

Vaticinium Severi et Leonis Imperatorum [Oracles of Leo the Wise]

In Latin and Spanish (title page only), illustrated manuscript on paper
[Spain or Italy, dated 1701]

33 leaves, on paper, complete (collation i9 [1 cancelled], ii14, iii10), written by a single scribe on 21-22 long lines in brown ink in a cursive script (justification c. 173 x 128 mm.), with 16 pen-and-ink drawings (105 x 73 mm.), highlighted with wash, the first three drawn directly on the page and surrounded by double framed lines, the last 13 pasted onto the sheets, inside double framed lines, a few loose, some spots and signs of use, some fading of text from glue used for mounting the illustrations, some worm holes, but generally in very good condition. Modern paper binding in imitation of leather. Dimensions 218 x 168 mm.

Although a copy of a printed book, the present manuscript contains a series of 16 finely executed drawings and testifies besides to the persistent interest in the sibylline prophecies concerning Byzantium, reinterpreted here in the context of the fall of the Ottoman Empire to show that the reign of Muslim domination has effectively passed.

PROVENANCE

1. Copy of a book printed in Brescia in 1596 (Pietro Maria Marchetti), the present manuscript may have been made in Spain because the title is partially translated into Spanish.
2. Owner's signature crossed out, and now unreadable on ff. 1 and 2 (bottom of the title page).

TEXT

f. 2, Title page, *Vaticinium/ Severi et Leonis/ imperatorum/ in quo videtur finis Turcarum/ una aliis cum nonnullis in hac re/ Vaticiniis/ in Brescia apresso Pietro Maria/ Marchetti 1596/ con licenza de Superiori/ E trasladado do impresso por/ Sum Curioso anno de 1684 e/ Agora segunda ves por outro mode/ 1701*; (Prophetic visions of the emperors Severus [Alexander] and Leonis [Leo VI the Wise] in which one sees the end of the Turks, with some other prophecies on the subject, printed in Brescia by Pietro Maria Marchetti in 1596 with the license of the Superiors. And copied from the imprint by a curious in the year 1684, [and] now for a second time by another);

f. 3, rubric, *Proboemium/ In explicationem praesentium propheticarum Figurarum/ Finis Imperii Ottomanorum in Bisantio*; incipit, "Author praesentis Vaticanii fuit Leo filius Baisilii Macedonis Bisantij Imperator, qui pro Bulgaris defendendis cum Turcis magum habuit bellum...";

f. 33, explicit, "... ut (si Deus voluerit) sperandum sit, brevis futurum tempus, unquo fiat unus pastor, e unum civile. Finis." [*Vaticinium Maumectanorum*, or "Prophecies of the Muslims).]

The present manuscript contains the text that circulated throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance under the name of the Oracles of Leo the Wise (emperor 886-912). This series of sibylline oracles concerns the fate of Greece, Byzantium, and Islam, as well as the future of good and evil. It mixes magic with religion and obscure divination with practical political expediency. By 1200, the prophecies were circulated under the name of Leo the Wise, founder of the

Macedonian dynasty. The text was interpreted and applied to specific events and people as circumstances changed. The oracles not only determined the fate of Greek politics for many hundreds of years, but they were also the source for the Pseudo-Joachim of Fiore *Vaticinium* composed in the late thirteenth century as prophecies about the papacy.

After the fall of Byzantium and with the rise of the Ottoman Empire and its successive wars for control in Europe, especially Italy, the Oracles of Leo the Wise regained their popularity as part of the propaganda against the Turks. They were understood to predict the ultimate defeat of the Ottomans by a unified Christian West. A lavish illuminated manuscript, the Bute copy of the Oracles of Leo the Wise prepared by Francesco Barozzi (1537-1604) under the orders of the Venetian governor of Crete, Giacomo Foscarini (1523-1602), was probably produced c. 1575 (see London, Sotheby's, 18 June 2002). This is around the same time that the first printed edition was issued in Brescia: *Vaticinium Severi et Leonis imperatorum, in quo videtur finis Turcarum in praesenti eorum imperatore* (Pietro Maria Marchetti, 1596). Our manuscript is a copy of the edition printed in Brescia (see Mortimer, no. 254). Added to the leonine prophecies in the present manuscript are the prophecies of the Muslims, which predict a reign of a thousand years for Islam, starting in 622.

No medieval copy of the Greek text of the oracles is known. It is recorded in 57 copies or fragments, not one of which is older than the sixteenth century. The modern edition exists in an unpublished dissertation (see Vereecken).

The text is profoundly imbedded in the history and culture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the sixteenth century, the mode of prophecies reached its height with Nostradamus (1503-1566), a French physician and astrologer who wrote in 1555 the *Centuries*, a book of more than 900 predictions about the fate of France, the world, and celebrated persons of his time. War in Italy against the Turks accounts for the revival of the Leo Oracles and its printing in Brescia. The seventeenth-century copies are testimony to the battles that led to the eventual defeat of the Ottoman Empire. The great battle of Kahlenberg (September 12, 1683) in which the army of Jean Sobiesky pushed back the Ottoman troops that attacked Vienna was followed by the Treaty of Carlovitz (January 26, 1699) where the Turks abandoned claims to a large part of eastern Europe. During the same period, a long war with Venice ensued (1645-69), culminating in the Ottoman conquest of Crete (1669). The prophecies appended at the end, which predict the reign of 1000 years of Islam, should be seen as confirmation that the threat of Muslim domination, posed for 1000 years beginning in 622, had effectively passed.

ILLUSTRATION

f. 5v, Two crows biting a snake;

f. 8v, An eagle holding a cross in its beak;

f. 10v, Unicorn with a crescent moon on its haunch;

f. 12v, Ox reclining beneath two bust-length figures;

f. 13v, Monster (bear with the head of a griffon) nursing its four babies;

- f. 14v, King holding a sickle in one hand and a rose in the other, crowned by an angel;
- f. 16v, City with a mosque, a decapitated head below;
- f. 17v, Monster bearing three standards (the Empire, the Papacy, and a third, the Ottomans [?]);
- f. 18v, Throne with a dismembered arm below;
- f. 19v, Unicorn with a crescent moon on its haunch;
- f. 20v, Embalmed emperor with an angel above and two monsters below;
- f. 21v, Two female figures, personifying the Sun (right) and the Moon (left);
- f. 22v, Standing king holding a scepter;
- f. 23v, Shepherd separating a wolf from his sheep;
- f. 25v, Angel bearing the imperial crown;
- f. 26v, the Emperor and the Pope

Copies after the woodcuts of the printed edition, the drawings are nevertheless charming, the watercolor wash adding nuance to the pen-and-ink outlines. They are closely linked to the text, which is composed in two parts, as an explication of the illustration: first, an epigram (*epigramata*); and second, an explanation (*expositio*). The letters A, B, C, D in the drawings refer to the epigrams on the facing page. This system of illustration is comparable to that of contemporary emblem books of which Alciati's *Emblemata* (printed 1550) is the most famous example.

The complex iconography of the drawings is related to that of the Pseudo-Joachim of Fiore *Vaticinium*. For example, the two crows and the serpent (the second prophecy) illustrate Repentance, indicating that the second son (the serpent) will destroy the bear [the king or emperor] but be savaged by the crows because, being descended from a degenerate eastern race, it will bring the city to despair and to tears and sorrow in the summer.

LITERATURE

Mortimer, Ruth. *Italian 16th Century Books in the Harvard College Library*, Cambridge, 1974.
 Vereecken, J. *De Ontkels van de zeer wijze keizer Leo, Kritische editie van de Griekse tekst en van de Latijnse bewerking de Vaticinia Pontificum*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Ghent, 1986.