An approach of the Pseudo-cyprian dissertations: the case of *Adversus Aleatores*

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Introductory notes

The spirit of dispute with randomness and the approach of random is a spirit that can be located in a great number of occupations of the postclassical world. We refer to a period where Tyche herself is a deified entity (and not just a sense), the favour of which can assure to someone a pleasant life. That which is particularly interesting is that already from the Hellenistic period and the rapid development and diffusion of stoic philosophy, the sense of cosmic order "displace" randomness, replacing it with a strict determinism, and the occupation with games of chance in the Hellenistic world may indicate a difficulty in adaption to the established order and to the philosophical background of stoicism, a resistance to the worldview that stoicism has created and which was diffused in the public sphere of the Hellenistic countries.

The Apologetic Literature has known works which were related to the justification of the Christian faith and its defense from external attacks. In the apologetic literature emerge at the same time underlying attacks against the way of life of the non-Christians, which aim at highlighting the antinomies which derive from the non-Christian way of life. More known are the references of the early Christian Fathers to issues of philosophy, however, a part of this polemic was focused on the way of life of heathens. The treatise under examination is exactly this: an

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approach (in the light of Christian ethics) to the Greco-Roman public life. Specifically, it aims at the denouncing of a vicious and deceptive way of entertainment.

What's the point of the prepositional determination "adversus"? This term is generally used in other works of the so called "pseudo-cyprianic", but also in the whole apologetic literature and means *against*. It is about a polemic which strictly and explicitly declares a part of the work's style. Many of the scholars do not accept that the original title of the work is this, but if we consider the aggressive style and the titles of the other works of the writer (e.g. Adversus iudaeos), then the view which accepts it as the original title seems quite possible. The *aleatores* on the other hand refers to those who visit the *alea*, the place which accommodates these games of chance. The word *"alea"* denotes at the same time and other things, such as the board game itself, for the evolution of which was necessary the use of cubes (dice). And in the Greek language the word «*κυβεία*» has problematic and difficult to interpret renderings. For instance, it can denote the game with dice, but it can also denote the whole practice of participating to a game of chance which squeezes money out of the public. In Greek antiquity the infinitive «*κυβεύειν*» denoted in the first place the occupation with dice, but also the game with knucklebones used as dice or coins. The word *aleator* is used not only in the laws of democratic Rome, but it is also attested to the Codex Justinianus and denotes someone who is systematically occupied with dice[1].

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1. In Eastern Roman empire the occupation with dice was very popular. The historian Theophanes refers about Theodosius I that: «[...] *τὸν τῆς Ἀρτέμιδος ναὸν ἐποίησε ταβλοπαρόχιον τοῖς κοττίζουσιν. ὅστις τόπος κέκληται ἔως τῆς νῦν ὁ ναός* [...]». *Χρονικόν*, 345, 16-345, 18. Famous for their occupation with dice were also the emperors Leo Phokas, Constantine VIII etc. Justinianus charged the bishops (specialists in moral breaches in public space, who carried on the work of the Roman praetors) with the supervision of the observance of the provisions of the Codex). We think it also advisable to mention that the translations from Dionysius Exiguus (inspirer of the term anno domini) were taken in 774 A.D. from Pope Andrianus I (*Regulae ecclisiasticae sanctorum apostolorum*) and were given as compilations of prescriptive content to Charlemagne, who strengthened them and converted them into laws in 802, aiming at the «*ἀνόθευτο*» of the clergy in the Synod of Aachen. Among them are the canons 42 and 43 which excluded the clerics from the occupation with dice.

1. Evidences about the place, time and the redactor of the treatise

i. The redactor

The redactor of *Adversus aletores* remains unknown to us. Many hypotheses have been put forward and "trouble" the researchers already from the end of 19th century. Already from 1871 and the occupation of W. Hartel[2] with the text starts a conversation in relation to the mystery concerning the person of the writer, whereas another researcher of the text, A. Harnack[3], considered that it is clearly about a bishop, not just any bishop: it's about a bishop who has been authorized «γιὰ νὰ μιλᾶ στὸ ὄνομα ὅλων τῶν ἐπισκόπων», which immediately directs attention to Rome or to Carthage. The issue was that the edition of W. Hartel but also that of A. Harnack seemed to have problems which related to the re-establishment of the text from the codes, as E. Wöllflin[4].

With the passage of time there have been many other researchers who led the research to a convergence or divergence (J. Haussleiter, F. Funk etc.)[5], with a crucial study of the text from W. Sanday[6]. For W. Sanday there is no doubt: the redactor of *Adversus aleatores* is a bishop from Carthage subsequent to Cyprian or a Roman who uses an African "formula" of writing. The redactor of the present treatise traces back quite often to the works of Cyprian of Carthage (hence the "pseudo-cyprian"), so often that we are not allowed to be able to speak of simple coincidences. Until today there have been suggested many names such as of bishop Miltiades, Callistos, Celerinos, Victor etc. With the data

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2. *S. Thasci Caecili Cypriani opera omnia*, recensuit et commentario critico instruxit G. Hartel (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 3/3), Vindobonae 1871.

3. A. von Harnack, *Der pseudocyprianische Tractat De aleatoribus, die älteste lateinische christliche Schrift, ein Werk des römischen Bischofs Victor I.* (Saec. II.) [TU 5/1], Leipzig 1888.

4. E. Wölfflin, «Pseudo-Cyprianus (Victor) de aleatoribus», *Archiv für lateinische Lexikographie und Grammatik* 5 (1888), pp. 487-499.

5. J. Haussleiter, „Ist Victor I von Rom der Verfasser der Schrift adversus aleatores?", *Theologisches Literaturblatt* 10 (1889), pp. 41-43; 49-51; 225-229 and F. X. Funk, „Die Schrift De aleatoribus", *Historisches Jahrbuch* 10 (1889).

6. W. Sanday, "Notes on the Text and Date of the Aleatoribus", *The Classical Review* 3, 3 (1889), pp. 126-128.

that we have until today the identity of the author is not indisputably demonstrable.

ii. Time

The scholars considered the treatise under investigation as the unique opportunity, so as to maintain that they have found "the oldest work of Latin ecclesiastical literature". Considering that external, in relation to this treatise, facts are not treasured up in it [except for the cryptic reference of the author to " the end of persecutions", an element which led some scholars (as A. Miodonski[7]) to support that the work is a product of 313-320 A.D., a precarious hypothesis], however, there are some linguistic elements which could lead us not to a very strict date, but to a very satisfactory approach with regard to the time of its redaction. From W. Sanday's researches follows that there are words which are used and which appear also in the ecclesiastical-theological vocabulary after the period of Cyprian of Carthage. Sandy cites three examples, which are very important: the words *oraculum*, *deitas*[8] and *deificus*. The fact that the text is characterized by the undeviating attitude and the strict word[9] of his redactor (removing it from the apologetic "formulas") gives the impression of a conventionalization at an early stage, elements which an ecclesiastical text of the 1st or the 2nd century could hardly have.

A key element is also the difficulty to discern between the New and Old Testament, as also the quotations from *Revelation* and from *The Shepherd of Hermas*. Some have chosen to approach the work reversely: They set as *terminus ante quem* the Synod of Elvira (appr. 305-306 A. D.), in which they had been integrated canons with prohibitive provisions against the practice of dice, however, this estimation "drags" Adversus

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7. A. Miodonski, „Zur Kritik der ältesten lateinischen Predigt Adversus aleatores", in: *Commentationes Woelfflinianae*, Leipzig 1891, pp. 371-376.
8. For the word *deitas*, Arnivios and saint Augustine apologize for using it, since they consider it as modernism.
9. The austerity of the redactor of the text created the feeling that it's about an adherent (or a person from the circle) of Novatian, the great theologian with the enormous contribution to the constitution of the Christian Latin language. The style of the text is proper to the austerity that the works of Novatian exhibited against Lapsi.

aleatores in the depths of time[10]. It's almost certain that the text under investigation has been written some decades earlier. In any case, the multiple uses of non-biblical texts (many of which have not been found today) denote an archaic origin, however the degree of similarity with the works of Cyprian denotes the subsequent appearance of the redactor of the work. The most likely redaction of the work is dated at the end of the 3rd century A.D.

iii. Place

Initially there were two basic assumptions: either that Adversus aleatores was written in Rome or in Carthage. Besides it is known that Carthage[11] was the birthplace of the Latin Christian literature (at least during the first post-Christian centuries). There was the conviction from the end of 19th century that Adverrsus aleatores was the earliest sample of Latin ecclesiastical literature, since it was supported that it was written by the Bishop of Rome Victor A΄. For many reasons it would have been important if we knew with certainty that the redactor of the treatise is Victor A΄, since that would have given some crucial information about the Latin early church, the vulgar Latin which is used in the text, the place of the Bishop of Rome in an era that great changes were boded etc., but this assumption is removed and therefore this work is subsequent. With reference to the place we would support-admittedly with enough risk – that between Rome and Carthage the second option seems more probable.

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10. According to the ΜΓ΄ canon of the Holy Apostles: «ὑποδιάκονος ἢ ἀναγνώστης ἢ ψάλτης ὁμοίαν ποιῶν [παίζων δηλ. κύβους] παυσάσθω ἢ ἀφοριζέσθω». Also, too a laic, as the 6th Ecumenical Synod with the ν' canon stipulates.
11. There, were written the earliest Christian texts in Latin, such as *Octavius* by Minucius Felix. Moreover, it was in Africa that some of the earlier translations of the Holy Bible in Latin, were realized, and Latin was also used for the liturgical needs of the Church.

2. The character and the language of the work

Adversus aleatores or *De aleatoribus* is a rhetoric-confessional treatise, which seems to address more to the Christian congregation than to single recipients. The fact that it's about a careful speech, which in the past has been delivered in front of the flock of the redactor, cannot be excluded, since the character of the treatise is concise. It is also clear that, if the target of the title of this polemic treatise is the dice, its' content must be understood in a dilative way: the pseudo-Cyprian attacks in fact to every kind of game of chance.

Adversus aleatores is important for another reason: it introduces a dialectic which is related to a special subject of public life and with this way becomes the predecessor of a whole literature, which aims at the connection of the games of chance with the sin - a connection which later influenced many scholars, the first of which was Bernardino da Siena, where in 1425 wrote a treatise against the games of chance[12]. For da Siena there is a whole "initiation" about game, which resembles religious ritual: the believers are the bystanders, the priests the players and the book of liturgy the dice, which are presented having cyclic marks, resembling the marks that the nails left on Lord's limbs. Another scholar who was occupied with the issue of the games of chance, was the preacher Peter Northbrook, who in his concise treatise under the title: *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes*, with *Other Idle Pastimes* attacks practices which survive within Christian ethics and which may drive people to secular morality[13]. In antiquity it was not paid enough attention to *Adversus aletores*, probably because the work was referring to a worthless subject: the games of chance, and for one more reason: the sense of randomness, identified with the "indefinite", was something so fluid, that seemed as if it was not susceptible of more investigation. The re-investigation of the work, in connection with the

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12. Da Siena placed also chess among the games of chance. *Bernardini Senensis opera omnia: Quadragesimale de Christiana religione: sermones I-XL*, P. M. Perantoni (ed.), Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1950.

13. J. Northbrooke, *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes*, J. Payne Collier (ed.), AMS Press, New York 1971.

new treatises which were based on it, led *Adversus aleatores* to the place that it has today, namely to be recognized as one of the earlier texts of Latin Christian literature[14].

The somehow "awkward" use of the vulgar Latin (*Latina vulgare*) causes particular problems in the attempt to study *Adversus aleatores*, an issue that many other interpreters and commentators of the work notice. The redactor of the text follows consistently the style of Tertullian and of Cyprian of Carthage, to such an extent that it would not be a verbal exaggeration to say that a more attentive approach concerning grammatical issues would turn the text into an important *imitatio*. In this text the use of grammar and syntax of the Latin language is "unstable" (an element which is found in many African acquisitions of Latin) and approximates to its complete collapse, - elements which to a certain extend "devitalize" the text. The author is driven by an inclination to evoke different and scrapy parts from the Old and the New Testament, as also from texts which seem today to have been lost or to not have been integrated in the canon, to such an extent that scholars –as M. Minasi[15]– to be ready to attribute to the text a compilation's character. The text looks like a circular which is edited in a crucial moment, as it is clear from the introduction of the text: "*Multa et magna nobis ob uniuersam fraternitatem cura est* […]".

3. The parts of the treatise

The text, which consists of eleven small capitals trisects to a preface (chap. 1st-4th: the redactor draws attention to the threatening occupation with dice, introducing us with an abrupt way the subject), to a t*ractatus* the part where the main argumentation is developed (chap. 5th-10th: the redactor describes in detail the behaviors of the players, what constitutes a sin, the relation of dice with evil, the consequences of this practice and

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14. Pseudo-Cyprian is not mentioned in the works of the later eastern Fathers like John Chrysostom or Basil the Great, who had also referred to the issue of the games of chance.
15. I. M. Minasi, «L'opuscolo Contra aleatores scritto da un Pontefice romano del II secolo», *La Civiltà Cattolica* 15 (1892), pp. 469-489.

generally the potential risks) and to an epilogue (chap. 11th: in this last chapter the redactor describes the means of evading and returning to the Christian community).

Although the text has a monotonous and strict character, the author manages to fluctuate its depth with the use of harsh characterizations, appeals to emotion or to authority, to the scriptures etc. The evidence mentioned above forced A. Harnack to characterize the style of the author "clumsy" regarding the connection of the sentences and the way of arguing. However, the subject is dealt with clarity. The vocabulary is a return to the works of Tertullian and Cyprian, with the specific distinction of the incorrect use of the Latin language, the wrong endings, the incorrect use of some prepositions, the discrepancy between pronouns and adjectives and the grammatical errors (incorrect use of conjugations). In general the morphological-syntactic irregularities betray ignorance of the Latin language and probably its use exclusively for the writing of these treatises (elements which the work shares with other pseudo-cyprian treatises).

4. Epilogue's notes

Christianism never objected to the notion of game, with the exception of the games of chance or their brutality (an element which Tertullian also demonstrates in *De Spetaculis*). An element which rendered this practice hostile to Christianism, was the notion of "surrender" to random. The behaviors of the players relate to the hope of acquiring money and this practice acquires a magic hypostasis. Constant evocations to goddess Tyche, punitive curses against the adversaries etc., constitute elements which Christianism was at the same readjusting to the field of philosophy, where it was trying to adjust the stoic cosmic order under the shelter of the will of the one God[16]. Thus, the game became a mode

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16. The players wore jewels and talismans which, they believed, could subdue fortune and bring it round. A characteristic example is that of saint John Chrysostom, who was angered when he was meeting people who were bearing coins with the portrait of Alexander the Great, which were-supposedly-sources of "good fortune".

of evocation of things which in the collective Christian imaginary have already been integrated as "demon possessed", since from the moment that there existed nothing else beyond the will of God, it acquired a pure relation with evil and the gods of the Graeco-Roman world were for certain something like that. Fortune itself seems as if it "transgresses" God's plan, as if it constitutes an opportunity to come out of a world which is conquered by Christian religiousness[17]. There was also another characteristic feature that the games of chance concealed: Many times there have been cases where some claimed that they could "see" the future through a cast of the dice and that concealed many serious dangers even for the state itself, since it introduced supposedly the ability to know things which should never have become known (like the death of an emperor).

Our occupation with this treatise is an attempt to "update" the early Christian literature, since it's about a useful reading, which aimed at the admonition of people who fell into the "trap" of the games of chance, whereas at the same time brings new information concerning the early Latin ecclesiastical literature.

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17. In antiquity the same practice of magic was based to a great extent on the grace of gods and on fortune.