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**THE ANCIENT BIOGRAPHY OF AULES PERSIUS FLACCUS
OR THE SO-CALLED *VITA PERSII DE COMMENTARIO PROBI
VALERI SUBLATA***

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It is unquestionable that the *Vita Persii de commentario Probi Valeri sublata* is one of the most important sources in the research and investigation of the history of literature in the Neronian period. Although the literary life of the Roman Silver Age is well documented because many of the works of those authors have survived who worked during the reign of Nero (e.g. the younger Seneca, Lucan, Silius Italicus, Petronius) or those who flourished after the death of the emperor. However, their lifetime was connected to the earlier period of Martial, Quintilian, or the younger Pliny. Their life and works and their connections with each other might be reconstructed either with the help of their own works or from historical accounts and later fragments.

The history of Nero's principate is well known from Tacitus (*Annales* XIII–XVI), Suetonius' *Vita Neronis*, and Dio Cassius' work (*Historia Romana* LXI–LXIII), but the political events of this period are in the focus of their historical books, and the literary life seems to be interesting only if they would like to show the extravagant changing of Nero's behaviour that might have been visible in his literary and theatrical product and production(s).

Except for the Suetonian life of Lucan, there is no biography that treats so fully the life and social or literary connections of a poet who lived in Neronian Rome like the biography of Persius. From another point of view, the *Vita Persii* is one of the longest biographies of a Roman poet what survived.

The *Vita Persii* is ascribed in the tradition of manuscripts to the famous philologist of the first century AD, Valerius Probus Berytus. The biography shows the Etruscan origin of the poet and his family, talks about his childhood and schools in Volterra and later in Rome, about his friendship with the philosopher and his master L. Annaeus Cornutus, with the poet Caesius Bassus and Lucan, and Thrasea Paetus. In summary, the *Vita Persii* gives such a detailed picture of

the internal connections of the literary life in the age of Nero that no other ancient source provides.

My thesis is divided into two parts. The first is a general discussion of the *Vita Persii*, the second is a philological, textual, and linguistic commentary of it.

As we have seen, the *Vita Persii* is ascribed to Valerius Probus in the tradition of manuscripts. There is a long history of the research and editions of this text.¹ The *Vita Persii* survives in many manuscripts from the early Middle Ages (from the IXth century), and there are many extant versions from the XIIth and XIIIth centuries and the Renaissance period.² Although we have many well readable manuscripts from the Carolingian period (e.g. *Leidensis* 78 or *Canabrigiensis coll. Trin. O. IV. 10*), the earlier printed version of the *Vita Persii* (in the first edition of Britannicus in Venice) is incomprehensible.³

In the first half of the XVIth century, the text of the *Vita Persii* was published repeatedly with the Satires, but beside the editions we find the notes of the critics, for example in the edition of Ioannes Britannicus⁴. In the second half of this century, it seems to have begun a new period in the history of the *Vita Persii*. Petrus Pithoeus, a French scholar tried to reconstruct the proper form of the *Vita Persii*. His edition and the edition of Casaubonus became the leading edi-

¹ The most important editions of the text: A. Persii Satyrarum liber I., D. Iunii Iuvenalis Satyrarum lib. V. Sulpiciae satyra I. Cum veteribus commentariis nunc primum editis, Ex bibliotheca P. Pithoei IC. Cuius etiam Notae quaedam adiectae sunt, in officina Sanctandreana, 1590; Auli Persii Flacci Satirarum liber cum scholiis antiquis edidit O. Iahn, Lipsiae, 1843; Des Aulus Persius Flaccus Satiren, berichtet und erklart von C. Fr. Heinrich, Leipzig, 1844; A. Persii Flacci Satirarum liber, ex recensione Caroli Friderici Hermanni, Lipsiae MCMIX.; Perse, Satires, texte établi et traduit par A. Cartault, Paris 1929²; 1951³; A. Persii Flacci Saturarum Liber, accedit vita, edidit W.V. Clausen, Oxford 1956.; A. Persii Flacci et D. Iuni Iuvenalis Saturae edidit brevisque adnotatione critica instruxit W.V. Clausen, Oxonii 1959.; Perse, Satires, Texte établi et traduit par L. Hermann, Bruxelles-Berchem 1962. (Collection Latomus Vol. LIX); A. Persii Flacci Saturarum liber, praecedat vita, edidit, praefatus est, adparatu critico, interpretatione et verborum indice instruxit Dominicus Bo, Torino, 1969.

² About the manuscripts of Persius, see D. M. Robathan-F. E. Cranz, A. Persius Flaccus, in: Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum: Mediaeval and Renaissance Latin Translations and Commentaries, ed. P. O. Kristeller-F. E. Cranz, 8 volumes, Washington 1860-, III (Washington 1876) 201-312; P. Scarcia Piacentini, Saggio di un censimento dei manoscritti contenenti il testo di Persio e gli scoli e i commenti al testo, Roma 1973 (Istituto di lingua e letteratura latina. Facoltà di lingue e letterature straniere, Università di Pisa, Studi su Persio e la scolastica Persiana, Ser. 2) and Eadem, Corrigenda et addenda al censimento dei manoscritti, note bibliografiche, indici, concordantiae siglorum, Roma 1975 (Studi su Persio e la scolastica Persiana, 3, 2).

³ Cf. Persius cum tribus commentis, Cornuti phylosophi eius praeceptoris commentarii Ioannis Britannici Brixiani commentarii Bartolomei Foncii commentarii, Venetiis 1495.

⁴ Cf. Vita Persii per Ioannem Britannicum: Quae ab aliis traduntur de eius vita cum auctoritate careant mihi non probantur. In: Persii Saturae, Venetiis 1495.

tions until the work of Otto Iahn, the first modern editor of Persius. In the XXth century, the text of the *Vita Persii* was edited by excellent scholars: Cartault,⁵ Clausen,⁶ or the Italian Bo⁷ thoroughly studied the text but they focused only on the most reputed manuscripts and neglected the problems of the textual tradition. We are indebted to two Italian scholars, Rostagni⁸ and Paratore,⁹ who had solved – without studying the textual tradition – some internal problems and contradictions in the text. The focus of my investigation is the whole set of problems of the *Vita Persii*: textual tradition (a), dating, authorship, sources (b), and the interpretation of the text from the point of view of the history of literature (c).

(a) There are more than 500 manuscripts dating from the late antiquity to the XVIth century that contain the satires of Persius. A minor part of these manuscripts contains the so-called *Commentum Cornuti*, a collection of scholia written probably in the Early Middle Ages. This collection of the scholia on Persius has been the subject of an intensive research program from the sixties. In the research, a new period began in the early nineties – since then, two different research groups deal with the problems of the *Commentum Cornuti*. The German scholars published many very important articles on the textual tradition,¹⁰ while Clausen and Zetzel prepared a new edition of the *Commentum Cornuti*,¹¹ and later Zetzel published his monograph about the principles of the edition and his view on the *Commentum Cornuti*.¹² Although the *Vita Persii* has never become

⁵ Perse, Satires, texte établi et traduit par A. Cartault, Paris 1929²; 1951³.

⁶ A. Persii Flacci Saturarum Liber, accedit vita, edidit W. V. Clausen, Oxford 1956; A. Persii Flacci et D. Iuni Iuvenalis Saturae edidit brevisque adnotatione critica instruxit W. V. Clausen, Oxonii 1959.

⁷ A. Persii Flacci Saturarum liber, praecedit vita, edidit, praefatus est, adparatu critico, interpretatione et verborum indice instruxit Dominicus Bo, Torino, 1969.

⁸ A. Rostagni, Suetonio *De poetis* e biografie minori, Restituzione e commento di A. Rostagni, Biblioteca di Filologia Classica diretta da G. De Sanctis–A. Rostagni, Torino 1944.

⁹ E. Paratore, Biografia e poetica di Persio, Firenze 1968. There are two important articles in this volume: La *Vita* di Persio, op. cit. 1-55. and Persio e Lucano, op. cit. 56-103.

¹⁰ For example: C. Wiener, Beobachtungen zur mittelalterlichen und frühneuzeitlichen Persius-Kommentierung. Die sog. Tradition E in Florenz des 15. Jahrhunderts, *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università di Siena*, 16 (1995), 63-98; and C. Wiener, Persius-Kommentierung vom 10. bis 15. Jahrhundert. Beobachtungen zur handschriftlichen Überlieferung der sog. Tradition A, *Würzburger Jahrbücher für die Altertumswissenschaft*, N.F. 26 (2002) 171-183.

¹¹ COMMENTUM CORNUTI IN PERSIUM. Recognoverunt et adnotatione critica instruxerunt W. V. Clausen–J. E. G. Zetzel, Monachii et Lipsiae in aedibus K.G. Saur, Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana, MMIV.

¹² James E. G. Zetzel, *Marginal Scholarship and Textual Deviance, The Commentum Cornuti and the early scholia on Persius*, Institute of Classical Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London, *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies Supplement* 84, London 2005.

part of the *Commentum Cornuti*, because the manuscripts of the *Commentum Cornuti* contain generally the *Vita Persii* or its mutilated version, the results of the research on the *Commentum* help us to reconstruct the textual tradition of the *Vita Persii*. Robathan divided the manuscript tradition of the *Commentum Cornuti* into five parts (A, B, C, D, E). The C, D, E groups of the codices contain the later tradition of the text, many of them contain the *Vita Persii* as well, but their common character is that they interpret the *Vita Persii*. The most excellent example of how the scholars of the Late Middle Ages or the Renaissance tried to emend the incomprehensible text is the biography version in the Florentine codex 37, 20.¹³ According to Robathan, the early manuscripts can be divided into two groups, but the manuscripts of tradition B do not contain the *Vita Persii* or contain only its mutilated version. Because the original version of the *Vita Persii* seems to have been copied only in the manuscripts of tradition A, my research is focusing on the text of these manuscripts. I have reconstructed the text from the manuscripts of tradition A.

(b) The title of the *Vita Persii* reveals that the biography was originally part of a commentary written by Valerius Probus. Although it does not mean automatically that the *Vita Persii* was written by Valerius Probus, many scholars suggested that the famous Roman scholar, Valerius Probus Berytus wrote a commentary on the satires of Persius and the life of the poet. Another group of philologists suggests that the *Vita Persii* was the part of the lost and only fragmentarily known *De poetis* of Suetonius, because it seems to be proven that the Suetonian opus concluded with the lives of Persius and Lucan, the latest poets whose biographies were extracted by Jerome in the addition to Eusebius' *Chronicon*. A smaller group of philologists thinks that the *Vita Persii* is a later compilation from the IInd and IIIrd century¹⁴ or the late antiquity. According to my research results, the *Vita Persii* is neither the work of Valerius Probus nor of Suetonius and it is not a later compilation. Because the basis of the *Vita Persii* seems to be very reliable and informs for example about the fortune of his lost works as well as his library and money, it was written about the time of the death of Persius, and the author of the main source (who is not identical with the writer) had the opportunity to know the poet personally. This *Ur-Vita* was attached later to the commentary of a later Valerius Probus or somebody who

¹³ About this manuscript, see C. Marchesi, Gli scoliasti di Persio, in: Scritti minori di filologia e di letteratura, vol. II. Florence 1978, 907-983.

¹⁴ About this idea, see K. Fetkenheuer, Die Rezeption der Persius-Satiren in der lateinischen Literatur, Untersuchungen zu ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte von Lucan bis Boccaccio, Bern-Wien 2001 (Lateinische Sprache und Literatur des Mittelalters, 31) and G. Brugnoli, La tradizione di Persio, in: Studi su Persio e la scolastica Persiana, 2, 1, Roma 1971, 13-16.

called himself Valerius Probus, because the last two sentences seem to be the beginning of a commentary on the choliambic verse and the first satire of Persius. The different representation of the satiric poet at the end confirms this supposition. Consequently, the word *sublata* means that the *Vita Persii* is based on the commentary of a certain Probus, but it does not mean that the *Life of Persius* was written by the same person.

The Suetonian origin was refuted by Rostagni effectively, who pointed out that the differences between the Jerome's *Chronicon* and the *Vita Persii* exclude the possibility that the *Vita Persii* derives from the *De poetis*. Although Paratore tried to refute Rostagni's theory, his argument that the model of the *Vita Persii* is the Suetonian schema (since the *Life of Persius* seems to be earlier than the *De poetis*) is not sufficiently powerful.

The first author in the Flavian period to praise Persius was Quintilian. It is well known that Quintilian had been living in Rome during the first years of emperor Nero's reign, and in the year 59 AD he left the capital and returned only ten years later with the new *princeps*, Galba. In the fifties, Quintilian had close connections to some eminent persons of the contemporary literary and social life of Rome. Not only as a native of Hispania, he knew Seneca and Lucan personally, and – it seems to be very likely – he met Persius in the house of the stoic historian Servilius Nonianus. The similarity between Quintilian's view of the poet and that of the first part of the *Vita Persii*, the same estimation of Seneca, and some grammatical elements also show that the *Vita Persii* mirrors the influence of the concept of the famous orator.¹⁵

(c) The particular interpretation of the grammar, the style, and the issues of the *Vita Persii*, as well as the comparison with other sources help to reconstruct its original message. The most important statements of my dissertation are the following: a) Persius lost his father when he was eleven years old; b) Lucan and Persius were not good friends, they were simply both disciples of Cornutus in the fifties; at some point the nephew of Seneca and Quintilian may have listened together to a recitation by the satirist; c) the works of the young Persius were never destroyed because it seems to be impossible that his master and best friend, Cornutus would give such an inhuman advice to a mother who lost her only child.

In short, the research of the *Vita Persii* can shed light on new relationships in the life of Persius as well as in the picture of the literature of the time of Nero.

¹⁵ About this concept, see L. Takács, *Sero cognovit – Persius és Seneca meg Quintilianus* (Persius, Seneca and Quintilianus). In: 101 írás Pusztai Ferenc tiszteletére (101 Studies in the Honour of F. P.), szerkesztette Mártonfi Attila, Slíz Mariann és Papp Kornélia, Budapest 2006, 518-522.