

Disclosing Secrets: Virgil in Middle High German Poems

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Virgil as a Magician

During the Middle Ages, Virgil became a versatile character in literature throughout Europe. Since Domenico Comparetti's pioneering book, *Virgil in the Middle Ages*, this particular topic in medieval literature has been widely examined.¹ Nevertheless, many questions still remain unanswered, one of them being the peculiarity of the German tradition. The presence of Virgil in German literature differs, in particular, from his presence in other European traditions in the demoniac characterization ascribed to the Latin poet in certain works.² In particular, Virgil is connected with the existence of a secret book written by the Latin poet, in which the access to *ars notoria* and magic arts are hidden through obscure sentences. The obscurity of the contents of Virgil's secret book became object of a wide interest in German literary production during the thirteenth century and warrants an investigation into the origin and diffusion of this aspect of Virgil's reception which will also take into account the popularization of themes like the obscurity in the transmission of forbidden arts among a lay public living in the German courts.

At the beginning of the thirteenth century, Virgil was well known in German courts thanks to Heinrich von Veldeke's rewriting of the *Aeneid*, to which particular attention was paid in the cultural milieu of Landgrave Hermann of Thuringia.³ The representation of Virgil as a magician

¹ Domenico Comparetti, *Virgilio nel Medio Evo* (Livorno: F. Vigo, 1872), repr. edition by Giorgio Pasquali (Firenze: La nuova Italia, 1937–41, 2nd ed. 1943).

² Otto Neudeck, "Möglichkeiten der Dichter-Stilisierung in mittelhochdeutscher Literatur: Neidhart, Wolfram, Vergil," *Euphorion* 88 (1994): 349; Franz Josef Worstbrock, "Vergil," in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters. Verfasserlexikon*, ed. Kurt Ruh, vol. 10 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), 276.

³ Maria Grazia Saibene, "Le 'Metamorfosi' di Ovidio nella traduzione di Albrecht von Halberstadt," in *L'antichità nella cultura europea del Medioevo*, ed. Rosanna Brusegan and Alessandro Zironi (Greifswald: Reineke, 1998), 21–22.

in vernacular German literature goes back to Wolfram von Eschenbach, who cites Virgil in his poem *Parzival*.⁴ In the long section of the poem devoted to Gawain, the knight meets the necromancer Clinschor who was born in the Terra di Lavoro, a plain near Naples, and is a descendant of the Latin poet.⁵ Since Wolfram reports that Virgil was the ancestor of the sorcerer Clinschor, it must be assumed that the former was also a magician.

Virgil is associated with the city of Naples in a literary tradition which started immediately after his death. Latin authors, like Pliny the Younger, recalled the poet's tomb just outside the walls of the city. Virgil's grave was situated more precisely on the road to Pozzuoli in the *Vita Svetonii vulgo Donatiana*.⁶ Ultimately, the widespread knowledge of the site of Virgil's tomb is to be attributed to Jerome's translation of the *Chronicon* of Eusebius of Caesarea.⁷ After having recalled that Virgil died in Brindisi and that his bones were carried to Naples, Jerome reports the epitaph engraved on the tomb.⁸

Comparetti imagined that some popular, oral stories about the poet in Naples developed alongside a written biographical transmission con-

⁴ Neudeck, "Möglichkeiten," 350.

⁵ "His land is called Terre de Labur. He is born of the descendants of one who also devised many marvels. Virgil of Naples" (Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival and Titarel*, trans. Cyril Edwards, Oxford World's Classics [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], 275); "sîn lant heizt Terre de Lâbûr: / von des nâchkomn er ist erborn, / der ouch vil wonders het erkorn, / von Nâpels Virgiliûs. / Clinschor des neve warp alsus," (Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival* 656,14–18, Text und Übersetzung, 2nd ed. with text from the 6th edition by Karl Lachmann [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003], 660).

⁶ Jan M. Ziolkowski and Michael C. J. Putnam, *The Virgilian Tradition. The First Fifteen Hundred Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 185.

⁷ Rudolf Helm, *Die Chronik des Hieronymus*, in Helm, ed., *Eusebius Werke*, VII, part 1 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1956), 165h; Ziolkowski and Putnam, *The Virgilian Tradition*, 201.

⁸ "Virgil dies at Brindisi under the consulships of Sentius Saturninus and Lucretius Cinna. His bones, carried over to Naples, are buried at the second milepost from the city, with an epitaph of this sort written above, which he himself had dictated as he was dying: Mantua gave birth to me, the Calabrians snatched me away, Parthenope now holds me; I sang of pastures, plowlands, and leaders" (Ziolkowski and Putnam, *The Virgilian Tradition*, 201); "Vergilius Brundisii moritur Sentio Saturnino et Lucretio Cinna cons. Ossa eius Neapolim translata in secundo ab urbe miliario sepeliuntur titulo istius modi supra scripto, quem moriens ipse dic-taverat: Mantua me genuit, Calabri rapuere, tenet nunc / Parthenope; cecini pas-cua rura duces" (*Die Chronik des Hieronymus*, 165).

cerning Virgil during the Early Middle Ages. His theory has been fiercely contested by subsequent scholars,⁹ but, even if Romantic in its approach, Comparetti's conclusion should not be definitively rejected. The greatest obstacle to Comparetti's theory was the lack of sources which might demonstrate the link between Naples and how Virgil came to be characterised as a magician. The most ancient text dates back to the middle of the twelfth century: it is a passage in the *Policraticus* by John of Salisbury, where the author speaks about a mechanical fly constructed by Virgil which could drive real flies from Naples, in this way ridding the city of the plague.¹⁰ After John of Salisbury's assertions, several other writers likewise claimed that Virgil was a magician.¹¹ A considerable number of clerics who wrote about Virgil as a sorcerer and astrologer came from Germany and Britain, but the reasons for the spread of this belief among Germans and Britons in particular remain unclear. The association of Virgil with demoniac practices, which appeared in Germany for the first time with Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, seems even more obscure.

If we consider a group of texts from the early Middle Ages, it may be possible to find a solution to these controversial questions. John of Salerno (Ioannes Italus Cluniacensis or Ioannes Romanus) lived for some years in Naples and Salerno in the middle of the tenth century. While he was in Salerno, he came into contact with Greek books and the Hellenic cultural milieu, and wrote his *Vita Sancti Odonis*. In this work, he asserts that Odo dreamt of a beautiful pot from which snakes issued when it was opened. Odo was quick to think that the pot had belonged to Virgil, and considered the snakes to be negative symbols of past pagan poetry.¹² The *Vita Popponis Abbatis*, written in the middle of the eleventh century, reports what happened to a young monk, Gazo, who, in a delirium caused by a high fever, was terrified by the apparition of a host of spirits: Ae-

⁹ Wilhelm Viëtor, "Der Ursprung der Virgilsage," *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* 1 (1877): 165–78; Giorgio Pasquali, "Prefazione dell'editore," in Domenico Comparetti, *Virgilio nel Medio Evo*, ed. Giorgio Pasquali (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1937), I, xxiii; Ziolkowski and Putnam, *The Virgilian Tradition*, 826–27.

¹⁰ John of Salisbury, *Ioannis Saresberiensis episcopi carnontensis Policratici sive De nugis Curialium et vestigiis Philosophorum libri 8*, ed. Clemens C. J. Webb (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), I, iv, 26.

¹¹ Ziolkowski and Putnam, *The Virgilian Tradition*, 825.

¹² John of Salerno (Ioannes Italus Cluniacensis), *Vita Sancti Odonis*, in *Patrologiae latinae cursus completus* 133 (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1853), xii, 49.

neas, Turnus, Virgil and many other characters from the *Aeneid*.¹³ The presence of Virgil in nightmares is quite frequent, as had already been mentioned in a letter written in the ninth century by the Swabian Ermenrich of Ellwangen to the abbot Grimald of St. Gall. Ermenrich reports a vision in which Virgil's tomb is plunged into the Stygian swamp. Moreover, the poet causes nightmares, appearing as a ghost with a trident.¹⁴ Here are two final examples. The first comes from the *Historiae* by Raoul Glaber, dating back to the beginning of the eleventh century. He wrote about Vilgard to whom devils appeared in the guise of Virgil, Horace and Juvenal.¹⁵ The second source is perhaps the most curious and interesting. It comes from Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum Historiale*, which was widely circulated. In chapter 26 in the edition published in Douai in 1624 (chapter XXVII, 4 in the fourteenth-century MS Douai, Bibliothèque municipale, 797), Hugh of Cluny cannot sleep because he dreams that beasts and snakes are lying under his head. He wakes up to find the *Liber Maronis* under his pillow. He throws it away, and thereafter sleeps peacefully.¹⁶

Massimo Oldoni, who found most of the previous sources, argued that the demoniac image of Virgil developed during the tenth century in Naples and Salerno, two cities which were still in close contact with Byzantine culture: the interest in mechanical automata is assumed to have come from there and was henceforth constantly present in narratives involving Virgil, the magician.¹⁷ As far as the magic powers ascribed to Virgil are concerned, two main pieces of evidence can be adduced. The first is the well-known interpretation of the prophecy contained in the fourth *Eclogue*, where Virgil was supposed to have predicted Jesus's

¹³ Everhelm, *Vita Popponis abbatis*, ed. Wilhelm Wattenbach, in *MG.H., SS.*, 11 (Hanover: Impensis bibliopolii aulici Hahniani, 1854), 32, 314.

¹⁴ Ermenrich of Ellwangen, *Epistula ad Grimaldum abbatem*, in *MG.H., Epistolae*, 5, *Epistolae Karolini Aevi* 3 (Berlin: apud Weidmannos, 1899), 24, 561.

¹⁵ Rodolfo il Glabro [Raoul (Rodulfus) Glaber], *Cronache dell'anno mille (Storie)*, ed. and trans. Guglielmo Cavallo and Giovanni Orlandi (Rome: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, 1990), 106–09.

¹⁶ Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum Historiale* (ex MS Douai, BM, 797 from the 14th cent.): <http://atilf.atilf.fr/bichard/>: xxvii, 4; Vincentius Bellovacensis, *Speculum quadruplex, sive speculum maius: naturale, doctrinale, morale, historiale* (Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1964) (repr. of edit. Duaci, ex Officina typographica Baltazaris, 1624): 5, xxvi.

¹⁷ Massimo Oldoni, "L'ignoto *Liber Maronis* medievale tradotto dall'antico," in *Lectures médiévales de Virgile. Acte du colloque organisé par l'Ecole française de Rome (Rome, 25–28 octobre 1982)* (Rome: Ecole française de Rome, 1985), 365.

birth. The second piece of evidence comes from a long literary tradition that goes back at least to Macrobius's *Saturnalia*, where he asserted that Virgil's poetry contained all human knowledge: "omnium disciplinarum peritus."¹⁸ Moreover, Fabius Planciade Fulgentius tried to discover Virgil's occult knowledge through etymological interpretations in his *Expositio Virgilianae continentiae secundum philosophos morales*, a work that was widely read during the Middle Ages, in particular in the twelfth century.¹⁹

It is easy to see how the tradition connected with Virgil's tomb in Naples, the poet's extensive knowledge, his prediction of Christ's coming, his association with Byzantine automata, and the existence of a book which causes nightmares to virtuous Christians combined to give Virgil the reputation of being a magician. The demoniac connotation, even if not very widespread, had existed at least since the ninth century and circulated in clerical milieux throughout Europe.

Virgil and the *ars notoria*

During the twelfth century, some clerics from Northern Europe, and from Britain and Germany in particular, spent some time in southern Italy, namely in Naples and Salerno. When reporting their journey, they quite frequently told stories about Virgil in connection with his burial place, with the automata he created to help the inhabitants of Naples or Rome and, finally, with the existence of a book of magic arts which had belonged to him. An epistle by Conrad of Querfurt (†1202), bishop of Hildesheim and Würzburg and chancellor to Emperor Henry VI, is of particular significance for the German context. He wrote from Sicily, probably in 1196, to the prior of the abbey of Hildesheim. In this letter, preserved in the *Chronicle of the Slavs* written by his contemporary Arnold of Lübeck, Conrad relates many anecdotes about the magician Virgil and the marvellous things he created: a city in a glass bottle, a bronze horse, a bronze fly, the serpent gate in Naples, the preservation of meat at the butcher's block in Naples, the means he devised for defending Naples

¹⁸ Ambrosius Theodosius Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, apparatu critico instruit, in somnium Scipionis commentarios selecta varietate lectionis ornavit Iacobus Willis, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1970), I, 16.12.

¹⁹ Worstbrock, "Vergil," 253.

from the volcano Vesuvius and a statement about the Baths of Virgil (at Baia, near Naples).²⁰

The most famous of all these early German statements about Virgil as a magician is certainly the passage in the third part of the *Otia Imperialia* by Gervase of Tilbury († c.1228). Gervase, who was born in the last decade of the eleventh century, spent most of his short life in Italy. He studied in Bologna, stayed in Venice and lived some years in Sicily at the court of the Norman king, William II, who gave him a *villa* in Noia, a town in the Terra di Lavoro north of Naples. He settled in Arles, where he wrote his famous work for the Emperor, Otto IV. His final years are still the object of much scholarly debate.²¹ During a stay in Naples, he was informed by his former master in Bologna, Giovanni Pignatelli, at that time archdeacon of Naples,²² about "what great wonders Virgil performed in this city,"²³ for instance, the marvellous machines and charms he created to protect Naples. Many of them were also reported by Conrad von Querfurt, but what is completely new is the description of the search for Virgil's lost burial place by a man from Britain,

a man of great learning: proficient and highly talented at the trivium and quadrivium, he had achieved much in medical studies, and was unrivalled in astronomy.²⁴

who was given permission by King Roger II of Sicily (1095–1154) to take possession of Virgil's bones. Thanks to "arte sua," he discovered the grave, hidden in a mountain, where Virgil's corpse still lay undisturbed. At the poet's head was a book, "in which the art of magic was written down, along with other signs relating to his practice of that art."²⁵ The inhabitants of Naples refused to give up the bones, so he could take away only the book, which was later seen by Gervase himself by permission of the cardinal of Naples, under the pontificate of Pope Alexander III. Ger-

²⁰ Arnold of Lübeck, *Chronica*, in *M.G.H., SS. 21*, ed. Johann Martin Lappenberg (Hannover: Impensis bibliopolii aulici Hahniani, 1869), 192–96.

²¹ Banks and Binns, "Introduction," in Gervase of Tilbury, *Otia Imperialia. Recreation for an Emperor*, ed. and trans. S. E. Banks and James Wallace Binns, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), xxv–xxxvii.

²² Banks and Binns, "Introduction," xxvi.

²³ "Quanta miranda Virgilius in hac urbe fuerit operatus" (*Otia Imperialia*, iii, 12, 580).

²⁴ "summe litteratus, in trivio et quadrivio potens et accutissimus, in fisica operosus, in astronomiasummus" (*Otia Imperialia*, iii, 112, 802).

²⁵ "in quo ars notaria erat inscripta, cum aliis studii eius characteribus" (*Otia Imperialia*, iii, 112, 802).

vase admits to having made some successful experiments following the book's instructions.

Virgil's bones had previously been an object of interest to other authors. For example, John of Salisbury noted in his *Polycraticus* that a French scholar was interested in the poet's corpse,²⁶ while Conrad of Querfurt writes that Virgil's bones were kept in a castle by the sea in Naples, namely the Castel dell'Ovo.²⁷ As none of these authors mentions any book, it is evident that Gervase of Tilbury added a new piece of information that he had found elsewhere or, more simply, had just invented.

Another particularity of Gervase's text lies in the fact that he mentions the existence of a book of *ars notoria* in connection with Virgil. As Lynn Thorndike defines it, the

Ars Notoria, or Notory Art, . . . seeks to gain knowledge from a communion with God by invocation of angels, mystic figures, and magical prayers. We are told that the Creator revealed this art through an angel to Solomon one night while he was praying, and that by it one can in a short time acquire all the liberal and mechanical arts.²⁸

More recent studies have demonstrated that the *ars notoria* was not transmitted directly from Eastern or Arabian culture, but spread from Northern Italy, more specifically from Bologna, starting at the beginning of the thirteenth century.²⁹ Gervase of Tilbury's citation is hence one of the oldest pieces of evidence about a theurgic practice which had no demoniac implications. On the contrary, it was mainly used in order to increase a person's memory and instill knowledge. The period spent by Gervase of Tilbury in Bologna may explain the existence of a book of *ars notoria* connected to Virgil in his *Otia Imperialia*.³⁰ At Gervase's time, a tradition concerning the poet's extensive knowledge of the liberal and mechanical arts that were used to help the people of Naples had already been established. Ascribing these abilities to a knowledge of the recently discovered *ars notoria* was a very small step. Further evidence of this

²⁶ John of Salisbury, *Ioannis Saresberiensis*, ii, 23, 132.

²⁷ Arnold of Lübeck, *Chronica*, v, 194.

²⁸ Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. II (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923), 279.

²⁹ Julien Véronèse, "The *ars notoria* in the Medieval and Early Modern Period: Study of a Manuscript Tradition of Theurgic Magic (XIIth–XVIIth century)," *Societas Magica Newsletter* 10 (2003): 7; Julien Véronèse, *L'ars notoria au Moyen Age. Introduction et édition critique*, Micrologus' Library, Salomon Latinus 1 (Florence: Sismel Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2007), 17 and 24.

³⁰ Véronèse, *L'ars notoria*, 24.

association of Virgil with the *ars notoria* comes from the *Dolopathos* of John of Alta Silva, a monk in Lorraine, which was written at roughly the same time. In John's work, Virgil is teacher to prince Lucinius and writes a book that permits his pupil to learn in a very short time, which is one of the characteristics of *ars notoria*.³¹

Gervase of Tilbury and the German Reception

Gervase's *Otia Imperialia* were contemporary with Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, the first German text alluding to Virgil as a magician, but there is no evidence of any direct contact between Wolfram and Gervase. We likewise have no evidence that Wolfram might have known or read the *Otia Imperialia*, since the manuscript diffusion of *Otia Imperialia* does not suggest any contact between the two authors: Gervase worked on a draft copy of *Otia Imperialia* (Vatican City, Vat. lat. 933 [N]) until the second decade of the century,³² and, as far as we know, during the first decades of the thirteenth century, Gervase's work had principally been copied in France and southern England, but never in Germany.³³ The lack of manuscripts in German territories does not, however, exclude their existence a priori, or, at least, a dissemination of the work and recent editors admit that "there is ample evidence that the book was produced over a substantial period of time and subjected to constant correction and improvement."³⁴ As was often the case in the Middle Ages, other, earlier versions of the text were already circulating, and it is more than likely that the *Otia Imperialia* were known also to the German public: its dedication to Emperor Otto IV of Braunschweig should be sufficient proof of this. Moreover, the creators of the famous world map of Ebsdorf (Braunschweig) were unquestionably familiar with the *Otia Imperialia*.³⁵

Conrad of Querfurt and Gervase of Tilbury, two authors who speak about Virgil as a magician in the years around 1200, thus imported the notion of Virgil the magician from southern Italy to Germany. Gervase then augmented his marvellous narration about Virgil by adding the

³¹ Johannis de Alta Silva, *Dolopathos, sive De rege et septem sapientibus*, in *Historia septem sapientum* 2, ed. Alfons Hilka (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1913), 13–23.

³² Banks and Binns, "Introduction," lxiii.

³³ Banks and Binns, "Introduction," lxiii.

³⁴ Banks and Binns, "Introduction," lxxx.

³⁵ Banks and Binns, "Introduction," xxxv, lxxxvi.

book of *ars notoria*, about which he had presumably heard in Bologna. Furthermore, Gervase and Conrad also played a considerable role in the courts of the emperors of the Holy Roman Empire and were consequently well-known in their time in German courts.

In the same years, Wolfram von Eschenbach was affiliated with the court of Hermann of Thuringia, who was an important person in the political dynamics of that period. It is hard to believe that Wolfram did not know about the works of Conrad of Querfurt and Gervase of Tilbury, especially since Wolfram reveals in his literary works that he knew the French and German poetic production of his times, and was also an omnivorous reader of every kind of text. The representation of Virgil as Clinschor's ancestor connects Wolfram to the creation of the image of Virgil as a magician, a figure that was well on the way to being defined in the same years. We could almost say that Wolfram was *à-la-page*. In the few lines devoted to Virgil, Wolfram indirectly shows substantial knowledge about the new stories concerning him: he came from Naples, more precisely from the Terra di Lavoro (*Terra de Lâbûr*), where the Campi Flegrei (namely *Avernus*), Baia, and so on are located. Virgil came from a city where he worked many marvels and his grandson was also a man who knew magic arts, that is to say, Virgil had transmitted his wisdom to him. All the attributes that would characterize Virgil in subsequent poetic production can already be found here.

Virgil in Middle High German Poems

But it is thanks to two thirteenth-century poems, *Zabulons Buch* and *Reinfried von Braunschweig*, that the existence of the book of *ars notoria* in connection with Virgil is clearly introduced into German narrative.³⁶

³⁶ About *Zabulons Buch* cf. Karl Simrock, *Der Wartburgkrieg* (Stuttgart: Cotta'scher Verlag, 1858), 184–229 and 300–05; Tom Albert Rompelman, *Der Wartburgkrieg* (Amsterdam: H. L. Paris, 1939), 70; Günter Schweikle, *Parodie und Polemik in mittelhochdeutscher Dichtung. 123 Texte von Kûrenberg bis Frauenlob samt dem Wartburgkrieg nach der Großen Liederhandschrift C* (Stuttgart: Helfant Texte, 1986), 131–39; Burghart Wachinger, "Der Wartburgkrieg," in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters. Verfasserlexikon*, ed. Kurt Ruh, vol. 10 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), 753–56; Alessandro Zironi, *Enigmi di sapienza nel Medioevo tedesco*, Studi e testi di linguistica e filologia germanica (Padova: Unipress, 2001), 205–99. For *Reinfried von Braunschweig* cf. Alfred Ebenbauer, "Reinfried von Braunschweig," in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters. Verfasserlexikon*, ed.

Their authors recalled information that had been circulating in Germany since the beginning of the century, including the passage from *Parzival*. In both poems Virgil travels to the magnetic mountain in order to find a treasure. After many adventures which recall episodes and passages in *Herzog Ernst*,³⁷ Virgil finds a demon imprisoned in a glass in the form of a fly. After having been granted his freedom by Virgil, the devil reveals to him the existence of the book of Zabulon and leads the poet to the place where it is hidden. This is the version from *Zabulons Buch*:

I'll reveal to you how you'll patronize all arts.
Nearby me lies a book
About which, Virgil, I want to tell you. So, hear:
With it you will be superior to all clerics,
It stays by me
And you will take
What Zabulon wrote with his own hands.³⁸

The demon describes the place where the book is to be found: for one thousand years, an iron statue had hidden it. In the head of the statue there is a letter. Virgil goes with the demon to the place where the statue stands, breaks the statue and takes the book.³⁹ That is all the text tells us

Kurt Ruh, vol. 7 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 1171–76.

³⁷ The structure of *Herzog Ernst* is far too complex to discuss here and would lead our investigation too far from its main purpose. For a useful presentation of *Herzog Ernst* cf. Gustav Ehrismann, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur bis zum Ausgang des Mittelalters*, zweiter Teil, *Die mittelhochdeutsche Literatur*, I. *frühmittelhochdeutsche Zeit* (München: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1922), 39–58; Bernhard Sowinski, "Nachwort," in *Herzog Ernst, Ein mittelalterliches Abenteuerbuch* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1979), 405–29; Hans Szklenar and Hans-Joachim Behr, "Herzog Ernst," in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters. Verfasserlexikon*, ed. Kurt Ruh, vol. 3 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1981), 1170–91.

³⁸ "ich wil dir offenlich verjehen, du wirst noch künste rich. / ein buoch hie nâhe bî mir lit, / des wil ich wîsen dich, Virgilius, wizzet endelich, / dâ mit du allen pfaffen obe ligst, / dâz bî mir bleip, / und an gesigst, / daz Zabulon mit sîner hende schreip" (*Zabulons Buch* 32, 10–16; Zironi, *Enigmi di sapienza*, 236).

³⁹ "An iron figure stands nearby / Which has hidden the text for a full thousand years. / That it was made by magic means / No one can doubt. / A letter lies in its head, from which it gets its force / It grasps strongly a stick in its hands: / I give you the power to control all this;" "He broke the figure without any effort. / Cunningly the book was in Virgil's hands / And he took it with him over the sea" ("Ein êrîn bilt stêt nâh hie bî, / daz dâ der schrift gehuotet hât vollichen tûsent jâr. / daz ez mit zouber dar gemachet sî, / vervâhet niht ein hâr. / Ein brief im in dem hôupte lit, dâ von ez hât die kraft, / gewaltic einen klupfel fûert ez mit der hende sîn, / des gibe ich dir meisterschaft." "Er brach daz bilt gar âne wer, / mit listen wart Virgilius daz buoch in sîne hant; / er fuort ez mit im hin über daz mer";

about how Virgil came into possession of Zabulon's book, but we can assume that the iron statue was probably an automaton like the ones Virgil made and which were typical of most of the stories involving him as a magician.⁴⁰

The episode is described in greater detail in *Reinfried von Braunschweig*. The interminable, yet incomplete poem devotes more than 700 lines to the scene.⁴¹ The poem says that Virgil took three (!) necromantic books which had been written by Savilôn (ll. 21028–29). Together with Reinfried, Virgil discovers Savilôn's secret place, the entrance to which is barred by a heavy stone (ll. 21283–91). Inside the cavern, they see an automaton with a hammer in his hand and, sitting on a chair, an old man who is apparently dead but is in reality in a death-like state of unconsciousness.⁴² At his feet they see a book tied with a chain to the wall (ll. 21292–99) (now there is only one book!). The automaton had been made in order to strike anyone who might try to steal the book from the man's feet. (ll. 21485–94). A small letter is hidden in the old man's ear (ll. 21510–11). Virgil suddenly seizes the book, and the automaton strikes the old man dead (ll. 21682–85). Obviously the old man was Savilôn himself, who preferred in his old age to hide in a cave that he had built with the help of some demons. He wanted to keep secret what he had read in the stars when he was a young man, namely the birth of Jesus to a virgin.

In *Reinfried von Braunschweig*, Savilôn is an Athenian prince with a Jewish mother and a pagan father (ll. 21315–16; 21357–59). He is the first man to understand astronomy, necromancy and all the forbidden arts:

He was the first who ever
understood astronomy,
for he—thanks to his wisdom—knew
it and necromancy
just as he appreciated all arts
that are forbidden.⁴³

Zabulons Buch 33, 5–11; 34, 1–3: Zironi, *Enigmi di sapienza*, 238).

⁴⁰ John Webster Spargo, *Virgil the Necromancer: Studies in Virgilian Legends* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934): 117–35; Ziolkowski and Putnam, *The Virgilian*, 826–28.

⁴¹ *Reinfried von Braunschweig*, ed. Karl Bartsch, Bibliothek des Litterarischen Verein 109 (Stuttgart: Litterarischer Verein, 1871), 610–31, ll. 20989–21720.

⁴² "He sat on a chair / dead still living" ("er ūf einem sezzel saz / tōt noch lebende"; *Reinfried von Braunschweig*, 625, ll. 21498–99).

⁴³ "Er was der erste dem ie wart / astronomie bekant, / wan er mit sīnen sinnen vant / si und negromanzie / swie daz diu kunst nu sīe / verboten iedō was si

He wrote his prophecy in a brief letter whose content will be read by Virgil:

Then he saw the letters
and also the graphemes:
this was even carved.
Then Virgil could read
that also Octavian
was emperor in Rome
and that from the pure lovely
maiden mother Mary was born
God as man on the earth.⁴⁴

As far as the book is concerned, we do not know its subject matter. The anonymous author of *Reinfried von Braunschweig* reveals only the disappointing information that "they found written in the book / many marvellous marvels."⁴⁵ We can certainly agree with Oldoni when he stresses that the content of Virgil's book is never revealed because the biography and the works of the poet do not permit any speculation about magic or necromantic practices.⁴⁶ Only the revelation about the birth of Jesus is disclosed. The juxtaposition of the disclosed message of salvation and the obscure content of the *liber Virgilii* may explain how Virgil was still perceived by German poets in the thirteenth century: rather than being a sorcerer or necromancer, Virgil is the unconscious instrument of God's plan for salvation.⁴⁷ *Zabulons Buch* and *Reinfried von Braunschweig* are two texts which narrate the previous events, thus clarifying how Virgil was to become a magician.

As the battle of Acre is cited in *Reinfried von Braunschweig*, there is no doubt that the poem was written after 1291. Some years before,

wert" (*Reinfrid von Braunschweig*, 620, ll. 21328–33).

⁴⁴ "dô man die karakter sach / und ouch der figüren schrift. / diz waz eben in der trift. / dô diz vant Virgilius, / daz ouch Octaviânus / ze Rôme lepte keiserlich / und diu reine minnedlich / Mariâ muoter magt gebar / got mensch uf die erden har" (*Reinfrid von Braunschweig*, 630, ll. 21572–80).

⁴⁵ "Funden and dem buoch geschriben / wunderlicher wunder vil" (*Reinfrid von Braunschweig*, 619, ll. 21308–09).

⁴⁶ Oldoni, *L'ignoto Liber Maronis*, 369.

⁴⁷ Otto Neudeck, "Möglichkeiten der Dichter-Stilisierung in mittelhochdeutscher Literatur: Neidhart, Wolfram, Vergil," *Euphorion* 88 (1994): 351; Sonja Kerth and Elisabeth Lienert, "Die Sabilon-Erzählung der 'Erweiterten Christherre-Chronik' und der 'Weltchronik' Heinrichs von München," in *Studien zur Weltchronik Heinrichs von München*, ed. Horst Brunner, vol. 1, *Wissensliteratur im Mittelalter* 29 (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1998), 435.

probably about 1280, Jans Enikel composed his *Weltchronik*, in which Virgil is said to be "the son of Hell."⁴⁸ In Enikel's chronicle, however, Virgil is not involved in the discovery of messages, prophecies or books, but becomes a magician because he frees a crowd of demons who had been imprisoned in a bottle. At the very end of the thirteenth century, the figure of Virgil is transformed into a simpler character, where magic is interpreted as demoniac knowledge; here, what arouses the reader's interest is the telling of marvellous facts without any complicated moral implications.

Conclusion

Wolfram von Eschenbach is the writer who transfers Virgil from clerical culture to the public of the courts. Otto Neudeck stressed that Wolfram did not introduce any new aspects into his characterization of the poet;⁴⁹ this operation was carried out by the later poets who linked Virgil to Wolfram von Eschenbach. They were both poets, whose reputation depended on admiration for their profound knowledge of the seven arts rather than on their aesthetic and lyrical talents. Moreover, in the speculation of the medieval reader, both Wolfram's *Parzival* and Virgil's fourth *Eclogue* conveyed the idea of the eschatological promise which had to be interpreted and deciphered, in other words, disclosed. In *Parzival*, Flegetanis reads the revelation of the Grail in the celestial spheres. Virgil is a pagan because he lived before the birth of Christ, but he is at the same time a Christian, because he becomes *instrumentum Dei*, just like Flegetanis, in Wolfram's work.

Zabulons Buch and *Reinfried von Braunschweig*, which were composed during the thirteenth century, present Virgil as a messianic actor in representations where the exotic and much-appreciated atmosphere and scenarios of the marvellous East conveyed by the widely-known poem *Herzog Ernst* are fused with new stories from Italy and England, both of which were in close contact with the northern and central cultural areas of Germany, Lorraine, Thuringia and Braunschweig. Thanks to these writers, the figure of Virgil became known to a wider public and

⁴⁸ "der helle kint," in Jans Enikel, *Jansen Enikels Weltchronik*, ed. Philipp Strauch, in *M.G.H., Deutsche Chroniken* 3 (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1900), 462, l. 23270.

⁴⁹ Neudeck, *Möglichkeiten der Dichter-Stilisierung*, 352.

connected with magic, necromancy, forbidden arts, and finally with a book pertaining to Christian revelation, the *ars notoria*, composed by Solomon, the wise king of the Jews. Virgil, who knew the *ars notoria* in his turn, was the wisest of the pagan poets, just as Wolfram was the champion of an obscure culture that had extended beyond the walls of monasteries, the desks of universities and the *studia* of the clerics to reach the halls of the courts, where, amidst poetic lines about knights, damsels, demons and saints, the secrets of the seven arts were finally disclosed to a lay audience.



Obscurity in Medieval Texts

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Lucie Doležalová, Jeff Rider,
and Alessandro Zironi

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