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The *Compendium historiae in Genealogia Christi* and its Iconographical Tradition: Legacy of Classical Antiquity in a Mediaeval Biblical Anthology

The persistence of Classical antiquity during the Middle Ages is a well-known and much studied phenomenon. Scholars pointed out that different kinds of reception could take place, such as the reuse of artworks, the readjustment of iconographies, the reapplication of motives or styles[1]. Rather than focusing on such sorts of legacies, the essay I'm presenting will be based on the recovery of knowledge.

The central topic I will be dealing with is the *Compendium historiae in genealogia Christi*, a biblical anthology that combined a resumptive text and a very peculiar figurative apparatus. Although the original manuscript does not survive, there still exist several copies done soon after it and on its base[2].

Through selected case studies, I aim to demonstrate how Classical antiquity and its legacy made a contribution in the creation of the *Compendium*'s specific figurative system, tracing the connections between ancient theory and mediaeval practice.

In order to properly explain my argument, I need to say a few things about the function and the structure of the *Compendium*, before mentioning the sources likely used by its author. The *Compendium* was invented at the end of the 12th century by Peter of Poitiers (1157–1205), who was a theologian at the Cathedral School of Paris, where he was also appointed as chancellor in 1193[3]. He compiled many exegetical works and sermons, but is especially renowned because of a handbook he wrote to facilitate the learning of the Bible. That handbook is now known as *Compendium historiae in genealogia Christi* or sometimes just as *Genealogia Christi*. Designed as an educational short-cut, the *Compendium* is a summary of Christ's genealogy: beginning with Adam, it consists of brief biographical entries on the ancestors of Christ and other biblical personages, arranged in six historical periods, that correspond to the six ages of

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[1]   There are many good studies and publication on such topic. See at least [22] and [27].

[2]   In particular, the manuscripts now at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS. Typ 216H, and at the Cleveland Museum of Art, CMA 73.5, executed in France at the beginning of the 13th Century and in England around 1220 respectively [17]; an English manuscript at the British Library, MS Cotton Faustina, B. VII, from 1208–1216, and a codex in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 29 [31, p. 249]. For a list of the existing copies, kept in many Museums and Libraries all over the world: [1, pp. 166–168; 13, pp. 329–331; 20].

[3]   There are many good studies on Peter, his life and works; see, for instance: [7; 10, pp. 39, 106–108; 14; 18; 24, pp. 318–324; 30; 31].

the world[4]. The first five ages open with Old Testament personages: Adam, Noah, Abraham, David, and Zedekiah. The last age is heralded by the birth of Christ.

The function of the composition is clearly stated by the author himself: in the *prologus* to his *Compendium* Peter declares that his purpose was that to help his students to *memoriter tenere*, fix in memory, the complex biblical material[5]. For this reason the text was written in a simplified and resumptive way, as a memory aid. Peter also explains that the text, conceived as an *opusculum*, a brief textbook, though useful for all, is particularly efficient for those students who feel overwhelmed by the historical material. The pedagogical and didactic function of the manuscript is reflected in its shape: text and images were traced on rolls, rather than on codices. Thus the manuscript could have been hung on the walls of the lecture halls, as attested by early sources[6] and technical details: the scrolls are indeed usually very damaged at the top, where they were attached to the wall. Such a format was also functional to visualize the linear development of Christ's genealogy in its entirety. The manuscripts were unrolled from the bottom, through wooden or metal little boards which were fixed to the upper and lower edges of the parchment. When not in use, they were rolled and kept in leather containers.

In order to achieve his didactic and mnemonic goal, not only did Peter write a simplified version of the Old Testament, but he also invented a very peculiar figurative apparatus, that consists of a diagram, which worked together with the text. Again, it is Peter himself who explains the purpose of the diagram, when he says that with the aid of that, the biblical prolixity, having been visualized and made subject to the eyes, can be committed to memory and the manuscript's function can be realized. The fact that Peter invented the diagram was well known by his contemporaries as well, who seemed to have considered it a noteworthy circumstance; Alberic of Trois-Fontaines, for instance, mentioned that in Peter's obituary, recording the *pelles*, parchments, which were painted with the diagram showing the Old Testament[7].

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[4]   The idea of a world organized into six historical periods is derived by an ancient theological tradition that is based on the Bible (Genesis 5:1, Matthew 1:1–17); it was St. Augustine who formulated this doctrine first, dividing the history of humanity into seven ages that correspond to the six days of the creation of the world and to the seventh, the day of rest. On this topic: [3, pp. 13–17; 12, p. 149 no. 20; 17, p. 92; 25, p. 69].

[5]   The passage reads: "*Considerans scripture sacre prolixitatem, necnon et difficultatem scolarium quoque circa studium sacre lectionis, maxime illius que in historie fundamento versatur negligentiam, quorumdam quoque ex inopia librorum imperitie sue solatium querentium, volentibus, quasi in sacculo quodam memoriter tenere narrationes hystoriarum, temptavi seriem sanctorum patrum a quibus per leviticam et regalem tribum Christus originem habuit, cum eorum operibus, in unum opusculum redigere. Quod et fastidientibus prolixitatem propter subiectam oculis abita memorie commendari et omnibus legentibus utilitatem conferre. In quo quidem non facile laborem immo negotium plenum vigiliarum assumpsi cum brevitati secundum datam formam. Ita studui ut nichil de veritate historie detruncarem sed ab Adam incohans per patriarchas, judices, reges, prophetas et sacerdotes eis contemporaneos usque ad Christum, finem nostrum perduxi*".

[6]   Abbot Jean Lebeuf says that: "*Comme les livres coutaient beaucoup à écrire et que le gravure n'était pas usitée comme à présent, il y avait sur le murs des classes des peaux étendues, sur les unes desquelles étaient représentées, en forme d'arbes, les histoires et généalogies de l'Ancien Testament, et sur les autres le catalogue des vertues et de vices*" [16, p. 133].

[7]   Alberic of Trois-Fontaines recorded: "*Obiit Magister Petrus Pictaviensis […] qui pauperibus clericis consulens excogitavit arbores historiuarum Veteris Testamenti in pellibus depingere, et de vitiis et virtutibus similiter compendiose disponere*" [26, p. 886].

Indeed, starting from the first manuscripts of the *Compendium*, the figurative apparatus is an integral part of the manuscript. The design is that of a diagram. Beginning with Adam and Eve, the names of Christ's predecessors and of other biblical characters are listed in order, with a brief biographical sketch. The diagram stretches down to the birth of Christ, and usually ends with a depiction of the Crucifixion. In most of the extant copies, the names of Christ's ancestors are written inside roundels: those of his direct predecessors (Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, David, and Zedekiah) are presented along the central column, the "*linea Christi*", vertically; the others are instead scattered along lateral branches and are linked to the central one by secondary lines. There are usually other chief events (such as the *Temptation of Adam and Eve*, and the *Flood*) or other figures from the Old Testament. The orientation is facilitated and made clearly visible through an efficient system of colour-coding.

That precise structure can be observed in all the manuscripts of the *Compendium*, that share the same visual arrangement and figurative system, the same characters inside circles, shown while doing the same actions and with a similar attitude and gesture[8].

If Peter was the inventor of that peculiar figurative apparatus, one might wonder where did he derived it from.

Scholars have argued that the iconographic scheme might be derived from other representations of allegorical trees, such as that of Jesse, or from juridical manuscripts, where the lines of hereditary successions where shown as genealogical diagrams[9].

Although it is a much remarked on medieval characteristic to organize the space of a page in diagrams, and that, according to C. M. Kauffmann "*the pictorial diagram […] became one of the typical features of Romanesque art*" [4, p. 325], the *Compendium* shows some specific characteristics that make its decoration different from that of other typologies of manuscripts.

When one takes a closer look at Peter's *Compendium* miniatures, he would immediately be able to notice other specific characteristics: all the images are painted with a restricted color spectrum, not to stimulate too much the senses, and they are characterized by the repetition of specific colors or figures to make associations between events and personages related to one another. All these characteristics are clearly visible, for instance, in the *Compendium* now kept at the Biblioteca Casanatense in Rome (Ms. Cas. 434), done at the beginning of the Trecento in Central Italy (Ill. 143)[10]. The structure is very clear and the connections between the figures, as well as their identity, is understandable at first sight: the names of all women are written inside green roundels, whilst men's roundels are red. Again red and ochre circles are used for Kings, whilst the blue ones are reserved to the Prophets. The *linea Christi*, the central line where Christ's direct ancestors are listed, is also characterized by the use of different colours, meant to show the six ages intuitively: in the first two ages (from Adam to Noah, and from Noah to Abraham) red roundels are flanked by green lines; in the third age (from Abraham

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[8]   This is the case, for instance, of a manuscript done quite late (ca. 1370) by an unknown *scriptor* and illuminated by Serafino de' Serafini. On the manuscript see [12].

[9]   This hypothesis was proposed by Carlino [3, p. 46], and then accepted and repeated by many scholars.

[10]   The manuscript is a parchment roll and measures 384 × 19,3 cm. It entered the collection of the Biblioteca Casanatense in 1769, when it was sold to the Library by the Abbot Nicola Ugolini da Foligno. On this manuscript: [21, p. 50; 25].

to David) the central green line and roundels are flanked by red and blue lines; in the fourth (from David to Zedekiah) red is used for the main line and the roundels, whilst the lateral lines are green and blue; in the fifth (from Zedekiah to Christ) the central line and roundels are blue and they are flanked by ochre and blue lines; finally, the last age is characterized by an ochre central line inserted in blue lateral lines.

In this as well as in all other known manuscripts the diagram is extremely orderly, and all the figures are depicted while doing one single action, or with only one attribute, which immediately identifies them. For instance, Noah is usually shown holding a hacksaw and a piece of wood, to represent the construction of the ark. Both the images themselves and their relationship to one another are mnemonically important. There's a strict connection between text and images, that are clearly composed together, and all the images are *meaningful* rather than beautiful.

All these characteristics have to do with the mnemonic and didactic purpose of the manuscript, a purpose that other typologies of manuscripts did not have. The *Compendium* was indeed composed according to the most efficient mnemonic rules, which are evidently derived from rhetorical treatises written by Greek and Roman oratories that often theorized schemes to memorize a vast knowledge or data. Their method was based on the mental association between an ordered group of notions and well-defined images, used to suggest the concepts that one aimed to remember intuitively.

There are three chief ancient sources: Cicero's *De oratore*; the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, and Book XI of Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*[11].

All the treatises were known at the Cathedral School of Paris, where Peter taught and composed his Compendium. Indeed, during the first half of the 12th Century, the classical antiquity, its culture and system of knowledge, was very popular in Europe and in particular in Cathedral schools and in the first universities. At the same time, theologians composed the first *summae*, orderly collections of theological thoughts. Such a systematic creation of a new knowledge took advantage from the rediscovery of classical philosophy, and used it to reconcile the faith with a system of rational thought.

Thus the 12th century saw a new systematization of knowledge, characterized by the use of visual concept. Theologians and artists invented together visual strategies to display religious, historical and chronological information, often through the use of mnemonic compositional aids. These are indeed the main peculiarities of some manuscripts composed (written or illuminated) with mnemonic purposes at the Cathedral School of Paris, such as Hugh of St. Victor's *De archa Noe*, which is a universal diagram, designed to organize a large amount of disparate information in a readily available, mnemonically effective, way[12]; and Peter Comestor's *Historia scholastica universalis*, that presents a universal history and which was a required part of the core curriculum at the University of Paris[13].

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[11] On the *Ars memorativa* and its vast diffusion in the Middle Ages see in particular [2; 4; 6] and [32]. On the importance of three treatises mentioned: [3, pp. 25–37; 32, pp. 1–26]

[12] For some information of Hugh of St. Victor, his life and works, see: [24; 31]. For a deep discussion on Hugh's use and theories on memory aids: [3].

[13] For Peter Comestor, and the influence he had on Peter of Poitiers: [3; 9, p. 454; 12, p. 140; 23].

That is the background in which Peter lived and composed his *Compendium*. He must have been aware of what other scholastic masters (such as Hugh of St. Victor and Peter Comestore) were doing at the same time, and they might have had an influence on him. However, I argue that he moved a step forward, making a more conscious use of mnemonic rules, as his prologue seems to suggest. Thus I think he might have studied directly the ancient treatises mentioned previously, which were all available at the library of the Cathedral School where he taught.

The three treatises (Cicero's *De oratore*; the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, and Book XI of Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*) agree in some points, which correspond to the essential criterion on whose bases the *Compendium* is composed. I shall now take into account and discuss these points trying to trace the connections, or verify the existence of possible connections, between these texts and the *Compendium*.

First of all, they all agree in the importance of the sense of sight. Cicero's *De oratore* emphasizes that the invention of the art of memory rested on the discovery that the sense of sight is the strongest of all the senses. He argues that visual images are the keenest of all and best retained by the memory; auditory or other perceptions are retained when attached to visual ones. Thus the art of memory is conceived as a method that tends to summarize, distinguish, select and organize according to the needs of visual memory [32, p. 4]. Peter seems to make direct reference to this theory when, in the introduction to the *Compendium*, he openly declares that he has made visible to the eyes the prolixity of the bible, to help his students in the process of memorizing that material.

Secondly, the authors of the treatises make specific reference to the orderly disposition of the notions which one aims to remember. After having been visualized as images, these notions should be arranged in a certain order. The authors advised to imprint on the memory a series of *loci* or places, that might either be real or unreal, which should be memorized according to a specific order. Inside that places, one should put the images corresponding to what he/she wishes to memorize. As for the *loci*, the treatises suggested two types of mnemonic places: the commonest system used is the architectural type, where the order is fixed by the sequence of rooms and parts of rooms inside the imaginary building. The second one was the diagram type that was theorized and suggested especially by Aristotle. The choice of which system is to be used depends on the subject that one aims to remember. Some topics, because of the linearity of their contents, can more easily be memorized when represented in the form of a diagram. That is precisely the case of the *Compendium*, that needs to show chronology in line.

Now, turning to the *imagines*, the visual representations of what a person wishes to memorize, the treatises also provide the readers with some advice.

Cicero's *De oratore* argues that one needs images that are "*lively, sharp, and conspicuous, with the potential to present themselves quickly and to strike the mind*"[14]. Also the *Ad Herennium* gives an explanation to the psychological reasons for the choice of mnemonic images. The author notices that some images are strong and sharp and suitable for awakening memory, whilst others are on the contrary weak and feeble thus they hardly stimulate memory at all [32, p. 9]. He explains that "*Nature herself teaches us what we should do* […] *Ordinary things*

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[14]   Cicero's treatise is discussed in details by Yates, to whose studies I will refer [32].

easily slip from the memory while the striking and the novel stay longer in the mind. Let art, then, imitate nature, find what she desires, and follow as she directs. We ought then, to set up images of a kind that can adhere longest in memory" [32, p. 9].

The one thing that an image has to produce in order to stimulate memory is an emotion. It should create a strong response in order to activate and impress the user's memory and launch a recollective chain. This goal can be achieved through striking and usual image; or image, consisting of human figures, active, dramatic, striking, with many accessories to remind of the whole "*Thing*" which is being recorded in memory; or images where usual events are happening, events that would not make sense in real life but which do have a sense in respect to the narrative. All these characteristics can be observed in many manuscripts of the *Compendium*: one would hardly be able to imagine a figure more striking and visually efficient than that depicted in the manuscript kept in the Stadtarchiv of Retz, Cod. 65/19, where the creation of Eve from Adam's rib is represented with God holding in his left hand a rib with a head, clearly a female head as the long curly hair suggests, that represents of course the very moment in which Eve is being created from Adam's rib[15].

Obviously, some of the characteristics that I have discussed thus far are common to other artistic products. However, the *Compendium* shows such a deep consciousness of ancient mnemonic rules, such a direct assimilation of what the philosophers theorized centuries before, that finds no precedents in any other similar products, and that has its reason in the function of the manuscript. After all, the context in which Peter lived makes plausible a direct study of the ancient treatises, that Peter might have done while trying to find a good method to teach his students and help them to memorize all the biblical material.

The success of Peter's method, which rested on the collaboration between an Ancient theory and a Mediaeval thought, is demonstrated by the vast diffusion of the *Compendium*, that continued to be produced for over three centuries as a didactic aid. This production must have involved specialized ateliers, since the shape and the figurative apparatus were very peculiar. Some manuscripts, which are very similar to one another, seem to be "twin manuscripts". These are, for instance, the Additional 24025 and the Additional 14819 of the British Library, that bear an identical shape, images arrangement and iconography, and also an interesting detail: a circle left empty between two personages (Isaia and Naum), that suggests that both the manuscripts were done on the base of the same model, that lacks one figure.

Classical antiquity and the Middle Ages period practice thus cooperate in the creation of that didactic manuscript, that is an interesting example of the reception of Classical antiquity in the Middle Ages, suited to the new Christian thought.

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Abstract. This article aims to analyse a little known, yet extremely important, phenomenon of reception of Classical antiquity and its legacy in the Middle Ages. It deals with the *Compendium historiae in genealogia Christi*, a biblical anthology created at the end of the 12th century by Peter of Poitiers, theologian and teacher at the Cathedral school of Paris. In the prologues, Peter himself declared that the purpose of his work was to help his students to fix in memory the complex biblical material. For this reason the text was written in a simplified and resumptive way, and it was also accompanied by an

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[15]   On this very interesting manuscript see [11, p. 165] and [16, pp. 180–183, no. 21].

unusual apparatus of images that immediately visualized the main concepts which the students should learn and remember. Peter seems to have derived the figurative system from Greek and Roman mnemonic treatises. Through selected case studies, I aim to demonstrate how Classical antiquity and its legacy made a contribution in the creation of that specific art system, tracing the connections between ancient theory and mediaeval practice.

Keywords: Peter of Poitiers; Compendium; Art of Memory; Scholastic; Cathedral Schools; Diagrams.

Название статьи. Compendium Historiae in Genealogia Christi и его иконографическая традиция: наследие античности в средневековой библейской антологии.

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Аннотация. Данная статья посвящена анализу малоизученного, но тем не менее чрезвычайно значимого феномена восприятия классической античности и ее наследия в Средние века. Объектом исследования является *Compendium historiae in genealogia Christi* — библейская антология, созданная в конце XII в. Питером из Пуатье, теологом и преподавателем Кафедральной школы в Париже. В прологе сам Питер поясняет, что назначение его книги — помочь студентам с запоминанием сложного библейского материала. По этой причине текст был написан в упрощенной обобщающей манере и сопровождался необычным набором иллюстраций, посредством которых происходила мгновенная визуализация основных понятий, которые студенты должны были усвоить и запомнить. Питер, как полагает автор, мог заимствовать образную систему из греческих и римских мнемонических трактатов. На нескольких примерах продемонстрировано, как наследие классической античности отразилось на создании этой специфической художественной системы, и прослежена связь между античной теорией и средневековой практикой.

Ключевые слова: Питер из Пуатье; компендиум; искусство запоминания; схоластика; Кафедральная школа; диаграммы.

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