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Pseudo-Dionysius' Concept of Hierarchy and the Imperial Cult in the Early Roman Empire

Abstract

This article focuses on the relationship between the imperial cult in pagan Rome and the heavenly hierarchy taught by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. The latter's thought played a significant role in the construction of the medieval image of the world. Medieval reflection on the state and law drew from it as well. Therefore, possible analogies between the imperial cult and the philosophy of *Corpus Dionysiacum* would indicate an indirect influence that the imperial cult of the emperor had on certain later ideas about state power, on the legitimacy of certain forms of social and constitutional organization, and on prophetic visions inspiring social and political movements.

Against this background, the article compares the emperor's genius (as well as the imperial virtues and the emperor's *numen*) with the immaterial beings described by the Areopagite. It reveals clear parallels regarding the hierarchical construction of geniuses in the imperial cult of ancient Rome and Pseudo-Dionysius' Angels, Names of God, and divine providences. The similarities in mediation between the human world and the divine reality regarding the granting of creative power and supernatural knowledge are also associated with this structure. In both cases, the divine element (genius and heavenly beings) has a historiosophical aspect, consisting of justification of belief about care that the deity exercises over the universal history of mankind.

The conducted research constitutes an impulse for further research in the field of political aspects of medieval angelology.

Keywords: Emperor's genius, providence, Pseudo-Dionysius, hierarchy, daimon

Słowa kluczowe: geniusz cesarza, opatrność, Pseudo-Dionizy, hierarchia, daimon

1. Introduction

This study compares the hierarchical structure of the universe in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite with selected aspects of the imperial cult of geniuses and *numen* in ancient Rome. The proposed approach is based on the belief that the Areopagite's

thought possesses some similarities to the religious content in the political philosophy of the early empire. Thus, the choice of parallel threads is dictated by the criterion of relevance from the point of view of political doctrine, and the basic thesis of this text can be reduced to the statement that the hierarchical structure of beings in Pseudo-Dionysius contained elements similar in content to the imperial religious politics of the emperor's genius.

In the description of the concept of imperial cult, I shall rely mainly on sources from the principate era. This approach is due to the necessity to reach the earliest approach to the imperial genius before the concept was expanded in later reflection. In turn, to present the views of Pseudo-Dionysius, I will mainly use the writings *Celestial Hierarchy* (*Peri tīs ouranias hierarchias*) and *The Divine Names* (*Peri theiōn onomatōn*). From the point of view of my research, the following works are also important: *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (*Peri tīs ekklesiastikīs hierarchias*), *Mystical Theology* (*Peri mystikīs thelogias*).

The proposed topic seems important from the point of view of the study of the political thought of antiquity and the Middle Ages. It must be stated that although the very thought of Pseudo-Dionysius did not focus on political issues, it to a large extent strengthened the philosophical background of the hierarchical image of the world in the works of medieval authors.¹ Many later theologians, philosophers and mystics were influenced by the Areopagite. We find inspiration from *Corpus Dionysiacum* among medieval philosophers: Hugo of Saint Victor, Thomas Gallus, Robert Grosseteste, Albert the Great, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas or Dante, as well as mystics: Master Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, John van Ruysbroeck, and John of the Cross.² The image of the world as a great hierarchy, culminating in God himself, dominated medieval thought in many aspects. It also served as a matrix for medieval philosophical, legal, political and social constructions. Hence, a positive response to the thesis of this article presented above may turn out to be useful in a struggle to better trace the issue concerning the influence of the principate's political philosophy on medieval authors.

Moreover, the hierarchy described by Pseudo-Dionysius not only inspired the hierarchical social order, but could also be an impulse for prophetic concepts of a political dimension. The point of contact between medieval prophetism and the hierarchy of Pseudo-Dionysius is the concept of an angel developed by the Areopagite. By combining the patristic research regarding angels³ with enneadic systems of beings in Neoplatonic philosophy,⁴ the author of *Corpus Dionysiacum* created the figure of an angel as a being participating in the chain of beings between the human world and God, remaining in the area of transcendence. The angelology he described, remained inextricably linked with the vision of the cosmic hierarchy and, with it, passed into medieval thought, and thus it defined and established Christian angelology. Moreover, this angelology was also politically engaged. It seems reasonable to suspect that the creators of the political concepts of

¹ Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, 70–5.

² With the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius more broadly see: Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 29–38.

³ The catalogues of angels were presented by such thinkers as Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom or Ephrem the Syrian. See: Louth, *Denys the Aeropagite*, 36; Oleschko, *Aniolów*, 50–8.

⁴ The dependence of Pseudo-Dionysius' thought on the philosophy of Proclus, who considers the world of angels from a Neoplatonic perspective, is particularly clear. The enneadic systems of beings used by the Areopagite can also be found in Porphyry and Iamblichus. See: Stepień, "Przedmowa", 12 and 55; Procl., "Elements of Theology", 125–36.

the angelic pope and the angelic emperor had the image of angels created by the theology of Pseudo-Dionysius before their eyes.⁵

The above observations form the basis for the belief in the relevance of the question posed by this article, whether some elements of the hierarchy structure in Pseudo-Dionysius have their counterparts in the political philosophy of the pagan empire; especially in the hierarchical structure of geniuses and the parallel between the genius and the angel, drawn against this background.

2. The concept of a genius

The noun *genius*, *genī* comes from the verb *gignere* [*gigno, gignere, genui, gentium*] meaning to beget, to give birth. Hence, in the most basic version, the genius was the guardian deity of the father of a Roman family, responsible for fertility and prosperity. In addition to geniuses, other domestic deities were also known in pagan Rome, such as *lares*, *penates*, or *iuno* (being the female equivalent of a genius).⁶

Geniuses were a separate category of deities worshiped publicly in pagan Rome. Their specificity was based on a special contact with certain people. Henry Fairfield Burton identifies a genius as a duplicate of a man, who is above man, takes care of him and determines his earthly existence. The cult of the imperial genius was equivalent to the deification of the ruler during his lifetime, as evidenced by the equal rank of oaths made to the emperor's genius and other deities of the traditional pantheon.⁷ In turn, Emil Beurlier notes that the imperial genius was something similar to a divine element inhabiting the person of the ruler.⁸ The imperial cult, however, was not limited to geniuses. It also included the imperial virtues and *numen* of the ruler. However, all these beings remained in close ontological and conceptual connection with each other.⁹

The cult of geniuses in ancient Rome stretched back to the archaic times. The earliest known manifestation of it was the bloody sacrifice made in 218 BC in order to provide supernatural protection against the dangers of the Second Punic War.¹⁰ Initially, the genius was worshiped privately and counted among the deities called *Lares*. The family *Lar* took care of the entire house, property and residents remaining under the authority of the head of the family.¹¹ It was a common belief that individual objects, animals, places, and even political institutions, such as the senate and the Roman people (*genius populi romani*) and the city of Rome (*genius Urbis Romae*), also had their own geniuses.¹²

⁵ The reader will find a rich study on medieval prophetism and its political significance in: Grzeszczak, *Pomiędzy utopią*.

⁶ Flower, *The Dancing Lares*, 46ff; McIntyre, *A Family on Gods*, 93ff.

⁷ Burton, "The Worship", 84.

⁸ Beurlier, *Essai sur le Culte*, 45.

⁹ More on the topic in: Mattingly, "The Roman «Virtues»", 106–13.

¹⁰ Weinstock, *Divus Julius*, 205.

¹¹ Gillmaister, Musiał, *W cieniu Kapitolu*, 93ff.

¹² *Ibidem*, 96–7; Sajkowski, "Genius Augusti", 51–2.

Rendering the cult of the genius public is related to the social changes of the republic's twilight, which also included religious issues. It was then that the genius became associated with the person of Emperor Octavian Augustus. According to the testimony given by Cassius Dio, who lived at the turn of the 2nd and 3rd century, in the year 30 (or 29) BC the senate decided that henceforth every private and public feast was to be opened by a libation in honour of Augustus. The honours thus rendered, celebrated the victory at Actium. It should be noted, however, that although Cassius Dio did not specify the details of this cult, it is assumed that it was related precisely to the imperial genius.¹³ The truth of this belief is confirmed by a much earlier source, namely a fragment of Petronius' *Satyricon*, where at the feast of Trimalchio, during a libation, it is the emperor's genius that appears next to the household *lares*.¹⁴

When, after the death of Lepidus in 12 BC, the highest priestly function *pontifex maximus* was entrusted to Octavian, he connected the cult of genius with his person even more. Princes resigned from living in the house of the high priest, and made part of the palace on the Palatine a place open to the faithful. By that means, he made his private cult of genius, previously performed in the home *lararium*, public.¹⁵ Already as a *pontifex maximus* in the years 8–7 BC, Octavian decided to reorganize the cult of *lares compitales*, i.e. deities guarding the street corners and crossroads. They were associated with the person of the ruler, thus becoming *lares Augusti*. At the same time, a figure of the emperor's genius was to accompany them. The care for the development of a new cult was entrusted to priestly colleges (*collegia compitalicia*) specially created for this purpose. Games in honour of the *genius Augusti* were also established at that time. An important stage in the development of the imperial cult was the year 2 BC, when Octavian assumed the title of *pater patriae*. Then his role in relation to the state became closer to that of *pater familias* in the Roman family. The consequence was the recognition of the emperor's genius as the general genius of the entire nation, similar in essence to the genius of the Roman people.¹⁶ Worth quoting is the observation made by Ittai Gradel in his study of imperial worship in the Roman religion. In his opinion, the Roman *pater familias* in his own family had the status corresponding to the Hellenistic monarch.¹⁷ Thus, Octavian, assuming the title of *pater patriae*, incorporated some elements of the political thought of Hellenistic monarchies into Roman political philosophy.¹⁸

From the Christian perspective, a particularly important manifestation of the imperial cult was the order to swear oaths on the emperor's genius. This obligation appeared occasionally since the time of Augustus.¹⁹ According to Martin Charlesworth, during the

¹³ Cass. Dio, *Roman History*, LI, 54–5.

¹⁴ Petron., *Sat.*, 60.

¹⁵ Suet., *Aug.*, 3; Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus*, 154–7; Taylor, "The Worship", 124–6; Taylor, *Divinity*, 190.

¹⁶ Cass. Dio, *Roman History*, LV, 10, 10; Taylor, *Divinity*, 200.

¹⁷ Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 132ff.

¹⁸ Taylor, *Divinity*, 190.

¹⁹ Emperor Trajan resigns from taking oaths before his genius. Hadrian and Antoninus Pius are also following in his footsteps. The cult of genius experienced a renaissance in the times of Marcus Aurelius, to whom the Senate granted the privilege of worshipping his *genio Imperatoris*. From now on, the cult of genius will be a permanent religious practice in the Roman state. See: Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 192.

reign of Domitian, oaths by imperial genius were part of the divine worship of the ruler.²⁰ This position supports the observation that the persecution of Christians and Jews in AD 93 for refusing to make sacrifices before the image of a genius coincides with a period of weakening faith in the divine ruler (especially evident in the end of the Flavian reign).²¹ Weinstock notes that the sensitivity of Caligula, Nero, or Domitian regarding the cult of one's own genius was motivated by the desire to tie one's cult strongly with the religion of the state.²²

It can be assumed that this aspect heavily burdened the association of the Roman genius with the Christian fallen angel. The necessity to worship the emperor's genius made Christians consider it an idol and a false god – namely, the devil. And the terror accompanying his worship provided irrefutable arguments confirming the diabolical provenance of the imperial cult. However, it was not the Christians who identified the genius with the demon.²³ There is a view present in the literature on the subject, that the genius' origin reached the Greek term *daimon*.²⁴ Based on this opinion, it can be assumed that genius was understood as one of the non-corporeal beings that mediated between gods and people. From the time of Plato, these substances were known to philosophers, who called them demons. It seems that the figures of demons came to Christianity thanks to Philo of Alexandria, who combined them with the Old Testament image of angels. He argued that it was the custom of Moses to name as angels the same beings that the pagan philosophers knew as demons.²⁵ In Middle Platonism, the science regarding demons, who played the role of intermediaries between the human world and the reality of the gods, was developed by Plutarch and Apuleius. This theme was taken up and developed by Neoplatonic thought. Iamblichus puts demons in a row with archangels, angels, and heroes.²⁶ Much attention is also paid to them by Proclus, whose heir was Pseudo-Dionysius.²⁷ This philosopher organizes these beings in the enneadic system,²⁸ so did the Areopagite.

All this seems to confirm our earlier intuition about the ontological and conceptual relationship between the figure of an angel in Pseudo-Dionysius and the imperial genius. It is possible to trace the path of the transfer of religious images related to imperial worship from the genius in the age of the principate to the concept of angelology in *Corpus Dionysiacum*.

²⁰ Charlesworth, "Some Observations", 28, 32ff.

²¹ *Ibidem*, 33.

²² Weinstock, *Divus Julius*, 214–7.

²³ It should be noted that the concept of *daimon* in Greek philosophical thought was free from the negative associations that characterize the figure of the demon in Christianity.

²⁴ Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 9ff.

²⁵ Philon d'Alexandrie, *Les oeuvres*, 25; Stępień, "Przedmowa", 40.

²⁶ Jamblique, *Les mystères d'Égypte*, I, 4.

²⁷ Manikowski, "Warunki doświadczenia mistycznego", 10.

²⁸ Stępień, "Neoplatońska koncepcja", 112; Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 63.

3. Hierarchical structure

The question of hierarchy is at the centre of interest for Pseudo-Dionysius. According to him, the world of creatures is a storied structure, the top of which disappears at the heights of divine transcendence.²⁹ Although the hierarchy covers all creation, including animals, plants and inanimate beings, the Areopagite nevertheless focuses on the description of non-corporeal beings whose world extends beyond human reality. However, the use of the name “angel” in relation to all these creatures is not entirely precise,³⁰ because the substances described by the author of *Corpus Dionysiacum* also bear other names. Dionysius fills the heavenly world with a great harvest of beings who are “around Him [the Creator, Divine – M.T.]”, and “have participated in Him, in many forms”³¹; in this number, apart from the angelic beings, there are also powers, energies, divine names and divine providences. In the theology of the Areopagite, the term “divine names” refers not so much to God, who is beyond all knowledge, but to beings directly derived from him. These names – providences, powers and energies – have a function similar to that of angels, hence they participate in the hierarchy between God’s transcendence and the immanence of the world. With their help, God contacts the material creation and acts in history.³²

The pattern used by the Areopagite is not reflected in the Bible and does not come from the texts of the apostolic fathers. On the contrary, the structure and ontology of the hierarchy in Pseudo-Dionysius are pagan in origin. While ordering the heavens, Dionysius uses an enneadic scheme, consisting of three threefold systems.³³

In the applied hierarchy method, Pseudo-Dionysius discovered the key to understanding of the whole reality. As it turns out, enneadic levels of being concern not only the heavenly world but also the Church and human society. The angelological aspect is particularly evident in the hierarchical character of the priesthood. The sacraments, priesthood and laity levels described by the Areopagite reflect the storied order of angelic beings.³⁴

This order leads from the general to the specific; from the unity of supreme divine to the multiplicity of creatures.³⁵ The position in the hierarchy depends on the degree of participation in the divine. Thus, what is closer to God is also more general. It is only in the process of descent that gradual multiplication of beings appear, with an ever greater degree of differentiation and detail.

²⁹ Pseudo-Dionysius, “Celestial Hierarchy”, III, 1.

³⁰ Strictly speaking, the name “Angels” belongs to only one category of existence, additionally placed at the lowest level of the heavenly hierarchy. See: *ibidem*, VI, 2.

³¹ *Ibidem*, IV, 1.

³² Stępień, “Przedmowa”, 53.

³³ And so we have the triads: 1. Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones; 2. Authorities, Lordships, Powers; 3. Angels, Archangels, Principalities.

³⁴ Pseudo-Dionysius, “Celestial Hierarchy”, XII; “Ecclesiastical Hierarchy”, I, 1–6. Pseudo-Dionysius gives three levels of the church hierarchy, which in turn are divided into three consecutive ranks. These are: sacraments – baptism, Eucharist, consecration of oil; clergy – bishops, priests, deacons; laity – monks, faithful, cleansing (catechumens, penitents and possessed).

³⁵ Stępień, “Przedmowa”, 55.

The geniuses worshiped in pagan Rome had a similar hierarchical structure. From the point of view of our interests, a very interesting interpretation of the ontological structure of geniuses was presented by Tadeusz Zieliński in the first half of the 20th century. According to this author, Roman deities were, on the one hand, subject to division (differentiation), and on the other hand, integration, that is, merging with other gods. Genius belonged to the latter category.³⁶ The merging was based on that, that the deities who looked after the most detailed things connected to form geniuses of a higher, general level, who, in turn, followed the same process at successive levels, and so on. The scheme of the hierarchy of geniuses follows the Roman social order. From the time of the kingdom, the family was the basic unit of society. The genius of the father of the family was therefore the first combined deity, uniting in itself the individual geniuses of people and things under the authority of the head of the family. At the higher ranks there were geniuses of families, *curia* and *tribus*. The top of the pyramid built in this way was occupied by the *genius populi romani*, and from the principate, the *genius Imperatoris*. This superior genius was of the highest degree of generality and combined within himself all the geniuses from the lower levels of hierarchy.

It seems that both in Pseudo-Dionysius and in the Roman cult of geniuses the hierarchy described, concerns not only divine (or immaterial and more united with deity) beings, but also reflects the social order. Thus, it contains political content, is related to the aspect of power and constitutes the ideological base for the legitimization of a specific systemic formation.

The difference between the angels of Dionysius and the geniuses of the Romans lies in the location of the starting point for reflection. The inquiry regarding geniuses is based on the fundamental insight of multiplicity, from which they gradually ascend towards less and less differentiation. Roman religious thought led from multiplicity towards unity, on the principle of summation. In turn, the theology of Pseudo-Dionysius takes as its starting point the indivisible and supersubstantial Divine Sovereignty, from which subsequent beings emanate. This difference, it seems, results from the adoption of different perspectives and a different philosophical background. The basic starting point of the ancient Roman religion was the experience of *sacrum* in relation to the simplest manifestations of human contact with the world of nature and forms of social organization.³⁷ In this way, the religious man populated the surrounding space with myriads of intelligent divine beings who were responsible for almost every detail of existence. Only the next stage of reflection was the gradual abstraction and merging of these entities into larger groups, which were also subject to further summation, until the most general concept of the emperor's genius was formed. In turn, while the author of the *Celestial Hierarchy* started to build his system, he had a powerful tool in the form of Neoplatonic metaphysics. The key assumption is the transcendent God who is the source of all existence. It is only on the basis of this foundation that the Areopagite presents the world of the highest creatures, and then busily multiplies successive branches at lower and lower levels of the hierarchy.

³⁶ Zieliński, *Rzym i jego religia*, 23ff.

³⁷ Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 3ff.

The structure created in this way made it possible for the higher beings to take care over the elementary world. Thus, it played the role of a force exercising divine authority over historical events and the fate of individual people. Its functions then, can be defined as mediating, enlightening, creating and caring.

4. Supernatural cognition

Pseudo-Dionysius characterizes the purpose of the hierarchy of celestial beings as the assimilation and union with God in all holy knowledge and in all pious action. The key aspect here is the sacred knowledge.³⁸ We can understand it as supernatural knowledge that eludes natural cognition. These are therefore truths about God Himself, but also pious inspirations and information about unknown events in the world, warnings or advices. The Areopagite ascribes a special role in the regulation of this supernatural knowledge to providences. *Pronoia*, or Providence (lat. *Providentia*) appeared in the writings of Proclus. The philosopher identified it as a pra-intelect.³⁹ It was the transcendent form of the intellect, proper to the gods; it was the understanding of all things. In the opinion of Proclus, human intellects possess only a reflection of this total knowledge belonging to the gods.⁴⁰

Trying to define God's providences more closely, Pseudo-Dionysius uses a beautiful metaphor. He likens Providence to the sun,⁴¹ the intellectual light that gives all knowledge.⁴² However, this supernatural knowledge, poured out like light, drawing out individual beings from darkness, is not only God's share. It is also accessible to angels and the "godlike Minds" below. This category of existence is interesting, since it does not apply to immaterial beings, but to people who were, in a way, "promoted" and climbed higher on the ladder of creation. Pseudo-Dionysius explains their exaltation by the fact that they unite with the divine light thereby being genuinely and supernaturally enlightened.⁴³ In this context, the angelological thread also returns. "Godlike Minds" acquire their knowledge by imitating angels.⁴⁴ It is the close contact with angelic beings that enables union with God and enlightenment regarding the cause of all things. Among these intellects, first of all, are the prophets and the saints. Nevertheless, they do not empty the catalogue. As Tomasz Stępień notes, "godlike Minds" are also pagan philosophers and mystics.⁴⁵ A question then arises, as to what extent may they be similar to the image of the emperor in the Roman religion.

³⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius, "Celestial Hierarchy", III, 2.

³⁹ Proclus, "Elements of Theology", 120. A rich study on the Providence of God was presented in Polish by an expert in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and Neoplatonic philosophy, Tomasz Stępień: *Stępień, Porządek i miłość*.

⁴⁰ Stępień, "Przedmowa", 53–4.

⁴¹ Pseudo-Dionysius, "The Divine Names", IV, 4.

⁴² *Ibidem*, IV, 6.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, I, 5.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ Stępień, "Przedmowa", 53.

It is worth mentioning here that in the patristic literature one can come across a conviction that the emperors had some extraordinary knowledge. Already in Hippolytus we find a passage suggesting that Octavian Augustus was aware of the birth of Christ, and therefore he treated Christians with respect.⁴⁶ Similar fragments are also present in Orosius. The author of *History Against the Pagans* resorted to the concept of the emperor's extraordinary knowledge to explain Octavian's rejection of the title "Lord". Namely, Augustus could not accept this distinction because he knew that in Bethlehem the true Lord of all mankind was born.⁴⁷

It should be noted that "godlike Minds" owe their extraordinary cognition to some dualistic ontological construction. On the one hand, they remain human, on the other, their humanity has been enriched with the divine element. It is difficult to say how exactly deity and humanity meet in their being. This particular aspect was not deepened by Pseudo-Dionysius. Undoubtedly, any analogy to the hypostatic union should be ruled out. The Areopagite states that this relationship is based on likeness and union. We can therefore say that these "godlike Minds" have a theanthropic, or divine-human, construction.

The theme of Theanthropism is also present in the imperial cult. According to Zieliński, the theanthropic figure appears in the mysterious connection between the emperor and the genius. It is thanks to this ontological structure that the ruler occupies a prominent place among other people and can be worshiped during his life, as well as be fully deified after death. At this point, the Polish researcher refers directly to the analogy with Christianity. He argues that the theanthropic aspect of the cult of genius allowed the Romans to receive Christian views more quickly. He is also convinced that the Roman religion played a role similar to that which is attributed to the books of the Old Testament in the history of salvation.⁴⁸ William Warde-Fowler also shares the theanthropic view of a genius. He identifies genius as the element of man, which makes him look like a god.⁴⁹ To illustrate his observations, he uses fragments of Horace and Tibullus.

In the passage from Horace indicated by Warde-Fowler we read:

scit Genius, natale comes qui temperat astrum,
Naturae deus humanae, mortalis in unum
Quodque caput, voltu mutabilis, albus et ater.⁵⁰

Horace thus affirms the belief in the divinity of a genius. At the same time, he expresses the conviction about his close relationship with man. This connection is so deep that genius shares with the emperor the aspect of mortality (*Naturae deus humanae, mortalis in unum*).

An even more interesting testimony regarding the beliefs about a genius comes from the writings of Tibullus:

⁴⁶ Hippol., *Commentary on the Prophet Daniel*, IV, 9. In: Peterson, "Monoteizm", 51.

⁴⁷ Oros., *Seven Books*, VI, 22, 5–6.

⁴⁸ Zieliński, *Rzym i jego religia*, 99.

⁴⁹ Warde-Fowler, *Roman Ideas*, 17ff.

⁵⁰ Hor., Ep., II, 2, 187–9.

Mane geni, cape tura libens votisque faveto,
Si modo, cum de me cogitat, ille calet⁵¹

At tu, Natalis [genius – M.T.], quoniam deus omnia sentis,
Adnue: quid refert, clamne palamne roget?⁵²

The above text introduces the reader to the mystery of the oath submitted to a genius. The lyrical subject presents incense and asks the deity for favor (*cape tura libens votisque faveto*). In addition to the theme of divinity itself, in the second fragment there is a very interesting theme of extraordinary knowledge (*quoniam deus omnia sentis*). The author clearly links this omniscience with the divine aspect.

In comparison with previous findings, it must be stated that, due to the theanthropic nature of the genius, the emperor also participated in the deity. One of the manifestations of this participation was the experience of extraordinary cognition possessed by the genius in his divinity.

In this way, the image of the monarch in pre-Christian Rome came close to the concept of “godlike Minds”. Thus, the genius performed a function similar to that of God’s providences, being the sources of the enlightenment according to the Areopagite.

At the end of this thread, it is worth noting that the theme of supernatural knowledge of God is a particularly important angelological motif in medieval prophetism. In the apocalyptic of the Middle Ages, the angel acted as an intermediary to convey a special revelation, written down in rhetorical figures and hidden under a subtle veil of mystical symbols.⁵³

5. Fertility and care

Providing fertility was the most ancient function of a genius.⁵⁴ Vitalism and creative power were the main content of the cult of guardian spirits even at a time when they appeared as deities guarding the head of the family. Aspects of fertility dominate the genius representations that decorate the walls of houses. A painting of a genius as a beardless man pouring libation on the altar and wielding a *cornucopia*⁵⁵ has survived to our times in Pompeii. The genius did not lose its connection with fertility in the principate era. But then its understanding took on a broader and more abstract meaning. Thus, the creative powers of the emperor’s genius were manifested in the general prosperity of the state and the well-being of its citizens.

Similar aspects are also present in the hierarchy of entities in Pseudo-Dionysius. In the opinion of the Areopagite, the first of divine Providences is Goodness. It is the principle of all other things. Thanks to it, God the Father, hidden in the heights of transcen-

⁵¹ Tib., “Elegiae” IV, 5, 9–10.

⁵² *Ibidem*, 20–21.

⁵³ McGinn, *Visions of the End*, 4.

⁵⁴ More broadly on the functions of a genius related to the prosperity of the house and the fertility of the family see: Flower, *The Dancing Lares*.

⁵⁵ Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 210.

dence, creates all invisible beings who participate in the creation of the visible world. Providences are therefore the substance-creating principles by which God defined and created the world. This creative role of providences is equivalent to the fertility of geniuses. In both cases we deal with the same function, although shown on the basis of different reflections. For genius at first ensured fertility in a purely physical sense, then also the prosperity, growth and development of the state. In Pseudo-Dionysius, this function is taken over by providences, through which God the Father carries out his plan to create all things. To emphasize this aspect of providences, the Areopagite also uses other terms that express a creative function. He talks about exemplars, energies or powers.⁵⁶

It is worth noting that in the imperial cult we also deal with a certain conceptual differentiation, which is most fully revealed in the context of the function of a genius. Thus, in addition to the traditionally understood protective spirit, the Romans also knew the *numen* and imperial virtues. From the ontological point of view they were, like genius, identified with deities, but their understanding was dominated by the dynamic aspect.⁵⁷ *Numen* was understood as the divine power proper to a genius, while virtues were associated with specific features or actions of particular geniuses, such as *Salus Populi Romani* or *Clementia Caesaris*. Like geniuses, also the virtues were arranged in a certain hierarchy, the top of which was occupied by imperial virtues.⁵⁸ Referring to the person of the ruler, they gave religious meaning to specific moments in the history of his reign and to important threads of the policy pursued. Some emphasized the establishment of peace (*Pax*), others the victorious war campaign (*Victoria*), or liberation from some restrictions (*Libertas*). The highest-ranking virtues connected the imperial genius with Jupiter, along with the person of the ruler constituting an undivided existence and guaranteeing the deity's supernatural protection.⁵⁹ Using an appropriate composition of virtues, the image of an ideal ruler was built or the ground for subsequent deification was prepared.

However, both in Pseudo-Dionysius and in the imperial cult, this expanded structure of the immaterial beings present in the world has much broader competences than just ensuring fertility and creative activity. Its functions also include taking care of the human world.⁶⁰ Thus, the philosophical thought built around it provided a theoretical basis for explaining the common belief in the active role that the deity played in the history of mankind. It can therefore be said that it had a historiosophical content. Thanks to the belief in divine protection, an image of the history of mankind was obtained, being no longer exclusively the result of many events, but a realization of a deeper cosmic plan. It was a reflection of God's order.

The historiosophical aspects of the genius are particularly prominent in the writings of Cassius Dio. To describe the genius of Emperor Augustus, this author uses the Greek term *tyche*,⁶¹ which can be expressed through the terms "luck" or "fate". This term, in the historiosophical sense, is first used by Thucydides. The author of the *Peloponnesian War*

⁵⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius, "The Divine Names", IV; II, 8; V, 8.

⁵⁷ Beurlier, *Essai sur le Culte*, 44–5.

⁵⁸ Zieliński, *Rzym i jego religia*, 96.

⁵⁹ Green, "Notes on the Augustan Deities", 91ff.

⁶⁰ Even in the era of the republic, the figure of the genius was expanded to include a guardian function. See: Sajakowski, "Genius Augusti", 51.

⁶¹ Cass. Dio, *Roman History*, LVII, 130; LVIII, 190; Weinstock, *Divus Julius*, 206.

uses it to describe a force at work in history that actively influenced historical events.⁶² Thanks to Polybius, the *tyche* reached Rome, where it found its counterpart in the form of Fortune.⁶³ However, unlike the unbridled *tyche*, Fortune worshiped in Rome ruled history with a certain plan and discernment. For Fortune, although capricious, displayed a certain weakness towards its chosen ones, whom it clearly favoured and secretly steered historical events for their benefit. The association of *Fortuna* with the Roman state gave historiosophical legitimacy for the military expansion of the empire.⁶⁴ For Rome, as an empire beloved by Fortune, was predestined to rule the world. It can therefore be assumed that the term *tyche* used by Cassius Dio endows the concept of genius with related to Fortune historiosophical content.

In the era of the principate, this historiosophical aspect was taken over by the imperial genius. This is emphasized by the fact that during the empire, the position of *Fortuna* was weakened, and its cult was replaced by the virtue of *Fortuna Augusti*.⁶⁵ Thus, a certain transposition took place, the consequence of which was, in a way, the absorption of *Fortuna* by the *genius Imperatoris* and its reduction to a virtue inherent in the ruler's protective spirit. In this way, the care exercised by the genius acquired historiosophical features. Other virtues related to important deeds of emperors, such as the aforementioned *Pax* or *Victoria* also possessed historiosophic content. However, in the context of our interest, the link between Fortune and Providence is particularly important. After the death of the first emperor, an altar was erected in honour of *Providentia Augusti*, Providence of Augustus.⁶⁶ The similarity that can be observed here, between the terms used by the political philosophy of the principate and the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius, is not superficial. For while in Proclus the function of Providence was limited only to the transmission of knowledge, the Areopagite sees it as a tool with which God looks after the world and exercises his rule in history. In this way, Pseudo-Dionysius referred to the patristic tradition, which identified Providence as a force serving God to guide the history of humanity towards eschatological fullness. From the historiosophical point of view, the Providence described in *Corpus Dionysiacum* does not differ much from that which appears in the writings of Orosius or Augustine. The originality of Pseudo-Dionysius lies in expanding the ontology of Providence and finding a place for it in the heavenly hierarchy. There can be no mention of any pagan polytheism in his writings. There is only one God, and the care provided by the Neoplatonic gods is replaced by the work of many divine providences.⁶⁷ Like angels, providences also act as intermediaries between God and creation.⁶⁸ Thus, in relation to the earlier patristic authors, the semantic scope of the concept itself is changing. It acquires essentially pagan and neoplatonic features. In terms of ontology, however, it resembles the ghosts worshiped on the grounds of imperial cult.

⁶² Cochrane, *Chrześcijaństwo i kultura antyczna*, 460. Good example can be the plague in Athens. Thuc., *The Peloponnesian War*, II, 47.

⁶³ Polyb., *Histories*, I, 35.

⁶⁴ Cochrane, *Chrześcijaństwo*, 466.

⁶⁵ Zieliński, *Rzym i jego religia*, 98.

⁶⁶ Fears, "The Cult of Virtues", 885ff.

⁶⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius, "The Divine Names", V, 2; Stępień, "Przedmowa", 40–1.

⁶⁸ Stępień, "Przedmowa", 35.

6. Summary

The above study shows at least three elements linking the imperial cult in ancient Rome with the structure of entities described by Pseudo-Dionysius.

First, in both religious concepts we are dealing with spiritual beings above the material world. The basic concept that can be applied to both the Roman genius and the angel in Pseudo-Dionysius is the Greek term *daimon*. However, both concepts developed a whole range of other terms to describe specific aspects of these spirits. Thus, in the imperial cult, apart from the genius, the virtues and the imperial *numen* were also worshiped, while in the writings of the Areopagite, the concept of an angel may be extended to divine names and divine providences.

Secondly, the ontological order of these beings was hierarchical and was extended above the human world. At the same time, these hierarchies reflected both the cosmic and the earthly order. Thus, they had a political aspect and provided theological legitimacy for a specific political order.

Third, the similarities between these entities are not limited to the hierarchical and conceptual layers. They perform the same functions in terms of the source of supernatural cognition, fertility, as well as creative power and care for the world that has been brought into existence.

The elements indicated in the imperial cult were of an eminently political nature. They were the ideological base for the imperial political formation and the justification of Rome's claims to expand. The political theme of Pseudo-Dionysius did not occupy a central place, because the Areopagite was not interested in creating a political doctrine. His purpose was drawn with much greater panache. Therefore, *Corpus Dionysiacum* presents us with a universal picture of reality that can also be applied to the earthly order. The Areopagite himself uses a hierarchical schematics to justify a specific formation within the church structure. Moreover, the hierarchy he created will be reflected in the political writings of the authors of subsequent eras.

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