**A Linguistic Commentary on Gregory of Nazianzus *AP* 8.21**

After a brief overview of the contents discussed in it, this article proposes a formal and linguistic commentary on an epigram by Gregory of Nazianzus (*AP* 8.21), and then draws some generalizable observations.

The poem belongs to the series of epigrams dedicated to Gregory’s father, who is also the *persona loquens*. The poet starts from a well-known scriptural quotation from the book of the prophet Micah (5) about how small Bethlehem is, and extends the same concept to Nazianzus, the village whose spiritual care Gregory’s father has entrusted to him. In both cases, in fact, the town’s small size corresponds to its inversely proportional importance on a spiritual level.

The formal solutions adopted in the epigram, and specifically the use of the adjective τυτθός, reveal the poet’s admiration for and imitation of Callimachus, but also his originality in renewing the pagan poetic language with the purposeful insertion of Christian vocabulary. An area for further research concerns the presence of elements of the most widespread epic diction of Gregory’s time (such as the increased usage of the datives in -εσσι), as found for instance in the *Sibylline Oracles* and Manetho’s *Apotelesmatica*.

Gregory of Nazianzus’s epigrammatic production has been the focus of renewed interest by specialists in late antiquity, as evidenced by the increased number of studies in historical, literary and stylistic criticism.[[1]](#footnote-2) In this article, I intend to analyze an epigram such as *AP* 8.21, which belongs to the epitaph sequence dedicated to Gregory’s father (*AP* 8.13-24), deploying a lexical and stylistic method in order to identify some formal preferences in Gregory’s writings.[[2]](#footnote-3)

The epigrammatic genre and the funerary context, however, lead Gregory to depict the relationship with his father as idyllic. Gregory aims to show himself in a specific light to his father and his siblings—his brother Cæsarius and his sister Gorgonia—because of the spiritual legacy that connects father and son in their priestly mission.[[3]](#footnote-4)

It is interesting to note that ἀτάρ was not popular in Quintus of Smyrna (found twice) and Nonnus (only once), whereas it was quite common in Gregory (25 times) and in Eudocia’s Homeric style (with about 30 occurrences). The variant αὐτάρ, which Homer uses indifferently instead of ἀτάρ, depending on his metrical needs, is more common, although with some significant differences (111 occurrences in Gregory of Nazianzus, 192 in Eudocia, and 51 in Nonnus).[[4]](#footnote-5)

The Callimachean influence on Gregory is clearly recognized by Poulos 2019, 65-66. For an insight into the stylistic level of τυτθός in Gregory, see also Poulos 2019, 92-93.

λιθάκεσσιν

About the ending in -εσσι in Imperial Age poetry, in the *Sibylline Oracles*, “the Sibyl […] also has a fondness for synthetic epic forms in -εσσι, in all types of third-declension stems.

It cannot be excluded that λιθάκεσσιν is an Aratean *tessera* that Gregory of Nazianzus must have liked, since his writings account for 5 of its occurrences out of a total of 14 in the whole of Greek and Byzantine literature (moreover, two of those 14 are to be found in medieval lexicons devoted to Gregory’s works).[[5]](#footnote-6) However, besides Aratus, Nicander also offers one occurrence of λίθαξ, although not in the dative: it is to be found in a sophisticatedly worded passage where λίθακας is paired with the synonym ἕρμακας ‘heaps of stones’ (*Th.* 150). This context will be taken up again by Dionysius Periegetes (*GrDFr* 14r).

**ἀνάσσει**: the diversely conjugated verb ἀνάσσειν ‘dominate’, was commonly used in hexametric clauses from Homer onwards, to Hellenistic and Imperial Age poetry. Elsewhere (*carm*. 2.1.1.143) Gregory even resuscitates the rare epic infinitive ἀνασσέμεν of Homeric origin (and only attested three times in the *Iliad*), as Apollonius Rhodius had previously done once (*Arg*. 1.719).

Gregory of Nazanzius is very fond of the ancient superlative φέριστος ‘best’: it is already found in Homer (although only 7 times), but Gregory uses it 27 times, probably because of metrical needs (it occurs 22 times in a hexametric clause).

One should also bear in mind the problems related to the authenticity of Ignatius’s epistolary and his cultural milieu, for which I would refer to Brent 2006. As for χριστοφόρος and the many adjectives composed in -φόρος in Ignatius, see also Brent 2006, 143-145 and 173- 174.

There is only one epigraphic parallel in a funerary inscription dated to the second century CE found in Pisidia (Sterrett, *WE* 305, 427). Within the epitaph sequence dedicated to Gregory’s father, see also the previous epigram: *AP* 8.20.2, ἐπὶ παιδὶ φίλῳ. The construction in the dative is also repeated in the fifth book of Nonnus’s *Paraphrase of John* (v. 77).

In conclusion, a close reading of *AP* 8.21 offers the readers a very rich *specimen* of all of Gregory Nazianzen’s expressive possibilities: from his clear admiration for Callimachus (τυτθός, ὀλίγος), to a possible recovery of single expressions by other Hellenistic poets such as Aratus (λιθάκεσσιν); these possible readings seem to be confirmed in the usage of other contemporary poets. The linguistic sources of expression are still to be found in traditional language, which is in turn beholden to epic diction, as demonstrated by the use of φέριστος and of φίλος in a construction that seems to recall its Homeric possessive value. Christian inspiration, however, does not give way before the author’s exuberant παιδεία. It rather makes itself known both *thematically*, with the double scriptural reference to the Old and New Testament (in the first case as an elegant reformulation in Callimachean terms), and *formally* [or ‘*linguistically*’], by deploying lexical items suggestive of the new faith (χριστοφόρος).

1. I will cite here a few studies on Gregory's epigrammatic production in order to contextualize this research: Consolino 1987, Conca 2000, Milo 2005, Palla 2015, Ypsilanti 2018, and Simelidis 2019. Gregory’s debt to preceding literary tradition was the focus of many successful studies, such as those by Wyss 1949 and Demoen 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. A comprehensive introduction to the epigrams devoted to Gregory’s father can be found in Milo 2005. This study offers a precise analysis of lexical expressions claimed to be taken directly from older authors, about which I would often be more tentative. Simelidis 2009, 31 explains away some of those expressions taken from older authors as “mere borrowings”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Cf. the previous epigram in this series (*AP* 8.20 Γρηγόριος, τὸ δὲ θαῦμα, χάριν καὶ πνεύματος αἴγλην / ἔνθεν ἀειρόμενος ῥῖψ’ ἐπὶ παιδὶ φίλῳ) and *AP* 8.13.5, where he introduces himself as the mildest, gentlest (ἀγανώτατος) among his father’s children. On Gregory’s monopoly on affection, see also Milo 2005, 443. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. As for αὐτάρ in Gregory, for instance in *carm.* 2.2.7, “the formula αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ (‘but I’) in 300 is a favorite tag of the Cyrenaean, who uses it to close the *Aetia* (αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ Μουσέων πεζὸν ⦋ἔ⦌πειµι νοµόν ‘but I shall go to the foot-pasture of the Muses.’ fr. 112.9)” (Poulos 2019, 86-87). According to Denniston 19542, 55 “the particle αὐτάρ is virtually confined to Epic (and, later, Pastoral) poetry, its place elsewhere being taken by ἀτάρ”. Indeed, poets such as Gregory of Nazianzus, Eudocia and Nonnus preferred αὐτάρ to ἀτάρ. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. The other cases of λιθάκεσσι are found in *carm*. 1.2.1.217, *carm*. 1.2.19.227, *carm.* 2.2.4.43, and *carm*. 2.2.6.3. As for the medieval *lexica* exemplifying this form, they are the lexicon contained in cod. Paris. Coislin. 394 and *Lexicon casinense*, which explains λιθάκεσσι though λίθοις (for which, cf. Kalamakis 1992 *s.v.* and Kalamakis 1995 *s.v*. respectively).

   As for the other occurrences in Gregory, also in non-dative forms, cf. *carm.* 1.2.1.244, *carm.* 1.2.1.512, *carm.* 2.1.34.64. The most significant one, considering the semantic importance acquired by this word, is probably the last one: after all it is found in a statement of poetics. Gregory avoids in his works a whole series of topics dear to pagan poetry, among which he also includes naturalistic or astronomical subjects, according to the taste of much Hellenistic poetry (οὐκ αὐγὰc λιθάκων, οὐ δρόμον οὐρανίων). An analysis of this priamel, full of references to pagan literature and characterized by an “unmistakably Callimachean air, without being closely related to any specific passage of Callimachus” (Hollis, 2002, 47), is to be found in Simelidis 2009, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)