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“ANNO AB INCARNATIONE DOMINI NOSTRI MLXVI”

A Note about Halley’s Comet in Viterbo’s Archbishop Library Collection

Abstract

Outlined Viterbo’s archbishop library’s multifaceted book collection, the aim of this paper is representing an unknown volume now located in the CeDiDo Library – a very valuable item from a historical and cultural point of view. This item provides a preliminary clue to the scientific studies in the medieval papal court developed later in thirteenth century.

As matter of fact, the *Liber Canoniorum*’s explicit has been enriched by a detailed astronomical description about the passage of the 1066 Halley’s comet.

Therefore, the focus of this paper will be on the codicological and philological manuscript’s properties and peculiarities, comparing them with Viterbo’s historical sources and other contemporary textual and iconographic ones about the comet, useful for a correct classification, dating, and inclusion in the *Studium Viterbiensis*’ research on speculative framework and intellectual production.

Keywords: Halley’s Comet, manuscripts, Viterbo, CeDiDo Library

The Viterbo Cathedral’s collection of books, conserved since 2004 in the Diocesan Documentation Center (CeDiDo) Library, housed in the vaulted spaces of the medieval Papal Palace,¹ preserves in its catalog dozens and dozens of

¹ About the papal architectural palace and its edification see Toesca (1904: 510–513); Signorelli (1962); Radke (1996).

volumes.² These include manuscripts, incunabula, sixteenth-century books, several pieces of extreme value, extraordinary *codices* for *Patrimonium Sancti Petri*'s illumination history, such as, for example, Goffredo Tignosi's *Liber Pantheon* (Mantovani 1962: 313–341. Torquati 2002: 3–15. Atzori 2006: 65–66), the *Biblia Balneoregensis* (Falcucci 2009: 32–37. Rapone 2012: 26–34. Maddalo et al. 2013), or a fragmentary *Gradual* series coming to St. Sisto archive, only recently recomposed (Salvatelli 2018: 7–11). Volumes which together with the two “*gradensi*” Bibles now preserved, respectively, in Ardenti Library (ms II.A.VI. 5)³ (Egidi 1934: 11–13. Salmon 1979: 20. Palma 1983: 124, 130) and in Vatican Library (ms *Ott.lat.* 532) (Salvatelli 2020b), as well as Cardinal Gonsalvo Gudiel's Aristotelian manuscripts,⁴ reveal the centrality of the multiformal cultural and artistic vivacity of the city between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. But in the bookcases of the Cathedral's Library, other manuscripts, although more austere, deserve a special attention and analysis, because of they are custodians of hidden surprises.

“No one is so completely slow and dull and stooping to the earth that he is not aroused by celestial phenomena but rises erect with his whole mind, especially when some new marvel flashes in the sky”.⁵ In that way Lucius Annius Seneca (4 BC–65 AD) opens the seventh book of his *Naturales Quaestiones* (VII, 1–3). Among the different celestial phenomena the passage of a comet, a graceful and majestic creature of the firmament, has been always considered a moment of maximum attention, and its observation inspired omens and horoscopes of all sorts.

Among the different comets, Halley's comet, which sails the starry vault above the Earth, returning cyclically every 76 years, has quite an exceptional renown. How not to remind us its mention in Giovanni Pascoli's *Alla Cometa di Halley* (vv. 1–3): “Stray star, scattered star, / that maybe you are looking for, in your crazy way, / the door to escape from the universe!”,⁶ or its passage in

2 For the library and archive of Viterbo Cathedral: Dorez (1892, 1895), Egidi (1906: 7–382; 1907: 83–103); Scaccia Scarafoni (1940: 182–186); Osbat (2004).

3 As a result of its restoration and digitalization it has been devoted a monographic volume in: *Biblioteca e società*, 17.4 (2007).

4 The bibliography and the historical debate on this topic is very wide see especially Paravicini Bagliani (1991: 166–169, 226–229); and lastly Salvatelli (2015: 65–75).

5 “Nemo usque eo tardus et hebes et demissus in terram est ut ad divina non erigatur ac tota mente consurgat, utique ubi novum aliquod e caelo miraculum fulsit”, Corcoran (1972: 227).

6 “[...] Stella randagia, astro disperso, / che forse cerchi, nel tuo folle andare, / la porta onde fuggir dall'universo”, Pascoli (1910: 1). See also Pascoli (1912); Pascoli (1913).

12 BC, reported in the *Scriptures* to emphasize the birth of the Our Redeemer in Bethlehem, a moment masterfully immortalized, for example, in *Magi's Adoration* episode by Giotto's Padua Scrovegni Chapel (Olson, Pasachoff 1988: 1–11), where it refers, once again, to another passage, more recently, the XXI, in the fourteenth century (1301). An event remembered by Giovanni Villani (1280–1348) in the *Nuova cronica* (I, 48) too, or in Dante's *Convivio* (II, 13, 21–22), and also by a trace in *Commedia* (Par., XXVI, vv. 10–12): "[...] So Beatrice and those souls happy / Transformed spheres above fixed poles, / Flaming times, in the guise of comets [...]"⁷

Examining the historical records, notes, and descriptions of its incessant wandering, a testimony, discovered for the first time in 1910, the year of its penultimate sighting (the XXIX passage), but unfortunately returning to oblivion again (Addeo 1910: 1–15) until today, is kept inside a modest manuscript (Viterbo, CeDiDo, ms. 36) in St. Lorenzo Cathedral (Fig. 1).

"In the year of our Lord 1066, the ninth of April appeared haired star [...]"⁸ in that way begins the note in the above-mentioned manuscript, passage readable as a final *glossa*, placed above the end of the *Liber Regulae Canonorum Explicit*. It is a brief note composed of only six lines of writing, hidden between the pages of a theological *codex*, consisting of two different parts, written by two different hands, the first concerning *Instructiones patrum ad clericos regulares* (ff. 1r–95v) (Fig. 2), and the second *St. Gregori Magni Homeliae super Ezechielem* (96r–133v), respectively, merged and bound together in a single volume in the fourteenth century.

A first analysis of the handwriting, the decorative *apparatus* and the *mise-en-page*, show us immediately how the text, related to the astronomical episode, is coherent and homogeneous with *De Ordine canonorum's* editorial project (Fig. 3), a theological text approved by the Council of Aachen (1063). So it is referable and datable to the end of eleventh and the beginning of twelfth centuries, as testified by the writing typology as well.⁹ Therefore, the astronomical text could have been copied. by an unknown scriptor from an earlier antigraph (*postquem* 1063 – *antequem* 1066) but now missing. The model is distinguished

7 "[...] Così Beatrice; e quelle anime liete / si fero spere sopra fissi poli, / fiammando, volte, a guisa di comete [...]"

8 «[...] Anno ab incarnatione Domini Nostri MLXVI nonus aprilis apparuit stella cometas [...]», Viterbo, CeDiDo, ms. 36, f. 95v.

9 From a paleographic point of view it is a writing in transition between the uncial one and the *littera textualis rotunda*.

by an epigraphical space between the last *Regula's* writing line and its *Explicit*, white space where *ex abrupto* the detailed passage about the comet in 1066 had been set by an amanuensis, who signed himself by the name Amminuno, a probable eyewitness to the event.

The fact that the text, now readable by us, is the result of a copy and not the original archetype, is also suggested by a later transcription error. As a matter of fact the Roman numeral in the third line of writing has to be understood, and read as XII, instead XV, solving in that way the dating error inside the autoptical note (Fig. 4). In another way, with the help of a *lector difficilior*, the *aporia* would be solved by only reading *nonus aprilis*, the starting date for the aforementioned celestial phenomenon as a misunderstanding for the Latin correct form of *nonae aprilis*, corresponding to 5 April in the Gregorian calendar.

According to the description, the comet would appear for the first time on 9 April in the East (*Nonis aprilis*), stopping in the sky for 12 days, and be replaced by 21 April (*usque ad XIII Calende maj*), to appear, a second time, in the West on 24 April (*VIII Calenda maj*), during the evening, obscuring the Moon with its light, and flaming in the sky until 1 June (*Calendae iuni*). The astronomical description for language properties and scientific accuracy about the appearance fit perfectly with the Chinese testimonies about the same sighting. The phenomenon is comparable with the observations recorded by Byzantine annalist Joannes Zonaras (1074 – after 1145) (Fink 1970: 678–680). Here, the author affirms that the star was visible for 40 days until June. A similar comparison could be established with Chinese annals as reported by Antonie Guabil (1689–1759) in *L'Histoire de l'astronomie Chinoise*, where it is stated that the comet had been seen until 7 June. This fact makes plausible the conflicting Western sources about the same event collected by Alexandre Guy Pingré (1711–1796) in *The Cometographie ou Traité Historique et des Theorique Cometes* (Guabil 1729–1732; Pingré 1783: 376; Yoke 1962: 127–135). Not only has the phenomenon been recorded here as visible for a day, or a few days, or even for a week, but for fourteen days, or more generally for a longer time. Therefore, Viterbo's note appears today as the earliest and most precise Western sighting of the XVII passage of the Halley's comet, variously and roughly fixed until recently during the Holy Week, or on Easter Sunday (16 April), according to Mattheus Parisiensis' (1200–1259) *Chronica Majora* (Luard 1872–1873) or Romualdo Salernitano's (1110–1181) *Chronicon* (Muratori 1775; Arndt 1865: 387–461).

In Viterbo's observation, it is also important to note the total absence of any mystical or prophetic interpretation, linked to *mirabilia*, or divine manifesta-

tions, elements that always appear inseparably in such chronicles, concealing the awe that a comet aroused as well as the fear deriving from its identification with an evil entity, mainly because of its unpredictability. It has been described as a celestial phenomenon, disruptor of the elements, of the rotating uniform spheres, guarantee of stability and order, subvert or of the imperceptible Aristotelian crystalline drawing of the universe, of its logical rules, as cited, for example, in *Melancholy I* (1513–1514) by Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528).

Neither it is connected here with any references to tragic events but rather with those remembered, for example, in the *Anglo Saxon Chronicles* (Giles, Ingram (eds.) 1912; Härke 2012: 34–43), where the “bearded star” is seen to be related on one side with King Edward’s death, and on the other with the British Isles’ Norman conquest, shown in a very meaningful way in the Bayeux tapestry (Bayeux, Bayeux Tapestry Museum). Here the star, pointed out by the people and identified by the caption *Isti mirantur stella*, appears above the traitor Harold II’s throne, a divine sign for his sins and those of his people (Fig. 5). The picture reminds us of a similar description of Merlin in King Uter’s death in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s (1100–1155) *Chronicle*, where once again the comet is seen as a deadly angel (Hammer 1951: 149–151).

Returning the focus on Viterbo, according to different chronicles, the ms. 36 is not the only mention about the Halley’s comet and its connection with the city and its history. Retracing a brief diachronic *excursus*, it could be verified for the XII passage, where the star in Paul the Deacon’s *Historia* (720–799) turns out to be a warning for the Longobardian conquest of Tuscia (Bethmann, Waitz 1878: IV, cap. 2), or once again in 704, where it has been recalled that “It rained blood and milk and a great comet was seen [...],”¹⁰ a description that seems to follow literally and visually the episode later depicted in the *Chronicles* of Lucerne (1513) by Diebold Schilling the Younger (1460–1515). Even Urban IV’s (1261–1264) death, founder of the *Studium viterbiensis* and Novello Socrates, in 1264, according to the mathematician Campano Novara (Paravicini Bagliani 1973: 3–22; 1983: 773–789; 1984: 99–111), results from a similar celestial event: a comet paused in the sky for three months, disappearing on 2 October, the day of the departure of Jacques Pantaléon (Zuliani 1846: 45). In February 1472, finally, Niccolò della Tuccia (1400–1473), reporting his autobiographical sighting of a *commata* star, did not insert in his correspondence any amazing event (Della Tuccia 1872: 102): it was the XXIII passage of the Halley’s comet.

10 “[...] Piovve sangue e latte e poi si vidde una gran cometa [...]” (Benincasa 1720: 206).

In conclusion, Amminuno's astronomical description could be considered as a first and early clue of exact scientific attention and studies in an urban centre, such as Viterbo, emerging between the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Signorelli 1907; Pinzi 1887–1913; Pagani 2002), particularly in the political context of *Patrimonium Sancti Petri*, which existed as a delicate balance between papacy and emperor. The cultural aspect of it would become important later, in the second half of the thirteenth century, especially predominant as it has been recently demonstrated by the essential role played by Viterbo's papal court in European scientific culture through the optical demonstration primarily and as part of related manuscript production (Salvatelli 2016: 413–434; 2020a).

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Fig. 1

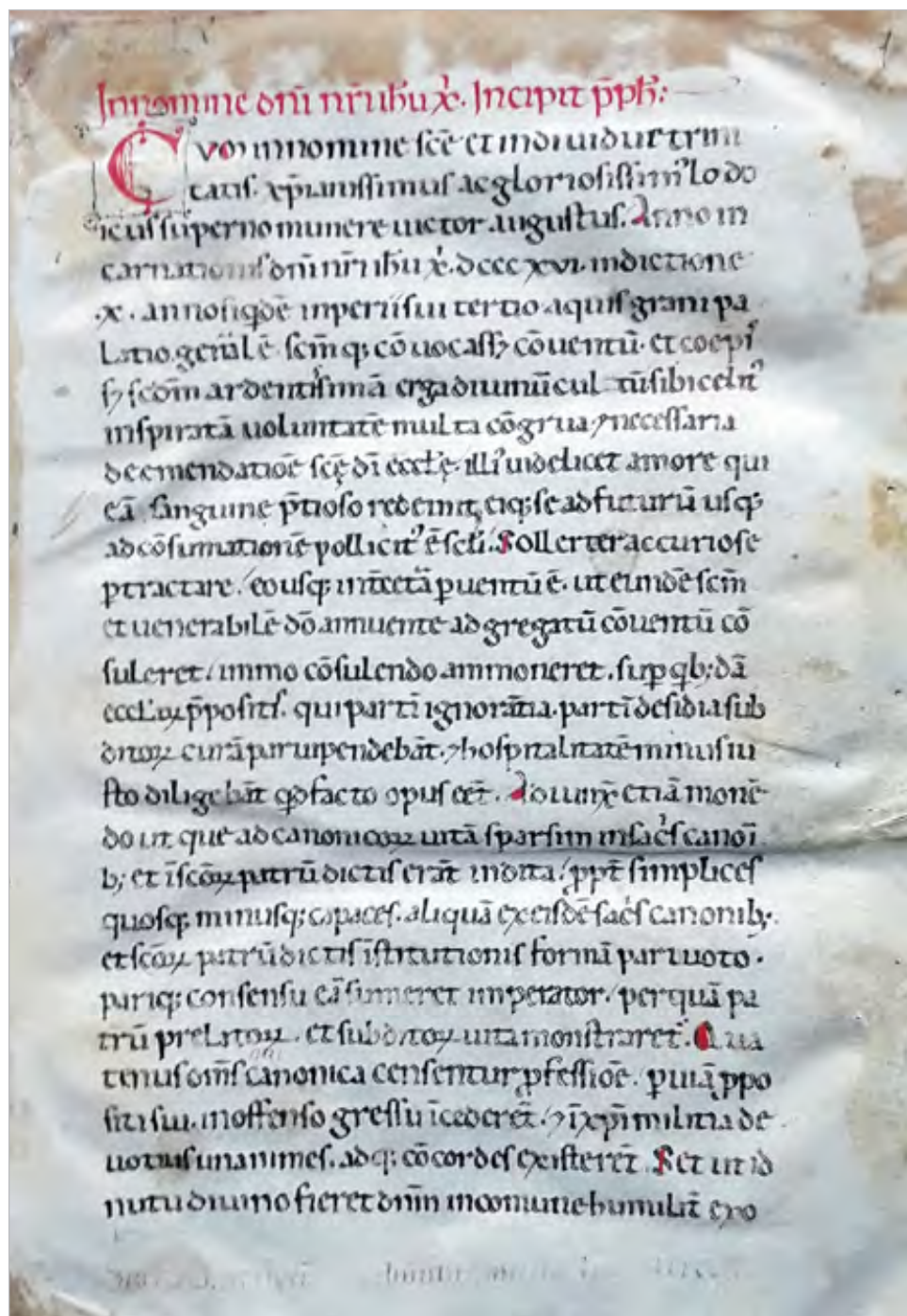


Fig. 2

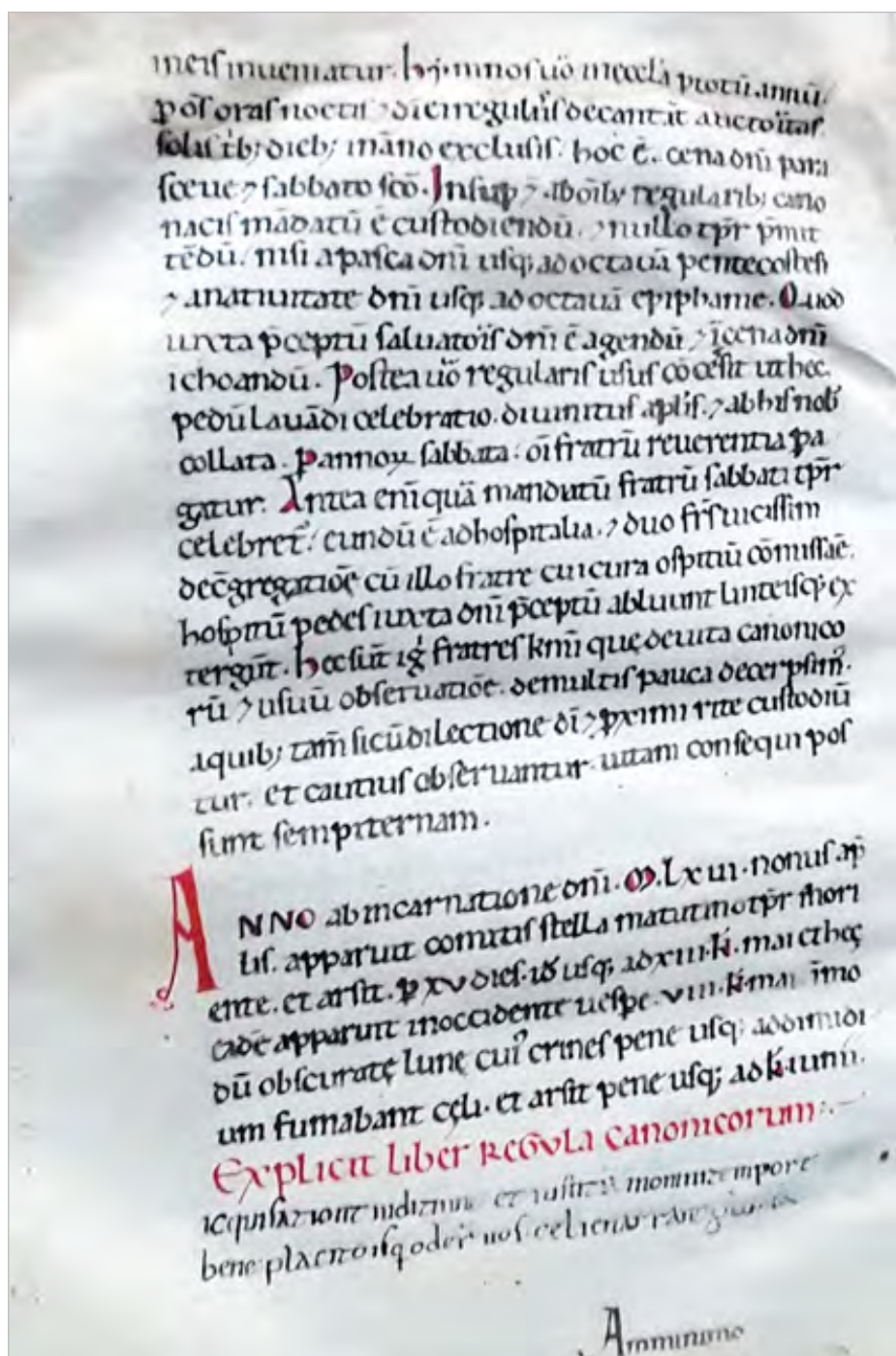


Fig. 3

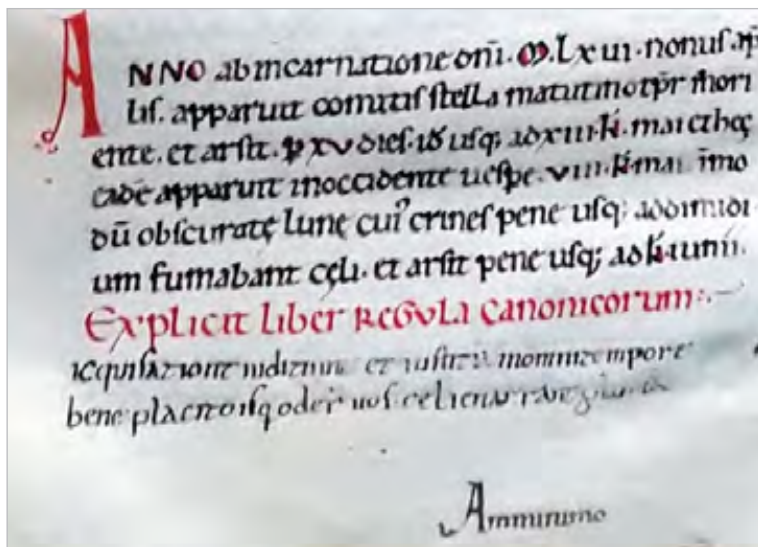


Fig. 4



Fig. 5