**Comment on two epigrams by Gregory of Nazianzus**

**1) *AP.* 8.21**

The epigram is based on the interweaving of two motifs, the smallness and preciousness, whose combination is presented as a distinctive feature of a series of elements: the pearl, tiny (τυτθή), but superior to all other stones (λιθάκεσσιν ἀνάσσει); Bethlehem, a small and insignificant village (τυτθή), but the one where Christ was born (χριστοφόρος); finally the flock of faithful parishioners assigned to Gregory, which is quantitatively limited (ὀλίγην) but qualitatively the best (φερίστην) in his opinion. Those elements are arranged in a series that zooms in from the natural kingdom, to the reality of sacred history, and down to the author’s individual story; this juxtaposition of motifs is underlined by the anaphora in the first two lines, a rhetorical figure to which the author often resorts, in order to emphasize words and concepts.

The three-element simile acquires greater rhetorical force and draws its effectiveness also from the bipartite structure of the lines, the second half of which builds a counterpoint to the first, as indicated by the conjunctions ἀτὰρ (l. 1, after a feminine caesura), ἔμπα (l. 2), ἀλλὰ (l. 3, after a bucolic diaeresis). Strictly speaking, the first couplet with the two images constitutes the *illustrans*, while the *illustrandum* is introduced only in l. 3 (ὣς), so that the true protagonist of the epigram, Gregory himself, only appears at the end (l. 4). This happens after a purposeful waiting period and in the *enjambement*, according to the Callimachean models, of which Gregory knows himself to be an original interpreter.

The reference to the small community of faithful entrusted to him (l.3 λάχον) is probably to be explained in the context of the dialogue on which the epigram is built: Gregory's father, also a bishop, begs his son to accept guiding his small flock. It happens to be a well-known fact that Gregory had long hesitated before accepting the episcopate.

On the metric level, finally, the epigram demonstrates Gregory's preference for dactylic lines (Agosti - Gonnelli 1995, 372-375), albeit within certain limits: the use of τυτθή ποίμνη, and of the sacred place name Βηθλέμ makes it necessary for him to resort to a spondee as *incipit* (v. 1: **sdddd**; in the first *hemiepes* of v. 2: **ss-**). This occurs frequently in Gregory's poetry, unlike in Hellenistic poetry where placing a spondee in II and IV position was preferred (other spondees are found in l. 3: **ddsdd**; and in the first *hemiepes* of l. 4: **ds-**).

**l. 1 τυτθός**: 'little', with this distinctive *incipit*, also reinforced by the anaphora in the following line, Gregory professes his preference for Callimachean models. In fact, this is an adjective derived from Homer, through the language of drama, to Hellenistic (I am thinking especially of Callimachus, *Aitia* fr. 1,5 Pfeiffer ἔπος δ'ἐπὶ τυτθὸν ἐλίσσω) and Imperial poetry (Quintus of Smyrna: 35 examples, Eudocia: 37 examples, while it is found only twice in the poetry by the innovator Nonnus of Panopolis).

**μάργαρος**: 'pearl'. The reference to the world of precious stones recalls Posidippus, but there is no precise citation. After all, the term did not have a tradition in the poetic language before Gregory, and it would not be popular after him (*hapax* in Nonnus, *Dion*. 5.167): for other examples in Gregory Nazianzen (8 times), cf. for example *Carmina de se ipso* (*MPG* 37, 1210, 1, 1241, 9).

**λιθάκεσσιν**: epic dative, from an originally adjectival stem λίθαξ ‘of stone’; it is a Homeric *hapax* (λίθακι ποτὶ πέτρῃ in *Od*. 5.145), then made into a noun, it is an artificial form from Hellenistic poetry whose first occurrence is documented in Aratus (*Ph.* 1.1112), then followed by Manetho and Tryphiodorus. This is a refined usage that Gregory of Nazianzus must have particularly liked, since his writings account for 5 occurrences out of a total of 15 in the whole of Greek and Byzantine literature (two of which are to be found in medieval lexicons devoted to Gregory’s works). In fact, it is on a formal and grammatical level that Gregory's tireless research can be observed, where it leads him to make original choices even within the Homeric vocabulary.

**l. 2 Βηθλέμ**: the figurative repertoire which Gregory uses here is not new. The traditional motif of Bethlehem’s smallness is already found in the Prophet Micah (5 Καὶ σύ, Βηθλεεμ οἶκος τοῦ Εφραθα, ὀλιγοστὸς εἶ τοῦ εἶναι ἐν χιλιάσιν Ιουδα) and is also mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew (2.6). The scriptural citation, however, only concerns the theme, because Gregory relishes in creating variations and, consistently with his attitude of a Christian steeped in classical culture, he prefers the poetic τυτθός to the adjective ὀλιγοστὸς from the *Septuaginta*, and to ἐλαχίστη, the form with which it was paraphrased by Matthew.

**χριστοφόρος**: a clear novelty for the poetic language is the use of this compound adjective, 'bearer of Christ' (l. 2), coined as early as the II century A.D. (for instance in the prose of Ignatius of Antioch), which now, also thanks to an easy prosodic configuration (- ∪ ∪ -), Gregory introduces into the hexameter (10 occurrences).

**l. 3 ὀλίγην… ποίμνην**: the motif of the little flock is already found in the Gospel (*Lk*. 12, 32 Μὴ φοβοῦ, τὸ μικρὸν ποίμνιον, ὅτι εὐδόκησεν ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν δοῦναι ὑμῖν τὴν βασιλείαν) and it became known in the Latin world as the *pusillus grex*. Gregory, as was his wont, creates a lexical variation on it.

**φερίστην**: as also the ancient superlative φέριστος 'best', which was however already found in Homer, is a very dear form to this author (27/28 occurrences). It is otherwise relatively infrequent in both prose and poetry: 7 occurrences in Homer, then it becomes rare; it is often found in the vocative in lyrical poetry and in tragedy, and attested then only sporadically in later poetry, in authors such as Manetho, but never in Nonnus and only once in Quintus of Smyrna (1.465).

Callimachean taste seems, on the other hand, to inspire the preceding bucolic diaeresis.

**l. 4 λίσσομαι**: the Homeric citations in Gregory Nazianzen are also evident from a tessera such as the verb λίσσομαι ‘to implore', common in Hellenistic and Imperial poetry, especially in the participle (Quintus, Nonnus, Eudocia).

**ἄγοις**: Gregory frequently uses verbs in the optative form in prayers, attributing to them a well-attested desiderative valence: see for example φέροις in *carm.* II,1.19 l. 83 (Τῆ νῦν, Χριστέ, φέροις με ὅποι φίλον), II,1.45 l. 344 (τέρμα φέροις ζωῆς ἵλαος).[[1]](#footnote-1)

**2) *AP.* 8.170**

The entirely hexametric epigram is a traditional *topos*, on which the same Gregory focuses often, i.e. the oath against the tomb profaners (ἀραὶ ἐπιτύμβιοι). This practice, the so-called τυμβωρυχία, had a very ancient history in Greece and was documented for example by Cicero, who reported the existence of Solon’s law against sepulchre violators (*Leg*. 2.64 = fr. 72a [36] Ruschenbusch). The imperial age, especially from the III sec. a.C., had experienced a significant increase in cases of profanation of tombs.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The poem is cleverly constructed on a triadic schema. Gregory reproaches the tomb profaners three times, as well as wishing death upon them as many times, denouncing the gravity of their gesture: in the first two verses one witnesses the mixing of the bodies of the unbelievers (σώματ ἀνάγνων') with those of the martyrs (ἀθλοφόροις); in lines 3-4 the devastation of some tombs, often valuable because they contain precious objects (σήματα), and the resale of the objects (lines 4-5); finally in the last two verses we witness the sacrilege against the martyrs (lines 5-6) with the invocation of the descent of the Σοδομίτιδες πηγαί. The triadic motif at the basis of the poem’s structure reappears in line 5, with the insinuation that the profaners have each sold the valuable objects from the tombs three times (τρίς).

At the metric level, the dactylic hexameter prevails, at times in a holodactylic form (lines 3, 5 and 6), or with a spondee in the first position (l. 4), or in the second (l. 1 and 2). The distribution of the trithemimeral caesura in l. 1 and 2 highlights the words in the *incipits*. One notices also the bucolic diaereses in l. 4, a feminine caesura in l. 5 and a masculine one in l. 6.

**l. 1 Τρισθανέες**: nominative plural of the adjective with two possible forms τρισθανής, ές, 'deign of dying three times’, a *hapax* only attested in Gregory. This is a vehement *incipit*, underlined by the caesura, and striking for its originality thanks to the neologism. Faithful to his usual modus operandi of *variatio in imitando*, Gregory will have recalled the Homeric δισθανής ‘twice dead’, *hapax* in *Od*. 12-22, reported by Circe to Odysseus and his companions, who had just returned from the νέκυια and therefore paradoxically destined to die twice.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**l. 2 ἀθλοφόροις**: the ἀθλοφόροι (literally ‘winners’) are the martyrs in the Christian vocabulary, because they have earned their victory through the suffering of martyrdom. The term had a non-linear history, because in archaic and classical literature it sounded as poetic; and after Homer (3 occurrences), it was back in vogue only in the epigrams, cf. Posidippus (ep. 71.3; 82.6 Austin-Bastianini) and in a very erudite text of the *Septuaginta* as *IV Macc* (2 examples). Its true recovery would only start with the acts of the martyrs and the literature of the late antiquity, e.g. Gregory (13 examples), who particularly likes this term, Ephrem the Syrian (11 times), Nonnus (9 times), until its very common usage in the medieval Byzantine Empire.

**θυηπόλον**: accusative of θυηπόλος, ‘performer of sacrifices', 'priest' already in the pagan world, attested at least from Aeschylus onwards. Its meaning is not entirely clear. Gregory reprimands the tomb profaners for mixing the bones of martyrs with the bodies of non-believers (ἀνάγνων) and adds that the tombs (of the unbelievers?) thus contain the remains of a probably Christian θυηπόλον. The grammarian Pachomius Rhusanus, who lived in the XVI century, provides us with a useful paraphrase that is consistent with this interpretation: καὶ οὕτως οἱ τάφοι τῶν βεβήλων ἱερέα περιέχουσι (*Oratio funebris*, in Karmires 1936, 35). Or maybe the remains of the martyrs are thus mixed with those of a pagan priest: this is consistent with the Ambrosian comment in the margin reported by Muratori 1709, 211 (τύμβοι δὲ βεβήλων θυοπόλον πολλάκις μέσον ἔχουσι κείμενον), on which Boissonade based his Latin translation with *flaminem* (cf. also Paton).

**ἀμφὶς ἔχουσι**: the expression has the value of περιέχω, according to Homeric use, in reality only found in the Odissey (*Od*. 1.54; 3.486; 8.340; 15.184), of which Gregory makes occasional use (8 times: cf. also *AP 8.137*,2), unlike other authors of the imperial age, as Quintus of Smyrna (once) or the innovator Nonnus that totally ignores it. ἀμφὶς instead of ἀμφί is an epic form.

**l. 3 διεπέρσατε**: aorist of διαπέρθω 'destroy', is also an epic form, and a refined one at that, since in Homer it is found in the third person singular διέπερσε (*Od*. 9.265), in the first plural inside a formula subject to small variations (*Od.* 3.130; 11.533; 13.316), and only three times in the *Iliad* (4.53; 4.55; 9.46), only slightly more often than the simple verb πέρθω (19 occurrences). Interesting to note that the word in the aorist would still be used by Quintus of Smyrna (4 times), Gregory himself (7 occurrences), but not by Nonnus. For other uses in the epigrammatic context in Gregory’s work, cf. *AP.* 8.209 and 8.219.

**ἀθέσμως**: adverb liked by Gregory Nazianzen (7 occurrences), which serves to deplore the absence of respect with which the profaners devastate the tombs. The privative stem ἀθέσμ-, rare in Hellenistic prose, with two occurrences even in the *New Testament* in the Second Epistle of Peter (2.7.2, 3.17.2), would have been very frequent in the *Sibylline Oracles* (16 times), where the adverb is used in a hexametric clause (3.524, 8.80, 11.313), as in Gregory's epigram.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**l. 4 σήματα**: 'monuments', is the preserved form, except for the Codex Palatinus that has εἵματα ‘clad’ instead; Mabillon amended it as σώματα, but it is preferable to keep σήματα for thematic consistency, since it concerns funerary monuments (thus Waltz and Beckby). Gregory reproaches the profaners for the pointlessness of their act: Pachomius Rhusanus adds καίτοι οὐδεμία ἡ ἀνάγκη (Karmires 1936, 36), since they also have similar funerary monuments.

**l. 5 ἱεροσυλεῖς**: is an amendment by Muratori instead of the preserved ἱεροσύλοις. In this way, it also establishes the usual dialogical style of the funerary epigram, dear to Gregory of Nazianzus.

**l. 6 οἷς**:Good amendment by Desrousseaux, set into the text by Waltz instead of οὕς. In this way, with the ellipses of the demonstrative and the attraction of the relative, the text becomes clearer through a reference to those who receive the benefits from robbing the sepulchers. However, the paraphrase of Pachomius Rhusanus seems to confirm the reliability of the preserved textual tradition.

ἵξατε: aorist of ἱκνέομαι ‘to arrive’, amendment by Jacobs in place of the preserved εἴξατε, aorist of εἴκω ‘to give’. Before him, Muratori interpreted it, in fact, as *Sodoma, cede, maior enim est horum quam tua improbitas* (1709, 267). A valid alternative, according to Boissonade, could be Salvini’s supposition ἥξατε (cf. Aeschylus, *Prometheus* 135, but also Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis* 416), or even ᾄξατε from ἀίσσω ‘to rush/move violently‘, also in the sense of ‘to gush', proposed by Boissonade himself, and accepted by Waltz ("jaillissez, sources de Sodome”), which seems preferable to me.

**πηγαί**: 'sources' but also 'torrents'. A reference to Σοδομίτιδες πηγαί seems odd here and there have been proposals to amend it: "Novi quid iotacismus suadeat scribendum, nisi vetet Patris os sanctum" (Boissonade), but Waltz’s interpretation solves the problem by resorting to the biblical image of the torrents of fire and brimstone that had incinerated Sodom (*Gen.* 19). Thus also Beckby: "Oh kommt ihr Sodomaquellen". In Gregory, in fact, the adjective Σοδομιτικὸς refers 7 times out of 8 to fire (πῦρ): cf. for instance *epist*. 77.10; *epist*. 95.1; *orat.* 40 (*PG* 36.412). The originality of the *iunctura*, an *unicum* in Greek and Byzantine literature, and unattested in the corresponding passage in *Genesis*, is appropriate in the use of πηγαί. Pachomius Rhusanus added a further interpretive possibility, but I feel it is rather unlikely.

1. "A very similar use is found in the prayers, thanks to the presence of the form ἄγοις, in *carm*. I,1.36 l. 33 (ἀλλά με καὶ νῦν ἄγοις ἐσθλὸν ἐπὶ τέρμα πορείης), at the end of the poem, I,1.37 l. 6 (καί με, Ἄναξ, παλίνορσον ἄγοις ἐπὶ δῶμα πενιχρόν), I,2.12 l. 12 (Κόσμε, παρῆλθον ἐγώ, λαὸν ἄτρωτον ἄγοις), also in this case in the last line of the poem" (Ricceri 2013, 231-232). On the use of the desiderative optative without ἄν or another particle, Ricceri refers to Smyth 1920, 406. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Floridi 2013, 58. On the laws concerning tomb profanation, Nock 19862. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Among neologisms obtained with the prefix τρισ-, some had been successful, such as τρισάθλιος 'three times unhappy’ starting from Sophocles and onward; others were curiously destined to be a *hapax*, such as the rare compound τρισαλιτήριος, 'three times cursed', *dis legomenon* in *Septuaginta* (*II Macc.* 8.34, 15.3 and *Esther* 8:12p). About the elative value of the prefix τρισ-, "very commonly employed in affective speech", cf. Thesleff 1954, 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On the influence of the *Sibylline Oracles* on Gregory, cf. Simelidis 2009, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)