Articles

The Syncretic Revelation of John of Gaza

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Abstract

This paper suggests that John of Gaza's poem *Tabula Mundi* which is in general considered to be an *ekphrasis* of a real picture that had once adorned winter baths in Gaza or Antioch, actually reflects the author's personal cosmological beliefs and is an *ekphrasis* in form only. In the poem there are parallels both with the mystical narratives of the ascent to heaven, and with Christian apocalyptic teachings. However, John of Gaza's 'revelation' is not about the end of the world, but about its infinity and wise structure. The form of *ekphrasis* may have been chosen for the sake of disguise, since in the time when John lived, the views reflected in his poem may have been considered heretical.

Keywords

John of Gaza – ekphrasis – ancient cosmology – apocalypse – revelation – personification

The poem by John of Gaza, entitled: Ἰωάννου γραμματικοῦ Γάζης ἔκφρασις κοσμικοῦ πίνακος τοῦ ὄντος ἐν τῷ χειμερινῷ λουτρῷ – *Description of a picture of the world situated in the winter baths* – and commonly referred to as *Tabula Mundi* has reached us in a single manuscript, part of the Palatine Anthology (Supplementum Graecum 384). The title isn't the original one belonging to the poem, but a creation of a later scholiast.

The pictorial prototype of the image described in the poem is unknown, but usually taken into account when the poem is under discussion. There were debates about the prototype's actual location even in the time when the manuscript was written: two marginal notes reveal that the scholiast did not know the exact whereabouts of these baths, either in Gaza or in Antioch.¹ Based on the fact that the baths apparently ceased to exist relatively soon after the poem was written, scholars have strived to date it linking the destruction of the baths to one of the several known earthquakes of the period. It has previously been suggested that John of Gaza's *ekphrasis* refers to the winter baths mentioned by Choricus in his *Encomium to Doux Aratius and Archon Stephanus*.² They were supposedly built in 535-536. However, the same Choricus stated that there were other baths in the city.³ G. Kramer upheld that John had written the poem in the 7th century because the baths's depiction was approximate.⁴

Archeologists found an image of personified Earth and two children named Fruits (Καρποί)⁵ during the 1930s excavations of Antioch. Procopius of Gaza, teacher and predecessor of Choricus spoke in a lost monody of Antioch baths destroyed in the earthquake of 526, John of Gaza's manuscript's marginal notes state that the baths he described were also mentioned by Procopius. A. Cameron thought that the poem was referring to the Antioch baths, and that the depiction of Earth and Fruits found in Antioch was a copy of the depiction from those baths (he accordingly defined the *terminus ante quem* as 526).⁶ D. Lauritzen, however, does not set such precise chronological limits, and refers to the time of John's creative flourishing as 500-530. Regarding the correspondence of the poem's description to the hypothetical original from the winter baths, the researcher is cautious, assuming that this is a fairly free interpretation.⁷ Nevertheless, it is generally taken for granted that John described a real depiction in *Tabula Mundi*, and so his poem was analogous to Paul the Silentiary's *Ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia*, who wrote it a few decades later influenced by John's work.⁸

1 Jean de Gaza, *Description de tableau cosmique*, ed. D. Lauritzen. Paris, 2018, p. XII. – further – JG. In the text of the article the title of the poem is abbreviated to *TM*, verses numbered according to the same edition.

2 JG, p. XXIII-XXIV.

3 A. Cameron, "On the date of John of Gaza," *CQ*, 43 (1993), pp. 348-351.

4 JG, p. XVII-XVIII.

5 G. Downey, "John of Gaza and the Mosaic of Ge and Karpoi," *Antioch-on-the-Orontes*. II. The excavations of 1934-1936. Princeton – London – La Hague, 1938, pp. 205-212.

6 A. Cameron, "On the date of John of Gaza," p. 351.

7 JG, p. XX-XXI.

8 About the influence see: D. Lauritzen, "Paule le Silentiaire lecteur de Jean de Gaza", in: *Le voyage des légendes. Hommages à Pierre Chuvin*, ed. D. Lauritzen, M. Tardieu. Paris, 2013, pp. 309-323.

At the same time, it is impossible not to see that John of Gaza's *Ekphrasis* differs significantly from Paul the Silentiary's *Ekphrasis*. The latter was written in 562 on the occasion of re-consecration of Justinian's Sophia, rebuilt after the collapse of its dome as a result of an earthquake. Paul recited the poem on one of the festive days between Christmas and Epiphany partly in the Imperial Palace and partly in the Patriarch's residence where listeners relocated in a procession led by the Emperor. This is reported in the poem's iambic prologue and interludes. The reliability of this description is not in doubt, as the monument has survived. There is also no shortage of evidence from the ancient authors: Paul's contemporary, Agathias of Myrina already advised his readers to consult his description, if one was not able to visit Sophia oneself.⁹

Paul persistently links his description to the physical aspects of the actual building: location of the Church, its correlation to cardinal directions, its different levels, etc.¹⁰ However, Paul's poem is not only an *ekphrasis* of a famous Church, but also an *encomium* to its main Builder – Emperor Justinian, whose achievements Paul constantly evokes, praising Patriarch Eutychius as an associate of Justinian¹¹ at the same time. Paul also doesn't forget the actual builders of the Church: Anthemius, Isidore and Isidore the Younger, who rebuilt the dome (*Descriptio Sanctae Sophiae*, 268; 276-278; 552-553).¹²

John of Gaza's poem provides us with a completely different representation. John never mentions which building he is describing. (One can only gather from the scholiast's words that the picture was located in the baths). It is believed that the picture in question was painted on a vaulted ceiling, but it is not quite clear from the text itself whether it refers to the vault of the building or the vault of heaven (cf. *TM* 163). The poet does not speak either of the geographical location of the supposed baths, or of the occasion on which his *ekphrasis* was composed. He only says that he took up the description not of his own will, but ordered by certain 'lords' (δεσπόταις πεπεισμένος – *TM* 11), but they remain nameless.¹³ He repeatedly refers to the 'audacious painter'

9 Agathias Myrinaei *historiarum libri quinque*, ed. R. Keydell (CFHB, Series Berolinensis, 2). Berlin, 1967, p. 175.

10 Cf.: *Descriptio Sanctae Sophiae*, 373, 398, 400, 417, 441 etc.; *Descriptio Ambonis*, 294 etc. – See: Paulus Silentiarius, "*Descriptio Sanctae Sophiae. Descriptio Ambonis*", ed. C. de Stephani. Berlin – New York, 2011, pp. 26-27, 29-30, 88.

11 T. Viljamaa, *Studies in Greek Encomiastic Poetry of the Early Byzantine Period*. Helsinki, 1968, p. 15.

12 Paulus Silentiarius, *Descriptio Sanctae Sophiae. Descriptio Ambonis*, pp. 18, 38.

13 Paul the Silentiary also mentions "lords" in plural; in his case it is either Justinian and Theodora, or Justinian alone, addressed in a hyper-polite form (see: Paulus Silentiarius, "*Descriptio Sanctae Sophiae. Descriptio Ambonis*", p. 38, 46). Regarding John's "*Ekphrasis*", Lauritzen suggests that they may have been certain officials from Gaza or Antioch (Jean de Gaza. *Description de tableau cosmique*, p. 57) and Gigli Piccardi implies that they had

(ζωγράφος ζέων θράσει – *TM*16), who allegedly was the creator of the picture. He calls the painter θρασύβουλος (θρασύβουλος ἐκεῖνος – *TM* 618). D. Lauritzen suggests that it could be the proper name of the painter.¹⁴ If ‘Θρασύβουλος’ is the name, the expression Θρασύβουλος ἐκεῖνος means that he was a well-known person, but he is not otherwise known and John doesn’t praise him as Paul the Silentiary praises Anthemius and Isidore). Beyond that the meaning of the name is too consistent with the inferred qualities of the artist to be real, it would not be an actual name and is probably just an epithet.¹⁵ It seems that the poet does his best to offload the responsibility for the presented description. However, I admit that it may just be the topos of external motivation.

The context of the poem’s creation is unclear, but its preface gives an impression that it reflects certain debates on the subject of what poetry should be.

Ἐγὼ δ’ ἄγωνα περιλαβὼν ταῖς ἐλπίσιν
 ἄλλον βαδίζειν τοῖς λόγοισιν ὥόμην· 10
 ὃν νῦν παρήκα δεσπότης πεπεισμένος·
 ἀεροβατεῖν γάρ φασι καὶ τὴν εἰκόνα
 τὴν παντόμορφον κοσμικαῖς ἐξουσίαις
 ὡς ἐκ βίας πέμπουσιν ἐξωπλισμένον
 ἐνθουσιῶσαν πᾶσαν ἐκφράζειν στίχοις,
 ἦν καλλιτέχνης ζωγράφος ζέων θράσει
 ἔγραψε συνθεῖς, καὶ μεθυσθεὶς τὰς φρένας.¹⁶

But I, filled with hopes, thought of entering another contest, which I now abandoned in obedience to the lords, for they say it is like walking on air. And they give me a multiform picture of the world’s elements, and force me to sing of it, full of inspiration, in verse. The image that the artist, who was boiling with audacity, envisaged and depicted, his spirit inebriated.

The verb ἀεροβατεῖν is known from *The Clouds* (v. 225), a comedy written by Aristophanes, in which it is put in Socrates’ mouth. Daria Gigli Piccardi paid

been John’s teachers (D. Gigli-Piccardi, “Poetic inspiration in John of Gaza: Emotional Upheaval and Ecstasy in a Neoplatonic Poet” in *Nonnus of Panopolis in Context: Poetry and Cultural Milieu in Late Antiquity with a Section on Nonnus and the Modern World*, ed. K. Spanoudakis. Berlin – Boston, 2014, p. 412).

14 JG, p. 42, 195.

15 A similar use of a proper name as an epithet occurs in the Homeric cento (the name Θεοκλύμενος becomes the epithet of Christ – cf. *1HC*, 690, 712 *et passim*. See: Eudocia Augusta, *Homero-centones*, ed. M.D. Usher. Leipzig, 1999, pp. 26–27).

16 JG, p. 5.

special attention to this verb and showed that the following *ekphrasis* is presented as a kind of an aerial journey by the poet, who contemplates a splendid picture of the Universe in mystical speculation. Gigli Piccardi believes that the fact that *ekphrasis* can be presented also as a mystical speculation testifies to the flexibility of the genre of *ekphrasis* in Late Antiquity.

Agreeing with this observation on the whole, I suggest looking at the problem from a different point of view. The verb ἀεροβατεῖν also evokes the *Apology of Socrates*,¹⁷ where it is mentioned that Aristophanes had accused Socrates of ‘walking on air and saying a lot of other silly things’ (φάσκοντά ἀεροβατεῖν τε καὶ ἄλλην πολλὴν φλυαρίαν φλυαροῦντα).

John’s audience evidently found these words memorable. Thus, in the very beginning, the poet responds to accusations of senseless and pretentious ‘walking on air’ and counters them with his Christian humility (somewhat exaggerated, in the spirit of monastic self-abasement) and his complete obedience to unknown ‘lords’.

μή με γράφοιτε πρὸς θράσος· τόλμης γράφῃ.
ἐγὼ γὰρ ἦλθον οὐ γραφεὺς τῆς εἰκόνης,
μηδέν τι τολμῶν, ἀλλὰ τὴν τόλμαν φράσω.¹⁸ 25

Don’t attribute audacity to me, because it’s he who writes from impudence. I am not the creator of the image. I am not audacious, I will only speak of audacity.

However, the hexametric part of the poem begins with a description of the mystical flight of the inspired poet:

Πῇ φέρομαι; πτερόεις με δι’ ἥερος ἔμφροني ροίζω
Σειρήνων λιγύφωνος ἄγει θρόος· ἐν δὲ μενοινῇ
Μουσάων πλῆκτροισιν ἰμάσσομαι ἄρσενι κέντρῳ,
ἔρπων ξεῖνα κέλευθα καὶ αἰθέρι πεζὸς ὁδίτης
λύσσαν ἔχων γονέεσσαν ἀείρομαι· αὐτὰρ Ἀπόλλων 30
ἀμφιπεριπλήγδην δολιχῶι σκιρτήματι μύθων
εἰς πόλον ἀστερόνωτον ἀκοντίζει με διώκων,
καὶ φρενὶ βακχεύειν σοφίης ἐνοσίφροني παλμῳ.¹⁹

17 Plato, *Apologia Socratis*, in: *Platonis opera*, vol. 1, ed. J. Burnet. Oxford, 1900, p. 19C3.

18 JG, p. 6.

19 JG, p. 6-7.

Where am I striving? Through the air with a mental noise I am carried away by a winged melodic host of Sirens. Zealously the plectrums of the Muses scourge me with their cruel sting. I crawl on unknown paths, on air – on foot. As if in a mad inspiration, I ascend. Apollo with a long verbal leap forces me to rush to the starry sky and stings me mercilessly and makes me mad in my soul with a striking blow of wisdom.

These verses depict the image of a neo-Platonic contemplative poet, obsessed with mystical inspiration, receiving revelations from Apollo, the Muses, and even the Sirens. However, after a few verses, the poet returns to the Christian symbols, describing the Cross and the Trinity (*Desr. tab.* 54-69). The syncretism in the representation of deities is quite remarkable: the God to whom John refers may be both a Christian and a philosophical deity at the same time. The ambivalence of John's poetic ideas is present throughout the *ekphrasis*; the poet is well-read in both pagan and Christian literature. Therefore, Christian allusions may also be relevant for him.

Gigli Piccardi notes that John's poem is close to mystical poems about the ascent to heaven, pointing out a number of parallels, both pagan: Parmenides, Manilius, Himerius, – and Christian: Clement of Alexandria, Cyril of Alexandria, Cosmas Indicopleustes.²⁰ *Argonautica Orphica* should be added to this list as well. It also refers to a mystical flight of an inspired poet, driven by the 'sting' of Apollo and Bacchus (Cf. above ἄρσενι κέντρῳ):

...Βακχοῖο καὶ Ἀπόλλωνος ἄνακτος
κέντρῳ ἐλαυνόμενος²¹ 10

driven by the sting of Bacchus and Apollo.

However, it can also be seen that John's *Tabula Mundi* has some genre characteristics of apocalyptic literature such as recipient (poet) receiving a revelation from a being from another world.²² The already quoted poem's beginning that describes the flight of the poet ('..καὶ αἰθέρι πεζὸς ὁδίτης') resembles the beginning of *The Shepherd* of Hermas:

20 D. Gigli Piccardi, "AEROBATEIN. *Lecfrasi come viaggio in Giovanni di Gaza*", *Medioevo Greco. Revista di storia e filologia bizantina*, 5 (2005), p. 187.

21 "Les *Argonautiques Orphiques*", ed. F. Vian. Paris, 2017, pp. 74-75.

22 K. Moreschini, E. Norelli. *The early Cristian literature*, vol. 1. Peabody, 2005, p. 86.

...περιπατῶν ἀφύπνωσα. Καὶ πνεῦμά με ἔλαβεν καὶ ἀπήνεγκέ με δι' ἀνοδίας τινός, δι' ἧς ἄνθρωπος οὐκ ἐδύνατο ὁδεῦσαι (Visiones, 1, 3).²³

While walking, I fell asleep, and the spirit picked me up and carried me somewhere, through an area that a person could not pass through.

Although there are no direct references to this work, some images are similar. Thus, John's personification of Wisdom:

ἀλλ' ἐνὶ θώκῳ
 πρωτοφανῆς Σοφίη περιδέξις οἷα Σελήνη
 ἀργυφὴ πέπλοισι χαράσσεται· ἔστι δὲ πᾶσα
 χιονέη, πάλλευκος ὅλον δέμας· ἐκ δὲ προσώπου
 Πιερίκῃς ἔστεψε περίφρονος ὄργια Μούσης
 μαῖα θεορρήτων παμμείλιχος εὐεπιάων, 100
 μορφῇ ἐπ' ἀχράντῳ σταθερόν σέβας...²⁴

But on the throne sits the first-shown Wisdom on the right hand, similar to the the Moon, with her silver clothes sparkling. She is all snow-white, all her body is white. Her face shines, wise, showing mysteries of the Pierian Muse. She is the sweet midwife of eloquence, her venerable appearance is immaculate.

This image is reminiscent of Sibyl – the Church depicted in *The Shepherd*:

...βλέπω κατενώπιόν μου καθέδραν λευκὴν ἐξ ἐρίων χιονίνων γεγονυῖαν μεγάλην· καὶ ἦλθεν γυνὴ πρεσβύτις ἐν ἱματισμῷ λαμπροτάτῳ, ἔχουσα βιβλίον εἰς τὰς χεῖρας, καὶ ἐκάθισεν μόνη (Visiones, 2, 3).²⁵

In front of me I see the white big throne, made of snow-white wool. And then came an elderly woman in the most splendid clothes with a book in her hands and sat alone.

There is also some resemblance to the Apocalypse of John. Although John of Gaza doesn't allude to it directly, his knowledge of Christian literature in

23 Hermas, "Le Pasteur", ed. R. Joly (SC, 83). Paris, 1958, p. 76.

24 JG, p. 11.

25 Hermas, "Le Pasteur", pp. 80-82.

general²⁶ allows one to assume that this work, already part of the New Testament's canon by the 6th century, is familiar to him. Personifications appear in *Tabula Mundi* with the same spontaneity that is characteristic of the visions in the Apocalypse. Thrones in heaven (*Apoc.* 4, 2-6; 20, 4, and *TM* 91-95), lions (*Apoc.* 4, 7 and *TM* 720-722), calves or bulls (*Apoc.* 4, 7 and *TM* 312-322), angels, appearing now and then (*Apoc.* 5, 2; 5, 11; 7, 1-2; 8, 1-13; 10, 1-11; 14, 6; 15, 1, 6-7; 18, 1, 20, 1; 21, 9 and *TM* 332-339, 402-406, 434-437), horsemen or charioteers (*Apoc.* 6, 2-8; 19, 11-14, and *TM* 254-296), hosts of people in white raiment (*Apoc.* 6, 11; 7, 9, and *TM* 102-104); trumpets (*Apoc.* 8, 6-12; 11, 15, and *TM* 272); the beast (*Apoc.* 9, 7-10; 13, 1-2, 11, and *TM* 323-327); rainbow (*Apoc.* 4, 3; 10, 1, and *TM* 561-591); thunder (*Apoc.* 10, 3-4; 14, 2, and *TM* 526-537), women giving birth (*Apoc.* 12, 2, 5, and *TM* 396-406); snakes (*Apoc.* 12, 9, 14-17; 20, 2, and *TM* 412-419), harvest (*Apoc.* 14, 15 and *TM* 420-421, 686-694). One should also remember the recurrent remark ('I saw') that introduces almost every new vision (*Apoc.* 4, 1; 5, 1-2, 6; 6, 2; 8, 2 etc and '91, 205, 219, 444, 520). In *Tabula Mundi* 'I thought' may be used instead of 'I saw' (*TM* 373), which means that the picture unfolds rather in the mind of the poet than on the picture presented to him.

As in other apocalyptic literature, the visions of John of Gaza are not static. These are moving, changing images displaying actions that are sometimes incompatible within the same depiction. Earth for instance holds a cornucopia (*TM* 410), harvests, gives birth, and cherishes babies at the same time.

Γαῖα δ' ἀμαλλοτόκεια συνήθεα καρπὸν ἀέξει 420
καὶ πολὺν γεγαῶτα παρέθρισεν εἰς γένυν ἄρπης.
Ἡ δὲ φερεζῶων μελέων ὥϊξεν ὀχῆας
καὶ διδύμους λοχίης διδυμητόκος ἔβλυσε Καρπούς
ἄρτιγόνους μεθέπουσα νεήλυδας οἶά τε παῖδας.²⁷

Here parturient Earth collects ordinary harvest in sheaves, and reaps the whitened fields with an arc-shaped sickle. From her womb she brings forth the twins called Fruits, she cherishes them like newborn children.

The images of Earth and Fruits found in Antioch are much simpler and more primitive;²⁸ John's descriptions are sometimes too complex for pictorial art.

26 D. Lauritzen mentions a few parallels of *Tabula Mundi* and Christian writings in her edition, although many more can be pointed out.

27 JG, p. 31.

28 Downey, op. cit. In the Archaeological Museum of Antakya there is another image of Earth and Fruits, closer to John's description, there baby Fruit kisses mother Earthe, but it

Another work that was most likely known to John and which he could have used in *Tabula Mundi* is *Martyrdom of St. Cyprian* written by Empress Eudocia. John's visions are somewhat similar to the speculative visions of Cyprian, who also sees personified images of vices and dark forces,²⁹ but if Cyprian sees the dark side of the world, John sees its light side. An enthusiastic contemplator, he admires the beautiful images of elements, luminaries, natural phenomena, and depicts them with inspired delight.

John of Gaza's 'revelation' of is polemical in relation to Christian revelations, and above all to the New Testament Apocalypse: according to *Tabula Mundi*, angels do not serve as messengers of God's wrath, but help the natural elements, snakes symbolize eternal renewal, not Evil, sun does not incinerate, but gives life, storm waters thirsty plants. *Tabula Mundi's* 'revelation' is not about the evil that has filled the Earth and not about the end of the world, but about the world's wise dispensation and infinity.

...ἁρμονίης δὲ
μέτρον ἔχων ῥιζοῦτο καὶ ὥπασε μέτρον ἐκάστῳ 715
ἀενάων ἐτέων ἔλικά δρόμον ἡνιοχεύων,
τηλεπόρῳ σοφίῃ κοσμήτορι πάντα φυλάσσων.³⁰

He (the Cosmos) appointed the measure of this harmony and defined measure for everything, ruling his chariot in an infinite spiral of years, keeping all in perfect order with far-sighted wisdom.

The question then arises: did this poetic revelation have any definite pictorial prototype and did the poet need it? Although the connection of John's *ekphrasis* with the pictorial art is certain, the complete picture of *Tabula Mundi* could have been created by John himself inspired by famous paintings.

Descriptions of fictional paintings in Late Antiquity were quite common (one may recall, for example, Philostrati's *Imagines*). Longus begins his *Daphnis and Chloe* novel with an *ekphrasis* of a picture allegedly seen by the narrator on Lesbos. It depicted the entire story of Daphnis and Chloe and was displayed

still does not reflect the complexity of the Earth image presented in the poem.

29 Александрова Т.Л. «Персонификация пороков в поэме О св. Киприане императрицы Евдокии» [Aleksandrova T.L. "Personification of Vices in Empress Eudocia's Poem *The Martyrdom of St. Cyprian*"] in: Аллегория в истории зарубежной литературы: от поздней античности до романтизма [*Allegory in the History of Foreign Literature: from Late Antiquity to Romanticism*]. Moscow, 2019, pp. 42-60.

30 JG, p. 48.

somewhere near the sanctuary of the nymph.³¹ Thus, the whole novel too, may be perceived as a very detailed form of *ekphrasis*. However, in such cases it is hardly possible to envisage any pictorial prototypes that really existed.

Depictions of mythological heroes had their own well-established iconography. Thus, an *ekphrasis* of a painting of the rape of Europe, introduced by Achilles Tatius at the beginning of his novel *The Adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon* (1, 1, 6-13)³², implies an iconography that survives in many pictorial representations of the story (for example, late antique mosaics from Zeugma, Byblos, etc.): Europe clad in fluttering raiment sits on the bull, looking back and holding a windblown veil over her head. At the same time, such description itself could become a verbal model for new paintings.

Nonnus (*Dionysiaca*, 1, 45-138)³³ evokes the same iconography of the rape of Europe in his description. It is picturesque, static, and clearly refers to the existing iconography of the scene. At the same time the image is presented from several points of view: the narrator, the intended viewer, Nereus, Athena, a mariner, and finally, Europe herself.

In his *Tabula Mundi*, John regularly appeals to Nonnus, using his vocabulary and images and sometimes simply unfolding descriptions given by Nonnus. For example, at the end of the 11th book of the *Dionysiaca*, Nonnus describes the Four Seasons (*Dionysiaca*, 11, 495-529).³⁴ John enlarges upon the same description giving it much more details and colours (*TM* 659-702). It is clear that Nonnus could hardly have seen the baths be it of Gaza or Antioch, and John did not need any pictorial prototype beside the text of Nonnus.

Iconography represented in *Tabula Mundi* is common for the Late Antiquity art. For instance there have been many mosaic depictions of personified Seasons, Sun on a chariot, Moon, Virtues, Ocean, and other sea deities, various fish and monsters. However, as a whole images of *Tabula Mundi* seem to bring forward John's own philosophical and poetic ideas, not to be confined to the pictorial representations painted by an unknown artist.

In other words, the form of *ekphrasis* chosen by John may have been just a disguise. It is he who paints a beautiful and audacious picture of the Universe, attributing his own courage to the fictional artist 'Thrasylbulus'. Even if there was a single pictorial prototype for *Tabula Mundi* (because some pictorial cosmographic images are known to exist)³⁵, it was probably much more primitive

31 Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe*, ed. M. Reeve. Leipzig, 1982, p.1.

32 Achilles Tatius, *The adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon*, ed. et trad. S. Gaselee (LCL). London, 1917, pp. 2-8.

33 Nonnos de Panopolis, *Les Dionysiaques*, vol. 1, ed. F. Vian. Paris, 2003, pp. 48-51.

34 Gigli Piccardi, "AEROBATEIN...", p. 184.

35 JG, pp. xx-xxii.

than the poetic picture that John renders verbally, and it wasn't necessary for John to have it under his eyes at the time of creation of the poem.

What was the reason of need for such a disguise? We do not know the particular time the poem was written, but we should remember that this is the period of the closing of the Athenian Academy, and possibly the period when Cosmas Indicopleustes (*Topographia christiana*, 1, 1-3)³⁶ criticizes those who, like John of Gaza (cf. TM 132-137), share the idea of a spherical sky, the period when Emperor Justinian criticizes Origen from the position of discrepancy with the Scripture.³⁷ From a Christian point of view, the picture of the world presented by John looked "heretical", despite his apparent loyalty to Christianity and the presence of Christian symbols in his poem. Of course, this was not a theological work, but around the same time in the West the *Gelasian Decree* banned a list of different writings. For example, such innocuous poetic works as the *Vergilian Cento* of Proba were considered as apocryphal. So, it is possible that for some reason the poet sought to absolve himself of responsibility for the images created.

Poetry of Late Antiquity is imbued with intertextual play: quotations, direct and hidden, references, allusions weave a fine fabric of associations that is no less important than images presented in the poem. With this in view, I want to return to the topic I started with: Paul the Silentiary's *Ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia* that contains unambiguous references to *Tabula Mundi*.³⁸ In Paul's poem, these allusions create a parallel between the picture of the universe presented by John of Gaza and the man-made image of the world – Justinian's Sophia. Justinian would hardly have agreed with John's interpretation of the Universe; it is not known whether the Emperor knew of *Tabula Mundi* (most likely not), but its image appeared and shone with a reflected light in Paul's *ekphrasis* emphasizing the parallel between the image of the world and the image of the temple, and this *ekphrasis* was read before Justinian himself.

36 Cosmas Indicopleustès, *Topographie chrétienne*, vol. 1, ed. W. Wolska-Conus (SC, 141). Paris, 1968. pp. 272-277.

37 Cf. Justinianus, Flavius, "Edictum contra Origenem" in: *Scritti teologici ed ecclesiastici di Giustiniano*, ed. M. Amelotti, L.M. Zingale. Milan, 1977, pp. 72, 74, 76 *et passim*.

38 For the examples see JG, pp. XIV-XVIII.