« Letteratura profetica, oracolare e sibillina fra XIII e XV secolo »


Felicitas Schmieder
Since 2007 a group of researchers has assembled around Gian Luca Potestà (Università cattolica, Milan), Sylvain Piron (École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris), Felicitas Schmieder (Fernuniversität, Hagen) and Robert E. Lerner (Northwestern University, Evanston). The group plans to meet regularly for workshops in order to exchange and discuss information about new findings and ongoing research in the field of medieval eschatology and prophetic thought. This workgroup will serve to organize and coordinate collaborative projects and, not least of all, to foster dialogue among a growing number of scholars from around the world. The first workshop took place in Modena, Italy, thanks to the gracious sponsorship of the Stifterverband für die deutsche Wissenschaft, Franco Cosimo Panini Editore, and the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Modena.

The most impressive result of this meeting was certainly the presentation and discussion of three significant prophetic texts that had recently been discovered and identified. Prophetic writings have been generally neglected in medieval research, in part because of their cryptic language and difficulty of interpretation. As a result, this is one of the fields of study in which further research is sure to yield exciting discoveries that challenge our current ideas. Furthermore, by interpreting both the known and newly-discovered texts, by establishing their location and date, and by charting their diffusion, we can expect to see more evidence about the ways in which prophecy was a central medium by which contemporaries reacted to times of change and conflict – a medium that was highly regarded by some, but often feared and controlled or combated.

Here is a brief account of the conference proceedings.

Gian Luca Potestà began with an introductory overview that established the place of the central prophetic authors and texts within the wider framework of medieval European culture, "Letteratura profetica, oracolare e sibillina fra xiii e xv secolo. Questioni aperte e
prospettive di ricerca" (= Prophetic, oracular, and sibylline literature from the 13th to 15th centuries. Open questions and perspectives for research). Next, Elena Tealdi gave an account of her recently finished master’s thesis, Le fonti e gli obiettivi del Protocollo della Commissione di Anagni. Una riconsiderazione del testo (= Sources and objectives of the protocol of the Anagni Commission. A reconsideration of the text). By meticulously analyzing the discussion, in 1255, of crucial prophetic texts by a commission of cardinals, Elena offered a striking example of how prophetic authors can be seen as part of a community acting “internationally,” and who were likewise criticised and censured like any theologian.

This impression was strengthened by the following contributions. Around the year 1300, many members of the Church – particularly, though not exclusively among Franciscans – perceived a serious crisis, partly due to the controversial Pope Boniface VIII. The output of prophetic writings treating the coming of Antichrist multiplied, as did the reactions to them. One of the new findings, introduced by Robert E. Lerner (“A new source for Arnald of Villanova and many other things”), is one of the earliest reactions to a particularly controversial treatise on the dating of Antichrist’s advent. And the first of two contributions by Sylvain Piron, “L’Oraculum Cyrilli. Tentativo di decifrazione di una profezia anti-bonifaziana” (= The Oraculum Cyrilli. An attempt at deciphering an anti-Boniface prophecy) deals with this context as well. The Oracle of Cyril is a text that has long puzzled historians of prophecy, but Piron has discovered in it references to the influential Franciscan thinker, Peter John of Olivi, some of whose ideas were condemned during Boniface’s reign. Finally, the identification of a lost prophetic text by Katelyn Mesler, “The Nature and Fortunes of the Prophetic Text Merlinus, De summis pontificibus”, served to emphasize this heated ecclesiastical moment, when the papacy was seen as both the source of Christendom’s problems and the institution through which those problems would be resolved. Perhaps too, in the frescoes in the Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi, can be found a reaction to the prophetic ideals of the Spiritual Franciscans, as Peter Bokody argued (“Between Ubertino and Olivi. The allegory of obedience in Assisi”).

The world did not end in 1260, as the followers of Joachim of Fiore had expected. But in a time when prophecy and human error were considered equally possible, this only meant the necessity to rethink, and new dates were constantly proposed in the following centuries. The most important prophet of the fourteenth century, John of Rupescissa, was treated by Sylvain Piron in his second contribution, as well as by Felicitas Schmieder. Sylvain Piron, “L’allucinante scoperta di un trattato sconosciuto di Roquetaillade in un armadio lorenese” (= The incredible discovery of an unknown text by Rupescissa in a wardrobe in Lorraine), presented the third new finding of the workshop, a hitherto unknown substantial treatise by Rupescissa, that was literally found with miscellaneous papers in a cabinet, and is now being prepared for edition by a team that includes several of the conference participants. Rupescissa is also known for an enormous commentary that he wrote on the Oracle of Cyril (for which Felicitas Schmieder, “Prophecy as means of political propaganda. The example of the Commentum in Oraculum beati Cyrilli by John of Rupescissa”, reported the status of plans for edition and commentary). Rupescissa spent the last years of his life in prison: he was considered an inspired prophet and thus was allowed to write and was apparently supplied with all necessary materials, but he was also daringly critical of the Church, and so it is not surprising that this and two other long treatises have survived, so far as we know, only in unique copies.
One of his shorter texts is an exception, for it was extremely widespread, surviving not only in many manuscripts copies of the original Latin, but also in numerous vernacular translations. **Barbara Ferrari**, “Les traductions françaises du *Vade mecum in tribulatione*, xiv<sup>e</sup>-xv<sup>e</sup> siècles” (= The French translations of the *Vade mecum in tribulatione*, 14th to 15th c.), is in the process of editing three different late-medieval French versions. **Pavlina Cermanova** (“The Visions of Johannes Rupescissa as an inspiration for the pre-Hussite and Hussite apocalyptic authors”) is dealing for her PhD thesis with the Czech history of impact especially in the 15<sup>th</sup> c. Especially in this latter context of textual traditions in Hussite Bohemia it can be easily seen, once again, how much prophecy itself was accepted and the prophets or their opinions criticised, since both sides, Catholics as well as Hussites, were using it in equal ways. Prophecies for the coming of Antichrist were also popular in the context of Late Medieval Bavaria. **Courtney Kneupper** (“The reception of prophecy in fifteenth-century Germany”) is dealing with in a study of the diffusion of mostly shorter prophecies to be found in Southern German libraries. They appear in early, pre-Gutenberg block prints, but also assembled with other texts in collective manuscripts. An especially significant result of the research for her doctoral dissertation is establishing the nature of other textual genres that have were copied together with prophetic writings, in order to better understand the position of the reader with respect to these texts.

A main desideratum of research was hinted at particularly in Ferrari’s work. Traditionally, editions of medieval texts are created by trying to establish an archetype that comes as close as possible to the author’s original version of a text. This method is inappropriate when it comes to prophetic texts: while we normally can assume that a copyist was eager to keep the original text and that discrepancies were created by mistakes, prophetic texts were copied in order to use and make them relevant. Changes were thus very often intentional and hence constitute important elements of the history of the impact of the text. In principle, this would make it necessary to put side by side all existing versions, because there is no such thing as a “correct” one. But it is still not clear how this editorial challenge can be solved in ways that are most helpful for researchers. This is a question that the workgroup will continue to discuss, and it may serve as a point for connecting our work with that of textual scholars and editors.

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