John of Rupescissa’s engagement with prophetic texts in the Sexdequitoium

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1 In 1356, John of Rupescissa produced two important works that each offered an exposition of the future of the papacy. One, the Liber ostensor quod adesse festinant tempora, is a long treatise, offering detailed exegesis of dozens of medieval prophetic texts; the other, the Vade mecum in tribulatione, is a brief summary of his prophetic view, which would become the most influential and widely-circulated of the author’s writings. Both works discuss the coming of a future Franciscan pope, whom Rupescissa called the reparator, and whose characteristics were based on the Spiritual Franciscan notion of the “angel pope”. The reparator’s election would mark the beginning of a restoration for the Church, inaugurating a new era of cooperation between popes and emperors, which would last until the inevitable advent of the Antichrist. This is a central issue for Rupescissa, and one to which he devoted much ink from his prison cell. In both the Liber ostensor and in the Vade mecum, he offered a partial list of the works that he had written on the subject. I quote the passage in full from the former:

“I have described [the reparator’s] role at length in many of my books – in the two commentaries, major and minor, treating [the Oracle of] Cyril; in a commentary on the book that begins Ascende calve, at the part Ad alta vocaris, where I explained how clearly he will understand all the Scriptures; in a commentary on the Horoscopus, concerning his role and works in detail; in the commentary I wrote on Merlin, in his book that begins Glorioso patri domino Blasio, in the chapter Letatus sum in his qui dicta sunt michi; in the second book of Clavis finalium temporum, in the [section?] Doctrinali duorum prophetarum; in the book De speculis temporum, mainly in the three final [sections], especially the third and fourth; and prominently in the volume called Liber oratii rugitam muti ante faciem miserentis Dei pro apertione porte luminis tertii status generalis mundi a raparandum [sic] orbe – three books of this work are arranged concerning him and his works. And, to put it briefly, everywhere I must speak of him and his role.”
The list differs only slightly in the Vade mecum, where Rupescissa again concluded by noting that the list was far from complete, and that he had treated the subject in “many of my other books”. Only one of the writings mentioned on the list, the commentary on the Oraculum Cyrilli, has been identified, forcing us to try to understand Rupescissa’s complex and agile thought based on just a fraction of what this prolific author actually wrote. However, the fortuitous discovery of a hitherto unknown work by Rupescissa now offers us access to one of those unnamed “other books”.

The Sexdequiloquium (“sixteen-part treatise”) dates to the first months of Innocent VI’s papacy, thus placing it in late 1352 and early 1353. The content of the text was not entirely of his own design, but rather serves as a systematic response – at the urging of a certain Brother Bertrand – to several condemned propositions of the Franciscan theologian, Peter John Olivi (d. 1298). Given the occasion of its composition, the Sexdequiloquium is not the most obvious place for a prophetic exposition, and it is clear that Rupescissa generally minimizes recourse to prophetic texts throughout. However, he does turn heavily to prophecies to support his notion of the reparator in the final part of the fifth tractate (V 4,2). The question prompting the discussion is whether “it can be proven from sacred and authoritative Scripture, or from other ‘extravagant’ prophecies, or from rational arguments” that the leadership of the Church will be “taken away from wicked prelates” and assumed by holy men from the Franciscan Order (V 4,2 [fol. 75v-76r]). This is essentially a return to the issue posed in the opening passage of the fifth tractate (V 1 [fol. 58v]). The intervening arguments provide background and challenge counterarguments, but it is in this final section that Rupescissa shows his skills as a gifted and subtle exegete of Biblical and post-Biblical prophetic writings.

Before treating Rupescissa’s prophetic argument as a whole, it will be helpful to identify the various “extravagant” prophecies that he cites here. In order to help understand the development of his thought and the use of particular prophecies throughout his oeuvre, I offer some brief notes on how the citations in Sexdequiloquium compare with his citations of the same prophecies elsewhere. Prophecies appear in the order cited.

Veh mundo in centum annis

Sexdeq. V 4,2,6 (fol. 82v-83r). Rupescissa knew this prophecy at least as far back as the Liber secretorum eventuum (1349), and he later wrote a commentary on Veh mundo, known as De oneribus orbis (1354/55). He also cites the prophecy repeatedly in the Liber ostensor, though mainly with respect to Castilian politics. In the prophetic section of the Sexdequiloquium, however, he refers to it only once, quoting the opening lines of the prophecy to support an exegesis that the reparator will be a “new David”.

The Visions of Robert of Uzès

Sexdeq. V 4,2,7-8 (fol. 83r-83v). Rupescissa cites this Dominican friar’s prophetic visions throughout the Liber ostensor in order to argue positions concerning the reparator, the Antichrist, the Avignon Papacy, and other topics. In the Sexdequiloquium, however, he limits his references to two extended quotations from visions 13 and 18. These particular visions speak of the coming pope, with Robert of Uzès asserting, “I saw him in the habit of the Friars Minor”. Rupescissa’s main concern in citing these passages is to show that even
A Dominican supports the idea that the future holy pope will be a Franciscan. “Thus,” Rupescissa argues, “if the conclusion of a Friar Minor is not believed, at least let that of a Friar Preacher be trusted”. He makes the same point again in the Liber ostensor, emphasizing Robert’s affiliation with the Dominicans, though without quoting the passages as extensively. This passage in the Sexdequiloquium now provides Rupescissa’s earliest identified reference to Robert of Uzès.

Horoscopus

 ultimate, the reasons for Rupescissa’s omission of Rabanus are probably, at present, lost with the commentary that he wrote on the text. We know of this commentary from comments in the Liber ostensor and the Vade mecum, while an earlier reference in the Deoneribus orbis establishes 1354/55 as the latest possible date of composition. The Sexdequiloquium now offers us precision on the terminus post quem: “I would have written the aforementioned exposition [on the Horoscopus] before this [present] book, he writes, were I not prevented at the outset by the request of brother Bertrand [i.e., to write the Sexdequiloquium]”. We can thus be certain that Rupescissa wrote his commentary on the Horoscopus between 1352 and 1355, though almost certainly in 1353/54.

The Sexdequiloquium provides Rupescissa’s earliest identified reference to the Horoscopus, and his use of the prophecy here already hints at its role in the Liber ostensor. In the latter, this prophecy is particularly crucial for establishing details and dates concerning the reparator. One discussion in particular shows Rupescissa disregarding the calculation of 1359 for the year of the reparator’s papacy, which he derived from the Epistola Merlini (see below), in favor of the year 1361 that he obtained from the Horoscopus. Of course, he had long anticipated 1361 as a crucial date, and the Horoscopus may have thus served to confirm his ideas rather than change them, but it remains to be seen how the text influenced his early thought. The two passages in the Sexdequiloquium are too narrowly focused on the question at hand to offer much clarification, but it is notable that one of them is repeated on two occasions in the Liber ostensor.
**Epistola Merlini (On the Popes)**

10 *Sexdeq.* V 4,2,10-11 (fol. 84v-86r). This pseudepigraphal prophecy was one of the earliest texts to offer a detailed narrative of the succession and acts of the anticipated angel pope. Rupescissa’s first identified citation of the text appears here in the *Sexdequiloquium*, where he provides a brief lemmatic commentary on key passages. Although he could have turned to the *Horoscopus* as well, the *Epistola Merlini* is the sole prophetic source he cites in the *Sexdequiloquium* when discussing the historical progression of the papacy. He quotes from most of the text’s nine sections, identifying them with Nicholas IV (§ 2), Celestine V (§ 4), Boniface VIII (§ 5), Innocent VI (though the identification is subtle) (§ 6), the *reparator* (§ 7), the second holy pope (§ 8), and the third holy pope (§ 9). The majority of Rupescissa’s exegesis, however, concerns the sections on Innocent VI and the *reparator*, thus showing the change from a wicked pope (*iniquus*) to a holy Franciscan pope. His brief references to the final two popes of the series serve to show that they too will be Franciscans.

11 Rupescissa’s interpretation of the *Epistola Merlini* had not significantly changed at the time when he wrote the *Liber ostensor*. For example, he still saw Innocent VI as the wicked pope preceding the *reparator*, though he was bolder in announcing it. But it is notable that he no longer showed the same interest in using the prophecy to explain the historical progression of popes. In fact, he quotes directly only from the sections on Innocent VI and on the *reparator*. There is very little overlap in the quotations in the *Liber ostensor*, but one instance (from § 5 of the prophecy) is particularly notable, as repeated citations of the same text show that Rupescissa knew the prophecy in at least two versions.

12 Finally, it is noteworthy that Rupescissa makes no mention in the *Sexdequiloquium* of having written or planned his commentary on the *Epistola Merlini*. Given that he bothered to mention his plans for the commentary on the *Horoscopus* (see above), it is likely that he had not yet written or planned the commentary on Merlin. The commentary thus dates from sometime between 1353 and 1356.

**Genus nequam**

13 *Sexdeq.* V 4,2,12 (fol. 86r). Rupescissa does not quote from this famous set of pope prophecies in the *Sexdequiloquium*, offering instead only a brief summary of the relevant points. He indicates that the prophecies describe the events from the time of *reparator* until the coming of the Beast (corresponding to *Genus nequam* 11-16). He also comments on the *reparator’s* evangelic life, implicitly identifying him as a Franciscan, and further notes that this pope will be “crowned by angels”. This comment clearly establishes a link between the *reparator* and the tradition of the angel pope.

14 Rupescissa was familiar with *Genus nequam* at least as far back as his commentary on the *Oraculum Cyrilli* (c. 1348/49), but he did not tend to cite it frequently. Even in the lengthy *Liber ostensor*, the *Genus nequam* set appears only twice. Further, it seems that the first ten prophecies of the set held little interest for him, as he does not mention them in the *Liber ostensor* either. It is notable, however, that he does not employ them in this later work with reference to the *reparator’s* Franciscan affiliation. In all cases, he treats the
prophecy as an anonymous text, rather than attributing it to Merlin, Rabanus (see above), Joachim, or any other prophet.

**Verus imperator (De laudato paupere)**

Although this brief prophecy has been identified in three manuscripts from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Rupescissa is the only medieval author known to quote from the work. In the Liber ostensor, he quotes passages from this prophecy to calculate crucial dates in the life of the *reparator* (birth, current age, age at election, and age at death) and to determine the *reparator*’s name: “Saxum?”. An additional mention of the True Emperor prophecy brings precision to the length of the *reparator*’s papacy, but the citation in question is not found in any known version of the text. In contrast, his citation in the Sexdequiloquium is particularly brief, noting simply that the future pope will be “an evangelical man revealed by an angel”. It is particularly important however, as this becomes our earliest explicit citation of the prophecy by any author.

Even more significant is that Rupescissa does not cite it by the text’s original incipit (“De laudato paupere et electo imperatore”), as he does in the Liber ostensor. Rather, he cites it as “De laudato paupere et electo *pastore*”. This citation is no mistake. Although the original text of the prophecy referred always to an emperor (with no mention of a pope), it was often interpreted as a papal prophecy rather than an imperial one. However, in one version of the text, copied in 1448, all references to the emperor were replaced by references to the pope, with the incipit reading exactly as cited above. The evidence of the Sexdequiloquium thus demonstrates that a “papal” redaction of the text already existed by 1352. Not only is Rupescissa’s access to both versions impressive, but it explains why he was so quick to begin in the Liber ostensor with the assumption that the prophecy about the emperor was actually a prophecy about the pope.

**Ascende calve**

In the Liber ostensor, Rupescissa quotes from this later set of pope prophecies far more often than from the earlier set, Genus nequam (above). In the Sexdequiloquium, however, his reference to this prophecy is subtle. Rupescissa describes the coming pope as one “who will kill Nero [and] heal the wounded”, where Nero represents Pope Innocent VI. This image, as Robert Lerner pointed out to me, draws on Ascende calve 13, “Rise and be valiant. Kill Nero and you will be secure; heal the wounded”. Unlike the previous prophecies, Rupescissa does not mention this one by name, nor does he give any indication that he is referring to a prophetic text.

Once again, the Sexdequiloquium shows that Rupescissa’s interpretation of a particular prophecy predates the Liber ostensor. In this case, the new dating is particularly significant. The oldest known reference to Ascende calve, found in the writings of Henry of Kirkestede, dates to the reign of Pope Clement VI (1342-1352). Thus, Rupescissa’s use of this prophecy in 1352 appears soon after the earliest citation, and it further proves that the prophecy was available by that time in distant regions. This last point is further reason to question 1349/50 as the date of authorship proposed by the Liber ostensor’s
editors\textsuperscript{27}. Rather, the evidence of circulation may coincide better with the date 1328-30 as proposed by Schwartz and Lerner.

**A Notable Omission: The Liber de Flore**

It is worth mentioning briefly that Rupescissa does not cite the *Liber de Flore*, a pseudonymous work attributed to Joachim of Fiore, which draws heavily on the narrative of the *Epistola Merlini*. The *Liber*’s account of popes could have easily supported Rupescissa’s main argument, but the omission is even more striking when we consider that it is one of the most frequently cited prophecies in the *Liber ostensor* (cited well over a hundred times). The fact that he makes no mention of the text in the *Sexdequiloquium* probably indicates that he did not yet know the text or else that he was purposely omitting prophecies attributed to Joachim. Given that the *Genus nequam* set was sometimes attributed to Joachim, the former may actually be the most plausible explanation.

**Rupescissa’s Argument**

Before building his argument on extra-biblical prophecies, Rupescissa begins with the exegesis of certain biblical passages, which emphasize the transfer of the Kingdom of God to the righteous (Mt XXI,43; I Cor XV,24) and possession of the “keys” to the Church (Is II,22; Rev III,7-8). He argues that bad leaders must be driven out (Ez XXXIV,10), and that the Church will be united under one leader, an antitype of David (Ez XXXIV,23). The exegetical leap towards arguing that the pope will be a Franciscan is based on the description of the righteous in Psalm XV, where “David speaks prophetically of the Friars Minor”. It is here that Rupescissa quotes briefly from *Veh mundo*, with reference to the “new David” (V 4,2,6 [fol. 82v-83r]). Much work remains to be done on Rupescissa’s versatility as a biblical exegete, and I will merely note here that he does not recycle this exegesis in the *Liber ostensor*, even when discussing the same subjects.

Rupescissa opens the following discussion of prophetic texts with Robert of Uzès, whose testimony carried additional credibility precisely because a Dominican was not expected to be a partisan for the Franciscans. The same might not be said of the more cryptic *Horoscopus*, which follows, but this may be precisely why Rupescissa leans repeatedly on the authority of the name Rabanus. He also emphasizes the correspondence with his previous discussion, noting that the description of the *reparator* is “just as the aforementioned Brother Robert affirms” (V 4,2,9 [fol. 84v]). Afterwards, another famous prophetic authority, Merlin, is introduced by name, and Rupescissa also includes the context of the prophecy: “...his book on certain Roman pontiffs, which he wrote at the request of saint Blaise, bishop of London” (V 4,2,10 [fol. 85r]). Bishop Blaise is indeed the fictional addressee of the *Epistola Merlini*, and Rupescissa appears to be relying on the implication that the prophecy carried the Church’s stamp of approval. Again, Rupescissa stops to emphasize the concurrence of the prophecies, arguing that the holy pope from Merlin’s prophecy is the same as “the one whom the *Horoscopus* treats; and the one who, according to Brother Robert, is the reformer of the world in the habit of the Friars Minor; and who, according to Ezekiel, is the sole ruler in all the world, under the type of David” (V 4,2,10 [fol. 85v-86r]).
With the exception of the brief citation of Veh mundo, all of the prophecies treated so far have rested on the authority of their authors. In the twelfth and final proof of the argument, however, Rupescissa lists the anonymous Genus nequam and Verus imperator prophecies. It is true that he normally cites these prophecies less often than the others, but the contents of either could have served as strong support for the argument at hand. Likewise, he appears particularly cautious in his reference to the Ascende calve prophecies, where he does not even acknowledge his prophetic source. Given the occasion of the Sexdequiloquium’s composition, perhaps Rupescissa was trying to minimize his reliance on anonymous – and thus suspicious – prophecies.

This brings us at last to the concluding pages of book five: “These twelve proofs indicate that the highest office of the Church will undoubtedly be transferred from wicked prelates to holy men, either to chosen Brothers Minor, as I think, or to the holy men of another status” (V 4,2,13 [fol. 86r-v]). This change, he notes, will occur around the year 1361. The details that Rupescissa offers concerning the specifics of the reparator’s election and reign show that, three years prior to the Liber ostensor, he had already thoroughly digested this cluster of papal prophecies, and that his prophetic program of the reparator was already worked out. He would just need to fill in the details.

NOTES


2. Johannes de Rupescissa, « Vade mecum in tribulatione », in Appendix ad Fasciculum rerum expetendarum et fugiendarum, Edward Brown, London, Chiswell, 1690, p. 501. It is possible that the difference between the lists is due mainly to the faults of the printed edition. The dozens of extant manuscripts of the Vade mecum show numerous variations, and there are at least two recensions of the text.

3. See the contribution of Sylvain Piron, « Le Sexdequiloquium de Jean de Roquetaillade », in this present issue of Oliviana.

4. The following analysis treats only the prophecies appearing in treatise five. It is important to remember that there are passing references to other prophecies in the Sexdequiloquium (e.g., the Oraculum Cyrilli in VI 3,2,8,5 [fol. 96v]).


8. Jean de Roquetaillade, Liber ostensor, bk. 3, par. 27 (p. 136–37).

9. There is no edition or extended study of this treatise, but the most notable recent work is Matthias Kaup, “Der Liber Horoscopus: Ein bildloser Übergang von Diagrammatik zur Emblematis in der Tradition Joachims von Fiore », in Die Bildwelt der Diagramme Joachims von Fiore: Zur


13. Liber ostensor, bk. 8, par. 184-90 (p. 486-90).

14. Liber ostensor, bk. 3, par. 29 (p. 138) and bk. 6, par. 71 (p. 359).

15. I am now completing a study and critical edition of this text.

16. Liber ostensor, bk. 4, par. 35 (p. 156) and bk. 8, par. 180 (p. 483). The latter more closely matches the corresponding passage in the Sexdequiloquium (V 4,2,10 [fol. 85r]), though there are still notable differences.


19. One prophetic quotation, noted in the edition as a possible reference to Genus nequam 14, can be firmly ruled out. See Jean de Roquetaillade, Liber ostensor, bk. 6, par. 55 (p. 347) and n. 2. The prophecy in question can be found in New Haven, Yale University Library, Marston 225, fol. 35v-37r.


21. Liber ostensor, bk. 8, par. 197-98 (p. 494-95).

22. Liber ostensor, bk. 6, par. 74 (p. 360-61).

23. Liber ostensor, bk. 4, par. 174 (p. 253).

24. Although there are significant differences, I remain open to the possibility that there is a reference to Verus imperator in a passage from Gentile of Foligno (writing c. 1332), distorted in his memory from having read it « perhaps thirty years ago ». Of course, it is equally plausible that he was referring to some unidentified text that was influenced by Verus imperator. See the passage in Matthias Kaup and Robert E. Lerner, « Gentile of Foligno Interprets the Prophecy ‘Woe to the World’, with an Edition and English Translation », Traditio, 56, 2001, p. 200-201.

25. Liber ostensor, bk. 4, par. 174 (p. 253).


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