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A NOTE ON PETRUS CRINITUS AND  
THE INVENTORS OF THE ALPHABET

*Estratto da:*

ITALIA MEDIOEVALE E UMANISTICA · XXVI (1983)

EDITRICE ANTENORE  
VIA G. RUSCA 15  
PADOVA

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A NOTE ON PETRUS CRINITUS AND  
THE INVENTORS OF THE ALPHABET

Aware of the desire for more knowledge about ancient languages among his educated contemporaries, the Florentine humanist Petrus Crinitus calls attention to several verses about ancient alphabets, their inventors, and the order of their appearance.<sup>1</sup> The verses and a short paragraph about their discovery appear in Crinitus' encyclopedic work *De honesta disciplina*.<sup>2</sup>

Quoniam saepe in questionem venit quot apud veteres idiomatum genere fuerint, quaeque maxime celebrata, putavi non indignum fore si seniarolos quosdam de septem linguis subiciam, quos eundem in pervetusto codice legi ex bibliotheca Septimiana. In eo enim libro multiplex linguarum varietas demonstratur, tum quod septem litterum genera praececellant, ut hebraicae, atticae, latinae, syriacae, chaldaicae, aegyptiacae ac geticae. Sed audiamus veteres versiculos, ne impendio longius evagemur:

Moyses primus hebraicas exaravit litteras,  
Mente Phoenices sagaci considerunt Atticas,  
Quas Latini scriptitamus edidit Nicostrata,  
Abraham Syras, et ibidem reperit Chaldaicas,

1. Interest in the invention of the alphabet is of course found in much scholarly literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth century and may be traced back to ancient models such as Pliny, *Natural History*, Book VII, 56, 192 ff. Discussion of the origin of languages is found in the *Miscellaneorum centuria prima*, Basel 1522, 52-53, by Crinitus' teacher Angelo Poliziano; in the *Oratio habita in enarratione Iuvenalis atque Salusti* by Filippo Beroaldo, Basel 1509, xi v-xiii r; in Marsilio Ficino's discussion of Platonic philosophy, *Opera*, Basel 1561, vol. 1, chapter 29, pp. 1236-38; in works such as the *Margarita philosophica nova* by Gregor Reisch: Strasbourg 1508; Book 1, Tractatus tertius, f. 8r ff.; as well as works devoted to technical inventions such as *De rerum inventoribus*, Lyon 1546, chapter 6, pp. 25-31, by Polidorus Vergil. In these works one finds material that is drawn together in subsequent scholarly collections such as the *Lectioinum antiquarum*, Lyon 1560, vol. 1, Book 4, chapter 3, pp. 224-31, by Lodovico Ricchieri; or in Alexander ab Alexandro's *Genialium dierum*, Frankfurt 1673, Book II, chapter 30, pp. 109-110; or *De rerum inventoribus*, Nijmegen 1671, Part 1, chapter 1, pp. 2-3; not to mention those works not in Latin such as the *Silva de varia lectione*, Lyon 1556; Book III, chapter 1, pp. 371-75, by Pedro Mexia, or in *Il vago e dilettevole Giardino* (Vicenza 1602; 1 404-16) by Luigi Contarini.

2. Petrus Crinitus, also known as Pietro Ricci [1465-1507], *De honesta disciplina*, ed. C. ANGELERI, Rome 1955 (Florence 1504). The quotation is from Book XVII, chapter 1, p. 337. For further bibliography on Crinitus see Angeleri's introduction, pp. 1-55.

Isis arte non minore protulit Aegyptias,  
Gulfila prompsit Getarum quas videmus ultimas.

The fame enjoyed by these verses as well as the identify of their author has gone unnoticed and may be of interest.

Following their publication in Crinitus' work, the verses are repeated frequently in renaissance discussion about the origin of language.<sup>3</sup> They first appear in *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum* by Agrippa von Nettesheim,<sup>4</sup> and are also found in works by Theodor Bibliander,<sup>5</sup> Claude Duret,<sup>6</sup> Tomaso Garzoni,<sup>7</sup> and Herman Hugo.<sup>8</sup> Gerardius Vossius examines them carefully and even recommends emendation.<sup>9</sup> Petrus Lambeck also makes use of them and knows about the emendations made by Vossius.<sup>10</sup> A remark made by Etienne Morin shows that they were still well-known at the end of the seventeenth century: «Trito fertur carmine a Petro Crinito primum ante duo circiter saecula evulgato in suis de honesta disciplina libris, ubi agit de primis diversarum auctoribus». Their frequent appearance shows that they provided simple order in discussions often weighted with complexity. Undoubtedly, further investigation should find these verses in other works as well.

Since the verses cited by Crinitus are famous it is appropriate that they be restored to their original author, whom the modern editor of Crinitus was unable to identify. The verses make up poem 39, «De inventoribus lit-

3. For useful discussion and bibliography on the sixteenth and seventeenth-century debate on language see F. NICOLINI, *Origine del linguaggio e della scrittura*, in his book *La religiosità di Giambattista Vico: Quattro Saggi*, Bari 1949, 102-64; D.C. ALLEN, *Some Theories of the Growth and Origin of Language in Milton's Age*, «Philological Quarterly», 28 (1949), 5-16; M.V. DAVID, *Le débat sur les écritures et l'hiéroglyphe aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Paris 1965. For the encyclopedic tradition in which much of this debate may be found see P. CHERCHI, *Enciclopedia e Politica della Riscrittura: Tommaso Garzoni*, Pisa 1980.

4. Agrippa von Nettesheim, *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum* (n.p. 1539), f. 5v.

5. Theodor Bibliander, *De ratione communis*, Tiguri 1548, 43.

6. Claude Duret, *Trésor de l'histoire des langues*, Cologne 1613, 657.

7. Tomaso Garzoni, *La Piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo*, Venice 1589, 468-74.

8. Hermann Hugo, *De prima scribendi origine et universa rei literariae antiquitate*, Antwerp 1617, 51.

9. Vossius emends the first line to read «Primus Hebraicas Moyses exaravit/litteras» because the verses are trochaic and *Moyses* in Latin Christian poetry is tresyllabic. Vossius also proposes changing the last inventor from *Gulfila* to *Gulphilius*; he silently changes the final word from *ultimas* to *litteras*. *De arte grammatica*, Amsterdam 1635, 35.

10. Petrus Lambeck, *Prodromus historiae literariae*, Leipzig 1710, 1 45.

11. Etienne Morin, *Exercitationes de lingua primaeva*, Utrecht 1694, 172.

terarum» from the *Carmina* of Eugenius, Bishop of Toledo, who lived in the seventh century. Eugenius was the author of various epistles and a hundred or so poems easily found in two editions, one by Migne,<sup>12</sup> and another which is superior, edited by Friedrich Vollmer.<sup>13</sup>

The Bibliotheca Septimiana which provided the ancient manuscript used by Crinitus was the library of the Cistercian monastery San Salvatore at Settimo near Florence.<sup>14</sup> The library, known for its rich collection of manuscripts at the end of the fifteenth century, was despoiled in the sixteenth century through forced assimilation into other libraries, most notably the San Marco Library in Florence.<sup>15</sup> At the time Crinitus was assembling material for *De honesta disciplina* the library was still intact.

The manuscript in which Crinitus found the verses remains to be located. No reference to Eugenius is found in the lists of extant manuscripts from Settimo.<sup>16</sup> This, however, is not surprising since Crinitus probably discovered the poem in a manuscript where it was separated from the other *carmina* of Eugenius and where the author remained anonymous. In his careful study of the manuscript tradition of Eugenius' works, Yves-F.

12. *PL*, 87, 358-68; the verses cited by Crinitus appear as poem XXI, «De inventoribus litterarum», col. 366.

13. *MGH, AA*, XIV (1905), ed. F. VOLLMER, 227-91; in this edition the verses appear as poem XXIX, p. 257. Vollmer suggests that Isidore, *Etymologia*, Book 1, 3, 5; and Book 1, 4, 1, was the source used by Eugenius. For a detailed study of ideas of writing and their importance for Isidore see J. FONTAINE, *Isidore de Séville et la culture classique dans l'Espagne Wisigothique*, Paris 1959; see especially vol. 1, chapter 2, «Des signes graphiques à l'orthographe: la litteratio», pp. 57-93. The most substantial study of Eugenius is found in Y.-F. RIOU, *Quelques aspects de la tradition manuscrite des Carmina d'Eugène de Tolède: Du Liber catonianus aux Auctores Octo Morales*, in «Revue d'Histoire des Textes», 2 (1972), 11-44; for additional bibliography see Blossi *Aemili Draconti Satisfactio una cum Eugeni recensione*, ed. F. SPERANZA, Rome 1978, xxvii-xxviii.

14. For general reference to the Bibliotheca Septimiana see B.L. ULLMANN and P.A. STADTER, *The Public Library of Renaissance Florence*, Padua 1972, 26, 38, 46. A more detailed discussion of the library may be found in E. LASINIO, *Della biblioteca di Settimo e di alcuni suoi manoscritti passati nella Mediceo-Laurenziana*, «Rivista delle Biblioteche e degli Archivi» 15 (1904), 169-77.

15. The library at Settimo had important ties with the Florentine intellectual community at the end of the fifteenth century and deserves to be studied in greater detail. The library was enriched considerably in 1462 when the Florentine book-collector Ser Filippo di Ser Ugolino Pieruzzi left all his sacred books, as well as others, to the abbey. After Pieruzzi's death Cosimo Medici purchased manuscripts from Pieruzzi's library for San Marco. The famous Florentine teacher Giorgio Antonio Vespucci also had ties with Settimo in part through his association with Pieruzzi.

16. See the lists provided by Lasinio. For Settimo manuscripts not included in Lasinio's lists see M. PALMA, *Sessoriana*, Rome 1980, catalog entries 18, 35, 36, 52, 108, 115.

Riou shows the individual *carmina* were often included without attribution in works on grammar and rhetoric. The presence of «De inventoribus litterarum» with notes by Poliziano in a manuscript that once belonged to Crinitus suggests that it may have been Crinitus' teacher who first directed him to the poem.<sup>17</sup>

These verses by Eugenius then are remarkable for they shape a path through Renaissance linguistic debate. But even more important their appearance in Crinitus and subsequent fame show how Renaissance discussion could receive welcome direction from verses composed in an age of earlier intellectual inquiry.

17. See RIOU, 17-18; and Munich, Staatsbibliothek ms. lat. 807. For a detailed description of Munich ms. lat. 807 see I. MAÏER, *Les manuscrits d'Ange Politien*, Geneva 1965, 210-14. Riou indicates that «De inventoribus litterarum» appears on ff. 71-71v and is accompanied by fragments of an *Ars grammatica* by Julien of Toledo. Maïer does not refer to the poem but indicates that extracts from the works of Victorinus, Papirianus, and Phoca appear between ff. 67r and 71v. The matter is further complicated by a note on f. 67r which precedes the extracts. The note indicates that the extracts were made from an ancient codex examined in the house of the Duke of Ferrara in Venice in 1491 (Maïer, 123). The preliminary lists made by Lasinio of some of the manuscripts from Settimo do not indicate the presence of these authors.

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