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Ambrose and Vergil, *Georgics* 1.149 (*victum Dodona negaret*)

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Abstract: This short note demonstrates a previously unappreciated echo of a Vergilian phrase in Ambrose's *Epist.* 73 (Maur. 18). It is shown that Ambrose not only alludes to the phrase *victum Dodona negaret* but also subtly develops key features of it, including the latent etymological wordplay, as part of his rebuttal of Symmachus' *Third Relatio*.

Keywords: Ambrose, Vergil, *Georgics*, Dodona, etymological wordplay.

In his description of famine in *Georgics* 1, Vergil moves from a universal depiction to a particular (1.147–149):¹

*Prima Ceres ferro mortalis vertere terram
instituit, cum iam glandes atque arbuta sacrae
deficerent silvae et victum Dodona negaret.*

“It was Ceres who first instructed mortals to plough with iron,
when the acorns and arbutes of the sacred forest began to fail
and Dodona denied its food.”

Why should Vergil mention Dodona of all places in an account of general famine? Clifford Weber, noting that this question had not received an adequate answer by previous commentators, ancient and modern, put forth the following considerations that would explain Vergil's choice.² First, Dodona has an ideal dual connotation, standing for oak by metonymy and possessing an association with Jupiter, which fits the context whereby the acorn (and arbut) famine represents the end of the Golden Age brought about by Jupiter's will. Furthermore, Weber observed that the choice of Dodona allows Vergil an ideal opportunity for etymological wordplay. Vergil creates a vivid oxymoron in having Dodona, whose very name suggests the giving of gifts, deny food. The modest aim of this short note is not to contest any one of these points. Rather, it is to point out that these considerations were evidently already perceived and taken into account by Ambrose. This appears to have escaped the notice of both classicists and scholars of Ancient Christianity, and it thus seems worthwhile to demonstrate it here.

* I would like to thank Vittorio Hösle and the anonymous reviewers of *Museum Helveticum* for their suggestions and corrections to an earlier version of this note. Of course, I bear sole responsibility for any remaining errors and infelicities. All translations are my own and do not aim for elegance.

¹ For Vergil I use the text of M. Geymonat (ed.), *P. Vergili Maronis Opera* (Roma 2008).

² C. Weber, “Dodona Reneges: A Neglected Oxymoron in *Georgics* 1.149”, *Classical Philology* 86 (1991) 323–327.

The year 384 CE is the date of the famous controversy surrounding the Altar of Victory. The prefect of Rome, Symmachus, wrote in the summer of that year the well-known *Third Relatio* in an attempt to persuade the young emperor Valentinian II to reverse the anti-pagan measures of his half-brother Gratian that were instituted in 382, measures that included the removal of the altar from the curia and the defunding of the Vestal Virgins. Among his various arguments, Symmachus appealed to the widespread famine of 383 as a mark of divine justice against Gratian's policies, a warning for Valentinian II to heed. Learning of Symmachus' petition, Ambrose wrote in haste *Epist.* 72 (Maur. 17) to pressure the youth not to give in. He did so before he had access to Symmachus' text. It was only upon receiving a copy of the *Third Relatio* that Ambrose then composed a second letter, *Epist.* 73 (Maur. 18), a detailed and sustained rebuttal of Symmachus' arguments.³ In *Epist.* 73 (Maur. 18),¹⁸ Ambrose writes as part of his rejection of Symmachus' appeal to the famine:⁴

Et unde Graecis oracula habitae suae quercus, nisi quia remedium silvestris alimoniae caelestis religionis donum putarunt? Talia enim suorum munera credunt deorum. Quis Dodonaeas arbores nisi gentium populus adoravit, cum pabulum triste agrinorum honore donaret? Non est verisimile quod indignantes eorum dii id pro poena intulerint quod solebant placati conferre pro munere. Quae autem aequitas ut paucis sacerdotibus dolentes victum negatum ipsi omnibus denegarent, cum inclementior esset vindicta quam culpa? Non est igitur idonea quae tantam aegritudinem mundi fallentis causa constrinxerit, ut virentibus segetibus subito spes anni adulta moreretur.

“And for what reason were their oaks deemed by Greeks to be oracles, if not because they thought that the relief consisting of woodland nourishment was a gift of heavenly religion? For such they believe to be the gifts of their gods. Who but the gentile people worshiped the trees of Dodona, since they endowed the sorry food of the field with honor befitting groves? It is not likely that their gods, taking offence, gave for a punishment that which they were wont, when appeased, to confer as a gift. Moreover, what fairness would there be if, being upset that food was denied to a few priests, they denied it to all, since the vengeance would be harsher than the original fault? Therefore the cause is not appropriate to have drawn together so great a sickness of a failing world, that all of a sudden, the crops flourishing, the year's full-grown hope should perish.”

³ For the question of whether Ambrose's second letter reached the consistory or was merely an academic exercise, see N. B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley 1994) 166–167. This, however, is not relevant for the present argument.

⁴ The text is cited from M. Zelzer (ed.), *Sancti Ambrosii Opera. Pars Decima. Epistularum Liber Decimus; Epistulae Extra Collectionem; Gesta Concilii Aquileienseis*, CSEL 82/3 (Vindobonae 1982) 45, ln. 202–213. I use Zelzer's edition throughout.

The chapter before the one just cited abounds in echoes of Vergil's depiction of famine in *Georgics* 1, as all commentators have recognized,⁵ but no commentator has suggested, as far as I am aware, that *Dodonaeanas* followed two sentences later by *victum negatum ... denegarent* is to be connected to Vergil's phrase *victum Dodona negaret*. That it is based on the Vergilian phrase is confirmed by the preceding debts to the same Vergilian context. Here the echo is split – which is presumably why it has escaped detection – and employed across two distinct arguments, but this does not detract from the fact that the chapter as a whole is thoroughly grounded in the Vergilian context. In the initial argument of this chapter, Ambrose points out an inconsistency in the pagan understanding of famine. Oaks are held up as oracles, presumably because their food is to be seen as gifts. But when humans are reduced by famine to eating acorns (cf. *Epist.* 73 (Maur. 18).17. ln. 196–197: *concussa quercu famem in silvis miseram solabantur*)⁶, they cannot complain of suffering and of being denied gifts, when acorns should be the very gifts! The argument as it stands rests on the premise that acorns are to be understood specifically as the gifts of the oracle. This crucial part of the argument is accounted for by allusive reference to Vergil's etymological play. Here understanding Vergil's Dodona as *quercus*, he exploits the etymological link between the name *Dodona* and 'giving'. This much is evident from the presence of *donum* and *donaret* not far around *Dodonaeanas*.⁷ The identification of the gift as acorn must, in turn, come specifically from the Vergilian oxymoron *victum Dodona negaret*, where the oxymoron only works if the gift is the *victus*, i. e. the acorn.

Following this is a further argument that goes in a different direction. It criticizes what would be the disproportionate punishment of the gods in sending a universal⁸ famine in order to avenge the maltreatment of a few. *Quae autem aequitas ut paucis sacerdotibus dolentes victum negatum ipsi omnibus denegarent ...* Whe-

5 Cf. e.g. R. Klein, *Der Streit um den Victoriaaltar* (Darmstadt 1972) 144–145; J. Wytzes, *Der Letzte Kampf des Heidentums in Rom* (Leiden 1977), 238; M. Zelzer (ed.), *loc. cit.* (n. 4) 45. So also *Graecis oracula habitae suae quercus* of the current paragraph is very closely adapted from *Georg.* 2.16 (the *Georgics* model, incidentally, also supports the reading of *habitae* over *habita* in the Ambrosian text). Ambrose was prompted to use so many Vergilian echoes because Symmachus had already alluded to Vergil's description of famine in his description of the famine of 383. In ch. 17, the echoing of Vergil successfully serves, among other things, to answer the sarcastic (ln. 197–199) *Nova videlicet prodigia terrarum, quae numquam ante acciderant, cum superstitione gentilis toto orbe ferveret* ("These of course were new portents of the earth, which had never happened before when the gentile superstition was seething over the whole world!"), the implication being that Vergil's account represents – so the true pagan should admit – precisely one such case.

6 "They were assuaging their wretched hunger in the woods after shaking oak trees". This itself is closely adapted from *Georg.* 1.158.

7 The reference to *Graecis oracula habitae suae quercus*, while lifted from *Georg.* 2.16, may suggest – what is in any case to be expected – Ambrose's awareness of the 'original' etymological derivation from *διδόνα*. Vergil would of course have thought of the Greek as well, cf. Weber, *loc. cit.* (n. 2) 324ff.

8 Cf. *omnibus*. In fact, Ambrose will qualify this in ch. 21 when he notes that the famine was far from universal.

reas in the above, only Dodona was expressly echoed, but not *victum ... negaret*, here we have the reverse. Is it possible, however, that Ambrose also has Dodona in mind here as well? He seems not to have forgotten the word at this point, if appeal can be made to the subsequent use of *idonea*, arguably punning on Dodona or, better, *Dodonaeas*. I would suggest that Dodona stands in the background of the phrase *victum negatum ipsi omnibus denegarent*, where the *ipsi* are the *dii* of the previous sentence. What justification is there in connecting the gods denying food with Dodona denying food? Here we may appeal to Dodona's aforementioned association with Jupiter, and how in the *Georgics* Dodona conjures up association with Jupiter's divine will. While Ambrose does not make this connection fully apparent, it was likely working in his mind and what prompted him to proceed from the former to this latter argument.

To conclude, Ambrose, appreciating Vergil's use of Dodona with its twofold association with the oak and with Jupiter, and understanding Vergil's etymological play that demonstrated the acorn to be Dodona's gift, used the various meanings latent in the Vergilian expression to construct two arguments against Symmachus' attempt to link the famine of 383 with the anti-pagan measures of Gratian in the previous year. In his determination to undermine the religiosity of the pagan tradition, Ambrose subtly exploited its greatest poet.⁹

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⁹ It should be noted that this case of an educated Christian subtly employing his classical learning to undermine pagan religiosity is hardly unparalleled. To refer only to one recent article exploring this phenomenon, see M. Gassman, "Debating Traditional Religion in Late Fourth-Century Roman Africa" *Journal of Late Antiquity* 11 (2018) 83–110, esp. 104: "for men with the advanced education that Maximus, Augustine, and the earlier Latin-speaking defenders of Christianity enjoyed, to debate traditional religion was to debate about and by means of Latin poetry and philosophy".