Augustine and the Humanists

Reading the *City of God* from Petrarch to Poliziano

edited by

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in collaboration with

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Introduction

Guy Claessens & Fabio Della Schiava

> The gardens ravaged, the altars and chalices profaned, the Huns rode their horses into the monastery library and mangled the incomprehensible books and reviled and burned them – fearful perhaps that the letters of the books might harbor blasphemies against their god, which was a scimitar of iron. They burned palimpsests and codices, but in the heart of the bonfire, among the ashes, there lay, virtually untouched by the flames, the twelfth book of the *Civitas Dei*, which says that in Athens Plato once taught that at the end of time all things will return again to where they once were – that he, in Athens, before the same circle of listeners, will one day teach that doctrine once again. That text spared by the flames came to enjoy a special veneration; those who read and reread it in that remote province came to forget that the author put forth the doctrine only in order more roundly to refute it.[1]

So begins *The Theologians*, a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, first published in 1947 and reprinted two years later in the famous collection *The Aleph*. The protagonists are two theologians, Aurelian and John of Pannonia. Their rivalry is based on the problem of refuting the heresy of the *Monotoni*, who believed that history "was a circle, and that all things that exist have existed before and will exist again." The theory of the *Monotoni* reads as an anticipation of Giambattista Vico's notion of historical *corsi e ricorsi* and emerges in Borges' re-fashioning of late Antiquity as a "parallel universe" where fiction and (historical) fact are wonderfully intertwined. In this particular case, the fiction takes its cue from a real text that has influenced the history (or *histories*) of the Western world like few others: Augustine's *De civitate Dei*. In Borges' story, book twelve of *De civitate Dei* is the only one to survive the destructive fury of the barbarian invasions. Over time, however, readers began to forget that Augustine presented the doctrine of the circularity of history only to criticize it, and made it the object of a new belief instead. Yet in Borges' imaginary history *De civitate Dei* is not merely a narrative device. With the skill of a refined scholar and careful reader of Augustine (from whose works he knew extracts by heart, even in

[1] Borges, *Fictions*, 478-79.

Latin), Borges inserts the familiar dynamics of the text's historical reception into his narrative. Moreover, through its literary "reuse", he shows how Augustine's work is still deeply rooted in the cultural identity of the West – even to the extent that, in a parallel universe, it could rise to the dignity of a sacred and foundational text.

In fact, *De civitate Dei* has been among the most "consequential" works of Western literature. Nonetheless, scholars attempting to trace its reception in early modern Europe and beyond are faced with an often superficial bibliography, in which the dawn of the early modern era – the period in intellectual history generally referred to as Humanism or the early Renaissance – is almost completely neglected.

A thorough investigation into the early modern reception of *De civitate Dei* was implicitly part of a *desideratum* expressed by Paul Oskar Kristeller in his classic "Augustine and the Early Renaissance":

> The history of Augustine's "fortune" and influence has not yet been made the subject of an adequate comprehensive study. The basic facts are fairly well known, and a few specific phases and aspects have been studied in greater detail, especially for the earlier Middle Ages, for the Reformation period, and for seventeenth-century France. Augustine's influence on the early Renaissance has so far attracted less attention.[2]

Kristeller tried to – partially – remedy this absence by providing an overview of the figures who, more than others, contributed to Augustine's fortune in the fifteenth century. Inevitably, this outline is general and incomplete: Kristeller mentions Petrarch, Maffeo Vegio and Lorenzo Valla, but his interest is focused on Platonism in the late fifteenth century on the one hand, and on the contribution of Italian humanism to the Reformation on the other.[3]

Kristeller's "diagnosis" certainly helped to encourage subsequent lines of research, e.g. the theorization and study of *Augustinianism*, understood as the synthesis and/or elaboration of teachings and doctrines taken from the works of Augustine, which also includes "unorthodox" interpretations (as in the fictitious case of Borges' *Monotoni*). This research angle has been successfully explored by scholars from Étienne Gilson to Eric Saak, yet always with a main focus on the

[2] Also see the reading of this passage by Saak in this volume, at 20.
[3] Kristeller (1944) 1956, 362.

late Middle Ages, with *Agostino, agostiniani and agostinismi*, published by Carron, Brilli and Bartuschat in 2018, as its most recent result.[4]

In recent years, the topic has also been approached from a more philological perspective, in order to develop and refine the instruments and methodology for further research. Check-lists of manuscripts with Augustinian works in Italian libraries have been published along with essays devoted to specific aspects of their reception.[5] However, even if *De civitate Dei* has always been a part of the puzzle, it has never been the primary focus of any major research enterprise.

In general, research on the reception of *De civitate Dei* during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has not gone much further than the few preliminary conclusions drawn by Kristeller, and modern companions on Augustine and recent encyclopedic lemmas on his reception certainly prove this statement to be right. In the entry *Augustine in Renaissance Humanism* of the *Oxford Companion to the Historical Reception of Augustine*, very little is said about *De civitate Dei*, and, throughout the companion, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are generally neglected, as the focus lies on the late Middle Ages and the Reformation. In the entry *Medieval Political Philosophy* of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, John Kilcullen and Jonathan Robinson write the following about *De civitate Dei*: "Although this work was often copied in the Middle Ages (382 manuscripts survived), a reading of the entire work has never been part of the university curriculum." However, a recent update of Oberleitner's catalogue lists more than 730 manuscripts, 96 of which had never been mentioned before,[6] and although our knowledge of medieval university curricula may still be imprecise, we do know that at the end of the fourteenth century in Florence, Augustine's work was the object of public readings in the *Studium*, as the result of the synergy between the Florentine municipality and the Augustinians.[7]

This volume wishes to address the aforementioned lacuna in Augustinian studies and aims to do so through a series of portraits of Italian humanists, beginning with Petrarch and ending with Poliziano. This

[4] Bartuschat & al. 2018.
[5] Buonocore 1996; Coppini & Regoliosi 2001.
[6] Della Schiava & al. 2020.
[7] Brilli & Tanzini 2018, 208-16.

approach is certainly not without its weaknesses. Ultimately, the choice of humanists to be included in this gallery is arbitrary: even if (or perhaps *because*) it is based on a generally shared canon of relevance, it still remains the expression of a specific epoch, taste and set of idiosyncrasies. Prominent humanists whose scholarship is intimately linked to *De civitate Dei*, such as Giannozzo Manetti and other lesser-known figures, such as the Franciscan Lorenzo Traversagni da Savona, who read *De civitate Dei* at Cambridge in 1474, were also part of the work's readership.[8] Nonetheless, the selected case studies are representative of the different "modes" of Italian Humanism in the Trecento and Quattrocento: classical erudition, with particular attention to mythology; Greek philosophy, with a strong accent on Plato and Neoplatonism; Theology of History, with its ecclesiological and geo-political implications.

The aim of this volume is, first of all, to analyze the reception of Augustine by various humanists, examining the different reading strategies they use and the osmosis between Augustine's *magnum opus* and their own works. Although this goal can certainly be achieved through a series of case studies, we believe that such portraits should be placed in a suitable methodological frame as well. The contributions by Eric Saak and Elisa Brilli, which introduce and close the volume, serve (and challenge) this methodological approach.

As a scholar of the late medieval Augustinian tradition, Eric Saak raises some important heuristic problems, as *De civitate Dei* is a large, composite text that lends itself not only to being read through *excerpta*, but also to being epitomized and read through secondary sources, e.g. the *Milleloquium* by Bartholomew of Urbino. Citing Augustine does not always mean citing him *directly*. Saak argues that our knowledge of what humanists really knew about *De civitate Dei* is still partial and based on the prejudice that humanists had completely abandoned certain reading practices typical of the Gothic age.

Elisa Brilli complements our research angle with a typological study of the representations of *De civitate Dei* in illuminated manuscripts during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. At first sight, in the case of *De civitate Dei*, ideological and apologetic motives appear to be prominent (e.g. the representation of Augustine wearing the habit of

[8] Lodone 2019. Also see Saak in this volume, at 21.

the Hermits, or the identification of the *civitas Dei* with Florence or Rome). Brilli, however, shows how the focus lies on both the City of God and the Earthly City, with a predominantly eschatological interest. This is especially clear from the shifting spatial relationship between the two cities, one that is no longer imagined on a horizontal axis (earth-earth), but on a vertical one (earth-sky).

If the essays by Brilli and Saak provide a methodological compass to navigate the troubled waters of the reception of *De civitate Dei* in the Renaissance, the other contributions prove to be sturdy and safe vessels, albeit constructed from different materials and guided by helmsmen coming from different fields of study. These case studies offer new ways to understand the undeniable revival of our text during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The humanists' interest in *De civitate Dei* is in fact multifaceted. At times, the work is approached as an encyclopedia of the ancient world, as in the case of Petrarch, Boccaccio and Biondo. After all, *De civitate Dei* was an indispensable vehicle for the recovery or partial recovery of ancient masterpieces, such as Cicero's *De re publica*, Varro's *Antiquitates* and Seneca's *De superstitione*. But it also became the object of philological study and book collecting. Marco Petoletti examines its place among Petrarch's *libri peculiares*, while Outi Merisalo discusses how Poggio Bracciolini and Niccolò Niccoli contributed to producing new manuscript copies of the work. Antonio Manfredi presents the joint reading of Tommaso Parentucelli and Giovanni Tortelli, the founders of the Vatican Library, and Valerio Sanzotta investigates *excerpta* from *De civitate Dei* that Marsilio Ficino wrote in the margins of a codex containing Calcidius' commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*. Finally, Francesco Caruso follows a lost codex of the Convent of San Marco that might have been used by Poliziano. These are all concrete examples of a first-hand engagement with the Church Father, of a return *ad fontes* that seems to surpass the encyclopedic practices of the Gothic age.

But even if examples of individual approaches to *De civitate Dei* were already known, never before has the great "collective" effort of the humanists towards this text been noted. Besides the cases of Poggio & Niccoli and Parentucelli & Tortelli, it is worth mentioning Bessarion, who mobilized his whole *familia*, including Niccolò Perotti, in an attempt to scour the text in search of material for his *In calumniatorem*

Platonis (see the contributions by Gianmario Cattaneo & Giuseppe Pascale and by Marianne Pade).

The "collective" workshops emerging from these contributions once again refer to the two primary centers of Italian Humanism. On the one hand there is Florence, where the interest in *De civitate Dei* is as high among the direct heirs of Petrarch, e.g. Coluccio Salutati (see the contribution by Sam Urlings), as it is among humanists of the later fifteenth century, e.g. Poliziano and Pico della Mirandola (see the essays by Francesco Caruso and Ovanes Akopyan). On the other hand, Rome, where *De civitate Dei* could become a powerful weapon of propaganda for the Curia, exhibited a sustained interest in the Augustinian treatise during our entire period.

Simultaneously, there is a clear attempt to free *De civitate Dei* from traditional, Thomistic interpretations, as in the cases of Biondo (closely connected to the Curia) and Valla (whose relationship with the Curia was obviously more complicated) and their "unorthodox" challenging of Augustine on subjects such as the *bellum iustum* or the virtues of the ancient Romans. Francesco Filelfo, on the other hand, uses Augustine's Christian reinterpretation of Roman virtue in order to re-define the truly virtuous person (see the contribution by Guy Claessens & Jeroen De Keyser).

It would be useful to write and draw the *Storia e geografia* of the humanistic reception of *De civitate Dei* – to paraphrase Carlo Dionisotti's well-known study and methodological manifesto – yet such an exercise should also include Naples and Venice, which are only briefly touched upon in this volume because of the biographical links that connect these cities to Valla and Bessarion. Evidently, the increase in the production of manuscripts of *De civitate Dei* in Italy during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries affected the entire peninsula. Additionally, Augustine's work is not only among the most transcribed texts in Italy during the early Renaissance, but it is also one of the first works to be printed on the peninsula (at Subiaco, by Conrad Sweynheym & Arnold Pannartz, in 1467). Further research is needed to assess whether Italian institutions and centers of power played a role in developing specific strategies, and whether common patterns can be discovered. In any case, at the end of the fourteenth century the Florentine municipality showed great interest in exploring the work's ideological potential: a vernacular translation was promoted, public readings were

held at the *Studium* and Augustinian echoes can be traced in important documents of republican propaganda, such as Bruni's *Laudatio Florentinae Urbis*. And if it seems that Florence – unlike Rome – abandoned this strategy over the years, an echo can still be perceived in the iconography of the fifteenth-century manuscript that graces the cover of this volume and identifies Florence with the city of God (New York, NYPL, Spencer Collection, ms. 30 [see also PLATE 1]).

Finally, the revival of *De civitate Dei* among humanists can also be explained by their strong aversion (perhaps more theoretical than practical) to medieval scholastic thought. Interestingly, Augustine provided the perfect synthesis between a well-structured theological system and a precise and clear use of the Latin language that could compete with classical authors. Besides, among Augustine's works, *De civitate Dei* offered a "macro-text" comparable to a *summa*. It is not a surprise, then, to read in Vespasiano da Bisticci's *Vite* that Giannozzo Manetti "Usava dire avere tre libri a mente, per lungo abito, l'uno era l'*Epistole* di Sancto Pagolo, l'altro era Agostino *De civitate Dei* e de' gentili l'*Etica* d'Aristotele," to which Manetti's generation, of course, added Plato.[9] Possibly the best-known theological "metamorphosis" of Augustine's *De civitate Dei* in the fifteenth century, Nicholas of Cusa's *De pace fide*, is discussed in our volume by Enrico Peroli.[10]

Before leaving readers to embark on their own journey through the essays printed on these pages, we would like to thank everyone who made this volume possible. First of all, the authors, who worked relentlessly to ensure the swift and efficient publication of this volume; the project "*Magnum opus et arduum*. Towards a History of the Reception of Augustine's *De civitate Dei*", funded by KU Leuven and coordinated by Anthony Dupont, Gert Partoens and Andrea A. Robiglio, who have never failed to provide their loyal support; and, last but not least, Scott Blanchard, who reviewed all contributions in terms of language, and Sam Urlings, who checked the indices. Special thanks are due to Jeroen De Keyser, who not only played an important role in the conception of the project, but also contributed significantly to the editing of the volume, enthusiastically agreeing to publish it in the *Colibri* series.

[9] Vespasiano da Bisticci, *Le vite*, vol. 1, 485-86.
[10] Enrico Peroli's chapter on Nicholas of Cusa is a revised version of Peroli 2018.

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Acknowledgments

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Abbreviations of Augustine's Writings Cited in this Book

Agon.	*De agone Christiano*
Bapt.	*De baptismo*
C. Ep. Man.	*Contra epistulam Manichaei*
C. Faust.	*Contra Faustum Manicheum*
C. Iul.	*Contra Iulianum*
Civ.	*De civitate Dei*
Conf.	*Confessiones*
Cura mort.	*De cura pro mortuis gerenda*
Disc. Chr.	*De disciplina Christiana*
Div. qu.	*De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*
Div. qu. Simpl.	*De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum*
Doct.	*De doctrina Christiana*
En. Ps.	*Enarrationes in Psalmos*
Ench.	*De fide spe et caritate* (*Enchiridion*)
Ep.	*Epistulae*
Exc. urb.	*De excidio urbis Romae*
Gn. litt.	*De Genesi ad litteram*
Io. ev. tr.	*In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* CXXIV
Lib. arb.	*De libero arbitrio*
Mus.	*De musica*
Nat. b.	*De natura boni*
Praed. sanct.	*De praedestinatione sanctorum*
Qu. Hept.	*Quaestiones in Heptateuchum*
Retr.	*Retractationes*
Serm.	*Sermones ad populum*
Sol.	*Soliloquia*
Trin.	*De trinitate*
Vera rel.	*De vera religione*

Indices

Index codicum

Index locorum

This index contains all generic references to each of (Pseudo-)Augustine's works, followed by citations of specific books or other subdivisions of those writings.

Pseudo-Augustine

Index nominum