

FROM GERBERT'S LETTERS TO SYLVESTER'S PRIVILEGES: A MAN'S SEASONS

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Translating a 10th century text is a difficult task because of the major loss of information concerning the context: therefore each new translation is also a new interpretation. Panvini's and Rossi's Italian translations of Gerbert's letters are commented and compared.

Sylvester's privileges are considered from the points of view of their literary style (far from that of the letters), of their historical relevance and meaning, and especially with the aim of extracting indications on Gerbert's psychological evolution after his access to Papacy

Tradurre un testo del X secolo è un compito difficile a causa della grave perdita di informazioni relative al contesto: pertanto ogni nuova traduzione è anche una nuova interpretazione. Le traduzioni italiane di Panvini e di Rossi delle lettere di Gerbert sono commentate e confrontate.

I privilegi di Silvestro II sono presi in considerazione dal punto di vista del loro stile letterario (lontano da quello delle lettere), della loro rilevanza e significato storico, e specialmente con l'obiettivo di estrarne indicazioni sull'evoluzione psicologica di Gerbert dopo la sua ascesa al Papato.

About translations

When present day educated readers approach Gerbert's extant texts, and especially his letters, they immediately face a problem when trying a translation into their modern languages. Gerbert's complex personality is indeed reflected into a very complex style of writing. Moreover a thousand years have passed, and most references and information possessed by his contemporaries have been lost. As a consequence the difficulty of interpreting his texts is sometimes enormous, and the problem cannot be solved on purely linguistic grounds. In many cases problems arise just because of our ignorance concerning names, places and circumstances. By the way, some of Gerbert's letters are almost coded messages, probably to the point that even most of his contemporaries would not have been able to interpret them.

However such difficulties can also become a motivation for a specific effort in understanding at least what can still be understood. Such an effort, in my opinion, should lead not only to elaborating interpretative essays, but

also to editing translated versions. Such versions might make Gerbert's original thoughts more accessible, albeit through their interpretation, to the less educated readers. Many young students approaching medieval history do not have the time, patience and sometimes even the technical preparation that are needed in order to access the original texts. However if we were to passively accept this fact we would also accept the notion that most of our ancient culture is bound to be available only to a more and more restricted group of experts in the field.

Translations are therefore very welcome, and one must not think that a single translation of any given text be enough. First of all, as we already observed, each translation is also an interpretation. Besides that, we must keep in mind that language is a living and continuously evolving reality, and many of us have experienced the fact that a dated translation (say a Nineteenth Century one) is often something that must be interpreted rather than an interpretation tool.

We therefore welcome the generous effort made by professor Sigismondi in order to make Panvini's Italian translation¹ of Gerbert's letters available to a larger audience. Dr Maria Giulia Panvini Carciotto (Catania, 8/12/1949–16/10/1996) had prepared, some time before her untimely departure, a complete and fully annotated version. Her translation is rigorous, but not without attention to literary values, and it is therefore quite readable, even if the original text is often very cryptic. Notes are sober, as the author herself declares in the Introduction, but they are accurate and usually exhaustive.

Panvini's translation is based on F. Weigle's edition² published in 1966 in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*. In the meantime a new edition has appeared in 1993 in the *Belles Lettres*, due to Riché and Callu³ who took also care of offering a French translation of Gerbert's *Correspondance*. This was one of the reasons why we decided to get involved in a new Italian translation⁴, which will be soon published by Edizioni PLUS (Pisa) in the Series "*Fonti tradotte per la storia dell'alto medioevo*".

One of our main purposes (marking also some difference with Panvini) is a very strict adherence to the original text, even when this may imply a loss of literary grace, in order to minimize the student's effort of conversion into his native language when comparing with the original text. We also aim at complementing the translation with a very large set of notes and especially with a rich complementary information (a standard feature of the

¹ M.G. PANVINI CARCIOTTO (2009)

² F. WEIGLE (1966)

³ P. RICHE et J.P. CALLU (1993)

⁴ P. ROSSI (2009)

Series) regarding all the historical, linguistic, chronological, geographical and prosopographical aspects (including genealogies and bishops' lists) that may be relevant to the text.

It may be interesting, in order to understand the different spirit and purpose of the two translations, to compare the two versions of Letter 1, addressed in Spring 983 by Gerbert (who was then in Bobbio as its Abbot) to Emperor Otto II. Boldface is used only for identical words and sentences

Panvini's translation

Gerberto, una volta **libero**, **al suo signore** Ottone, cesare sempre augusto. Mentre prendo in considerazione i **pubblici** affari dei feudi, temo **di occupare con** gli affari privati **le orecchie del mio serenissimo signore**. **Il mio signore** parli nel rispondere al suo **servo** nel **modo** che gli è **solito**, in modo che risulti che egli è al suo servizio. Non ci sia **l'ambiguità**, propria delle lettere, che non evidenziano la fermezza di carattere **del nostro** cesare, che noi spesso abbiamo constatata e che le genti conoscono. In poche parole vi sia una precisa indicazione del vostro consenso o dissenso, dando una sentenza che dica "**bene**" oppure "**non bene**". Per quanto sta in noi, fin dove ci sarà possibile, agiremo di conseguenza, una volta riconosciuta **la vostra volontà**. Esprima **il signor vescovo** Gerberto un parere **sulla nostra innocenza** a proposito di Brovingo e di Isembardo. Dicano Litefredo e Gerardo **perché** Rodolfo si impadronì del **loro beneficio**. **Non sia** considerato **reo di lesa maestà colui per il quale fu sempre gloria** lo stare per cesare e disonore lo **stare contro** cesare.

Rossi's translation

Al suo signore O[ttone] Cesare sempre augusto, G[erberto] un tempo **libero**.

Quando misuro il peso degli impegni **pubblici** dei regni, ho timore **di occupare con** i miei **le orecchie del mio serenissimo signore**. Dica **il mio signore** al proprio **servo**, con proprie missive al **modo solito**, in che modo si possa fare esibizione dell'impegno a servirlo. Sia tolta **l'ambiguità** dalle lettere, che non riproducono bene la serietà **del nostro** Cesare, a noi sempre manifesta, e conosciuta dalle genti. E quindi sarà per noi segno che voi siete favorevole o contrario l'aver proferito la frase "**Bene**" o "**Non bene**". Infatti quanto è in noi, che è possibile sia fatto, è consequenziale che noi lo facciamo, se conosceremo **la vostra volontà**. Che **il signor vescovo** Gerberto pronunci una sentenza sulla nostra innocenza rispetto a Broningo e Isembardo. Spieghino Litefredo e Gerardo **perché** Rodolfo ha ricevuto il **loro beneficio**. **Non sia** giudicato **reo di lesa maestà colui per il quale fu sempre gloria** stare dalla parte di Cesare, ignominia **stare contro** di lui.

Sylvester II's papal privileges

Sylvester II's privileges do not appear in Panvini's translation, because they have not been written directly by Gerbert, being mainly the result of bureaucratic compilation by officials of the Holy See. They are however very significant remnants of Sylvester's time and activity, and in some special cases (which we shall consider in detail) they are documents of an important psychological and personal evolution of Gerbert, induced by his dramatic change of role and starting almost immediately after his ascent at the pontifical throne, as testified by the privileges themselves.

Undoubtedly some unavoidable structural elements mark a fundamental difference between these texts and Gerbert's letters. First of all, they are documents written (when the writer is explicitly mentioned) by the hand of *Petrus*, notary and secretary of the Holy Roman Church (eleven privileges out of thirty-one), of *Antonius*, regional notary and secretary of the H.R.C. (two privileges) or of *Johannes*, secretary of the H.R.C. (two privileges).

In many cases we do not even possess the original act, but only a copy (or the copy of a copy) preserved, and often willingly altered, by those who benefitted from the privilege.

Moreover these texts are largely built out of standardized *formulae*, not only in the opening title (usually SYLVESTER, BISHOP, SERVANT OF THE SERVANTS OF GOD) and in the greetings, but also in the listing of prizes and punishments, especially of spiritual nature, that are respectively associated with the violation and respect of the privilege itself.

In particular a very long sentence appearing already in the first privilege (April 999) is present, with minor variations, in a dozen documents and, when taking into account shorter versions of the same *anathema*, we easily reach the number of twenty occurrences. The sentence sounds:

*If anyone, by rash boldness, however, shall attempt to contravene this document of our apostolic confirmation, though this seems impossible, let him be advised that he will have been held fast by the chain of the anathema of Our Lord and of Peter, prince of the apostles, to be consumed in the everlasting fire with the devil and his most vicious retinue, and also with Judas, betrayer of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, sent down into the Tartarean depths to perish with the wicked. May he who is, indeed, the guardian and respecter of this our privilege receive the grace of benediction and eternal life from the Lord.*⁵

It is impossible to recognize here the often involved but often fascinating style of Gerbert's letters, where his wide literary culture and his good knowledge of the classical texts available at the time are almost

⁵ H. PRATT LATTIN (1961), p. 306

constantly apparent and determine a dense and never trivial way of writing, even in the short messages aiming at the fast transmission of an important information.

A literary analysis of these texts is therefore almost useless, except for the scholars studying the formalistic styles of the Roman *Curia*. It is instead very stimulating to study their content, both in order to understand the ecclesiastic policy of the Holy See around the year 1000 and to analyze Gerbert's mental evolution after becoming Pope. We shall not belabour on a couple of messages (concerning the revolt of Orte and the stealing in Hadrian's tomb), that are only interesting in that they are indicating the great weakness of the Pope in the recurring Roman crises, marked also by the fact that some privileges, between the end of 1001 and the beginning of 1002, were released in Todi and not in Rome.

For what concerns ecclesiastical policy, the most present and interesting element is the tendency (certainly not peculiar of Sylvester's papacy, but definitely maintained and systematically sustained by him) to strengthen the autonomy of Benedictine monasteries by the concession of important exemptions from obligations deriving from the existence of an episcopal jurisdiction on the territories where abbeys were located. This policy is extended upon all areas of Christianity, as shown by privileges for Helmarshausen, Seon, Quedlinburg, Lorsch, Fulda, Andlau in Germany, for Stavelot and Malmédy in Lothar's reign, for Déols, Langogne, Vezelay and Bourgueil in France, for Leno, Arezzo and San Salvatore dell'Amiata in Italy, for Sant Cugat in Catalonia. It usually amounts to recognizing possession of a large number of patrimonial estate, in granting freedom of the monks in their choice of an abbot and in exemption from control of the local bishop, as well as of all lay lords gravitating on the territory where the abbey is placed. The payment of a fee to Saint Peter, rather than an exaction, is a formal marker of direct dependence from Rome, and therefore it works as a guarantee of freedom from other powers.

Still within the context of ecclesiastical policy, but with slightly different features, significantly dependent on the different territorial situations, Sylvester acknowledges also some feudal lordships, like that exercised by the bishop of Vercelli on Santhià county or by Count Daiferio's family on Terracina county. In both cases the strategic interest of the Church is apparent, but the solutions adopted are of a quite different nature: the first example is more "political", the second has a clearly "military" content. Similar considerations might be advanced regarding the very important privileges granted to the bishop of Urgel (who is even presently the Lord of Andorra, jointly with the Head of the French state, because of this and related documents) and to the bishop of Gerona.

A special attention towards Catalan bishoprics is certainly worth being noticed, and is confirmed also by the document addressed to Geribert, viscount of Barcelona. This attention may signal not only the strategic interest deriving from the nature of Catalonia as a frontier March at the border with the Islamic world, but also the ancient and deep link established by Gerbert with the Spanish Mark during his stay in the years 967-970.

Sylvester II also intervenes on those themes where the Pope may act as the supreme arbitrator of all religious questions. He always emphasizes strongly such role of the Pontiff, as in the case where an abbot should be suspended because of simony (a document showing also other reasons of interest), in the case of reinstatement of the bishop of Puy-en-Velay, in the message addressed to Odilon, abbot of Cluny, and concerning the validity of the acts of a deposed bishop, in the call to order of the bishop of Asti and in the messages to the Doge of Venice and to the Patriarch of Grado about the reform of the Venetian clergy.

We are now left with the task of examining a last small group of documents, also aimed at establishing the papal authority on issues of ecclesiastical discipline. We selected them because we are especially interested in their deep psychological meaning. All the acts we have selected carry a direct or indirect reference to the long human experience of Gerbert in France and particularly in Rheims. We have already mentioned an act, released in May 999, concerning the suspension of an abbot. Here we only want to recall from it a single sentence, sounding *Illos autem libros, in quibus specialem sententiam legimus, in Gallia relictos recolimus*. In these few words we still perceive all the regret of Gerbert, the intellectual who has been forced to leave his much beloved volumes in a country where he knows he will never go back.

Much more interesting is the letter written in December 999, where Sylvester II definitively confirms his old opponent Arnulph as archbishop of Rheims. Gerbert is now silent, and only the Pope is speaking. Pope Sylvester cannot (and is not willing to) contradict what has been sanctioned by his predecessors, even if those sentences were clearly adverse to the archbishop Gerbert. *Tua abdicatio Romano assensu caruit*, is Sylvester's statement, and his comment is *Est enim Petro ea summa facultas, ad quam nulla mortalium aequiparari valeat felicitas*.

Here the notary is writing at dictation by the Pope: each single word is carefully weighted, and we can also imagine the author's pain. Nevertheless, a moral judgement against Arnulph is clearly present and perceptible, and it is especially effective since it is completely committed to the *forum spirituale*. Sylvester's words are formally offering a guarantee of protection, but they are also burning insults: *sed nostra te ubique auctoritas muniat, etiamsi conscientiae reatus accurrat*.

Another message addressed to Arnulph contains the order not to deny the Eucharist to anybody who is dying repentant, even if he asked to be buried in the cemetery of St. Remi's monastery (a place obviously dear to Gerbert). Also this message appears to be filled with hinted reproofs to somebody who seems to be forgetting (because of some local power game) the basic Christian charity imposing not to leave a dying brother without religious assistance.

Last but not least, we want to consider the letter written between the end of 1001 and the beginning of 1002 to Ascelin bishop of Laon, in order to summon him to Rome at Easter time, in the occasion of a synod where the bishop should try to clear himself of the several imputations pending on his head. In particular, he was accused of an attempt to betray the archbishop Arnulph and to take him prisoner. Actually Ascelin was indeed the author of an undefined number of treasons and attempted treasons.

The most (in)famous and successful of Ascelin's treasons was the one that, in the year 991, allowed Hugues Capet to capture his opponent Charles of Lorraine and recover Laon, the virtual capital of the reign, thus consolidating his grip and his sovereignty on France. Much less successful was Ascelin's subsequent attempt to betray also Hugues, in 993, in favour of Otto III, with the purpose of taking possession of Rheims, at the time already disputed between Gerbert and Arnulph.

Nevertheless, the bishop of Laon appears to be as much unbeatable as incorrigible: in 995 he had already recovered his episcopal powers, and a few years later he was ready to attempt a new treason against Arnulph. A singular irony of history shows us the same Ascelin, almost thirty years later, writing the *Carmen ad Rotbertum regem*⁶, where he sets forth the theory of the three orders of society (*oratores, bellatores e laboratores*), the ideal foundation of the feudal society, and he convincingly praises a social system based on the sacredness and inviolability of the principle of mutual faithfulness between lords and vassals.

To this purpose I would like to quote, with some vanity, the final words of my pseudo-autobiographical novel on Gerbert's life:

When Ascelin's treason (no other name was possible, notwithstanding the great advantage coming from it to the whole country) appeared to me in all its impious greatness, I thought I would have been no more capable of speaking to him. However I soon considered (and I was probably not the only one to do this) that nobody was coming spotless out of that story, and that the bishop of Laon, assuming for himself the role of Judas, had accomplished an essential task in the Plan of Salvation: without Judas there is no Redemption, and without redemption every man is damned.

⁶ ADALBÉRON DI LAON (2004)

*Is there possibly a place, in the Father's House, also for him who accepted to see his own name cursed without an end in order to allow the Kingdoms's Gates to be opened for all mankind?*⁷

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⁷ P. ROSSI (2008) , English translation by the Author