαριστία) is another virtue that the author attributes to the ideal imperial paradigm: "Know, O divine ornament of piety, that you are the debtor of an all the greater reward, as you have been worthy of God with such gifts great" (ch. 5), "From you I expect *gratitude*, not benevolent words, but pious deeds" (ch. 5).

Demonstrating long-suffering and prudence, the emperor will know what to do for the good of his subjects: *steadiness* (ατρεπτος νους) is another virtue that emperor must achieve: "the emperor's conscience must remain *steadfast*. Its pretense along with the pretense of things is proof of an unstable mind" (chap. 14), or "...keep your mind *steadfast* in the fickleness of circumstances, do not let yourself be intoxicated by joys, nor discouraged by sorrows" (chap. 33), or "...remain yourself and, in changed circumstances, you keep your good conscience unchanged" (ch. 34). And again: "...must that you, glorious emperor, may have a devout and *steadfast* mind in this rapid pretense of things" (chap. 11).

Depending on the presence and, above all, the weight that Agapetus gave, in the text, to the religious, ethical, or moral virtues, a taxonomy can be configured from which the imperial image emerges outlined as follows: firstly, it is a theomimetic authority - the emperor reigns imitating God¹⁵:

"Imitate, therefore, Him who needs no one and in abundance have mercy on those who beg your mercy, without scrutinizing your subjects too closely, but fulfilling all their requests to cover the necessities of life" (ch. 63).

¹⁵ Christian writers have promoted this concept since the 4th century.

Secondly, the imperial power is given to the emperor for him to fulfill a clearly defined duty: the emperor has the duty to show mercy to those in need, an obligation that he must fulfill regularly for everyone, as “the duty of the sun is to illuminate all creation with its rays” (ch. 51). Although the imperial authority seems at first glance, an absolute one, nevertheless, from the formulations present in the paraenesis of Agapetus, it follows that, to be “worthy of God”, the monarch “must” necessarily fulfill certain things:

“It must, therefore, so that he takes care of all people as his own members, so that all may advance towards the good and not be preoccupied with the bad” (chap. 46) or, again, “the king’s mission to have mercy on the needy” (chap. 51).

Very interesting, in the context of the paraenesis, the lexical-conceptual structure *fear - love*, Agapetus urging the monarch to make use of both feelings, in precise circumstances:

“Be, pious emperor, feared by your subjects, for your power, but also beloved, for your good deeds. Do not despise fear for fear of love, nor love for fear’s sake, but, without contempt for meekness, be without meekness for things worthy of contempt” (ch. 48).

As such, the emperor must inspire in his subjects both fear (due to power) and love (due to beneficence), an idea that the author reinforces with the exhortations present in the following paragraphs:

“And they rule the earthly kingdom well those who show parental love to those they rule, instead being honored by them with the fear owed to the rulers, those who keep the commission of mistakes in check by threats and spare the subjects from the trial of punishments” (chap. 59).

Agapetus reinforces the dihotomic approach to the concept of love *versus* fear:

“Our kingdom is rightly worthy of honor because it shows its strength to its enemies, humanity to its subjects. And if some are conquered by the power of weapons, others are conquered by the unarmed power of love” (ch. 20).

IV. Conclusions

The features mentioned and highlighted before competing to define the style of government: the image of the Byzantine emperor is firmly outlined, but tributary to rhetorical “conventions” and lacking the originality that will characterize, in the following centuries, the writings of other “textbook” authors. In comparison with other paraenesis composed later, the *Advisory Chapters to the emperor Justinian* stands out as “evidence for opinions about the emperor and his role that were current in the sixth century”¹⁶.

¹⁶ P. HENRY III, “A Mirror for Iustinian...”.