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MACROBIUS AND THE CARDINAL VIRTUES

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This dissertation, entitled *Macrobius and the Cardinal Virtues*, examines the Neoplatonic virtue ethics of Macrobius Ambrosius Theodosius, a Roman author living at the turn of the 4th and 5th Centuries AD, on the basis of his two major works, *Saturnalia* and *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*. In the field of classical studies there has been a long-standing and dominant view that Macrobius was just an insignificant compiler, as a consequence of which both he and his works have received little attention. This is testified to 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 increased somewhat of late (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 have 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; this dissertation is designed to contribute to this with its results.

The cardinal virtues in question (i.e. *prudentia*, *temperantia*, *fortitudo* and *iustitia*) nominated by Plato played a central part in ancient moral philosophies. 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 constructs a specifically Roman virtue theory, which throws new light upon the role and significance of the individual practising his virtues in his own spiritual search.

The author's *virtus*-concept has previously been analysed by some researchers, but these examinations have only touched upon a rather narrow spectrum of his writings, the four virtues having been examined inclusively rather than separately. There is also another known view, according to which no examples can be found for the cardinal virtues in Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, which is why there is nothing to compare the virtue ethics of *Commentarii* to. These reasons form the basis for the

aims of this 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 Roman society's scale of values.

Research methods

Taking the premises of the scientific literature and the sparse evidence referring to Macrobius into account, this dissertation first deals with the issue of the writer's identity in the scope of a historical examination. By means of prosopography and source analysis it aims to provide an answer to the question as to which periods the lifework of this 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 style by means of text interpretation.

The second, major part of this dissertation is built on an ethical-terminological examination. The starting point is *Commentarii* I. 8., wherein the author summarises the main doctrines of neo-Platonic virtue ethics. Thereafter the premises and sources of Macrobius' concepts are introduced, as a result of which, it can be stated what differs in the author's virtue perception from the neo-Platonic 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 introduce 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 which the definitions of each virtue are investigated, then the analysis continues by considering and interpreting the examples collected from *Saturnalia*. Regarding the afore mentioned *exempla*, one of the main questions is how they are adapted to the virtue descriptions of *Commentarii*: whether 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 this 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 Theodosius who held the office of *praefectus praetorio Italiae, Illyrici et Africae* in the year 430AD, during the reign of Valentinian III. Although Latin was most assuredly his native language, he was not born in Italia but 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 that he held 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, while his grandson had the name Macrobius Plotinus Eudoxius.

Macrobius talks a lot about ancient Roman religion and ancient deities in his works; this topic is of great importance to him as it forms one of the main elements of traditional Roman culture, although 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 certain that he embraced the new belief at least formally, otherwise he could not have held the office which can be attributed to him. The paradoxical nature of the great silence surrounding Christianity becoming the state religion by the time of the author is well demonstrated by the fact that Macrobius is one of the most widely-read and popularly quoted authors of the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, his silence strengthens the conviction that his religiousness was based primarily upon philosophy, namely neo-Platonism, it being fashionable at that time. To his mind, the soul's breaking free from the body, the contemplation and the ascent to the 'One' may be realized through the virtues and that these are available to each and every person. This latter thought can be paralleled with Christian concepts though, and this may be the point – the age of Macrobius – when the mutual effect of Antiquity's final great philosophical system and Christianity can be recognized before the neo-Platonic idea could eventually melt in the doctrines of the victorious new belief system.

The first of the three works left to us by Macrobius is a grammatical tractate in which he examines similarities and differences between Greek and Latin verbs. The originality of this treatise 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 comparison of the two works' prefaces it may be assumed that *Saturnalia* was created earlier and that *Commentarii*, which was written later, is its integral continuation. Although they differ from each other as regards their genre, *Saturnalia* being a piece of *symposion* literature, while the other writing can be placed into the category of commentaries, still there is a common feature in them; via these works Macrobius wishes to transmit the values and rules of life important to himself to Eustathius and beyond that he also transfers a

huge amount of knowledge that includes almost all 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 may be considered as being a sort of *Fürstenspiegel*. The fatherly guidance found within them supports the evolution of the youth’s mind from adolescence to adulthood, which helps the accomplishment of his personality by acquiring Roman erudition and neo-Platonic philosophy in order to become *vir bonus*, one 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 neo-Platonic philosophy for his readers in any era.

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 at 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 neo-Platonic 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 correspond to the Greek neo-Platonists’ perception, although significant differences are to be found in Macrobius’ evaluation of the virtue levels.

There is no divergence of opinion between Macrobius and his Greek ideals regarding the idea that the aim of human life is to attain happiness, which is identical to divinization in neo-Platonic interpretation, although 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 may 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 considers the original concept to be 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 only possess a preparatory role in the process of ascent to the major virtues' level. The soul's ascension can only be attained by means of contemplation.

In contrast, Macrobius, proceeding from a syllogistic argumentation (according to which if the virtues render 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 of the author and through both types eternal celestial happiness is attainable. 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 assume that the author takes this view because he misinterprets neo-Platonic doctrines, while others think that in fact there is no disagreement at all. Macrobius states the same as Plotinus, only in a more elegant rhetorical context. This 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 neo-Platonic 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 which was previously provided by the Greek philosopher. Macrobius tends to rationalize his virtue ethics as much as possible in order to adapt it to 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 examples illustrating civic virtues do not appear in another work of his, *Saturnalia*. This 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 non existing theory. On the other hand, if we take into account Macrobius' idea 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 serve the function of supporting particular Macrobian virtue ethics; they can only be considered as being their antecedents. Moreover, they are able to contribute to an adequate interpretation of the author's virtue concept.

First *prudentia* was examined by way of the four cardinal virtues. According to 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 are added the examples of *Saturnalia*, 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 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 the juvenile Papirius Praetextatus – when it is attached to a young boy. Some possessors of *prudentia* are honoured as gods by posterity. Macrobius attributes this virtue to Janus, Romulus, Homer and Caesar among others; all of them are outstanding examples of the individual obtaining immortality by human acts.

According to Macrobius, 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; at 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 debauchery 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 in 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 neo-Platonic thought, which both motivated him to introduce the leaders of pagan aristocracy in such 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 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 frightful situations, thus he does not consider martial courage more

important than courage testified in any other areas of life. This is also proven by the fact that in *Saturnalia* he is not looking primarily for the virtue of *fortitudo* 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. According to 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* of giving 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 – with him it only appears on higher virtue levels. On the grade of major virtues justice ensures consistency and an eternal union between the soul and Nus. *Iustitia* is the only one among the four cardinal virtues that is not dealt with effectively in *Saturnalia*; all in all it appears only once in connection with the Goddess Iustitia. In contrast, he devotes a lot of space to it in *Commentarii*, its introductory art 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 Macrobian justice-terminology can be revealed, which manifest themselves in the different systems of relations between people.

Plotinus and Porphyry express their opinions laconically respecting the nature and significance of 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 courage and temperance belongs to the desirous one, above all of which 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 preference of the civic virtues the complex influence of 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 to 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 neo-Platonic virtue ethics in them – somewhat suggest this.

List of publications related to the dissertation

- Tóth, O.: Tradíció és tanítás: Macrobius Theodosius és a Saturnalia [Tradition and Teaching. Macrobius Theodosius and his Saturnalia]. *Könyv és könyvtár* XXVII (2005), 201-218.
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- Tóth, O.: Macrobius iustitia-konceptiója [Macrobius' Iustitia-Concept]. In: M. Nagy-I., Szekeres, Cs.-Takács, L.-Varga, T. (edd.): *Xenia. Tanulmányok a nyolcvanéves Tegye Imre tiszteletére*. Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó 2010, 203-213.
- Tóth, O.: Macrobe sur les vertus des esclaves. Analyse du chapitre 11 des Saturnales I. *Acta Classica Universitatis Scientiarum Debreceniensis* XLVI (2010), 157-175.
- Tóth, O.: A temperantia fogalmának macrobiusi értelmezése [Macrobius' explanation of the temperantia-definition]. *Történeti tanulmányok*. (under publication).