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Yet Another Work by John of Rupescissa

Robert E. Lerner

- 1 I have marveled before at John of Rupescissa's astounding literary productivity and even invented a word for it: 'megalopolygraphy'¹. Adding up the writings that we currently possess and a large number of others that he mentions but are lost it can safely be estimated that the total comes to some forty treatises, commentaries, and letters. This would not seem like such a terribly large number were it not for two complementary facts: some of these works are exceedingly long, and most were written in prison. And now I am able to call attention to yet another work. This one is quite short and expresses themes that Rupescissa had dilated on at greater length elsewhere. Nevertheless it bears its own interest.
- 2 The text I have in mind is the "*Verba fratris Johannis de Rupescissa*". Although this already has been published in a critical edition, it has been misidentified. It was noticed first by the founder of modern Rupescissa studies, Jeanne Bignami-Odier, who described it as "an extract from [Rupescissa's] *Vade mecum in tribulatione* and [his] *Liber Ostensor*"². But how can a single work be an extract from two different works? To deal with the problem the editors of the *Liber Ostensor* (more properly the *Liber ostensor quod adesse festinant tempora*) decided without supporting argumentation that the "*Verba fratris Johannis de Rupescissa*" is a "résumé" of the *Liber Ostensor* (hereafter I will use the short title) and published it as such³. On the other hand, Elena Tealdi, in her expert recent critical edition of the *Vade mecum in tribulatione*, considered the work to be a resume of the *Vade mecum*⁴. Evidently the confusion is based on the heading of one of the two retrieved manuscripts: "*Verba fratris Johannis Repetissa qui dicitur Vade mecum in tribulatione ... abbreviata de libro qui intitulatur Ostensore quot adesse festinant tempora futurorum*"⁵. Yet there is a simple explanation, for in the preface to the *Vade mecum* Rupescissa states that he is expressing briefly what he already had written at length "in volumine magno intitulo *Liber ostensor quod adesse festinant tempora*"⁶. On this basis it would seem that Elena Tealdi had good reason to classify the *Verba* as a resume of the *Vade mecum*.

- 3 And yet close examination reveals that this solution is not quite right. In the first place aside from occasional words or phrases verbatim repetitions are lacking in the *Verba*, whereas substantial word-for-word borrowings are customarily present in genuine abbreviations or resumes of the *Vade mecum*. Secondly, although the predictions in the *Verba* largely correspond to most of the predictions in the *Vade mecum* through intention twelve, they appear in different order. Consequently I will argue that the *Verba* is Rupescissa's reconsideration of the *Vade mecum*.

Date and purpose

- 4 The first relevant question in this regard pertains to dating. The *Vade mecum* was written late in 1356: the year is given as the *annus presens* in the first and sixth intentions, and the work shows cognizance of the battle of Poitiers (19 September 1356) and refers to an earthquake that struck Basel on 18 October 1356. As for the *Verba*, it almost certainly was written late in 1356, not only because it knows of the capture of the French King at Poitiers but because it predicts events to occur in 1357 as if that year had not yet come. (Rupescissa employed the *stilus curie Romanie*, which had the new year beginning on Christmas day.) And the *Verba* must have followed quickly on the *Vade mecum* since it clearly depends on it.
- 5 Obviously the most pressing question is whether Rupescissa himself was the author of the "words" attributed to his name. One piece of evidence in favor of this identification is that a reading in one of the two retrieved manuscripts has the author speaking in the first person: "my lord the King of the French"⁷. It is difficult to imagine someone other than Rupescissa taking on his persona. But there is even more compelling evidence. It has been mentioned that the *Verba* contains no sustained borrowings from the *Vade mecum* but that occasional words and phrases reappear. The best explanation for this is that Rupescissa was reconceiving the *Vade mecum* without having the text directly before him and in doing so employed words and phrases that were second nature to him. Moreover, original supercharged phrases in the *Verba* bear Rupescissa's mark: "doctrine solaris"; "leone terroris"; "potentia trinitatis." To imagine another person injecting language like this into a reworking of the *Vade mecum* would be to imagine a second John the Astonishing.
- 6 So now comes the question as to why Rupescissa would want to rework a treatise he recently had written. The answer lies in structure. The chronology of events predicted in the early intentions of the *Vade mecum* is jumbled. In the fourth intention the author predicts the flight of the cardinals from Avignon before (*infra*) the fifteenth day of July of the year 1362, and then in intention five he predicts a series of horrendous chastisements that will begin in 1360. To make matters worse, in intention six he backtracks. There he states in what seems like an afterthought that the flight of the cardinals from Avignon foretold in intention four and the chastisements enumerated in intention five would not be able to take place were it not for a dramatic weakening of the power of the king of France. To make the appropriate correction at this point he explains that wars to follow the capture of the king [at Poitiers] in the years 1357, 1358, and 1359 would much worse than before, and that among other things there would be wars between the people of France [the king being hors de combat] and the adversaries of the kingdom. In contrast, all this confusion disappears in the *Verba*, for there Rupescissa proceeds seamlessly from 1357 to 1360 to 1362 to 1365⁸. It is as if he had

experienced another of his many visions and an angel had appeared to him to say “thou shouldst be more coherent.”

- 7 It now needs to be observed that the *Verba fratris Johannis de Rupescissa* is not only a restructured version of the *Vade mecum* but that it also is greatly stripped down. In most cases the substance of the prophecies in the first twelve intentions remains, but there is less supplementary rhetoric and the text is denuded of elaborations and scriptural proof-texts. One consequence is less vividness. For example, one of the most memorable passages of the *Vade mecum* is the passages in intention five which foretells how earthworms will rise to devour lions and leopards and song birds will rip apart falcons and hawks. But this is missing from the *Verba*, as is the succeeding passage that tells of “popular justice” wreaking vengeance on tyrants and an affliction of the nobility more than can be believed. It is reasonable to wonder whether Rupescissa was censoring himself because missing too are the millenarian references in intention nine (“mille anni ad litteram solares”, “princeps pacis millenarie”, “mille anni solares”) and also the Joachite term “tertius status” (as in *Vade mecum*: 238, 117). Nevertheless these absences still appear to be best explained as the result of stripping down.
- 8 Doubtless it is true that the extended millenarian intentions – nineteen and twenty – are missing in the *Verba* as well. But this raises the question of why the text stops abruptly at the equivalent of the *Vade mecum*’s twelfth intention. Self-censoring could hardly be the explanation because the *Vade mecum*’s thirteenth intention would not be an obvious barrier to continuing: like many of the earlier intentions recapitulated in the *Verba*, this one concentrates on foretelling chastisements. Nor is there a concluding doxology or colophon as one finds in Rupescissa’s other works. Evidently, then, the *Verba* stops where it does because of an accidental mutilation – a folio or two got lost.

Circulation

- 9 The comparatively colorless quality of the work may best explain its limited circulation. As mentioned, just two copies have been retrieved. Yet both have some special interest. The first appears in a manuscript now in the Parker Library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge and copied originally in the priory of Norwich Cathedral⁹. This is a witness to the remarkably swift circulation of Rupescissa’s prophecies in Britain. I have established that a minimum of eight copies of the *Vade mecum* identifiable as British (one was Scottish) can be dated to the years between c. 1357 and no later than 1364, i.e. one to eight years after the composition of the original work. Now, with the closely related *Verba*, we have two more that come close to those limits. That is, the Cambridge copy had to have been made before 29 October 1365 because it appears in the manuscript together with predictions based on a planetary conjunction of that date¹⁰. I count a minimum of two English copies because the Cambridge one had to have been based on a missing exemplar. As for the context, the *Verba* was set down in this manuscript in a short prophetic anthology that included a glossed “Erithean Sibyl”. By implication, then, it was thought to have authority.
- 10 What would have made the *Verba* of particular interest to English readers? First of all it foretells toward the opening that even after the capture of the French king wars fought by the “Prince of Wales” (the Black Prince) and the English against the French would continue and get worse. This would have looked like an accurate prediction during the time when the Black Prince invaded France from the north in October 1359 and

continued a military campaign that threatened Reims and ended with the Peace of Brétigny of May 1360. And another plausible reason relates to the *Verba*'s prophecy of coming "unheard of pestilences," for the first devastating recurrence of the Black Death struck England in 1361. In fact one of the rare specific observations attesting to the reception of the *Vade mecum* comes from a statement in a Scottish chronicle that "the result and outcome of his prophecy [the *Vade mecum*] was seen, for in the kingdom of Scotland it turned out as he foretold because a second extremely severe mortality began on the feast of the Purification of Our Lady [1362] and lasted until Christmas"¹¹.

- ¹¹ The second retrieved copy of the *Verba* takes us very far away from the first. This one was made around 1470 by someone in the service of Margrave Lodovico Gonzaga of Mantua who placed it together with a large number of other prophecies¹². In this case it underwent a variety of scribal liberty that can be considered pious fraud, for the dates of the original were changed arbitrarily to fit the period from 1472 to 1477. The phenomenon of re-dating prophecies to make them applicable to the near future was common ; a large number of copies of the *Vade mecum* contain a re-dating that switch dates from the 1360s to the 1460s. To inquire into the motivation of the re-dating in the Mantua copy would take too much research into northern Italian events of c. 1470 to be worthwhile here. The real puzzle is how the same text known to have been in Norwich in the early 1360s made its way to northern Italy around 1470, but this appears to be insolvable. All one can say is *habent sua fata prophetie*.

Post scriptum

- ¹² After completing this short article I received Mathias Kaup, ed., *John of Rupescissa's Vade mecum in tribulacione (1356) : A Late Medieval Eschatological Manual for the Forthcoming Thirteen Years of Horror and Hardship* (London, Routledge 2017). This publication, which sets back Rupescissa studies by presenting a superfluous edition of a work that had been published in an exemplary edition by Elena Tealdi two years earlier, makes the mistake at p. 91 of categorizing the *Verba* as "mainly consistent excerpts from the *Vade mecum* and the *Liber ostensor*," evidently without examining the contents of the text, and compounds the error by misdating both of the manuscript witnesses.

NOTES

1. Robert E. Lerner, « "John the Astonishing" », *Oliviana*, 3, 2009. URL : <http://oliviana.revues.org/335>
2. Jeanne Bignami-Odier, *Études sur Jean de Roquetaillade (Johannes de Rupescissa)*, Paris, Vrin, 1952, p. 251.
3. Jean de Roquetaillade, *Liber ostensor quod adesse festinant tempora*, ed., André Vauchez et al., Rome, EFR, 2005, p. 859-863. Christian Jostmann, *Sibilla Erithea Babilonica. Papsttum und Prophetie im 13. Jahrhundert*, Hannover, Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 2006, p. 437 makes the same assumption that the work is a series of extracts from the *Liber ostensor*.

4. Giovanni di Rupescissa, *Vade mecum in tribulatione*, ed. Elena Tealdi, Milano, Vita e pensiero, 2015, p. 308. The same decision was made by Lesley A. Coote, *Prophecy and Public Affairs in Later Medieval England*, York, Boydell & Brewer, 2000, p. 151, 240.
5. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 16021, f. 5^v-6^r. The other retrieved manuscript, Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 138, f. 84^v, gives simply “Verba fratris Iohannis de Rupescissa . . . abbreviata de libro qui intitulatur Ostensor futurorum.” The likelihood is great that the omission here of “qui dicitur *Vade mecum in tribulatione*” arose from the confusing rubric.
6. *Vade mecum*, ed. Tealdi edition, p. 218, par. 10.
7. *Verba*, as in *Liber Ostensor*, Vauchez et al. (as n.2) p. 856, n. 12.
8. Specifically the *Verba* presents material from the *Vade mecum* in the following revised order: prologue; [ints. 1-3 lacking] int. 5, “primo”; int. 5, “tertio”; int. 4; int. 5, “secundo”; int. 5, “sexto”; [ints. 6-7 lacking] int. 8; int. 9; [int. 10 lacking] int. 11; int. 12.
9. M.R. James, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Library of Corpus Christi College Cambridge*, Cambridge, 1910, 1, p. 313-318. See also Coote, *Prophecy*, p. 150, 240, and Jostmann, *Sibilla Erithea*, p. 437.
10. James, 315, with the mistaken date of 1364.
11. Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon*, vol. 7, ed. D.E.R. Watt, Edinburgh, 1996, p. 318-19. The occurrence of a devastating plague in Scotland in 1362 is confirmed independently by John of Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, ed. William F. Skene, Edinburgh, 1871, 1, 381-82.
12. Jostmann, p. 479-80.

ABSTRACTS

Identification of a new treatise by John of Rupescissa, *Verba fratris Iohannis de Rupescissa*, being a reconsideration of the *Vademecum in tribulatione*

Identification d'un nouveau traité de Jean de Roquetaillade, *Verba fratris Iohannis de Rupescissa*, qui reformule le contenu du *Vademecum in tribulatione*

Identificazione di un nuovo trattato di Giovanni di Rupescissa, *Verba fratris Iohannis de Rupescissa*

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Mots-clés: Cambridge Corpus Christi College Parker Library 138 ; Paris BNF lat. 16021

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