GIANFRANCO AGOSTI

THE ΠΟΙΚΙΛΙΑ OF PAUL THE BISHOP


© Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH, Bonn
THE POIKIAIA OF PAUL THE BISHOP

Over the last twenty years, Belgian excavations in Apamea on the Orontes have been contributing dramatically to a better understanding of the culture of Late Antiquity. In particular, excavations under the so-called “cathédrale de l’est” have revealed a rich and complex pagan tradition, thus providing new evidence for Julian’s reaction. On this pagan framework Christians laid the foundations of their own cultural tradition. In 1970 an epigraphical testimonium came to light dating the restoration of the cathedral, badly damaged by earthquakes in 526, to exactly 533 AD. In addition, something even more exciting has been discovered: we now know the identity of the person who stood behind the work, the bishop Paul. Of him Jean Charles Balay has recently given us a learned and sympathetic portrait1.

Two years later a pair of metrical inscriptions was found, which enriched our information about the Bishop’s activity. In the cathedral’s southeastern corner, at the center of a huge mosaic with theriomorphic figures, animals and vessels, Paul wrote down two iambic trimeters2, in which he meant to describe his cultural program. At the same time, these verses invite the reader to understand the correct meaning of the surrounding mosaics3:

Τὴν ποικίλην ψηφαίδα Παύλος εἰσέγει
ὁ ποικιλόφρον τῶν ἀρτοθεν δομέτων
«It is Paul who is introducing this variegated mosaic,
since he has variegated knowledge of the doctrines from on high.»

Balty has been able to establish the connection between what the verses suggest to the reader and the mosaic’s figures. There can be no doubt that the pictures have a symbolic value4. These two trimeters, however, deserve some further comment, especially from the stylistic point of view.

First of all, the language of the couplet is not so exceptional as might seem at first glance. Some aspects of the poetic diction can be clarified by similar expressions found in Christian iambic poetry. For the meaning of τὰ ἄρτοθεν δομέται in l. 2, close parallels can be found in Gregory of Nazianzus, De virtute (1.2.10.164-6, PG 37.709 = p. 126 Crimi), where the poet speaks of his theological knowledge and says that he has been talking with θεοπνεύστων 5 τε δομέταις λόγοις / πιηή γλυκείας

---


2 It seems to me quite probable that Paul was the author of the epigram and the person who selected the motifs: for the same view see also H. Maguire, Earth and Ocean: The Terrestrial World in Early Byzantine Art, University Park-London 1987 (= Maguire 1987), 14.


4 Balty 1976, 41-43; see also infra.

sófrōn tin’ ὀρφακίον, ὐδὸν καὶ βάθος τι κρυπτοῦ ἐξηντλήσαμεν. Amphilochoius of Iconius, *Iamb. ad Seleuc.* 240-250 Oberg gives a definition of the μεθήργην τῶν παρ’ Ἐλληνων λόγων which sounds very similar to the concept expressed by the Syrian Bishop: see II. 243-247 [Hellenic knowledge must obey] τῇ τῶν ἄλλων δογμάτων παραρροίᾳ / τῇ πανσώφῳ τε τῶν γραμμών θεωρίᾳ. / Καὶ γὰρ δίκαιου τὴν σοφίαν τοῦ πνεύματος / ἀνοθέν οὔσαν ἐκ θεοῦ τ’ ἀφιμένην / δέσποιναν εἶναι τῆς κόσμου παιδεύσεως. George of Psidia in the proem to his *Hexaemeron* addresses Sergius the patriarch, who guides weak-minded human beings in the right direction: ἄριστος γὰρ ἱππαρχὸς τοῦ βάθους / ἑλπίζων τὰ κρυπτά ταῖς ὁφάισι τῶν δογμάτων (29-30 Hercher). And the poet also defines theological knowledge as follows: στερρόν τὸ βάθρον πτίζομεν τῶν δογμάτων (Hex. 1694 H). In particular, for the use of ἀνοθέν we can provide some further examples: Greg. Naz. *Carm.* 1.2.10.60-61, p. 118 Crimi θεία τῆς μεταρροή / ἀνοθέν ημῶν ἐρχομένη; *Carm.* 2.11.12.233, PG 37. 1183 οἱ τοῖς λόγοις ἀνοθέν τεθραμμένοι: George of Psidia, *Hex.* 1864 H. (the patriarch) τοῖς λογισμοῖς πάντων ἐκτείνας ἀνω. The Biblical text always referred was of course James 3.15 and 17 ἡ ἀνοθέν σοφία6.

However, the most interesting point in Paul’s inscription is the rare compound ποικιλόφρων. The first editor made the reasonable assumption that Paul had borrowed the adjective from Euripides, *Hecuba* 131, where it is used of Odysseus10. But we know of at least one other occurrence in a fragment of Alcaeus, 69.6-7 Voigt ὅ δ’ ὀλίσπει / ποικιλόφρων. As is often the case with many ἀκούα or rare words in the poetry of the Imperial period, where much has been lost, the real diachronic diffusion of ποικιλόφρων escapes us. In addition it must be remembered that the habit of using anthologies and collections of passaages and rare words was quite widespread11. When we are dealing with an isolated word it is hard to speak of plain borrowing, or imitation, unless the context provides further evidence. It is not a mere question of sources, or at least not only of sources. If we can discover the origin of the adjective, we shall be in a better position to understand the verses Paul wrote down as an emblem of his munificent efforts.

In both of the passages quoted above the context is a negative one: the adjective denotes a shrewd ability to persuade by rhetorical devices, which often leads to harmful results. In the Alcaeus fragment the “cunning fox” is probably Pittacus12 or, in any case, an enemy of the poet; in the Euripides passage the chorus, sympathetic to Hecuba, is explaining how Odysseus was able to persuade the hesitating and

---

6 *Hex.* 23 Hercher ἀποτεληντὸς τοῦ λόγου.
7 For the metrical position see also Amphilocho. *Icon. Seleuc.* 214, 293 Oberg; *AP* 1.107.5 (where the interesting idea is expressed that a mosaic could strengthen Christ’s tois λόγων τῶν δογμάτων); *APApp* III 289.17 Cognuy ἔλεγχον εὑρεί (Nestorius) τῶν ἐκστοσίων δογμάτων. Henceforth this clause became common in Byzantine dodecasyllabic poetry, as Fabrizio Gonnelli kindly pointed out to me.
8 Aug. *Enarr. in Pss.* 103.18 *alta praeepta Dei* (already quoted by Balty 1976 43 n. 67) is also very close.
9 See also *Ic.* 1.17 πάσα δόσις ἑγεθεὶ καὶ πᾶν ὀφέλιμος τῆς λόγου, ἐπάνω τῶν φῶτων: Jo. 3.31 ὁ ἀνοθήν ἐρχόμενον ἐπάνω πάντων ἑστιν; 8.23 εὗρο ἐκ τῶν ἄνω εἰμί. The meaningful employment of ἀνοθήν as an adjective was also not unknown to pagan thinkers: see, for example, *Procl. In Crat.*, with F. Romano, *Proclo. Lecioni sul “Cratillo” di Platone*, Rome 1989, XVII-XVIII.
10 Balty 1976, 40: Paul «se compare implicitement à l’Ulysse de la tragédie classique», and below, n. 55 «le mot ... paraît un hapax et a donc bien ici, me semble-t-il, valeur de citation».
11 A striking example is the *onomaston poeticon* found in PHibeh 172 = *SH* 991 (IIP). At least thirty compounds are new; among them being also ποικιλόφρων. Even deeply learned authors, like Nonnus of Panopolis, derived some Alexandrian themes from anthological collections (see I. Cazzaniga, *Temi poetici Alessandri in Nonno Panopolitano: tradizione diretta e indiretta*, in Miscellanea di studi alessandri in onore di A. Rostagni, Torino 1963, 626-646). In any case, however we conceive of imitation in the literature of Late Antiquity, we must always contextualize sources and take care to distinguish between *lingae* and *parole*.
divided Achaea assembly to sacrifice Polyxena. If Paul had had the Odyssey of the Hecuba in mind and wanted to make a recognizable quotation, it would have been difficult for any reader to grasp the relationship between rhetorical shrewdness and variegated knowledge of heavenly doctrines.

On the contrary, it seems clear enough to me that the bishop, with the best intentions, had something totally different in mind. Poikilóφρον has undergone, in my view, complete resemantization. Balty is right when he points out that Paul could perfectly well read the tragedies of Euripides and we should also perhaps bear in mind here the mosaics with scenes from the Hippolytus found in Madaba and in Sheikh Zouweid. Moreover, if the Christus Patiens proved a work belonging to Late Antiquity, this would be another piece of evidence in support of his contention. But (and it cannot be stressed enough) the original context makes all the difference. This is not particularly surprising, since the practice of giving a new meaning to a Pagan word (resemantization) is one of the most characteristic features of Christian poetic language. If this is also the case here, where did Paul get his adjective from?

The bishop may have run into the adjective in an anthology. Or more likely still he may have come across it in interpretations of the proem of the Odyssey, which he will certainly have been exposed to during his school-days. We know of the connection between polüvtropi and poikilída from a Homeric ξίνημα in Porphyry (Schol. ad Od. α 1 Schrader = Antisth. fr. 187.30 ff. Giannantonio): λόγον δὲ πολυντροπία καὶ χρήσις poikilía λόγον εἰς poikilías ὀκός μονωτροπία γίνεται. Eustathius too, who fills several pages in commenting on the meaning of polývtropo, provides the following explanation (In Od. I, p. 4.39-40 Stallbaum): πολυντροπος συν, ὃ διὰ πολλάν ἐμπειρίαν πολυφρόνων ὡς ὁ ποιμνις μετ’ ὀλίγα ἐρέω, καὶ ὃς Εὐρυπίδης ἐν οἶμοι, πολυφρόνων. Eustathius is surely summarizing ancient material, and it is significant that he uses poikilóφρον in a positive sense. Since the Euripidean quotation comes after dismissing negative depictions of Odysseus, it is evident that Eustathius’ sources had already decontextualized the epithet, while keeping Euripidean authorship.

If during his Homeric training Paul had learned that poikilóφρον was merely an equivalent of polývtropos, we can infer that he wanted to allude to Odysseus’ proverbial polυvtropi. In doing so, he naturally did not have the classical image of a shifty-minded man in mind, and certainly not that of an orator who cynically leads an assembly to vote for a young maiden’s sacrifice. A century earlier Cyrus of Panopolis writing a panegyric in hexameters to Theodosius II was careful to make a similar

---

13 P. Collard, Euripides. Hecuba, Warminster 1991, 138 translates «shifty-minded wrangler» and quotes for the meaning of poikilodo- R.G.A. Buxton, Persuasion in Greek Tragedy, Cambridge 1982, 172; cf. also AP 300.5 where Odysseus is called poikilodóφρον (Hermes’ epithet in HO 28.5); see also Collard ad Eur. Suppl. 187-8 and Headlam ad Herod. 3.89. For a late instance of poikilóδο in this pejorative sense see Agath. AP 11.3503-4 = 12 Viansino (against a jurist) βίρτη πιστείς poikilóφροιν ὑπὸ την μενονή/poikilón εὐδήσας μὴν ἐπισταμενή.

14 Things would not change, even if we read poikilóφρον in Sapph. fr. 1.1 Voigt (probably an ancient variant, see G.A. Privitera, QUCC 13, 1972, 132-133), since it is a poikilída bearing a love-δόlos. For a summary of contemporary views on Sappho’s text see D.E. Gerber, Lustrum 35, 1993, 81-83. A verb poikilóφρονιο is known from Σ ad Aristoph. Thesm. 441.


16 Even for the centos; on literary problems concerning these poems see the clear statements by K. Smolak, Beobachtungen zur Darstellungsweise in den Homerzentonen, JÖB 28, 1979, 29-49).


18 The epithet is also applied to Odysseus, without any indication of source at p. 308.5 St. το poikilôφρον Odisseu . . . ὤλουσκε.

19 See M. van der Valk, Eustathii Archiepiscopi Thessalonicensis Commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem pertinentes, I, Leiden 1971, XLVII.
And what is more likely still is that Paul would have thought of an Odysseus endowed with ποικιλόφρον, interpreted by the Neoplatonists as a spiritual quality. Christian writers accepted this interpretation and especially in pedagogical contexts held Odysseus out as a moral exemplum: in his iambic poem On virtue Gregory of Nazianzus introduces Homer himself defining Odysseus as προθή-λος τῆς ὁρμητικῆς ἀγκώμοιον (1.2.10.406, PG 37.709 = p. 144 Crimi). But such exegesis went even further: Ulysses represented the Saviour, according to an interpretation current in Christian art and literature. The hero chained to the mast of his ship was a figura of Christus dominus religatus in cruce, as Maximus of Torino tells us.

Paul’s claim to variegated knowledge of celestial doctrines and his implicit comparison of himself to Odysseus therefore suggest that figures of the sensible world (here the mosaics) point to the supersensible world, to a hidden superior meaning.

We encounter the same approach in the interpretation of the Odyssey as the story of the soul’s wanderings before returning to its heavenly fatherland. This interpretation was so widespread that by chance it has also been found in the Pagan mosaics under the Cathedral’s floor. These well preserved mosaics depict, together with other scenes, Ulysses’ return to Ithaca, his recognition by Penelope and the wet-nurse, and the maid servants’ (θηραπευτιδές) dance. The entire scene is very probably an allegory of the iter in philosophiam.

We must only ask why exactly Paul chose ποικιλόφρον to express his ideas. The new proliferation of ποικίλο - compounds in Late Antiquity, especially in patristic Greek shows that Paul had this linguistic tool available, but does not explain why he adopted it.

We need however to go a step further. Paul’s choice is clearly dictated by proto-byzantine aesthetic theories. About a century earlier, Nonnus of Panopolis had built his tantalizing Dionysiac and Christian epic poetry on the aesthetic foundations of ποικίλα, which should be understood not only as stylistic

20 On this poem see Al. Cameron, The Empress and the Poet, YCS 27, 1982, 229.

21 See especially Porphyry’s De antro Nympharum (edited with a good commentary by Laura Simonini, Postfario. L’antro delle Ninfe, Milano 1986), Buffière, Les mythes (quoted in n. 17), R. Lamberton, Homer the Theologian, Berkeley 1986, are reference books; see also Kiessling-Heinze on Horace, Epist. 1.2.17.

22 See C. Crimi-M. Kertsch, Gregorio Nazianzeno. Sulla virtù carme giambico [I, 2, 10], Pisa 1995, 33, 270. Basil., In adulents. 5.7-10 is very similar. For a further example of the resemanticization of a Homeric expression applied to Odysseus in Gregory of Nazianzus see F.E. Zehles, Kommentar zu den "Mahnungen an die Jungfrauen" (carmen 1, 2, 2) Gregors von Nazianz, V. 1-354, Münster 1987, 102-103 on Carn. 1.2.2.138 γόρος όρομής.


25 See especially Janine Balty, La mosaique en Syrie, in J.-M. Dentzer – W. Orthmann (eds.), Archéologie et histoire de la Syrie, II, Saarbrücken 1989, 493-495; Edid., Les "Thérapéutides" d’Apanée, DHA 18, 1992, 281-292 (and also P. Boufar-tigue, L’Empereur Julien et la culture de son temps, Paris 1992, 508-509). On the stylistic links between Paul’s mosaics and the previous pagan mosaics in Apamea see Balty 1976, 41-42 and 46. Balty had already noted the implicit comparison between Paul and Odysseus. He suggested that the Bishop might even want to allude to the pagan mosaics; I am not altogether persuaded by this suggestion, which implies either that the mosaics were still visible or that people clearly remembered them. If the mosaics are a product of Julian’s reaction, both ideas are rather implausible.

The poet clearly shows that polýtropos and poikílos are interchangeable, and in this he is surely following Homeric exegesis. Since Nonnus attributes the same trait to Dionysus in his proem, we can infer that Dionysus, who is a polymorphous principle, has to be sung of in a comparable style. Stylistic variation therefore assumes the task of representing the multiplicity of the universe behind which a superior unity is hidden. The concept of poikílía goes far beyond mere rhetorical or stylistic boundaries and becomes a peculiar way of viewing reality. It will be no surprise therefore to see Nonnus also applying it in his Christian poem, the Paraphrase of St. John’s Gospel. Here his rather personal view of Christ’s poikílio-morφía is apparent in a characteristically adjectival style containing such compounds as poikílóμυθος (Par. 3.9; 7.193)31, poikílóδόρος ἄντιξ (12.68), poikílóνος (19.25): Jesus’ signs are poikíla θαύμαστα (7.19), and His words are depicted as νοημέττων poikílía μυθόν (18.103)32. The arduous depths of Johannine theology are translated by Nonnus into a florid style, the most accomplished expression of baroque in Late Antiquity. His complex style reflects the multiplicity of reality and at the same time tries to express the impossibility of understanding the mystery of Christ’s descent to Earth.33 Stylistic poikílía mirrors the subject’s complexity.

This concept is based on the same relationship presupposed by Paul’s trimeters. The bishop invites his readers to recognize a higher meaning in the poikílía, a meaning revealed to him by his own variegated knowledge of heavenly doctrines. Balty has shown that the mosaics throughout do indeed convey a quite widespread symbolic meaning. The deer biting a snake and the contrarampant


28 Dion. 1.13-15: «but bring me a partner dancing in the neighbouring island of Pharos, Proteus of many turns, that he may appear in all his diversity of shapes, since I twang my harp to a diversity of songs» (translation, slightly modified, by W.H.D. Rouse, Cambridge-London 1984).3


31 Ποικίλομυθος is used by Nonnus with a ‘religious’ sense also in D. 3.423 (Hermes), 12.68 (the ὑρφέγονος Φρήν), see F. Vian, Nonnos de Panopolis. Les Dionysiaques. Chants XI-XIII, Paris 1995, 188.


33 Cf. Nonnus’ translation of Jo. 21.25 ἵστην δὲ καὶ ἄλλα πολλὰ καὶ ἔποιησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς, ὡσπερ καὶ ἔρισθαι καθ’ ἐν, σὺν αὐτῷ σύμμεισιν τό κόσμον χωρίσας τὰ γραφόμενα βιβλία. ~ Par. Φ 139-143 ἄλλα δὲ θαυμάτωται πολλὰ σοφή σφηνίζοσθε σιγῇ / μάρτις ἐπτυχιῆς, τάπερ ἦνευσαν αὐτῶν Ἰησοῦς, ὡσπερ καθ’ ἐν στοιχείων ἀνήρ βρασός οίκε χαράξει / βάβλως τοιούτως νεάστηκες σύν εὐδ οὐνεὶν / ἐλπίσαν ἔπλακόμοιον ἐπίτροπον κόσμον τιμήσα τίμησι. This is the only passage in the poem that could be interpreted as a statement of poetics, as I hope to demonstrate in a forthcoming paper.

panther and gazelle represent the victory of orthodoxy and a new period of peace\textsuperscript{35}.

The practice of pointing out the meaning of a figure to the observer by an interpretative epigram was rather common. We have some epigraphical\textsuperscript{36} and also some literary evidence, as, for example, the four Homeric verses written down by the Bishop Dometios to explain the meaning of the floor mosaic in the Church at Nikopolis\textsuperscript{37} and, in the Western world, the \textit{tituli} of Venantius Fortunatus for the church of St. Martin in Tours\textsuperscript{38}. Paulinus of Nola \textit{Carm.} 27.531-2 reports that the scene of Ruth and Orpah in a mosaic of St. Felix in Nola contains hidden meaning\textsuperscript{39}.

Paul explicitly calls the mosaics’ \textit{ψυχόνωα (Πωκλος . . . εἰσινίτε)}\textsuperscript{40} to the attention of the readers: such advice finds a striking parallel\textsuperscript{41} in the poetry of Nonnus. In book 25 of the \textit{Dionysiaca}, the poet emulates the Homeric model with a long description of Dionysus’ shield. Made by Hephaestus it is a real masterpiece (ποικίλα . . . θεοματα τέχνης 385; πολύτροπα διάδεκτα τέχνης 562, here once again ποικίλος and πολύτροπος are equated)\textsuperscript{42}. The divine artisan engraved the shield with a series of scenes, all referring to its future owner. The poet tries to point out the relationship between the carved figures and Dionysus; and once he explicitly suggests how a scene should be understood. The relief of the abduction of Ganymedes is said to be a διάδεκτον ἄρμενον, an «apt carving» to be set among the stars, because it is a \textit{figura} of Dionysus’ apotheosis\textsuperscript{43}. This use of \textit{ekphrasis} as a way of pointing out


\textsuperscript{36} Already Balty 1976, 42 n. 64 mentions the illustration of \textit{Is.} 65.25 on the floor of the church of Karlik (Cilicia); see also the floor of the church of Ma’in (Madaba), with a quotation of Isaiah, or the panels in the church of SS. Lot and Procopius in Nebo, with a quotation of \textit{Ps.} 50.21 (see M. Piccirillo, \textit{Mosaicici [quoted in n. 15] 58-60; 69-70). Other examples are collected by Maguire 1987, 9-10 and especially by E. Kitzinger, \textit{DOP}, 6, 1951, 101-102.

\textsuperscript{37} Studied by E. Kitzinger, \textit{Studies on Late Antique and Early Byzantine Floor Mosaics, I: Mosaics at Nikopolis}, \textit{DOP}, 6, 1951, 83-122, especially 100-103.


\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Brevis ista videtur / historia, at magni signat mysteria belli; in the right part of the apse of St. Felix in Nola Paulinus wrote: / quem sancta tenet meditanda in lege voluntas / hic poterit residens sacris intendere libris. See also Prud. \textit{Perist. 9.}

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{εἰσινίτε} refers primarily to the action of putting down the mosaics, but also to the spiritual \textit{εἰσινίτε} that Paul wants to offer to faithful readers. For the position at the end of the verse cf., for example, Georg. \textit{Ps. Hex.} 248, 659, 693, 1575. In the meaning of «to introduce, to represent a character» the verb is very common in rhetorical and scholiastic texts, as John Lundon kindly reminded me.

\textsuperscript{41} We have one other interesting, though different, testimony of that in Apamea itself: in the ‘Julianean’ mosaics under the Cathedral’s floor it is clear that the names of the characters have an explicative function, as in the mosaic with Socrates and the Sages (for a possible Christian interpretation of this iconographical type see G.W. Bowersock, \textit{Hellenism in Late Antiquity}, Ann Arbor 1990, 33; see also P. Zanker, \textit{The Masks of Socrates}, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1995, 309) or the \textit{θεραπευόνες} mosaic quoted above.

\textsuperscript{42} On the ‘importance for Nonnian poetics’ of the \textit{ποικίλος} root in this passage see Hopkinson, \textit{Nonnus and Homer}, quoted in n. 29, 23-24, who concludes: «the \textit{τέχνη} is equally of the artificer poet, who … contrives to forge a quite different shield with which symbolically to arm his hero».

\textsuperscript{43} See G. Agosti, \textit{Poemi digressivi tardoantichi (e moderni), Compar(ati)son 1, 1995, 140-141.
hidden spiritual meanings not only anticipates later Byzantine practice, but it expresses an attitude known through other examples in poetry. In the age of Theodosius II, Nilus Scholasticus wrote of the image of an Archangel: Ὅς θρασύς μορφῶσα τὸν ἁσώματον. Ἀλλὰ καὶ εἰκών / ἐς νοερήν ἐνέγει μνήστην ἐπουρενίων (AP 1.33)45. About a similar image Agathias is even more explicit: βροτός εἰς κόνστα λέξεσσιον / θυμὸν ἐκθεῖνει κρέσσονον φαντασία / οὐκέτα δ’ ἀλλοπράσσον ἐξει σέβας . . . / ὁμομέτα δ’ ὀπτύμουνες μεθανὸν νόον ’οδε δ’ ἡτέγνη / χρώμασι πορθῆται τὴν φρενὸς ἵεσην (AP 1.34.3-5; 7-8 = 18 Viansino)46.

Above I noted some resemblances between Paul and Nonnus. These similarities perhaps require some further explanation. I do not want to suggest, of course, that Paul is in some way directly dependent on the Egyptian poet, though even that is not impossible. In Aphrodisias, for example, in the same sixth century AD, some heroic epigrams show clear signs of being influenced by the Paraphrase47. But the poetic diction of our iambic couplet does not allow any such conclusion: stylistic devices like the threefold alliteration of labial consonants or the figura etymologica ποικίληθεν – ποικιλόφρον εἰς τοὺς ποιητὰς σωφρόνως is common in other late poets. For example, Pamprepius of Panopolis, one of Nonnus’s followers, in a similar Latin parallel is found in a hexameter inscription written down on the floor of the cathedral in Grado (579 A.D.) by Helijah the patriarch: atria quae cernis vario formata decore / (squalida sub picto caelatur marmore tellus)50.

The relationship between Nonnian poetry and Paul’s distich is rather interesting because they share certain literary and stylistic principles. The idea that the main characteristic of works of art is common in other late poets. For example, Pamprepius of Panopolis, one of Nonnus’s followers, writes in the iambic prologue to his description of a fall-day (fr. 3.2-4 Livrea):

οἱ λόγοι

τὸν ποικίλον νοῦν τῶν ποιητῶν σωφρόνως ἐλκοῦσαν51.

---

44 See Liz James – Ruth Webb, ‘To Understand Ultimate Things and Enter Secret Places’: Ekphrasis and Art in Byzantium, Art History 14.1, 1991, 1-17. An example close to Paul’s epigram is perhaps the Koukoulon in the anacreontic ekphrasis by Leo Charophakties on the bath mosaic (Dion. 18.83-4) and employs an expression quite similar to Paul’s, πολυστρόφων δὲ μετάπτον / φαράγνα ἐβυφημάδα πίθον ποικίλλετο τέχνη. But in this case too we probably have a widespread phenomenon. For example, Pamprepius of Panopolis, one of Nonnus’s followers, in a similar Latin parallel is found in a hexameter inscription written down on the floor of the cathedral in Grado (579 A.D.) by Helijah the patriarch: atria quae cernis vario formata decore / (squalida sub picto caelatur marmore tellus).


47 See the epigrams published by Charlotte Rouché, Aphrodisias in Late Antiquity (with contributions by J.M. Reynolds), London 1989, nn. 38, 74, 74, 100, 156. I shall deal with these epigrams in a forthcoming paper in MD.

48 Joëlle Gerbeau (Nonnos de Panopolis, Les Dionysiaques. Tome VII: Chants XVIII-XIX, Paris 1991, 137) has drawn attention to Epigr. 1224 (written for a mosaic, Cheikh Zouwen, fourth century AD) λεπτολείχ ψηφίδια. For the expression of Paul’s second iambic couplet, πολυστρόφοι συνθέσει cf. the inscription on the floor mosaic of Thysros at Tegea (fifth century AD) λίθου / λεπτολείχ / ψηφίδια κόσμως and see Maguire 1987, 24.


51 «The words draw the poet’s subtle mind discreetly with them» (translation by D.L. Page, Select Papyri, III Cam-
in deference to a rhetorical tradition quite widespread in other texts of this period and probyzantine times. This passage explains the meaning conveyed by Paul’s ποικιλόφων very well: another good parallel is offered again by George of Pisidia, *Hex.* 1712 H. (μεθειν θελήσως . . . τῇ ποικίλῃ γάρ καὶ σοφῇ θεωρίᾳ / τὸν νοῦν μερίζω — even though in this passage the ποικίλη θεωρία is inadequate to reach the Absolute by itself.

Even Paul’s depiction of himself as ποικιλόφων is not without parallels and falls within the well-known class of eulogies dedicated to benefactors of towns. In *AP* 9.670 a builder of Smyrna, perhaps a proconsul of Asia in the fourth or fifth century, is compared to the mythical founders of the city and defined a ποικιλόμητς ἕνεκα. This is another typical epithet of Odysseus and in Christian poetry it could even be referred, on occasion, to Solomon, as in *APApp* III 288.2 Cougny Σολωμῶν πολυγνώμων, ποικιλομήτης.

The epigram of our φιλόκτιστος bishop therefore sheds further light on aesthetics in Late Antiquity. The description of works of art is conceived as a way of representing something else, something beneath the surface, or better something behind it. There is a correspondence between a work of art and reality, between the sensible world and the suprasensible one. But we should be careful in considering these verses only a literary product. They were intended for an audience able to grasp the meanings conveyed by the word-play in ποικίλην ἡρφίλα and ποικιλόφων, and able to see their relationship to the iconographic ‘program’ it had under its eyes. In the churches of Late Antiquity works of art and literary texts were thought only within a context which made them intelligible.

The bishop’s verses once again provide striking proof that the Hellenic tradition was still a living source and continued to exert its influence, although in Numenius and Iamblichus’ hometown the wind was now blowing from Byzantium. It probably could not have found more open terrain.

Università di Firenze

Gianfranco Agosti