

## The Italian Manuscripts of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*

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### INTRODUCTION

The Pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes Vitae Christi* is one of the most popular late medieval devotional writings in Europe. It was written in Tuscany, and among the many Latin manuscripts there are a huge number of Italian ones. However, while the two main Latin versions have been published in critical editions,<sup>1</sup> we have no such publication in the case of the Italian ones, and we do not even know the exact number of distinct Italian versions (and there are at least three main versions in Italian, as we will see below). Furthermore, there is no scholarly consensus about the original language of the work, since the precedence of one of the Italian versions has recently been proposed once again.

The *Meditationes Vitae Christi* (henceforth: MVC) is basically a retelling of Christ's life, but the narration contains not only the episodes known from the Gospels, but also apocryphal narrative elements, mainly concerning the life of the Virgin and the infancy of Jesus; furthermore, the narration is enriched by moral teachings and a number of Bernardine quotations. The MVC has survived in hundreds of medieval manuscripts and a huge number of early print versions, and it has been widely argued that this text had an especially strong impact on late medieval spirituality, literature, theatre and visual art. Because of the popularity of the MVC, it has been studied by modern scholars since the eighteenth century; moreover, in the last few decades there has been a scholarly "revival" focusing on this medieval literary writing.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, we must observe that even the most fundamental questions concerning its origin are still debated and have remained open, or have been reopened by the most recent contributions.

Concerning the origin of the MVC, there are basically only two major elements that the scholarship is agreed upon, namely that it is a Franciscan and Tuscan text. The Franciscan character of the narrative is indubitable: many manuscripts are attributed to Saint Bonaventura; furthermore, in most of its known versions there is a friar to address the meditations to a nun, and we can deduce from the narration itself that the friar is a Franciscan while the nun is a Poor Clare. Another fixed element is the belief that the text originated from Tuscany: from a few references in the text, it seems that it would have been written in San Gimignano, and the many early Latin and vernacular manuscripts can be connected to Tuscany too.

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<sup>1</sup> *Meditationes de Passione*, Iohannes de Caulibus, *Meditationes vite Christi*.

<sup>2</sup> Flora, *The Devout Belief of the Imagination*; McNamer, "The Origins of the *Meditationes vitae Christi*." *Speculum*, 84 (2009), 905–955; *The Pseudo-Bonaventuran Lives of Christ*; Johnson, *The Middle English Life of Christ*

However, the debated issues are far more numerous, and most of them are closely related to the Italian codices of the text: the open questions include that of the author (John of Caulibus, a Pisan nun or Jacobus of San Gimignano), that of the original language and version of the text (Latin or Italian, the long version or a short version of it), and finally the date of its composition (the first years or the middle of the fourteenth century). I have had the opportunity to deal with many of these open issues previously; therefore, in the present article, I will present only some new results, focusing on the Italian manuscripts.<sup>3</sup>

I do not intend to deal here with the question of the debated dating. I would like only to summarise the *status quaestionis*. There are two dates of composition in circulation: the first years of the fourteenth century were the traditionally accepted terminus, while between 1990 and 2014 many prestigious publications – including the critical edition of the Latin text in the *Corpus Christianorum*, and the *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* – accepted a date of the middle of the fourteenth century.<sup>4</sup> The dating to the second half of the fourteenth century by Sarah McNamer is based on a mistaken identification of one of the sources of the MVC, namely the Revelations of the Virgin, attributed to Elizabeth of Hungary. However, the consensus around the dating was not absolute, because many art historians simply ignored it, and literary historians also argued against it. The most important contribution in the field is the monograph by Tobias Kemper.<sup>5</sup> I have dealt previously with this issue, arguing for the beginning of the fourteenth century, dealing with the Revelations, while Péter Tóth identified another piece of evidence, demonstrating that Michael of Massa (+1336) had used the MVC as a source.<sup>6</sup> In 2012 we started a joint research project, which has resulted in a number of studies not only about the dating, but also concerning the issue of the author and the original language of the MVC.<sup>7</sup> As for the dating, I am happy to say that in the most recent publications it has been again widely accepted; Sarah McNamer herself, the scholar who proposed the other dating 25 years ago, in her very recent article – partly based on independent arguments, partly accepting my points – refers to her dating for the second half of the fourteenth century as “obsolete”.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, we can say that there is a new consensus about the date of the MVC – that is, a return of the traditional one: namely, that the text was composed around 1300.

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<sup>3</sup> Falvai, ‘Le rivelazioni di Santa Elisabetta d’Ungheria,’ Falvai, ‘St. Elizabeth of Hungary in Italian Vernacular Literature’; Falvai, ‘Traduzione, volgarizzamento e presenza femminile in testi devozionali bassomedievali,’ Tóth-Falvai, ‘New Light,’ Falvai- Tóth, ‘L’autore e la trasmissione’

<sup>4</sup> Stallings, ‘Introduction,’ in Ioannes de Caulibus, *Meditaciones*, Arosio. ‘Giovanni de’ Cauli’

<sup>5</sup> Kemper, *Die Kreuzigung Christi*, 103-7.

<sup>6</sup> Tóth, ‘Pseudo-Apocryphal Dialogue as a Tool for the Memorization of Scholastic Wisdom’

<sup>7</sup> Tóth-Falvai, ‘New Light,’ Falvai- Tóth, ‘L’autore e la trasmissione’

<sup>8</sup> McNamer, ‘Further Evidence’ McNamer, ‘The Author’

## HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As for the catalogue of the Italian manuscripts, the most important contribution is connected to Columban Fischer. In his groundbreaking but at the same time often criticised study on the manuscript tradition of the MVC, first defended as a doctoral dissertation, and then published in the *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* in 1932, he listed altogether 217 exemplars in their various languages – Latin, Italian, English, French and German. Fischer intended to explore the MVC in general, but obviously he paid special attention to the Latin and Italian manuscripts, since – as mentioned above – the text was written in Italy, and, as we will see when we return to this point later, the primacy of one of the Italian versions has also been argued from time to time.

Fischer's work was criticised by several authors dealing with the topic following this pioneering study. The most important and influential contribution was written in 1952 by Alberto Vaccari, who proposed deleting at least four codices from the list, and also adding nine other ones, mainly from Florentine and Roman libraries, and furthermore made several fundamental philological analyses, which make his article the most important and long-lasting contribution in the field of the Italian manuscripts.<sup>9</sup>

The next significant contribution concerning the Italian manuscripts of the MVC was the well-known edition by Isa Ragusa and Rosalia Green in 1961, which published one of the most important Italian manuscripts, the famous illustrated codex from the National Library of Paris (MS. Ital. 115). Their publication on this was a milestone for the research of the text, mostly for art historical investigation, since they published all the miniatures of this wonderful fourteenth-century codex in their original position in the text, trying also to imitate the page layout of the codex, which enabled scholars to understand the interaction between text and image in the manuscript; indeed, that edition has become the usual point of reference for art historians, and not only for them.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, we must say that this publication is a real nightmare from the standpoint of philology. Not only did Ragusa and Green publish an English translation of a never-edited Italian text, but they even “corrected it” in many places by utilising the Latin text of the MVC, often without a clear reference to these places, and for the last quarter that is missing from the Paris MS, the editors used a Latin edition to complete the modern English translation.<sup>11</sup> A further complication of this publication is the fact that the Latin edition that they used is obviously not the critical one – made 30 years later – but an edition that differs considerably from the critical text. Isa Ragusa continued her research concerning the Paris MS, and she published two important – but, as we shall see, quite problematic – essays on its characteristics.

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<sup>9</sup> Vaccari, ‘Le Meditazioni della vita di Cristo in volgare,’ 352-356

<sup>10</sup> *Meditations on the Life of Christ*. ed. by Ragusa-Green

<sup>11</sup> The Latin texts that they used for the correction are two printed versions, Venice, 1761 and Paris 1868, while for the missing quarter of the Paris MS they used the second one, namely the edition of the writings of Saint Bonaventura (Paris, 1868, vol. XII, ff. 602). The part translated from the Latin starts at p. 327.

As we mentioned above, in the last decades the scholarship around the Italian MVC has again become more intensive. In 1990, Sarah McNamer published an article that would determine – as mentioned above – the scholarly consensus on the date of the MVC in general for more than 20 years; in particular she had some important arguments concerning the Italian manuscripts of the text as well. She later developed and partly modified her views, and in 2009 she published an article in *Speculum*, and almost contemporarily in a monograph, in which she proposed a totally new hypothesis concerning the origin and the author of the MVC, basing it on a special Italian codex.<sup>12</sup>

We must mention a further recent monograph that investigates one of the Italian variants of the text. In her important book, published in 2009, the art historian Holly Flora analyses the above-mentioned illustrated Paris manuscript from an interdisciplinary point of view, putting it in a wider context. The author, being an art historian, necessarily based her arguments concerning the textual history and dating on the results of the philological research that were available at that time, and thus on the articles of the above-mentioned Sarah McNamer and Isa Ragusa.<sup>13</sup> I have been dealing with the MVC since 2009, and in 2012 I started to conduct more systematic research, partly with Péter Tóth, and partly as a collective research project, partly individually with the support of the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, Villa i Tatti of Florence. During my Italian research in the year 2014/2015 I was able to identify a number of manuscripts that were previously unknown to the MVC scholarship.

The issue of the authorship is closely connected to Italian codices too. Concerning the author of the MVC, until very recently there has been an almost total consensus about the person of John of Caulibus. However, in the most recent publications, two radically new hypotheses have been formulated concerning the possible author of the text. Firstly, Sarah McNamer argued that the MVC could have been written originally by a female author, especially by a Pisan nun, while in our joint research, Péter Tóth has identified a certain Spiritual Franciscan, namely Jacobus of San Gimignano, as a more plausible author of the text.<sup>14</sup>

I shall not repeat here our arguments expressed at length in these publications; rather, in the present article, I would like to stress only three points, connected closely to the Italian codices. First, Jacobus was known to the previous scholarship too, but his name and role were seriously misinterpreted. Livarius Oliger misread the colophon of a manuscript “Qui se comença lo prolego ne le meditationi de la vita de Cristo, conposto per frate **Jacobo de l’ordene** di frati minori, translato de gramatica in latino”.<sup>15</sup> instead of “Jacobo de **l’ordene** di frati minori” he read “Jacobo de **Cordone** di

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<sup>12</sup> McNamer, ‘The Origins,’ McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*.

<sup>13</sup> Flora, *The Devout Belief of the Imagination*

<sup>14</sup> McNamer, ‘Further Evidence’ McNamer, ‘The Author’ cf. Tóth-Falvay, ‘New Light,’ Falvay- Tóth, ‘L’autore e la trasmissione’.

<sup>15</sup> Venezia, Biblioteca Marciana, MS. Ital. Z 7, f. 1r.

frati minore,” and in this way perpetrated an error that has been repeated by many other scholars.<sup>16</sup> Second, the scholarship used to mention him as a translator into Italian, since his name appears only on Italian codices, and in the sentence in question there is indeed a hint of translation. However, this latter clearly refers not to James but to the book. Another manuscript conserves another form of his name, as Jacobus of San Gimignano, and he is a documented Spiritual Franciscan from the first decade of the fourteenth century.<sup>17</sup> The third consideration is that while previous scholarship knew about three codices, now we can count no fewer than six Italian manuscripts that contain the name of Jacobus, and his name is attested in both the long and the short version of the MVC.<sup>18</sup> These considerations make Jacobus of San Gimignano a more plausible candidate than John of Caulibus, since his name appears only in an indirect and later source, and cannot be found in any exemplar of the MVC.

## THE ITALIAN MANUSCRIPTS

As for the catalogue of the manuscripts, I can summarise the state of research as follows – while admitting that I still haven’t seen personally all the MSS, but only roughly 85% of them, while the other ones I know only from catalogues and descriptions (and actually Columban Fischer too worked primarily on the basis of published catalogues). Speaking about numbers, we can state that while in Fischer’s catalogue there were 52 Italian MSS listed; at present we can count no fewer than 77 MSS of the Italian MVC, plus four or five fragments that contain some episodes of it. This amount of medieval MSS in the context of Italian vernacular devotional literature can be compared to the success of the *Fioretti*, or that of the Italian translations of the *Vitae Patrum* and that of the *Legenda Aurea*. Indeed, there are 86 medieval manuscripts of the *Fioretti* listed in the recent catalogue by Federico Fascetti, while in his monograph Carlo Delcorno has included no fewer than 191 MS of Italian *volgarizzamento* of the *Vitae Patrum*, made by Domenico Cavalca, while – as we can learn from the ongoing research by Speranza Cerullo – there are almost 200 manuscripts that conserve the Italian translation of the Golden legend, even if in the clear majority only partially.<sup>19</sup>

## THE CLASSIFICATION OF THE ITALIAN MVC

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<sup>16</sup> Petrocchi, ‘Sulla composizione e data delle *‘Meditationes vitae Christi,’* Vaccari, ‘Le Meditazioni della vita di Cristo in volgare,’ Arosio, ‘Giovanni de’ Cauli’

<sup>17</sup> Tóth-Falvay, ‘New Light’

<sup>18</sup> Florence, BNCF N.A. 350; V; MS Riccardiana 1378; BNCF Magl. XXXVIII. 143;; B. Medicea Laurenziana/Biscion. 6. Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana Ital. Z. 7. Biblioteca Franciscana di Falconara Marittima MS. 419

<sup>19</sup> Fascetti, ‘La tradizione manoscritta’; Carlo Delcorno, *La tradizione delle “Vite di dei santi Padri;”*. Speranza, ‘L’edizione critica del volgarizzamento toscano trecentesco.’

If we intend to speak about the Italian manuscripts of the MVC, first we need to summarise the situation of its textual history in general, on the one hand because it is far from being clarified, and on the other because the Italian variants play a crucial role in the reconstruction of the transmission of the text. The scholarship on the MVC has – mainly on the basis of Columban Fischer’s seminal article – distinguished three different versions of the Latin text: the so-called *grosse Text*, containing in general approximately 92-100 chapters, the *kleine Text* of about 40-48 chapters, and a short text, which deals only with the Passion, and is thus referred to as the *Meditationes de Passione Christi* (MPC). According to Fischer’s original hypothesis, this last and shortest version could have been originally written by Bonaventura himself, while the other versions would be simple re-elaborations of this original. This argument has been rejected by almost all other scholars, and the present scholarly consensus takes the opposite view that the *kleine Text* and the MPC are only extracts from the more original *grosse Text*. Furthermore, some scholars have argued in a convincing way that the Latin *kleine Text* in reality cannot be treated as a separate version, since it is not textually compact, and furthermore it has been attested only by a small number of manuscripts.<sup>20</sup>

The question of the Italian versions, however, is even more complicated, because among those too several different versions are attested. Some of them were – quite randomly – published between the eighteenth and the twentieth century on the basis of one single manuscript or just a few manuscripts that were easily accessible to their respective editors, who sometimes even contaminated the texts of different versions.<sup>21</sup> A striking paradox of the Italian codices is the fact that there is no critical edition of the Italian versions; nevertheless, it has also been argued in prestigious recent publications that one of the Italian versions could have been the original.<sup>22</sup>

From the narrative viewpoint, the text can be divided into three units: 1) the events before the Incarnation and the infancy of Jesus; 2) the public life of Christ; 3) the events around the Passion (from Palm Sunday to Pentecost). These three narrative units are separated also on the textual level, both in the Latin and in the Italian, with individual introductions. On the basis of the content, scholarship usually individuated two or three classes of the text. It was the same three scholars mentioned above that proposed a solution for the different groups of the text. As we have seen, Columban Fischer divided both the Latin and the Italian version of the MVC into three groups: the *grosse Text* (containing all three narrative sections), and the *Meditationes de Passione Christi* (MPC), which include only the section on the Passion, and an intermediate version, called the *kleine Text*, which contains the parts before Christ’s public life and the Passion. Alberto Vaccari analysed the Italian versions in particular, and he wrote about two versions, which he called *Testo integrale* (=

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<sup>20</sup> Gasca Queirazza, ‘Intorno ai codici delle ‘Meditationes Vitae Christi’ and McNamer, ‘Further Evidence’, pp. 251-257.

<sup>21</sup> *Cento meditazioni di S. Bonaventura sulla vita di Gesù Cristo, Le Meditazioni della vita di Cristo*, ed. by Sarri; *Meditazioni della vita di Gesù Cristo* ed. by Donadelli; *Quattordici scritture italiane*

<sup>22</sup> See below.

*grosse Text*), and *Testo dimezzato* (= *kleine Text*), but he individuated two variants (maybe two different translations) of the *Testo integrale*: *Testo A* (conserved only in the Paris MS) and *Testo B*. Meanwhile, Sarah McNamer proposed new and more neutral denominations, using the forms *Testo maggiore* and *Testo minore*, and she introduced into the classification a previously unstudied – and even shorter – version, surviving in one single manuscript of the Bodleian Library, which she named the *Canonici Version*.<sup>23</sup>

The differences between the denominations in reality indicate fundamental differences in the interpretation of the textual history of the MVC. The “traditional consensus”, represented by Vaccari, indicates the Latin *grosse Text* as the original, and the shorter Latin versions as extracts. As for the Italian versions, according to the traditional consensus, the same long Latin version was first translated into the vernacular – Vaccari argues that the *Testo A* (= Paris MS) constitutes a separate translation from, and a better-quality one than, the more diffused *Testo B* – and the Italian short text derives from the *Testo B*.

Sarah McNamer has proposed an almost entirely inverse stemma: she argues for the absolute primacy of the shortest known Italian version, attested uniquely in the *Canonici* manuscripts, and according to her reconstruction, this short Italian text written by an “Author A” was later expanded by an Author B into the Italian *Testo minore*, while as a result of further expansion we arrive at the *Testo maggiore B*. Only this third Italian version would have been translated first into Latin (= Latin *Testo maggiore*), and the other Latin versions are extracts from this translated text, while the other vernacular translations are also made from this long Latin version. A striking particularity of this reconstruction is the fact that the Italian *Testo maggiore A* (the Paris MS) appears at the bottom of this stemma, as a simple retranslation from the Latin.<sup>24</sup>

To summarise my views concerning the classification of the Italian text, from the propositions made by previous scholarship, I can easily accept the terminology suggested by Sarah McNamer (about the *Testo maggiore*, the *Testo minore* and the *Canonici Version*), but as for the textual history, the solution offered by Vaccari seems to be the most acceptable to me: in other words, I think that the MVC was written in Latin, while chronologically speaking the first Italian could have been the *Testo maggiore*, and indeed the *Testo maggiore A* looks much closer to the Latin than *B*.

## **THE ITALIAN *TESTO MAGGIORE***

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<sup>23</sup> Oxford: Bodleian Library: MS. Canon. Ital. 174. For details see below.

<sup>24</sup> The two reconstructions of the textual history are synthesized in a clear way in the two stemmas published by McNamer, ‘*The Origins*,’ 908-9.

At the present state of the research, we can affirm that the Italian *Testo maggiore* has survived in at least nine medieval codices, which constitutes clearly a minority among the complete manuscripts. The internal division of codices is even more striking, since eight out of these nine codices represent the *Testo maggiore B*. The *Testo maggiore A* – which seems to be a particularly important variant – is conserved in a *codex unicus*, that is, the famous illustrated MS. ital. 15 of the National Library of Paris.<sup>25</sup>

The importance of this variant has already been noted by Alberto Vaccari, who defined it as a first translation that is “greatly superior to the common one”,<sup>26</sup> and even mentions the possibility that this could have been the original version of the text, but in the same sentence he rejects this option, even without expounding this point in his essay:

If in the background of the Latin MVC there was an Italian original, it could be nothing else than this text A. Against this supposition I find serious arguments, but I keep from expressing them.<sup>27</sup>

This particular phrasing of Vaccari was misunderstood by some scholars, and one of them, Isa Ragusa (the editor of the English translation of this codex), developed this assumption further, by arguing not only that this could be a first and better translation from the Latin, but also that it could be the original version in the absolute sense of the MVC.

This hypothesis is rather problematic, and does not seem to be plausible to me. On the one hand, the partial collations published in previous collective publications make it implausible that *Testo maggiore A* could have been the original form of the text;<sup>28</sup> on the other, the main textual argument by Isa Ragusa for the absolute precedence of the Paris MS too is simply based on a mistake.

Indeed, in her article of 1997, Ragusa quoted a passage that she claimed could be a unique characteristic of this Italian manuscript:

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<sup>25</sup> The exemplars of the *Testo maggiore B* are: Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conv. Soppr. D. I. 227; Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Nuove Accessioni 350; Naples, Biblioteca Nazionale di Napoli Ms. XII F 13; Siena, Biblioteca comunale degli Intronati I.VIII.6; Siena, Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati I.V.7; Siena, Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati I. VI. 7; Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Rossiano 848; Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana Ital. Z. 7.; Verona, Biblioteca Comunale 643.

<sup>26</sup> VACCARI, ‘Le Meditazioni,’ 358.

<sup>27</sup> “...di gran lunga superiore alla comune. (...) Se dietro il latino delle MVC sta un originale italiano, questo non sarebbe altro che il testo A. Contro quella supposizione mi si affacciano gravi ragioni, ma mi astengo dall’ esporle.” Vaccari, ‘Le Meditazioni,’ 358, 361.

<sup>28</sup> Tóth-Falvay, ‘New Light,’ Ertl –Konrád –Gerencsér – Ludmann – Falvay, ‘The Italian Variants of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*’



This passage seems to be an intrusion, added in a second instance. And it is indeed [...] absent from the Latin version. It does not seem to be a result of a clarifying intent, of an intervention by a translator or an editor. The expression of confusion in the face of the perceived phenomenon – trying to justify himself and looking for a solution – is too straightforward for us not to recognise in it the authentic voice of the author...<sup>29</sup>

In the critical apparatus of the text edition of 1961, Ragusa and Green had already mentioned the special character of this passage, but at that time they argued only the absence of it in the Latin, saying “This entire paragraph occurs only in the Italian manuscripts of the Meditations.”<sup>30</sup> Also in her article of 1997, Ragusa first writes only about its absence in the Latin, but in the conclusion of this short article, she clearly assumes that it is a special characteristic only of the Paris manuscript, in contrast to all the other versions, by saying the following:

While trying to identify the author’s personality with more precision – even if without naming him – we have found some important indications in two features that belong only to the MS. ital. 115 [...] The second feature consists of the presence of some passages that do not exist in any other version of the text of the Meditations, neither in Latin nor in the vernacular: they attest the spontaneous move from the oral phase into the written one.”<sup>31</sup>

In the article, this very passage is the only quotation that she analyses in this sense.

We have to admit that the long passage in question indeed speaks about personal memory and forgetting, and it is also likely that these are the author’s words, since the passage contains expressions such as the following:

*Another meditation, which brought me great devotion and consolation, came to me one at this point, but it has slipped my memory, although I touched it briefly while meditating on the Life of the Lord Jesus that I am writing for you in this little book [...] to my great distress I had forgotten it. [...] Therefore, since then, I have thought of committing such beautiful things to writing, especially for my memory.*<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> “Il brano sembra un’intrusione, aggiun to in un secondo tempo. E infatti [...] manca nella versione latina. Non mi pare però possibile che sia dovuto a un’intenzione chiarificatrice, all’intervento di un traduttore o editore. Troppo sincera è l’espressione di confusione dinanzi al fenomeno percepito – lo sforzo di disculparsi e la ricerca di un rimedio – perché non si debba riconoscere qui la voce autentica dell’autore.” Ragusa, ‘L’autore delle Meditationes Vitae Christi’ 148

<sup>30</sup> Note 195, *The Meditations*, 401.

<sup>31</sup> “Nel cercare di individuare con maggiore precisione la personalità dell’autore – pur non offrendogli un nome – abbiamo trovato indicazioni importanti in due caratteristiche che son proprie solo del Ms. ital. 115. [...] La seconda caratteristica consiste nella presenza di alcuni brani che non esistono nelle altre versioni del testo delle Meditationes, sia in latino sia in volgare: questi testimoniano lo spontaneo trapasso dalla fase orale a quella scritta.” Ragusa, ‘L’autore delle Meditationes Vitae Christi’ 148

<sup>32</sup> *Meditations*, 295. cf. Un’altra cosa [d]a meditare m’intravenne qui una volta, la quale m’arrecoe grande devotione et consolatione ma escitti fuore de la memoria mia. Conciosia cosa ch’io trascorresse meditando la

But the problem with the whole argument is the simple fact that this passage is not absent at all from the other versions of the MVC. It is true that the passage in question is missing from the most diffused Italian version, the *Testo minore*, but this is not a surprise, since the quotation appears in the second narrative section of the MVC, in other words in the part that speaks about the public life of Jesus, which is entirely missing from the short Italian version. However, if we check the exemplars of the Italian *Testo maggiore*, we find the same paragraph apparently in every codex, not only in the unedited ones, but also in the well-diffused and published version that was edited by Bartolomeo Sorio in the nineteenth century.<sup>33</sup>

What is even more striking is the fact that the paragraph in question is clearly present also in the Latin *Testo maggiore*,<sup>34</sup> which – according to the traditional consensus – is the original form of the MVC. Consequently, we can say that this quotation, which can be indeed interpreted as the author's personal comment, can be found in all versions of the *Testo maggiore*. In other words, it attests that the original version has to be one of the long versions. This consideration will be essential when we treat another recent hypothesis, concerning the primacy of one of the short versions, but it does not help us to decide the original language or variant among the many variants of the *Testo maggiore*.

The reason for such a banal mistake can be found in the fact that when Ragusa was writing her article in 1997, the critical edition of the Latin text had still not been published, since it came out in the same year, and in the text edition that Ragusa used, the passage in question was indeed absent.<sup>35</sup> However, at least Sorio's text edition of the long Italian text could have been easily consulted in order to check the conclusion.

Apparently Isa Ragusa also realised her mistake, and she tried to modify her thesis in another article, published in the same journal six years later. However, instead of admitting her previous error, the author tried to modify the argumentation, in order to create a new and valid hypothesis, without rejecting the previous one outright. In this second article, Ragusa simply leaves out of consideration her previous argument about the passage in question, but on the one hand – on the basis of a quite unclear argument<sup>36</sup> – she continues to use the old Latin edition of Peltier instead of the new critical one, and on the other she stresses the original “oral composition” of the text, which could have been in

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vita del Signore Ihesu lo quale io ti scrivo in questo libricciuolo (...) si ll'abbo dimenticata con grande torbatione. (...) Et però d'allora io pensai d'arrecare in iscriptura ad mia memoria notabilmente contabilmente cotali belle cose. Ragusa, 'L'autore delle Meditationes Vitae Christi', 148

<sup>33</sup> The presence of this paragraph in the manuscripts of the *Testo maggiore*, has been revealed in the structural collation: Ertl – Konrád – Gerencsér – Ludmann – Falvay, “The Italian Variants of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*,” n. 63, p. 84-89.

<sup>34</sup> *Quattordici scritture italiane*, 142-143. Florence, BNCF, MS N.A. 350, cc. 185-186; Venice, Marc. Ital. Z. 7, 51v.

<sup>35</sup> Bonaventura, *Opera Omnia*, , p. 590.

<sup>36</sup> “Continuo di proposito a servirmi della vecchia edizione latina, invece della più recente (...) curata da M. Stallings-Taney, perché questa si basa solo sulle versioni scritte in latino.” Ragusa, ‘La particolarità del testo,’ 71.

the vernacular. However, she no longer argues that the first written version could have been the Italian version conserved in the codex of Paris.<sup>37</sup> The fact that the previous mistaken conclusion has not been corrected in an unambiguous way in the second article, nor – as far as I know – by any other scholars in the last 18 years, has had the unfortunate consequence of misleading other authors dealing with the MVC without concentrating especially on the textual history of the text, such as the art historian Holly Flora.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, the Italian *Testo maggiore A* remains an extremely important variant of the text, and at the present state of research we can consider it to be the first Italian version of the text, which most probably attests a first translation (or at least a separate redaction) of the text.<sup>39</sup> However, its impact on the textual history of the Italian MVC is limited, since apparently this redaction has remained isolated, and only an old print and a nineteenth-century copy seem to follow its textual characteristics.<sup>40</sup>

The Italian *Testo maggiore B* seems to be a much more widely diffused version of the MVC than the previous one. This is not only because it has been conserved in at least nine manuscripts – in contrast to the *codex unicus* of Paris – but also because it is more organically connected to the most widely disseminated Italian version, namely the *Testo minore*. The limits of the present article do not allow me to include long collations, but the several partial ones that I have executed – partly in collective publications – confirm that the *Testo maggiore B* and the *Testo minore* are strictly linked on the textual level.

## **THE TESTO MINORE**

The Italian *Testo minore* is the most diffused version of the MVC. We may know this version from the edition made by Donadelli, and from that made by Sarri, even if the last one is a contaminated one, since the editor “completed” the missing central part by using the previous text edition by Sorio.<sup>41</sup> As we have already mentioned above, it is divided on average into 41-42 chapters, and it contains the first and the third narrative section of the text: in other words, after the prologue,

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<sup>37</sup> “In ogni caso si tratterebbe sempre di un testo orale in origine e scritto in seguito (...) possiamo dedurre che anche la versione orale delle *Meditationes* era in volgare.” Ragusa, ‘La particolarità del testo,’ 78-79

<sup>38</sup> Flora, *The Devout Belief of the Imagination*, 27-33

<sup>39</sup> Also Jacques Dalarun has argued recently that the Paris MS is the first translation of the MVC. Dalarun, - Besseyre ‘La meditatione de la vita del nostro Signore Yhesù Christo’. I am grateful to Géraldine Veyseyre for informing me about this publication.

<sup>40</sup> Vatican: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS. Ferraioli 423. The incunabulum is: Milano, de Cornero, c. 1470. (see: n. 4767 *Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke*. vol 4.) quote by Vaccari, ‘Le Meditazioni,’ 345. According to Alberto Vaccari, this has the same prologue, and therefore he suggested that an eventual edition of the Paris MS should be completed with the text of this incunable.

<sup>41</sup> Donadelli, Sarri. Maybe the best, albeit partial, edition is that of Levasti: *Mistici del duecento*.

we can read about the events before the Incarnation (the life of the Virgin), and the infancy of Jesus. Following the baptism and the temptation in the desert, however, the narration jumps directly to the events that prepare for the Passion, so in the second part of the text we read about the events from Palm Sunday to Pentecost.

The Italian *Testo minore* has survived in at least 48 medieval manuscripts. The success of this version of the MVC can be explained by its easily manageable length, and maybe by the fact that these two sections could have been the most charming for a late medieval audience, since the infancy section contains many popular episodes from the apocryphal tradition, while the Passion was evidently at the centre of late medieval popular piety. Furthermore, as Sarah McNamer has convincingly demonstrated, this version – in contrast to the Latin *kleine Text* – is structurally compact and organic.<sup>42</sup>

This popularity and organic structure led McNamer in 1990 to formulate the hypothesis about the absolute precedence of this Italian *Testo minore*. I have expressed many arguments against this assumption elsewhere;<sup>43</sup> consequently, in the present article, I would only like to return for a moment to the passage analysed above, which was quoted by Isa Ragusa, as proof of the precedence of the Italian *Testo maggiore A*, since it contains phrases that could have been written only by the author of the text. As demonstrated above, this argument cannot be adapted to that specific version for which Ragusa intended to argue, since it can be read also in all other testimonies of the *Testo maggiore*, both in Italian and in Latin; nevertheless, it is a valid argument for the general precedence of the *Testo maggiore* over the *Testo minore*, since really none of the exemplars of the short version contain the passage in question.

## THE MARIAN REDACTION OF THE *TESTO MINORE*

At this point I would like to demonstrate the existence of a specific subtype of the *Testo minore* that was not registered by the previous scholarship on the level of manuscripts. When speaking about the early print versions of the MVC, Alberto Vaccari states that one of them, namely the incunabulum printed by de Zanichis in Venice around 1500, includes two additional episodes: an extra chapter on the birth of the Virgin at the beginning, and another one on her Assumption at the end of the text. Vaccari named this variant the “Marian redaction”, but he did not know about manuscript exemplars of this redaction.<sup>44</sup> During my research on the Italian manuscripts of the MVC, I individuated two codices that belong to this redaction.

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<sup>42</sup> McNamer, ‘Further evidence’

<sup>43</sup> Tóth-Falvay. ‘New Light’ In our forthcoming article we analyzed the usage of Latin sources in the different versions of the MVC, and also this investigation had the clear conclusion that the original version of the MVC cannot be other than the long Latin. Falvay-Tóth, L’autore e la trasmissione,’

<sup>44</sup> Vaccari, ‘Le Meditazioni della vita di Cristo in volgare,’ 346

The Museum of Montepandone conserves the former library of James of the Marches, the famous Observant Franciscan preacher of the fifteenth century, and among the codices we can find a previously unidentified manuscript of the MVC. Codex M37, copied in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, was described in the catalogue of 2000, but the content of the codex was misinterpreted, since it was termed an “anonymous vernacular translation from the fourteenth century of Saint Bonaventura’s sermons.”<sup>45</sup> However, in reality, it is a 49-chapter-long version of the MVC that we read in this manuscript.<sup>46</sup>

I have dealt with this codex elsewhere recently,<sup>47</sup> so in the present article I intend only to analyse it briefly in terms of its Marian content. In this manuscript we find both extra chapters mentioned by Vaccari as a characteristic of the Venetian old print: the birth of the Virgin can be read as chapter 4 at f. 6v-7r, while the Assumption can be read as the last chapter at ff. 109v-112v. On the basis of the textual aspect of the codex, we can assume that it belongs to the same textual group as the Venetian print.

There is another codex that seems to be connected to this subtype. The fifteenth-century MS 1052 of the Riccardiana Library of Florence is known to scholars of Dante, since it includes some poetic components attributed to Dante,<sup>48</sup> and it is listed in Fischer’s catalogue, but nobody has ever analysed the MVC in it from the textual point of view. Our text can be read on ff. 15v-88v. The particularity of that variant is that it does contain one of the two Marian extra episodes, namely that of the Assumption of the Virgin at the end of the MVC, and moreover the life of the Virgin before the Incarnation seems to be expanded. However, in this codex, the other additional episode, the birth of the Virgin, can be read as a separate text, not incorporated into the narration of the MVC. It can be read just a few folios after the MVC, at f. 91v, with a distinct rubrica “Leggende della nascita della Vergine” and incipit “Del nascimento della gloriosa madre di uita eterna Vergine gloriosa Maria la quale fu madre...”

On the basis of these considerations, we can hypothesise that this Florentine manuscript would attest a previous stage of textual transmission, compared to the Montepandone one and the Venetian print, since it is plausible that the additional Marian episodes were included in the text of the MVC gradually, taken from other sources. However, to prove this hypothesis, a further close textual comparison is needed, in order to clarify the internal relationship of these three exemplars of this subtype of the Italian *Testo minore*.

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<sup>45</sup> “Il codice contiene le Meditazioni su Cristo, volgarizzamento dei Semoni (sic!) di S. Bonaventura di anonimo del sec. XIV.” Loggi: *I codici della Libreria di S. Giacomo della Marca*, p. 73

<sup>46</sup> I am grateful to padre Lorenzo Turchi, since he kindly provided me with a digital copy of the manuscript.

<sup>47</sup> Falvay, *Gli osservanti e la letteratura devozionale volgare*.

<sup>48</sup> De Robertis, ‘Documenti,’ 347-348

## THE DIALECTAL REWRITINGS (*RIFACIMENTI*) OF THE *TESTO MINORE* AND THE *CANONICI VERSION*

In 2009 McNamer modified her previous thesis concerning the primacy of the *Testo minore* in general, and argued that a subtype of the Italian *Testo minore* should be the original form of the MVC. As mentioned above, this specific variant of the text has survived in a unique codex, in the Bodleian Library (MS Canonici Italian 174), and it has been called the *Canonici Version* by subsequent scholarship. We have no space or opportunity to present detailed textual comparisons here, but I have to admit that this version is indeed a separate one, differing both in structure and on the textual level from the other known Italian and Latin variants. McNamer's arguments are clearly summarised in the conclusion of her recent article, from 2014, as follows:

... that the original version of the popular and influential pseudo-Bonaventuran MVC was a short Italian version consisting of a prologue and thirty chapters, treating only the infancy and passion and replete with the affective and dramatic characteristics for which the MVC came to be so widely admired; that this original version, witnessed uniquely by Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Canonici Italian 174 (and thus designated, in what follows, as the Canonici version or text), was composed by a nun [...]. In short, my current hypothesis is this: the original version of the MVC, the *Canonici* text, was composed by a Poor Clare in Pisa, sometime during the first two decades of the fourteenth century, probably between about 1305 and 1315.<sup>49</sup>

I assume that almost all of the arguments expressed by McNamer are valid points: this text is stylistically more compact and more dramatic; I can also accept that this is the most valuable variant from the viewpoint of literary aesthetics; it is plausible too that it could have been written by a woman – contrary to the majority of the other variants that we know. There is only one point – but it is a quite important one – that I cannot admit, namely that this codex could testify to the original version of the text.

I had the opportunity to analyse the *Canonici Version* recently, in the most detailed way in two long articles written together with Péter Tóth,<sup>50</sup> so I shall investigate it here only in terms of a specific aspect, namely its dialectal features. The *Canonici* MS is clearly a fifteenth-century codex, as McNamer is also well aware, and from the linguistic analysis made by Pär Larson as an introduction to her text edition – still to be published, but summarised in McNamer's article from 2014 – we can learn that there are two distinct linguistic strata that can be distinguished in the Italian text of the *Canonici*

<sup>49</sup> McNamer *The Author*, 120

<sup>50</sup> Tóth-Falvay, 'New Light' Falvay-Tóth, 'L'autore e la diffusione'

*Version:* to sum it up in a simplistic manner, the copyist of the codex is from the Veneto region, while the original text could have been from Tuscany, and Larson has individuated a number of linguistic phenomena that are specific to Pisa.<sup>51</sup>

McNamer interprets these arguments as evidence that the *Canonici* MS was copied in the Veneto area (not necessarily Venice) directly from a Pisan model codex, but this is not the only possible explanation, and here I would like to come back to the issue of the classification of the Italian manuscripts. In my research on the textual tradition of the Italian MVC, I have come across a peculiar phenomenon: namely, while the fourteenth-century codices all follow the two previously established classes of the text – let us continue to refer to them as *Testo maggiore* and *Testo minore* – in the fifteenth century (of course among many simple copies), we find a number of codices that are quite different both structurally and textually; moreover, they are typically written in non-Tuscan dialect.

For instance, a Codex today kept in the National Library of Naples – it is interesting to note that this is the only Italian version that has been published in a recent scholarly edition by Giuliano Gasca-Queirazza – conserves the only known version of the MVC written in the Sicilian dialect.<sup>52</sup> The difference of this version is not only a linguistic one; it is also to be found on the structural and narrative level. It is a *Testo maggiore*, but several episodes have been left out, abridged or put together. What even more telling is the fact that the general setting of the narrative situation has also been radically changed: there is no longer a friar who addresses these Meditations to a nun; rather, it is clearly a male pupil that is instructed by this text; furthermore, the Franciscan character of this Sicilian version has been minimised, and many more Bernardine and Benedictine quotations have been added. In the opinion of the editor, this text is a separate translation or a *rifacimento*, a rewriting of the text for a Benedictine male community in the fifteenth century.<sup>53</sup>

We can observe similar peculiar phenomena in the case of another variant, which has likewise survived in a single fifteenth-century codex, today kept in the Angelica Library of Rome, and edited in the nineteenth century by Adamo Rossi. This text shows clear signs of the Umbrian dialect, and it differs again both textually and structurally from all the other known Latin or vernacular variants of the MVC. We have analysed the style and content of this version – which we termed the Angelica Version – in the essay written with Tóth, but here I would like to stress the dialectal character and the provenience of this codex. Its editors, Rossi and Vaccari, already noticed that the text of the codex has two separate dialectal strata: there is a Tuscan base, and on top of that base there is a marked Umbrian layer. Moreover, in Vaccari's opinion, in this case this codex cannot be considered to be a distinct

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<sup>51</sup> McNamer, 'The Author,' 122.

<sup>52</sup> Biblioteca Nazionale di Napoli Ms. XII F 13. *Meditazioni di la vita di Christu*.

<sup>53</sup> „dunque la redazione siciliana del nostro manoscritto è opera di un monaco benedettino. Il discorso poi è rivolto chiaramente a un destinatario di sesso maschile.” Gasca-Queirazza, *Meditazioni*, pp. xviii-xix.

translation from the Latin, but rather an interdialectal translation from the Tuscan into the Umbrian dialect.<sup>54</sup>

In addition, we have another piece of essential information that Rossi and Vaccari did not have at their disposal: namely, we have profound knowledge of the community in which the codex was made. This codex was undoubtedly produced in the fifteenth century in a famous Umbrian convent of Observant Poor Clare nuns, called Monteluca of Perugia.<sup>55</sup> Luckily, we have a number of recent publications concerning this female community.<sup>56</sup> Consequently, we can learn that these nuns were not only mere copyists; rather, several of them were original translators, rewriters, and even sometimes original writers. Therefore, we can suppose that the peculiar form of rewriting of the Angelica Version was a result of this original interpretative activity of these Umbrian nuns, and that the Umbrian dialectal level on the text of the Angelica Version is not simply a result of the copying, but is rather a sign of a rewriting, a *rifacimento* made by the Umbrian nuns in the fifteenth century.

Interestingly enough, we know another *rifacimento* of the MVC from the same place and time, and in this case we also have a named author for this peculiar version. Gabriele da Perugia was an Observant friar who, in the first decade of the sixteenth century, served as a confessor for the same Poor Clare community of Perugia by whom the Angelica Version was also produced. Gabriele da Perugia wrote an unpublished book, entitled *Libro devote, dicto Libro de Vita sopra li Principali Misteri de Christo Benedicto et de Matre sua*, known as *Libro di vita*, now kept in Perugia, divided into two manuscripts, copied again by the same female community.<sup>57</sup> This work is an original rewriting of the MVC in the vernacular (again with strong Umbrian dialectal signs), together with some parts taken from an Umbrian translation of the *Arbor Vitae* of Ubertino da Casale (a known Spiritual friar, who wrote his work virtually contemporaneously to the MVC, and treating the same topic in a quite different manner).<sup>58</sup> So in Gabriele's case we can clearly perceive a creative rewriting of the MVC in the early fifteenth century.

To sum up: these three examples of fifteenth-century creative, dialectal rewritings of the MVC lead us to two concluding considerations. First, the classification of the Italian MVC needs to be completed, and we should add a further class, and I would hypothetically term this group of

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<sup>54</sup> "...vi è trasportata e come a dire tradotta dal troscano in altro dialetto dell'Italia centrale, che il medesimo Rossi, buon conoscitore dal suo dialetto nativo, giudicò perugino." Vaccari, *Le meditazioni*, 352.

<sup>55</sup> Roma, Bibl. Angelica, ms. 2213, in *Appendice 1. Elenco Manoscritti del monastero Santa Maria di Monteluca in Perugia*, in *Cultura e desiderio di Dio*, 103-7: 106, n. 28.

<sup>56</sup> Baldelli, 'Codici e carte di Monteluca'; Ugolino Nicolini, 'I Minori Osservanti di Monteripido e lo "Scriptorium" delle Clarisse di Monteluca in Perugia'; *Uno sguardo oltre.; Cultura e desiderio di Dio.; Il richiamo delle origini.*

<sup>57</sup> Pulignani, 'Fra Gabriele da Perugia', Perini, 'Un 'Libro di Vita' di Gabriele da Perugia'; Busolini, 'Gabriele da Perugia'

<sup>58</sup> Cusato, 'Two Uses of the Vita Christo Genre in Tuscany,' for the relationship between the two texts see Falvay-Tóth, 'L'autore'



manuscripts *rifacimenti*, that is, a number of fifteenth-century creative rewritings of the text in different dialectal colours, and for different religious communities. Second, maybe we can also add to this group the *Canonici Version*, which – if this proposition is correct – cannot be a fifteenth-century copy of a genuine Pisan MS, which “witnesses uniquely the original version” of the MVC, as McNamer argued; I propose to interpret it as one of the creative fifteenth-century dialectal rewritings of this Pseudo-Bonaventuran text. Indeed it could have been written by a nun, and indeed it may be of high literary value, but in my view it is not the original version of this extremely popular Franciscan narrative.

## CONCLUSION

In the present analysis of the Italian manuscripts of the MVC, on the one hand, we can say that the Italian corpus is much larger than was previously thought; on the other hand, I have offered a more sophisticated categorisation of the Italian codices. Along with the previously known *Testo maggiore* (*A* and *B*) and *Testo minore*, I have introduced a further subtype of the *Testo minore*, namely the Marian redaction, and more notably, I have proposed a new class, hypothetically called *rifacimenti* or dialectal rewritings. Furthermore, I have argued that the *Canonici Version* too can perhaps be better collocated in this new category than be considered as the original form of the MVC.

In conclusion, therefore, we can say that the Italian versions of this pseudo-Bonaventuran text are to be considered as another example of the extremely rich *volgarizzamento* literature of the Italian early fourteenth century. In other words, even if we arrive at the supposition that the original version could have been in Latin, the large number of Italian vernacular exemplars, together with their multifarious textual and dialectal character, will still witness that this Franciscan narration, entitled *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, was a real vernacular success in Italy in the fourteenth or fifteenth century.

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