SOME UNEXPLORED ASPECTS OF

DEVOTIO DECIANA

BY

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The problems arising from the interpretation of the devotio as practised by three generations of Decii 1) according to Roman tradition have been extensively discussed in this journal by H. S. Versnel 2). He sets out to prove that the original type of devotio was not the self-sacrificing act of the commander-in-chief, but the devotio hostium as described by Macrobius 3) and historically closely related to the destruction of Carthage. Versnel argues that this type of devotio can be traced back to about 400 B.C., when it was probably part of the punishment inflicted on the captured city of Veii 4). It was not before the exploit of the Decii, who consecrated their lives to the Di Manes and Tellus before engaging in battle and thus added a new element to the original devotio hostium, that the devotio ducis became known as the traditional type of devotio. Versnel pays much attention to the magic character of this heroic deed and adduces interesting parallels from the field of phenomenology. Not being an expert on these parts of 'Religionswissenschaft' I do not wish to advance any criticism of Versnel's observations in question; rather, I should like to deal with some aspects which have been neglected so far and may probably contribute to a better understanding of this controversial act of self-sacrifice. The following points will come under discussion: a) the connotation of the prefix de-; b) occasional historical parallels; c) the Decii as Mures; d) the Decii as Aeneadae.

2) Mnem. IV 29 (1976), 365-410, hereafter cited as Versnel. To Dutch readers it may be useful to note that this study is an expanded version of an earlier one published in Hermeneus 36 (1964/5), 68-85.
3) Macrobr. Sat. III 9, 9-12.
4) Macrobr. Sat. III 9, 13; mentioned by Liv. V 21, 2 as a "substitute devotio" (Versnel, 382).
a) The connotation of the praefix de-

Apparently, Versnel is not very much interested in the interpretation of the praefix de-\(^5\); he contents himself with the definition given by Ernout-Meillet \(^6\); though stating a non liquit as to the question of its original meaning, he still accepts the general view that devotio was a type of magic votum addressed to the gods of the underworld. It is not to be denied that devotio/devovere must have something to do with vovere/votum \(^7\); accordingly, Versnel takes the line that true devotio “should satisfy the definition of votum, both as to formula and execution”; while the carmen devotionis quoted in extenso by Macrobius and referring to the destruction of Carthage in 146 B.C. may be qualified as a real votum, the devotio Deciana does not meet these requirements and displays all the elements of a consecratio. In conclusion, Versnel postulates \(^8\) that the self-sacrifice of the Decii actually was a consecratio \(^9\), but borrowed its name from the original devotio hostium, because the latter constituted a necessary complement to the devotio ducis; by consecrating their own lives to the Di Manes the Decii gave a new interpretation of an old magic rite.

Serious objections can be raised to this conclusion:

1. Nowhere the deed of the Decii is explicitly defined as a consecratio ducis.

2. How is it to be explained that this consecratio ducis, only known from Decian examples, was misunderstood throughout the

\(^5\) Versnel, 375: “The element de- of devovere need not occupy us very long”.

\(^6\) Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine II\(^4\) (1960), 753 s.v. voveo.

\(^7\) It should, however, be observed that the intermediary se vovere was probably modelled on se devovere, as it is attested only in reference to the Decian heroism (cf. Sall. Hist. II, 47 M., 10; Cic. De fin. V 64).

\(^8\) Versnel, 408 ff.

\(^9\) By using a quotation from Thomas Hobbes instead of the cautiously formulated words of Wissowa Versnel (368) inadvertently omits an essential element from the definition of consecratio, viz. that it is the Roman people that performs the consecratio; Wissowa rightly insists that consecratio was only possible “durch amtlichen Vollzug, der Einverständnis und Auftrag des Staates sowie die Ausführung durch den Pontifex voraussah”. The phrase consecrare se is not found in classical Latin, and even later it remains quite exceptional and unusual; the idea suggested by it would have been as strange and improper to the Romans as the image of a king crowning himself to us.