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‘Centones’ Dracontiani and the Centonic Art  
between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

**Abstract**

This paper is dedicated to three early medieval ‘centonizations’ exploiting phrases and passages taken from Dracontius’s *De laudibus Dei*. My aim is to reconstruct their compositional technique by comparing it with the rules established by late antique centoists. It seems evident that the composition of early medieval centos has very little in common with the technical mastery of their late antique counterparts as it is more likely that an early medieval cento was composed for a student.

**Keywords**

Centones Claromontani, medieval centos, Latin centos

**Riassunto**

Il presente articolo è dedicato a tre ‘centonizzazioni’ altomedioevali che riusano frasi e passaggi presi dal *De laudibus Dei di Draconzio*. Il mio obiettivo è quello di ricostruire la loro tecnica compositiva comparandola con le regole stabilite dai poeti centonari tardoantichi. La struttura compositiva dei centoni altomedioevali, ben diversa dalla maestria tecnica dei loro ‘archetipi’ tardoantichi, rende assai probabile il fatto che siano stati composti per lettori-studenti.

**Parole chiave**

Centones Claromontani, centoni medievali, centoni latini

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When discussing the reception of a particular author, it is customary to focus on citations, allusions and ‘echoes’ of their works found in subsequent literature. In the case of Dracontius, however, the data obtained from such a review are (simply speaking) not uniform. Abundant allusions to the poems by the Carthaginian lawyer (and specifically to his *carmina profana*) can be found in the texts by his contemporaries or by poets active only a few decades later. The so-called *Anthologia Salmasiana* serves as an excellent source of such examples. Scholars have learnt to search for and discern these allusions, studying Dracontius’s oeuvre not only diachronically (by reading him against the ‘canonical’ authors of earlier Roman literature), but also – and precisely – synchronically, in the context of Latin minor poetry of Vandal Africa, particularly epigrammatic (like *uersus serpentini*) and centonic (e.g. the *Alcesta*, possibly by a poet named Siria<sup>1</sup>, some years his junior). In later European literature, such instances are less frequent and even less frequent when it comes to *carmina profana*. An intriguing example is the *Epithalamium Patricii*, especially if we considered it – which is most probably the

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<sup>1</sup> As argued (in my view convincingly) by Paolucci 2015, LXXXIVff.

case – a literary forgery. However, do we have any objective reason to suppose that Caspar von Barth (the alleged author of the epithalamium, as Camillo Morelli already argued)<sup>2</sup> had immediate access to Dracontius's secular texts, which at the time were available only in *Codex Neapolitanus*?

*De laudibus Dei* and *Satisfactio* are better known throughout the Middle Ages and the early Modern era, yet even in their case citations and allusions appear somewhat haphazard. Upon reflection, however, we can realize that it is precisely Dracontius's Christian poetry that provides us with a most eloquent example of reception in its proper sense, when considering the methodology of literary studies. I refer to the aesthetic of reception as defined by Hans Robert Jauss, i.e., through the lens of the so-called horizon of expectation of a literary audience at a certain time in history<sup>3</sup>. I am pointing to the unique phenomenon of *redactio Eugeniiana*, or the rewriting of a segment of Dracontius's major work, *De laudibus Dei*, by Eugenius of Toledo. In the past, scholars were convinced that the main reason behind Eugenius's project to revise the text of Dracontius's *Hexaemeron* (i.e. the central part of the first book of *DLD*) was theological and religious: in other words, his intention was to purge the original of any remaining Arian contaminations. Nowadays, this line of interpretation is neither shared nor even defended. Instead, it is justly emphasized that the bishop-poet himself expressed his goals as literary and aesthetic, not ideological, particularly in the dedicatory letter addressed to king Chindaswint<sup>4</sup>. Eugenius's *Hexaemeron* – a rhetorical *excerptio* par excellence – is at the same time a most interesting example of framing Dracontius's poem as a biblical epic. This adaptation to the poetic canons of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages underscores its educative and indeed formative character. Not without a touch of irony might one say that Eugenius's attempt at defining *Laudes Dei* as an epic biblical paraphrase proved more successful than modern scholars' interpretations which (too often) label *Laudes* as epic just customarily, if not purely mechanically. Nevertheless, his approach involved simplifying and removing any problematic material that could not fit the hexaemeric scheme. By all appearances, Eugenius was not personally responsible for inventing this unique generic transposition ('transposition by reduction', one might call it) as he had access only to a shortened version of Dracontius's text (exactly like Isidore before him). However, he established its position among the poet's readership until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, he contributed to the original text by adding his two compositions, *Praefatio* and *Monosticha*. These

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<sup>2</sup> Morelli 1910, 423ff.

<sup>3</sup> Jauss 1982a; 1982b.

<sup>4</sup> As was noticed aptly by Langlois: 1964: 808: «ont fait soupçonner Eugène de n'avoir pas été un simple éditeur, mais un remanieur de Dracontius».

two sections reveal Eugenius's character, marked by idiosyncratic subjectivism and intimacy of confessions; composed in the epigrammatic convention (Eugenius's favorite format par excellence), they also serve as an introductory and dedicatory epigram on one hand<sup>5</sup>, and a model *deminutio* on the other. This *deminutio*, a recapitulation of the key issues of Dracontius's *Hexaemeron* in monostichs, is complemented with an original description of the seventh day of creation: in other words, it is the *deminutio* that is combined with the *augmentatio*<sup>6</sup>.

The *Redactio Eugeniiana* is not the only early medieval example of this kind of reception of the Carthaginian lawyer's major work, i.e. the reception at the center of which stands the very text itself, only that the original text undergoes such profound changes and re-compositions that its very structure seems utterly different. Three roughly contemporary pieces, definable as 'Dracontian centos,' also illustrate the same phenomenon. It is worth underlining that in their case the label 'cento' is not an invention or a suggestion of modern scholars. On the contrary, the phrase *Versus centoni ex libris Dracontii in laudibus Dei et de sua paenitentia* appears in the very manuscript *Berolinensis-Phillipps* 1824 (Berlin (DDR), Deutsche Stadtbibl. Rose n. 169) (C), datable to the 9<sup>th</sup>-century. Remarkably, this happens to be one of very few instances of the usage of this term in the Middle Ages and the strange *centonus* functions here as an adjective, whereas what is known from late antique contexts is only a noun: *cento*, *-onis*. In point of fact, the very notion of *cento* might have been familiar to a medieval reader, especially if they consulted a specific entry in the huge 'encyclopedia' by Isidore of Seville. In the first book on grammar (*De grammatica*) and in the chapter on meters (*De metris*), *Doctor Egregius*, while formulating his own definition, echoes some of Tertullian's observations<sup>7</sup>:

Centones apud Grammaticos uocari solent, qui de carminibus Homeri seu Vergilii ad propria opera more centonario ex multis hinc inde compositis in unum sarciunt corpus, ad facultatem cuiusque materiae. Denique Proba, uxor Adelphi, centonem ex Vergilio *de Fabrica mundi* et Euangeliiis plenissime expressit, materia composita secundum uersus, et uersibus secundum materiam concinnatis. Sic quoque et quidam Pomponius ex eodem poeta inter cetera stili sui otia Tityrum in Christi honorem composuit: similiter et de Aeneidos.

<sup>5</sup> The epigrammatic poetics of Eugenius's *Praefatio* has been recently amply discussed by Prontera 2021; see also Mondin 2008, 460ff.

<sup>6</sup> For a more thorough analysis of the piece see Mondin 2016, 226ff.

<sup>7</sup> See Tert. *De praescr. haeretic.* 39,3-4 *Vides hodie ex Vergilio fabulam in totum aliam componi, materia secundum uersus et uersibus secundum materiam concinnatis. denique \*Hosidius Geta\* Medeam tragoediam ex Vergilio plenissime exsuxit. meus quidam propinquus ex eodem poeta inter cetera stili sui otia Pinacem Ceбетis explicuit.*

However, the term does not seem to have been commonly used. In *Reg. Lat.* 251 (9<sup>th</sup> century), a scribe tried to explain the phrase *Incipit Vergilio centon, composuit Proba...* by writing *excerptio* in the margin: presumably, he considered it the synonym of *centon*. In *Reg. Lat.* 1666 (11<sup>th</sup> century), another scribe copied Isidore's definition<sup>8</sup>, being apparently convinced that readers would not understand the nature of the text from the mysterious expression *uergiliocenton* cited in the incipit.

Thus, an early medieval compiler – or a scribe copying the material the former had assembled (we cannot ascertain what was the case exactly) – encourages us to look at his 'production' through the lens of Latin cento tradition. *Per analogiam* two other texts composed in the same way, one also transmitted in *Berolinensis-Phillipps* and the other in the codex *Lat.* 8093 at the National Library of France in Paris, can be analyzed by applying the same approach. This perspective differs from the one usually taken into account when discussing these three witnesses, which focuses on the history of Dracontius's text. Naturally, it is undeniable that the major (if any) value of the two *Centones Claromontani* lies in their importance for the reconstruction of the final part of the third book of *Laudes* (i.e. verses 623-677). Nonetheless, let us read them simply as literary pieces. Of course, the composition method of 'cut and paste' cannot generate our enthusiasm as readers or critics, especially considering their numerous prosodic and grammatical flaws. However, examining the author's intention, goals and strategies is worthwhile. As a matter of fact, it is worth noting that by all accounts it was already Friedrich Vollmer who was quite aware that in that kind of composition an author (meaning in other words: a compiler) is not a wholly transparent figure. The editor commented with his idiosyncratic malignity: «ita non erubuit in uersibus suum in usum compositis uerba demere addere mutare ut singuli coirent ad sententiam excerptoris, non Draconti»<sup>9</sup>. Paradoxically, if unintentionally, Vollmer suggested that a florilegist – if considered not merely as a scribe, but indeed as an active (co-)author of a text – must not always be required absolute faithfulness in transmission and the lack of such faithfulness need not always result from ignorance alone.

Unfortunately, we know little about the circumstances of the three texts' composition as well as about their authors. Also, codicological information is incomplete. The first manuscript mentioned above, *Berolinensis Phillipps 1824* (Berlin (DDR) Deutsche Stadtsbibl. Rose n. 169), of French provenance and datable to the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, belonged to the Collegium Parisiense Societatis Jesu. It is listed in the *Catalogus manuscriptorum codicum collegii Claromontani*, Paris 1764, under no. 730. The manuscript originally comprised 102 folios, so the Berlin

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<sup>8</sup> Bažil 2014, 47.

<sup>9</sup> Vollmer 1905, XIII.

Library possesses today only the first half (72 folios). Besides passages from *Laudes Dei* (ff. 1-7v), it contains Juvenecus's *Euangeliorum libri*. Because of the name of Collegium Claromontanum<sup>10</sup>, the excerpts from Dracontius are labeled *Centones Claromontani*, a term coined again by Friedrich Vollmer<sup>11</sup> (earlier Wilhelm Meyer had used the expression *Berliner Centones*)<sup>12</sup>. The *centones* can be seen as a diptych with specific titles for each part: the first one is the above-mentioned *Versus centoni ex libris Dracontii in laudibus Dei et de sua paenitentia* (f. 1r) and the second one *incipit eiusdem Dracontii de origine mundi ab Adam et Eua* (f. 4v). Whether these titles were introduced by the compiler, or a scribe is uncertain, but they provide valuable interpretive tools for readers, best demonstrated by the almost technical term *uersus centoni* (sic), quite useful when analyzing the structure of the text.

The other manuscript of interest, *Lat.* 8093 from the National Library of France in Paris, lacks any kind of *incipit* or *titulus*. *Cento Dracontianus* – labelled as such in modern times – begins immediately after Sedulius's *Carmen Paschale*, the only paratextual information being *explicit liber Sedulii* on f. 15v. This manuscript is invaluable for studying the tradition of Dracontius's Christian writings, and particularly the tradition of *redactio Eugeniiana*, as it also includes *Laudes* and *Satisfactio* in the shortened, i.e. Eugenic, version. Notably, both texts transmitted in ms. 8093, the *Cento* and the *redactio*, date back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and appear related suggesting that the author of *Cento Dracontianus* and Eugenius used a similar – if not the same, in fact – exemplar of the Carthaginian lawyer's poems<sup>13</sup>. Besides, the codex on its whole reflects quite well the literary tastes typical of Hispanic readers from the mid-seventh century onwards. Apart from Dracontius's poems redacted by Eugenius, it contains some epigrams by Martin of Braga and Isidore, epitaphs, including those composed 'locally', i.e. in Iberia, and works by poets popular in Spain at the time, such as (again) Sedulius, Venantius Fortunatus, plus Ausonius and Paulinus of Nola, considering that the initial part of ms. 8093 (ff. 1-32) was once integrated with another manuscript, nowadays preserved in Leiden and signed as *Voss. Lat. F III*<sup>14</sup>.

Due to its Spanish provenance, some scholars still share the opinion of Sigmunt

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<sup>10</sup> In 1682, Louis XIV (king of France, 1643-1715) granted his official patronage to the leading Jesuit educational establishment in his country, and the Jesuits removed the old name, 'Collegium Claromontanum societatis Jesu', from the façade and replaced it with 'Collège de Louis-le-Grand'.

<sup>11</sup> Vollmer 1905, XII.

<sup>12</sup> Meyer 1890.

<sup>13</sup> Vollmer 1905, XXIIIff.; Moussy 1985, 120f.

<sup>14</sup> See Alberto 2005, 54f.; Moussy 1985, 121ff.

Tafel<sup>15</sup> that the composition of this Christian poetry collection would have been inspired by Theodulf of Orléans, who may have commissioned the manuscript. The hypothesis aligns with Theodulf's intellectual profile and seems to be corroborated by the fact that the codex was most likely copied in Lyons, an important reference point for Theodulf. Claude Moussy accepted – or at least not rejected – this theory<sup>16</sup>, but Francesco Stella, after thoroughly studying the manuscript *in situ*, objected to such conclusions. Stella argued: «resta tuttavia impossibile attribuire a Teodolfo, raffinato cultore di versi latini, il completamento autonomo del centone, che Vollmer definisce prodotto di uno *scripturiens, balbutiens barbarusque* contemporaneo di Paolo Alvaro»<sup>17</sup>. Stella does not intend to mimic the indignation à la Vollmer when addressing this sort of literary compositions, but based on serious arguments, suggests that the *Cento* was likely penned by a Spanish versifier active at the turn of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. This conclusion, however, does not detract from the primary focus of our research, which is the text itself rather than its (mysterious) compiler. The *Cento* represents a *deminutio* in the proper sense, recounting the seven days of creation within 35 verses. We will return to this issue later, but it is worth noting now that in such a case *Cento* and Eugenius's *redactio* share the feature of rewriting and also complementing Dracontius's hexaemic paradigm with their own description of the seventh day.

Thus, we can finally approach our main subject: the centonic character of the three early medieval pieces. Studies in ancient – specifically late antique – cento have flourished in recent decades, as they provide a field where classicists can experiment with contemporary interpretive methodologies while requiring 'classical' philological competences. In my view, of particular relevance are those studies exploring inter- and intratextual relationships, focusing on the complex interactions between the hypo- and hypertexts and specifically all the semantic tensions that arise<sup>18</sup>. A good instance (just to give one) might be a situation when a Virgilian phrase connotes a scene or a character contrary to the superficial narrative logic of the new poem built upon the old hemistichs and verses. A true expert in such combinations is Siria, the alleged authoress of the poem *Alcesta*, which closes the section of secular narrative centos of *Anthologia Salmasiana* (AL 9-15). Siria composes a text infused with a feminist message, attributing heroic virtues only to her female protagonist, Alcesta, while Admetus is often portrayed either as a helpless child – whenever he is hypotextually connoted as Ascanius –, or as an am-

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<sup>15</sup> Tafel 1914, 638.

<sup>16</sup> Moussy 1985, 104.

<sup>17</sup> Stella 1996, 14.

<sup>18</sup> See for instance a seminal study on the Virgilian formula *o dulcis coniunx* by Audano 2015.

biguous adult, when his Virgilian references embrace Aeneas the unfaithful lover of Dido or the absent-minded husband of Creusa<sup>19</sup>. Such examples could easily be multiplied, but my aim is merely to highlight the vast range of compositional possibilities for the author and interpretive opportunities for the readership that centonic technique offers when applied with mastery.

A cento is also a literary technique codified and theoretically described as early as in antiquity. The most relevant reference is the well-known passage from Ausonius's dedicatory letter to Axius Paulus, accompanying the experimental poem *Cento nuptialis*. Ausonius explains several aspects (listed in the passage cited below) of *cento* composition, and it is remarkable that the rules he had elucidated were strictly followed by Latin centoists:

Et si pateris, ut doceam docendus ipse, cento quid sit absolutam. Variis de locis sensibusque quaedam carminis structura solidatur, in unum uersum ut coeant aut caesi duo aut unus et sequens cum medio, nam duos iunctim locare ineptum est et tres una serie merae nugae. Diffinduntur autem per caesuras omnes, quas recipit uersus heroicus, conuenire ut possit aut penthemimeris cum reliquo anapaestico aut trochaice cum posteriore segmento aut septem semipedes cum anapaestico chorico aut <PONATVR>post dactylum atque semipedem quidquid restat hexametro, simile ut dicas ludicro, quod Graeci ostomachion uocauerunt.

The basic and implicit rule of the cento was its Virgilian character, as composing – and decoding – such a poem required intertextual proficiency based on a normative text and a normative author, exactly like *auctor Maro*. However, there are (actually) very few examples of centos built upon other models, such as the so-called *cento ouidianus* in the *Anthologia Salmasiana*. This four-verse description of the summer was composed rather mechanically, just by combining two distichs from *Ars Amatoria* (III 65-66 and 73-74). Dracontius himself shows a preference for certain quotations and includes them in his poems. His 'golden phrase' (repeated twice, in *Rom.* 10, v. 207 and *LD* III 626) appears to be the appeal of Virgil's Palinurus: *eripe me his, inuicte, malis* (*Aen.* VI 365). Nonetheless, when he composes his own centonic line (calling it a full-fledged cento would be an overstatement) at the outset of *Rom.* 5, he refers to hemistichs from Virgil and Lucan: *Quis furor iste nouus? Quae tanta licentia ferri?* (cf. *Aen.* V 670 *quis furor iste nouus?*; Lucan I 8 *quae tanta licentia ferri!*)<sup>20</sup>. Thus, it is not excluded that late

<sup>19</sup> For a more thorough analysis of hypo- and hypertextual tensions exploited by Siria in her cento *Alceste* see Wasyl 2018, 121-131.

<sup>20</sup> It is no exaggeration on the part of Étienne Wolff (2017, 39ff.) when he calls this verse

antiquity saw more similar literary experiments in composing centos, or at least centonic passages, that did not exclusively exploit Virgil's phrases. Nevertheless, non-Virgilian centos did remain an exception rather than a rule. Hence, the creation of at least three texts recomposing Dracontius *more centonario*, despite his being a quite recent and a non-canonical poet at the time, marks a significant – vital – departure from the ancient cento tradition.

Next, let us examine the arrangement of the material in all the three compositions<sup>21</sup>:

*Versus centoni ex libris Dracontii in laudibus Dei et de sua paenitentia*

I 1-9, 18, 19, 42, 62, 71, 74-77, 302, 79, 86, 89-92, 96-98, II 565, 566, I 101, 103, 106, 110, 560, 696-697, 699-700, 702-703, 707-708, 711, 714-715, 733-736, II 36, 696-697, 700, 704-706, 713, I 738-739, 741, 746-750, II 57, 154-155, 157-158, 159, 161, 198+199, 208-214, 216-217, 204, 218-219, 221-223, 235-238, 597, 603, III 98, 248-249, II 481-484, 467-473, III 564, 566-567, 572-577, 579-590, 592-593, 599-601, 603-607, 610-611, 613, 618-631, 643-661, 664-669, 674-678, 720-725, 735-736, 745-748, 750-755.

*Eiusdem Dracontii de origine mundi ab Adam et Eva*

I 329-330, 333-334, 336, 338-341, 343-348, 183, 182, 192, 349-351, 353-355, 360, 371-374, 377-384, 386-390, 393-397, 364-365, 367-370, 399-400, 402, 405+404, 406-407, 414-415, 427-429, 435-436, 439, 440-441, 443-445, 459-465, 469-474, 477-484, 488-491, 493, 535-536, 542, 545, 549-551, 553, 555, 560, 619, II 373-379, 388-389, 393, 405-406, 412, 415, 418-420, 429-431, 435-436, 485, 625-628, 630-633, 636-637, 635, 641-642, 650-652, 657, 796-797, 800-801, 803-805, 808, 659-661, III 480-481, 483, 485-486, 489-490, II 664-666, 672-673, III 210, 212, 216-218, II 686-688, 690-692, 597, 599-601, 509-510, II 516-519, 524, 528, 531, 534, 636, 541-542, 552-554, 556-559, 566.

*Cento Dracontianus*, ms. Lat. 8093 (considering the topic as such, its only source is Book One of the *Laudes*, and even more specifically - the *Hexameron*): 118-122; 138-140; 142-143; 149-150; 164; 152-153; 206-208; 211-212; 234; 238; 242-244; 255&330; 340; 383&382; 402-403.

A brief review of the data allows us to conclude that the compositional rules

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programmatic as the very allusion to the two poets, who are both Dracontius's special authorities, may - and indeed should - make the reader reflect upon the two visions of Romanness: the positive one, constructed upon the idea of imperialism, and the negative one, utterly critical toward the former.

<sup>21</sup> As for the *Centones Dracontiani*, the data are provided by Vollmer 1905, XIIIff.

suggested by Ausonius are simply not adhered to at all. The authors do not refrain from removing entire distichs or even complete sections from the original text. The longest segment, extracted from Book Three and included in the final part of *Versus centoni* (sic), contains nineteen consecutive verses. In the case of *Cento Dracontianus* these segments are shorter, though the text itself is notably more concise. Despite its apparent banality, what comes to mind in this context is a comparison with handicraft and its subtypes. Although the creation of a cento is often metaphorically described as patchwork or weaving, the two crafts are fundamentally different. The ancient cento as defined by Ausonius can be envisioned as the work of a skilled weaver who can combine diverse threads. In contrast, the early medieval cento, and specifically our *centones Dracontiani*, resemble much more of a patchwork (which intriguingly aligns with the everyday meaning of the noun *cento* in Latin). There are no examples of connecting a hemistich from one source with a verse and a half from another, although both *Centones Claromontani* and *Cento* do contain a few single lines composed from two original verses. Such combinations clearly disrupt the metrical value, and often even the rhythm, of the entire line, as in another of the Berlin centos, *De origine mundi*, where verses 405 and 404 (from Book One, detailing the creation of Eve) have been merged into a single line and the introduction of the additional word *Deus* did not help much:

I 404-407 Arbitrio commissa manent. His crescite, dixit Et replete solum Omnipotens de semine uestro Sanguinis ingeniti natis; nutrite nepotes Et de prole nouos iterum copulate iugales.	I 405+404 Omnipotensque Deus his crescite dixit <sup>22</sup> I 406-407 Sanguinis ingeniti natis; nutrite nepotes Et de prole nouos iterum copulate iugales.
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In *Cento Dracontianus* such conflation occurs twice. Notably, in one instance, the two combined verses (255 and 330) are not consecutive, which might suggest a higher level of technical skill. Additionally, there are new phraseological units in this cento that differ from Dracontius's: *formatur in artus* instead of *limatur in artus* (with *formatur* derived from the initial part of Dracontius's original verse 330); and *Inde de costa uiri socia* instead of *sensim costa uiro*.

I 255-256 Sexta dies folium ramis et floribus herbas- [Euomit et spicans acuit seges omnis aristas]	Sexta dies species hominis formatur in artus <sup>23</sup>
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<sup>22</sup> Meyer 1890, 282: «Duo uersus in unum redacti et *deus* additum ut hexametri euaderet species».

<sup>23</sup> I 330 *Formatur uirtute Dei, limatur in artus*. For notable analogies see also the closure of v. I 337 *membratur in artus*.

I 383

Nam iuuenis de parte breui formatur adulta | Inde de costa uiri socia formatur adulta<sup>24</sup>

The observations made notwithstanding, the Dracontian centos should not be dismissed as mere digests or abridgments, including the two Berlin centos which might appear to be simple *excerptiones*, using the term that an early medieval scribe, who was copying Proba's poem, employed to describe the enigmatic word (*Vergilio*)*centon* in *Reg. Lat.* 251. It is notable that in both centos, the compiler exercises considerable freedom in combining and rearranging material from Books I, II, and III. In addition, while in *Versus centoni* (sic!) the finale of the 'poem' is based on Book Three, specifically its concluding part, which also serves as the closure of Dracontius's entire work, in *De origine mundi*, passages from the central segment of Book Three merely complement a narrative based predominantly on Book Two. This results in a coherent internal structure. Furthermore, it seems that the compiler is so familiar with Dracontius's *Laudes* that he does not hesitate to modify and recombine it to convey his own 'message'. His confidence in his own goals is such that he does not feel compelled to adhere strictly to the original structure. Nor does the author of *Cento Dracontianus* transmitted in *Lat.* 8093: he introduces, even though only once, a similar inversion between verses 150 and 152, where he includes verse 164. This inversion is quite logical and pertains to the creation of the waters on the third day.<sup>25</sup> His idiosyncratic approach becomes clear when he extends the Dracontian material, which describes the six days with five verses each, by adding five new hexameters dedicated to the seventh day (*sabbatus*, v. 31-35):

Sabbatus inde sacer conpagat clausulam mundi:  
P[lacid]a<sup>26</sup> data quies machina feria<n>te librata  
Hac opera [pac]is sidere eque dicata perennis  
Recentibusque bonis dedit rebus sistere s[aecli]s.  
P[at]ri]s ergo cunctis hostiam sanctam praefixit.

The text of Dracontius's *Laudes* as transmitted in *Cento Dracontianus* does not seem to be directly dependent on any of the extant manuscripts from the family of *recensio Eugeniiana*<sup>27</sup>. However, the readings of G (as *Cento* is usually signed) are

<sup>24</sup> v. I 382 *Sensim costa uiro, sed mox reditura marito.*

<sup>25</sup> 150 *Fluctibus immensis pelagi freta glauca liquescent*; 164 *Et mare nauigerum quatitur spumantibus undis*; 152 *Eruiitur tellus uasto demersa profundo*; 153 *Et solidante globo grauior per inane pendit.*

<sup>26</sup> The reading *placida* is proposed by Stella 1996, 16f.

<sup>27</sup> See already Vollmer 1905, XIXf., now more specifically Stella 1996, 13ff.

for the most part and significantly different from those found in the 12<sup>th</sup>-century *Bruxellensis* (the only manuscript preserving Dracontius's *DLD* in three books) and are notably concordant with those in the manuscripts of the *recensio Eugenia* (in particular, La/L<sup>28</sup>, Lb/Q<sup>29</sup> and F – the last *siglum* referring to the same codex as *Lat.* 8093). Consequently, it has become customary to refer to Vollmer's conclusion<sup>30</sup> that the author of *Cento Dracontianus* and Eugenius of Toledo, when rewriting and supplementing Dracontius's description, likely used the same version of Dracontius's poems. Nonetheless, Francesco Stella points out that while there are no lexical similarities between the *Cento* and the relevant passage of Eugenius's *Monosticha*, some more general, or simply conceptual, parallels are easily identifiable<sup>31</sup>. Hence, it is plausible that the two authors not only worked from a similar (or perhaps the same) exemplar but were also not entirely independent, suggesting that the compiler might have been somewhat familiar with Eugenius's text. Whatever the case, one aspect remains constant with regard to the composition of *Cento Dracontianus de septem diebus*: the anonymous versifier considered it important to mark the centonic *deminutio* with a few words 'of his own', effectively adding his own signature, or a *sphragis*, to the work. Such 'enrichments' were also unconceivable in typical late antique centos.

The first conclusion to be drawn from the observations made thus far is that the early medieval cento does not aim at technical mastery or at harmonizing the heterogeneous phrases taken from the original text. The goal was not to integrate these phrases to the extent that no seam would be visible. As the major ancient theorist, Ausonius stated:

Hoc ergo centonis opusculum ut ille ludus tractatur, pari modo sensus diuersi ut congruant, adoptiua quae sunt ut cognata uideantur, aliena ne interluceant, arcessita ne uim redarguant, densa ne supra modum protuberent, hiulca ne pateant. Quae si omnia ita tibi uidebuntur, ut praeceptum est, dices me composuisse centonem.

These rules clearly do not define the objectives of either the compiler of the two *Centones Claromontani* or the author of *Cento Dracontianus*. However, there appears to be a clue that may shed light on the intentions of the early medieval versifier, and this clue is found in the device I have already described as particularly useful, i.e. the titles. Although we cannot be certain whether they were written

<sup>28</sup> Laon, BM 279 (L: Vollmer, Moussy, La: Farmhouse Alberto).

<sup>29</sup> Laon, BM 273 (Q: Vollmer, Moussy, Lb: Farmhouse Alberto).

<sup>30</sup> See Moussy 1985, 121ff.

<sup>31</sup> Stella 1996, 13ff.

concurrently with *Versus centoni* (sic!) it is evident that they cannot be later than the manuscript itself (from the late ninth century). It is therefore worthwhile to examine them a bit more closely.

At the outset, one relevant detail common to both deserves emphasis. In both the first: *Versus centoni ex libris Dracontii in laudibus Dei et de sua paenitentia*, and the second: [*incipit*] *eiusdem Dracontii de origine mundi ab Adam et Eua*, Dracontius's name is highlighted as strongly as possible. In late antique centos, Virgil's name was occasionally mentioned, specifically in collective phrases like *Cento Vergilianus* and *Vergiliocentones*. More commonly, however, poems were given unique titles such as *Cento nuptialis*, *Epithalamium Fridi*, *Hippodamia*, *Alcesta*, *De alea*. Simply, it was generally assumed that the readers would – and should – be familiar with the origins of the textual material. That is exactly why a late antique cento, being an overt and explicit borrowing bore little resemblance to plagiarism<sup>32</sup>. In contrast, the author of *Centones Claromontani* – or a scribe copying his work sometime later – appears to adopt a different approach. He seems convinced that the source of the text must be clearly indicated, otherwise his readers could fail to recognize it on their own. In this instance, he does not exploit intertextuality, or at least does not consider proficiency in this respect as a *conditio sine qua non* for his readers. Clearly, he does not expect his readers to decode and reconstruct the meaning of a certain *locus* or even of the entire piece independently. Instead, he retains the role of interpreter for himself. At the same time, he does not appropriate Dracontius's work for himself. If he did indeed create the two titles, he is ostentatious in highlighting the Carthaginian lawyer's identity while concealing his own. Proba did not do so and neither did Siria.

He also does not claim the work for himself in the manner of late antique centoists, who demonstrated their skill by seamlessly recomposing Virgilian words into entirely different contexts and often into completely different forms, such as tragedy or epithalamium. In contrast, while late antique centos never simply remain a reduced version of *Aeneid*, *Bucolics*, or *Georgics*, Dracontius's opus magnum *De laudibus Dei*, when reconstructed by an early medieval compiler, turns into... *uersus in laudibus Dei et de sua paenitentia*. By employing this paradox, I do not intend to dismiss our 'poet's' efforts as trivial. On the contrary, I wish to underline that he is quite successful in his task as a (mere) interpreter. He aims to elucidate the main sense and message of Dracontius's poem rather than transforming it into something completely new. Notably, the compiler consistently reads Dracontius's work as a combination of laudatory and penitential elements. Indeed, passages from Book Three, particularly from its conclusion, make up a third part of the

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<sup>32</sup> As emphasized, among others, by McGill 2005, XVII.

entire cento and are cited in the longest blocks. The versifier includes the segment starting from verse III 564, which serves as a sort of 'confession of sin'. Naturally, he introduces some abbreviations and necessary corrections (such as *sum ignarus* instead of *sumus ignari*)<sup>33</sup>; nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that he effectively captures the main generic quality of Dracontius's poem, i.e. its psalmodic features and the stance of contrition and lamentation à la King David.

Interestingly, even contemporary scholars emphasize these aspects when discussing intratextual relationships between *De laudibus Dei* and *Satisfactio*, justly recommending a parallel reading of the two prison texts by the Carthaginian lawyer. Indeed, the problem of generic classification of Dracontius's *opus magnum* remains a major topic of discussion among specialists. Many prefer to avoid definitive statements, instead suggesting terms like *genus mixtum* or *genre composite* (both of which are justifiable), or even concluding that the poem remains undefinable in terms of genre. Conversely, Francesco Stella<sup>34</sup>, already cited above, has argued – convincingly, in my view – that the key to understanding the generic aspect of the work is precisely the word *laudes*. This term is applied not only by our centoist, but also appears in a marginal note in the most important witness of the full version of the text, the 12<sup>th</sup>-century *Bruxellensis*. In its secular sense, the word *laudes* refers to panegyric writing, while in the Christian sense – to the Latin hymnic tradition as described by Augustine (*enarr. in Psalm.* 148, 17) and later by Isidore (*orig.* VI 19,17). However, defining *De laudibus Dei* within these categories requires notions such as *Gliedgattung* versus *Rahmengattung*<sup>35</sup> or Francis Cairns's concept of an 'overall genre'<sup>36</sup>. Francesco Stella resolves this crux by recognizing that any successful interpretation must account for the fact that the structure of the *De laudibus* includes not only hymnic determinants serving as a generic framework, but also many other heterogeneous elements, such as epideictic or typically narrative elements. It is also conceivable and, as I think, hermeneutically useful to refer to the idea of generic enrichment as outlined by S.J.Harrison<sup>37</sup> in his studies on the Augustan poetry.

In contrast, the early medieval centoist takes the opposite approach, simply ab-

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<sup>33</sup> III 564 *Nec sum ignarus quid sit fas quidue nefastum; III 566-567 Quorum primus ego plus quam peccator habendus. / Quando fatebor enim scelerum simul omne, reatum / III 572-577 Sed satis est dixisse reum sub crimine cuncto; / quod tua iussa uetant, solus peccasse fatebor, / omne quod horrescis non me fecisse negabo. / Cum iudex et testis ades Deus unus et idem? / Sacrilega quasi mente putem non omnia nosse.*

<sup>34</sup> Stella 1988.

<sup>35</sup> Stella 1988, 266.

<sup>36</sup> Cairns 1972, 158ff.

<sup>37</sup> Harrison 2007.

breviating and reorganizing the original material, *adapting* it to a given purpose. I quote here a term proposed by Martin Bažil<sup>38</sup>, the only scholar who has thus far devoted attention to *Centones Claromontani* while studying the late antique Christian cento. In fact, especially in the case of the first of *Claromontani*, the expression ‘centon-adaptation’ seems very apt. Paradoxically, this unique adaptation effectively highlights the main message of Dracontius’s opus, especially as it emphasizes the penitential tone. Throughout his poem, the Carthaginian lawyer strives to convey that when approaching God a human being can only perceive themselves as a sinner, relying solely on Divine Mercy. This meaning pervades the cento *in laudibus Dei*. Therefore – if we were to pass judgment, despite my earlier pleas to abstain from doing so – the adaptation by an early medieval compiler might be considered successful if its aim – as it most likely was – was to simplify and reduce to the necessary minimum the multidimensional and complex poem by Dracontius.

The second cento, *De origine mundi ab Adam et Eua*, offers an interesting parallel to other attempts at reshaping Dracontius’s major work as a biblical epic. While Eugenius of Toledo – or rather the author of the florilegium he was reading and copying – ‘extracted’ from *De laudibus* an account of the six days of creation (*Hexaemeron*), the early medieval centoist focuses on the story of the human race. The opening distich (ll. I 329-330) reads: *Omnibus his genitis animal rationis amicum / Formatur uirtute Dei, limatur in artus*. It is intentional on my part to speak of the history of the human race, not merely of creation of man, because the narrative incorporates motifs from all the three books (with Book Three being cited only in 11 verses intermingled with passages borrowed from Book Two) and concludes with the theme of the salvific mission of Christ. What draws our attention is the emphasis – achieved through the selection of these specific passages – on the sensuality of the description, first of the act of creation (in particular of the woman) and then of the nakedness of human bodies, still innocent in their ignorance of evil. This effect is, of course, due to Dracontius himself and his poetic artistry, yet the compiler should be acknowledged for recognizing and reusing it. This is not without reason, I think, considering that the next passage cited describes the serpent (passage 459-465, placed just below verses 440-441 and 443-445) and is equally vivid. The juxtaposition of these two segments allows the centoist to highlight the problem of original sin, precisely the sin that destroyed

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<sup>38</sup> Bažil 2014, 53. Bažil suggests the following categories as regards late antique centos: (1) ‘centon-pastiche’, (2) ‘centon-parodie’, (3) ‘centon-contrafacture’, and subsequently advocates for introducing an additional one, valid in particular for the early medieval centonizations, i.e. (4) ‘centon-adaptation’.

the innocence of the human body. In the subsequent narrative – touching on the expulsion from Paradise, the Flood, selected episodes of the Old Testament, the figure of Zacharias the father of John the Baptist, and finally the birth, miracles, death, and resurrection of Jesus –, the linear order is maintained. Interestingly, however, this is not the linear order of Dracontius's original poem, but that of the Old Testament. Thus, in the cento the mention of Judith (made by Dracontius in Book Three, as she is listed with other heroes and heroines of the pagan and proto-Christian world) precedes that of King David the sinner (whom Dracontius referred to in Book Two). This could be interpreted as an attempt to correct the hypotext or at least to readjust it to the standards of biblical chronology (where, indeed, the Book of Judith precedes the Book of Psalms). *Dracontius mutatus in melius*, one might be tempted to say...

It hardly needs repeating that from the perspective of today's readership, both these pieces do not appear particularly attractive. However, it seems they did fulfill their role at the time, mainly didactical, if not even propaedeutic. *Toutes proportions gardées*, it might be argued that the *Cento Dracontianus* appears somewhat more interesting than the two *Claromontani* (again, considering contemporary literary tastes) as it represents a quite radical – and hence bold – experiment in reducing Dracontius's *Hexaemeron* to a short form. If generic labels were to be applied, *Cento* might well be defined as an *epigramma*, and certainly as an *epigramma longum*. In addition, the piece combines the features of a cento and a 'novel' composition; novel yet at the same time possibly paraphrastic, if we accept Stella's suggestion that the versifier might have referred to Eugenius's *Monosticha* as a starting point for his five-verse description of *Sabbatus*. Doubtless, these three texts perfectly exemplify another Francesco Stella's observation about the circulation of several versions of 'Dracontius' at the dawn of the Middle Ages<sup>39</sup>. It is quite likely that these versions were different, possibly competing, and probably incomplete or/and rearranged, and thus adjusted to the literary needs and desires of their prospective readers<sup>40</sup>. Besides the *Claromontani* and the *Cento*, another

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<sup>39</sup> Stella 1996, 9-10.

<sup>40</sup> Domenico Romano (1959, 93) made some brief but quite sound comments regarding the topical focus of the centoist, which are worth citing in full: «Singolare l'attribuzione nel Brux. delle *L.D.* a S. Agostino: forse il copista, trovandosi dinanzi al poema anonimo, pensò bene di rivendicarlo al filosofo cristiano per quel *Doppelcharakter* della poesia delle *L.D.* nella quale, non diversamente dalle *Confessiones* agostiniane, la confessione dei propri peccati ed il pentimento si disponano alle lodi di Dio e della sua Potenza. Sono questi i due momenti della preghiera che il Cristiano rivolge a Dio; e dà appunto l'impressione di ubbidire a questa finalità pratica l'escortore, nella scelta che egli fa dei brani poetici variando l'ordinamento originario della materia delle *L.D.* L'origine del mondo interessa in

trace of such early medieval 'Dracontii' (whether they were centonic is, of course, impossible to ascertain) may be found in the catalog entry of the Benedictine abbey of Lobbes: *Libri Dracontii quos fecit in diuinis laudibus et de sua paenitentia et indulgentiis paschalibus et de natiuitate et de miraculis Christi*<sup>41</sup>.

It seems evident that the composition of early medieval centos has very little in common with the technical mastery of their late antique counterparts; simply, it is fundamentally different. It is more likely that an early medieval cento was composed for a student, whereas in late antiquity centonic poetry engaged its readers as partners and even co-authors (certainly co-authors of meanings and messages attributed to Virgilian phrases reappearing in the new context). Fortunately, classical philologists have come to appreciate this unique compositional technique. It is remarkable to think that, only a few decades ago, a renowned scholar did not hesitate to write at the outset of a very reputable edition<sup>42</sup>: «Centones Vergiliani (Riese 7-18), opprobria litterarum, neque ope critica multum indigent neque is sum qui uati reuerendo denuo haec edendo contumeliam imponere sustineam».

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quanto esposizione in versi del Genesi, e le due parti principali in cui si articola la raccolta si intitolano appunto *Laudes Dei* e *Paenitentia*. Una terza parte comprende il racconto della creazione dell'uomo sino al peccato ed alla punizione, nonchè brani di ispirazione biblica. Gli *excerpta* delle parti liriche delle *L.D.*, in cui il poeta parla di sé o rivolge a Dio la sua preghiera e le lodi sono però più important. Un esame attento del criterio seguito dall'*excerptor* nell'ordinamento dei versi, con particolare attenzione a quelli omessi, ci dà la misura del gusto del centonatore e d'un'epoca».

<sup>41</sup> Claude Moussy (1985, 44-45) supposed that the entry might refer to similar florilegium/florilegia, possibly composed of verses from Book II: 538-551; 78-94; 111-143. François Dolbeau (1989), on the contrary, does not exclude the possibility that the above titles (*De indulgentiis paschalibus*, *De natiuitate*, *De miraculis*) could even be interpreted as traces of some lost poems by Dracontius or (rather) poems attributed to the Carthaginian in the early Middle Ages.

<sup>42</sup> Shackleton Bailey 1982, III.

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