CHAPTER 3

Lactantius as Christian Cicero, Cicero as Shadow-like Instructor

Gábor Kendeffy

It was with regard to the excellence of his style that Pico della Mirandola, developing the evaluation of Jerome, labelled Lactantius *Cicero Christianus*. To confess the truth, as someone interested primarily in the theological thought of this author, I have always regarded this label as to some extent derogatory. With regard to the doctrinal content, to be sure, the oeuvre of Lactantius has some important common traits with Cicero's philosophical

---


2 Pico, “De studio divinæ atque humanae philosophiae 7: Quis apud nos non videat esse Ciceronem sed Christianum, hoc est, aliquem qui eum ad lineam unguemque expresserit? Quis enim non advertit, Lactantium Firmianum aequasse ipsum et forte praecelluisse in eloquendo?”

3 Jerome, *Epistulae* 58.10: “Lactantius quasi quidam fluvius eloquentiae Tullianae, utinam tam nostra affirmare potuisset, quam facile alia destructit.”
writings, but to my mind the apologist’s chief theoretical merits reside in a doctrine of divine providence that is far distant from the thought of Cicero’s philosophical dialogues. Nevertheless, in this essay I will claim that in a certain sense one can consider Lactantius as the Christian Cicero and that in this sense, the apologist deliberately prepared the label for himself. The first section is devoted to showing how important a role the father of Roman eloquence played in Lactantius’ self-reflection and how the latter emphasizes his dissent from Cicero, by correcting, debating with, and emulating him. The second will deal with Lactantius’ controversy with Cicero about the value of philosophy as praised in Cicero’s Tusculans and On Duties, and critiqued in Divine Institutes book 3. In the third, I will show how Lactantius implicates Cicero’s De Republica while addressing the question of why justice has the semblance of foolishness in the Divine Institutes, and, in this context, the fourth, will examine more specifically “the two ways,” the pagan way of wisdom (via sapientiae) and that of Christian foolishness (via stultitiae). Throughout, my intention is—by speaking about the appropriation of a rhetor by a rhetor—to follow the process of persuasion, and thus to find the place of Cicero in it.

1 Cicero’s Place in Lactantius’ Self-Reflection as an Apologist

As early as in the De opificio Dei, a crypto-Christian treatise written in 303/4, the Ciceronian inspiration is obvious. Here the apologist not only took a huge part of the doxographical matériel from the De natura deorum, but drew, by his own account, the idea of proving the divine providence from the teleological functioning of both the body and the soul predominantly from the same dialogue. What is more, he considers himself as accomplishing boldly (audaciter) the project that the great precursor left uncompleted. The most

---


5 Some of my new considerations have been inspired by Blandine Colot’s habilitation dissertation.

6 To do this, I was inspired in a large measure by the above mentioned habilitation dissertation of B. Colot: “Penser la conversion de Rome,” 2013.


8 In the preface (opif. 1.12–14.) Lactantius complains that Cicero, “this man of exceptional talent”, treated this topic just summarily and superficially not only in the book 4 of the