

THESES OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

MACROBIUS AND THE CARDINAL VIRTUES

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The aims of the dissertation

The dissertation entitled *Macrobius and the cardinal virtues* examines the Neoplatonic virtue ethics of Macrobius Ambrosius Theodosius, the Roman author living at the turn of the 4th and 5th centuries, on the basis of his two major works, *Saturnalia* and *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*. In the field of classical studies there was a long-standing and dominant view that Macrobius was only an insignificant compiler so he and his works were taken slightly any notice of. It is testified by P. De Paolis' Macrobius-bibliography as well, which presents a rather moderate quantity of special literature compared to other ancient authors being researched. However, the interest in Macrobius has somewhat increased lately (one obvious sign of this is the publication of *Saturnalia* in three volumes by the Loeb Classical Library series) and in the evaluation of his works partly new aspects started to play a role, partly already existing concepts were taken into consideration. As a result of these, a newly shaping Macrobius-image is being created: the present dissertation wishes to contribute to this with its results.

The cardinal virtues (i.e. *prudentia*, *temperantia*, *fortitudo* and *iustitia*) from Plato played a central part in the ancient moral philosophies. The Neoplatonic philosophers – among them firstly Plotinus and following him Porphyry – elaborated a specific version of the four virtues' doctrine, which linked the exercise of the virtues mentioned above tightly to the soul's ascension, to the ascent to the One. While writing the commentary on Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, Macrobius presents this doctrine of virtues (I. 8), although it differs from his Greek predecessors in several details, therefore he creates a specifically Roman virtue theory, which throws new light upon the role and significance of the individual, practising his virtues in his own spiritual seek of ways.

The author's *virtus*-concept has formerly been analysed by some researchers, but these examinations touched upon only a rather narrow spectrum of his writings, the four virtues were examined exclusively together, never separately. There is also another view known, according to which no examples can be found for the cardinal virtues in Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, that is why there is nothing to compare the virtue ethics of *Commentarii* to. These reasons were the basis for the aims of the dissertation by extending the range of research – to make a survey of all the occurrences of the four virtues in Macrobius' above-mentioned two works (his third writing left to us is a grammatical tractate, which is not relevant from this aspect), then to draw conclusions on the grounds of the accumulated texts' analysis about the author's attitude to the virtues forming the base of the Roman society's scale of values.

Research methods

Taking the premises of the scientific literature and the rather few evidents referred to Macrobius into account, the dissertation first deals with the problem of the writer's identity in the scope of a historical examination. With the means of prosopography and source analysis it is aimed to give an answer among others to the question within what periods the lifework of the Late Antiquity's author could be set in, sc. this is not negligible from the aspect of his works' better understanding. Following this, while introducing the three works, it defines an attitude towards the order of origin, primarily by structure and content analysis of the prefaces of *Saturnalia* and *Commentarii*, furthermore it examines the features of Macrobius' writing manner with the means of text interpretation.

The second, major part of the dissertation is built on an ethical-terminological examination. The starting point is *Commentarii* I. 8., where the author summarises the main doctrines of the Neoplatonic virtue ethics. Thereupon the premises and sources of Macrobius' concept are introduced, as a result of this, it can be stated what differs in the author's virtue perception from the Neoplatonic samples as well as what kind of consequences these differences take with respect to the interpretation of *virtutes cardinales*.

At this point it becomes necessary to involve the virtue examples of *Saturnalia* into the examination, henceforth both works of Macrobius play equally important roles. While revealing the features of *prudentia*, *temperantia*, *fortitudo* and *iustitia*, the ground for comparison is provided by the topic's ancient philosophical and literary antecedents, in relation to these the definitions of each virtue are investigated, then the analysis continues with considering and interpreting the examples collected from *Saturnalia*. Regarding the mentioned *exempla* one of the main questions is how they are adapted to the virtue descriptions of *Commentarii*: if they support these definitions or just contradict them, and how they modulate the concept formed previously on Macrobius' virtue perception. This complex philological and historical analysis provides the basis for the conclusions of the dissertation.

The results of the research

The examination of the problems concerning Macrobius' identity resulted in the following: the author is most probably identical to the Theodosius who held the office of *praefectus praetorio Italiae, Illyrici et Africae* in the year of 430, during the reign of

Valentinian III. Although most assuredly Latin was his native language, he was not born in Italia but he came from one of the provinces – maybe from the area of North-Africa. He does not refer to his political carrier in his own works: we can conclude his holding high state positions only from his titles indicated at the beginning of his works. His son, Eustathius was *praefectus urbi* in the period between 457 and 452, his grandson however had the name Macrobius Plotinus Eudoxius.

Macrobius often talks a lot about the ancient Roman religion and the old deities in his works, this topic is of great importance to him as it forms one of the main elements of the traditional Roman culture, while it would be a mistake to assume that these so-called pagan beliefs determined his own religious identity as well. He does not mention Christianity at all in his works, in spite of this it is almost sure that he took up the new belief at least formally, anyway he could not have held the office, which can be attributed to him. The paradoxical nature of the great silence around Christianity becoming the state religion by the age of the author is well demonstrated by the fact that Macrobius is one of the most widely-read and considerably often quoted authors in the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, his silence strengthens the conviction that his religiousness was based preferably upon philosophy, namely Neoplatonism being fashionable at that time. To his mind, the soul's breaking free from the body, the contemplation and the ascent to the One can be realized through the virtues and these are available for each and every person. This latter thought can be paralleled with the Christian conceptions though, and this may be the point – the age of Macrobius – when the mutual effect of the Antiquity's final great philosophical system and Christianity can be recognized before the Neoplatonic idea could eventually melt in the doctrines of the victorious new belief.

The first of the three works left to us by Macrobius is a grammatical tractate where he examines the similarities and differences between the Greek and Latin verbs. The originality of this writing is provided by its special content and examination methods, because of its high standards it can be regarded more as a scientific than a didactic work. The other two works, *Saturnalia* and *Commentarii* are equally dedicated to his son, Eustathius. By the comparison of the two works' prefaces it can be assumed that *Saturnalia* was created earlier and *Commentarii*, which was written later, is its integral continuation. Although they differ from each other as regards their genre, since *Saturnalia* is a piece of *symposion* literature, while the other writing can be put into the category of commentaries, still there is a common feature in them: by these works Macrobius wishes to transmit the values and rules of life important for himself to Eustathius and beyond that he transfers a huge amount of knowledge as well that

includes almost all the areas of Roman cultural history. On the grounds of the didactic intention obviously manifesting itself in *Saturnalia* and in *Commentarii* as well as of the great number of examples with a didactic aim, the two works can be placed among the ‘*speculum* of citizens’, which can be considered as a sort of *Fürstenspiegel*. The fatherly guidance found in them supports the evolvment of the youth’s mind from adolescence to adulthood, helps the accomplishment of his personality by acquiring the Roman erudition and the Neoplatonic philosophy in order to become *vir bonus*, who is able to control himself, govern others and serve his community. The two works mentioned above are with didactic feature, born in the spirit of *artes liberales*, the direct aim of the author with the encyclopaedic knowledge accumulated in the text is his son’s education, the extension of his erudition, while his indirect intention is to represent the traditional values of Roman culture as well as the essential ideas of the Neoplatonic philosophy for his readers of all times.

Following the examination of the questions concerning the author’s identity and works, his ethical perception was made the subject of further investigation. The *virtutes* are in the forefront of Macrobius’ moral philosophy. In his hierarchical system the cardinal virtues play the most significant part, the additional virtues mentioned by him – which are defined as the associate virtues of *virtutes cardinales* in the dissertation – represent one aspect each. The Neoplatonic thinker elaborates his theory relating to the role and significance of *quattuor virtutes* basically on the grounds of Plotinus and Porphyry’s doctrines, but the influence of other philosophical tendencies well-known to Romans can also be demonstrated here. The four virtues - *prudentia*, *temperantia*, *fortitudo* and *iustitia* – are defined on the level of *virtutes politicae*, *virtutes purgatoriae*, *virtutes animi iam purgati* and of *virtutes exemplares*. The certain virtues have different functions and features on each level. Placing them on four consecutive levels corresponds the Greek Neoplatonists’ perception although significant differences can be found in Macrobius’ evaluation of the virtue levels.

There is no divergence of opinions between Macrobius and his Greek ideals that the aim of human life is to reach happiness, which is identical to divinization in the Neoplatonic interpretation, at the same time regarding the way how the mentioned purpose can be achieved they differ in opinion. The Roman author’s ethical theory varies from his antecedents mostly in that it provides the civic virtues placed on the first level of *virtutes* with an emphatic role. Furthermore, on the levels of the so-called major virtues there are some smaller differences, which can be explained by divergences of opinion or rather by the fact that from time to time the author attempts to reinterpret his masters’ train of thought on certain points where he reckons the original concept illogical. Plotinus and Porphyry, who

arranged the virtue doctrines of the former into a systematic order, both considered the civic or political virtues necessary for the individual as a social being, but their conviction was that happiness cannot be achieved by these: they have only a preparatory role in the process of ascent to the major virtues' level. The soul's ascension can only be attained through contemplation.

On the contrary, Macrobius proceeding from a syllogistic argumentation (according to which if the virtues make someone happy and the civic virtues are virtues, then happiness can be achieved by the civic virtues as well) states that the way of divinization is open to people exercising civic virtues. The mentioned virtues are called *virtutes negotiosae*, while the ones of higher levels in connection with contemplation are the *virtutes otiosae*. As a matter of fact, these terms are the equivalents of the practical and theoretical virtues by the author and through both types the eternal celestial happiness is reachable. At the same time he also admits that although there is no difference in value regarding the final goal between virtues linked to *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, the ideal form is *genus mixtum*, i.e. if the two virtues can be found together in the individual. The mixed type is the perfect kind of virtues, this characterized Solon and Lykurgus, Numa and Scipio Aemilian.

Some scholars presume that the author takes this view because misinterprets the Neoplatonic doctrines while others think that in fact there is no disagreement at all: Macrobius says the same as Plotinus, only in a more elegant rhetorical context. The dissertation points out that neither of these views is convincing enough. Based on the text of *Commentarii* it seems obvious that the Late Roman writer is aware of the Neoplatonic ethical theories, and the existence of the mentioned differences can be proved unambiguously. Compared to the concept emphasizing the misunderstanding of the Plotinian system it is more probable that the commentator deliberately deprives the original doctrine of its mysticism that was previously given by the Greek philosopher. Macrobius tends to rationalize his virtue ethics as much as possible in order to adapt it to the Roman values and mentality in the highest degree following the traditional method of *interpretatio Romana*.

One of the arguments against the privilege of *virtutes politicae* is that the examples showing the civic virtues do not appear in his other work, *Saturnalia*. The dissertation argues that - as *Saturnalia* was probably written earlier than the *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* - it is not necessary to support a maybe not existing theory. On the other hand, if we take Macrobius' idea into account that anybody can possess the virtues, it is not enough to look for and investigate the virtues of *gubernatores*, but in a more extended sense, they can be analysed actually in connection with anyone. Thus several examples can be collected from

Saturnalia but here it should be stressed again that these do not have the function of supporting the particular Macrobian virtue ethics, they can only be seen as their antecedents, moreover they are able to contribute to the adequate interpretation of the author's virtue concept.

First *prudentia* was examined of the four cardinal virtues. By Macrobius *prudentia politica* is an intellectual virtue bearing practical wisdom in itself, which adjusts everything to the norm set by the intellect and decides what is right. On cathartic and theoretical level its task is to realize contemplation while on the grade of paradigmatic virtues it is identical to divine Intellect. To this definition the examples of *Saturnalia* are added, which demonstrate that the interpretation of the notion can be approached from several aspects: it is the essential precondition of all creative acts, it is as necessary for the foundation of a town or a cult as for the creation of a literary work. It is bound up with the memory and the eloquence as wisdom is needed for speaking as well as remaining in silence. It contains providence, foreboding the future, caution and the ability to create harmony. This virtue characterizes mainly elderly, experienced people, but we can find an example – the case of juvenile Papius Praetextatus – when it is attached to a young boy. Some possessors of *prudentia* are honoured as gods by posterity. Macrobius attributes this virtue among others to Ianus, Romulus, Homer and Caesar, all of them are outstanding examples of the individual obtaining immortality by human acts.

According to Macrobius, the people who have the virtue of *temperantia* do not do anything that should be regretted later, they exercise self-constraint, they direct their own desire to the appropriate way guided by the intellect. The Plotinian asceticism observed on the cathartic level appears less firmly by the Roman follower, the complete oblivion of human desires are the requirements of only the third level, on the highest grade it means the Intellect's turning towards itself. The encouragement to exercise temperance is an important element of education. In *Saturnalia* the author wants to draw his son's attention to the dangers hiding in intemperance by representing several versions of luxury. The writer introduces the main characters of his *symposion* as the eminent representatives of *temperantia*: in practicing this virtue Praetextatus, Symmachus and his friends exceed their predecessors, they strongly disapprove of the luxury and debauch of Ancient Times. The author might exaggerate when talking about the temperance of the *convivium*'s participants, as the manner of the celebrations' descriptions tend to the direction of asceticism sometimes going beyond the limits of sober self-constraint. It can be explained by Macrobius' absolute respect towards the prominent members of the Symmachus-circle and his Neoplatonic thought, which both

motivated him to introduce the leaders of pagan aristocracy in a way that they are ahead of average people in the process of divinization, inter alia due to their exceptional temperance.

The main criterion of the civic or political courage in *Commentarii* is that the soul can overcome the fear of danger, at the same time fear of things in the category of *turpia* is rather desirable. The author does not establish a hierarchical scale of values regarding the frightful situations, thus he does not consider martial courage more important than courage testified in any other areas of life. This is also proved by the fact that in *Saturnalia* he is looking for the virtue of *fortitudo* primarily not in brave warriors and in humans known for their firm character but in simple slaves who also have this *virtus* in them as much as free people. The other *exemplum* of courage worth mentioning is connected not surprisingly to Hercules: in this case the hero does not appear in the usual way but in the context of Sun-theology. By Macrobius Hercules is identical to the strength of Sun giving *fortitudo* by which humans become similar to gods.

From the four cardinal virtues the author mentions justice as the last one that has the task on the level of *virtutes politicae* to give everybody their due. This terse definition recalls certain passages from Cicero and legal terminology. Here Macrobius does not refer to the role of *iustitia* coordinating the other virtues – which is an important feature of the definition in the ancient justice-interpretations – by him it only appears on higher virtue levels. On the grade of major virtues justice ensures consistency and the eternal union between the soul and *Nus*. *Iustitia* is the only one among the four cardinal virtues that is not dealt with in effect in *Saturnalia*, all in all it appears only once in connection with Goddess Iustitia. On the contrary, he devotes a lot of space to it in *Commentarii*, its introductory art already examines the role of justice in the state on the basis of Plato and Cicero. Although *iustitia* does not play a significant part in *Saturnalia*, its associate virtues often occur in the most varied contexts. With their help the layers of the Macrobian justice-terminology can be revealed, which manifest themselves in the different system of relations between people.

Plotinus and Porphyry express their opinions very laconically about the nature and significance of the civic virtues. Starting from Plato's theory about the three parts of the soul they only state that the thinking part's virtue is prudence, the impetuous part has got courage and temperance belongs to the desirous one, above all of them there is justice coordinating their functions. The civic virtues are also respectful, but it refers rather to the major virtues, as divinization can be achieved through them. On the grounds of the things mentioned above, it is obvious that Macrobius attributes much more significance to *virtus politica*, but it cannot be explained merely by the interpretation of the commented Ciceronian text, as in the

preference of the civic virtues the complex influence of the Roman culture, traditional values and mentality becomes unambiguously visible.

In connection with the *exempla* of *Saturnalia* there were no preliminary expectations that they should correspond the *virtus*-definitions in the commentaries, still all the passages certify that there is no contradiction between the two works' virtue-image, furthermore, the examples analysed in the dissertation exceedingly illustrate *Commentarii* I. 8. The commentary on *Somnium Scipionis* provides the mature summary of Macrobius' concept about the four virtues and the allusions of *Saturnalia's virtutes* – bearing the seeds of the Neoplatonic virtue ethics in them – somewhat suggest this.

List of publications related to the dissertation

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Further publications

Translations

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