

JOHN OF SALISBURY'S SYMBOLICAL BIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT. *John of Salisbury's Symbolical Biography.* The article *John of Salisbury's Symbolical Biography*, is part of an ampler study upon the relationship between political philosophy and the philosophy of language in John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*. The article focuses on the manner in which certain events in Salisbury's life are reflected in the thematic of his work, particularly in the way he addresses the link between political philosophy and the philosophy of language.

Keywords: *John of Salisbury, Symbolical Biography, political philosophy, philosophy of language*

Historical Context of the *Policraticus*

When considering premodern political philosophy, the general tendency is to mention the Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, amongst whom are Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustin, and Justinian, and then to jump directly to the Renaissance, many people still considering that after Antiquity, the first political treatise was Machiavelli's *The Prince*. This view, however is incorrect. While political aspects had been swiftly tackled throughout the whole of the Middle Ages, in works which concentrated on other philosophical topics, it was not until John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* that a political treatise per se appeared.

Policraticus was written between 1154 and 1159, the introductory poem called *Entheticus*, which serves as a poetical art for the entire treatise, having been composed between 1154 and 1156, while the treatise itself was written from 1156 up until its completion in 1159.¹ *Policraticus* is made up of eight books, the first four concentrated on the frivolities (*nugae*) of the courtiers and the other four focused on John's political theory per se. The structure is similar to that of Augustin's *De civitate Dei*, as are the topics which Salisbury considers as frivolities in the first four

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¹ See Cary J. Nederman, *Policraticus*, Cambridge University Press, 2007/1990, pp. xviii–xix.

books: hunting, superstition, astrology, drinking. The last four books, comprising John's political theory itself, are under the pretense of being taken from Plutarch's *Instructio Traiani*, a fictional treatise invented by John in order to serve as an argument through authority and to support his view that the prince and the pope should follow in the footsteps of the philosophers (*vestigia philosophorum*). The target readers are the prince, Henry IInd, through the chancellor Thomas Becket, and pope Hadrian IVth. The work itself is double folded, encompassing the fields of both types of dedicatees, as it treats almost equally both the lay and the clerical side, highlighting the vices which can be found with both sides and the actions which need to be taken for an optimum form of terrestrial and spiritual rule.

Besides being a political treatise, *Policraticus* also focuses on the role of language and its link to politics. Proof in this sense is the fact that *Policraticus* was published together with *Metalogicon*, the latter a treatise of medieval grammar and logic. Medieval grammar was considered to be a meta-science, which lied at the basis of all the other sciences and branches of philosophy, facilitating the learner's access to them. In the same way, John of Salisbury creates the image of language as a necessary intermediary for political philosophy, through the metaphor of his voyaging book, sent by the writer to its dedicatees, as it appears in *Entheticus*. Moreover, language appears to be a simulacrum in Salisbury's approach, authoritative texts being just as significant whether they are real or made up, as the author himself shows in the prologue to *Policraticus*:

If someone, like Lanuinus, would calumny the unknown authors as if they were made up, then they should either accuse Plato's resurrected character, Cicero's dreaming African and the philosophers who celebrated the Saturnalia, or they should be indulgent with the authors' fictions and with ours, if these serve the public utility.²

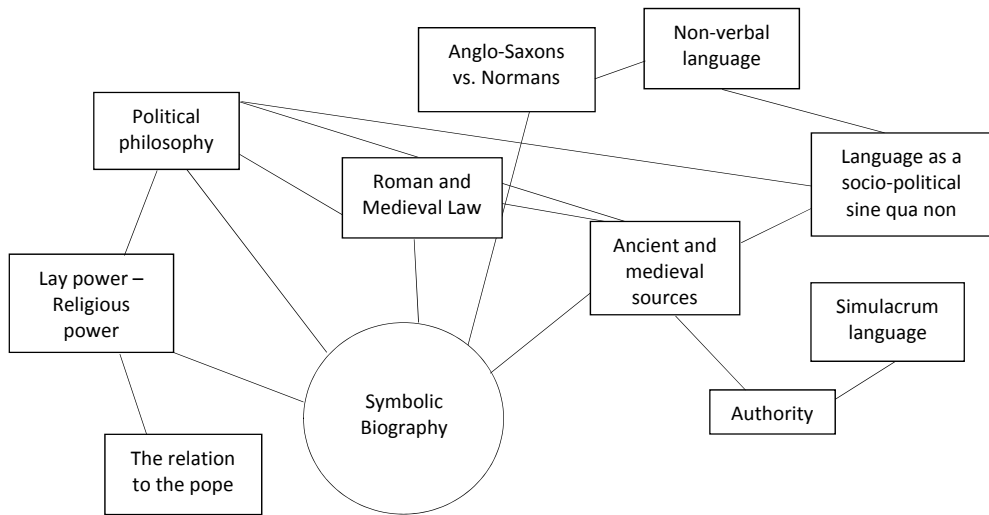
Not only does Salisbury use fictional quotations in order to express his personal beliefs, while giving them at the same time an authoritative value, but he also uses his personal life experience as symbolic exempla throughout both *Policraticus* and *Metalogicon*.

if he does mention in his work a number of events that occurred in his life, this is not with any autobiographical purpose (such an ambition would largely have been alien to him): rather, his intention was to situate these personal events within an exemplary scheme, where the actions and gestures accomplished by others may be

² John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, Brepols, 1993, ed. Keats-Rohan, p. 26: "Si quisignotosauctores cum Lanuinocalumpniaturutictos, autredivumPlatonis, Affricanum Ciceroni somniantem et philosophos Saturnalia exercentesaccuset, autactorumnostrisquefigmentisindulgeat,sipublicaeserviuntutilitati".

used as a model (or counter model) of action. In medieval works that are traditionally seen as autobiographical (such as the *Liber de temptationibus* of Othlo of Saint-Emmeran, the *De vita sua* of Guibert of Nogent or the *Historia calamitatum* of Peter Abelard), individuality always appears within a certain typological framework, and is inserted into existing narrative schemes.³

Thus, John's biography becomes significant for his approach towards politics, language, and the relationship between the two, as can be seen from the below figure:



Normans versus Anglo-Saxons

The first relevant point of John of Salisbury's biography is represented by his origins, given the historical context in which he was born.

The first date in John's life that is known with any certainty is that of his arrival in Paris as a student, one year after the death of Henry I of England (*Metalogicon* 2.10) – in 1136. Given that "higher studies" at that time began at about the age of fifteen, this leads us to date John's birth at around 1120; unless one accepts that he would have started his cycle of studies in England, in which case a date of around 1115 would be more likely. John was born on the former site of the present-day Salisbury (Old Sarum), to a family that is generally thought to have been of modest origins.⁴

³ Christophe Grellard, Frederique Lachaud, *A Companion to John of Salisbury*, Brill, 2014, p. 2.

⁴ Grellard, p. 2.

Thus, John was born at less than 100 years after the battle of Hastings and the Norman Conquest from 1066, at a time when the relations between the occupant Norman nobility and the conquered Anglo-Saxons were still bitter. After Hastings, William the Conqueror had replaced the entire Anglo-Saxon nobility with Normans, taking the Anglo-Saxons' privileges together with their lands and estates. The official language was also changed from the Anglo-Saxon dialects to Norman French, and together with the new nobility, the conquering king brought new customs. It is these new customs that John of Salisbury sees as frivolities and criticizes. This seems strange in the light of the fact that John's mother was of Norman origin, but since there is no information regarding the identity of his father, it is possible that he was of Anglo-Saxon origin "His mother, Gille Peche, had children by at least two husbands, who were perhaps dignitaries or canons of Salisbury Cathedral".⁵ John's constant criticism of the new Norman habits, such as hunting, superstition, astrology, seems to reflect a view upon society as a decaying one from the old Anglo-Saxon morality. This could be explained by the possibility of John having had a father of Anglo-Saxon origin, with which he would have identified himself more in terms of national identity. This hypothesis is supported by the low social status that John's family had.

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However, Salisbury's criticism of the Norman nobility's habits cannot be explained only by his potential Anglo-Saxon origins. These customs are described by the author as functioning as non-verbal language. Hunting, the first criticized frivolity of the courtiers, acts as a pretext for the manifestation of an exacerbated ego, and as a context for adultery. Superstition and the practice of astrology are depicted as fake signs, and therefore dangerous if used by the leaders of the realm. The danger comes from the fact that language is seen as having an essential role in political and social interaction, without it politics and society becoming impossible.

⁵ Grellard, p. 3.

⁶ Grellard, p. 2.

John's Classical and Philosophical Education

Another point of John's life which highly influenced his works were his studies. *Policraticus* is filled with quotations, whether marked or unmarked by the author, used in order to support his ideas as arguments of authority. Not mentioning the authors of the inserted quotations has a double role in John's opinion: that of encouraging those who are not familiar with them to read more, and that of not being redundant for those already versed in philosophy and in the Scriptures, particularly for the dedicatees of *Policraticus* and *Metalogicon*:

I took care to insert <passages> from various authors that came into mind, as long as they helped or entertained, keeping their names silent at times, both because I had known that a lot of them are wholly known to you, as you are versed in letters, and so as the one ignorant of them to be led to a more assiduous lecture.⁷

The source of these quotations stands in his studies at Paris and Chartres, where John became acquainted with classical literature and philosophy, but also with some of the most remarkable thinkers of his time such as Abelard, Alberic, William of Conches, Thierry of Chartres, Peter of Celle, Gilbert of Poitiers etc.⁸

The Power of Language

The multiplicity of quotations and references from John's texts gives birth to two important aspects of his philosophy of language. The first aspect is represented by the problem of authorship, whether it the fictional or non-fictional authorship. The two are depicted as being equal in value and relevance, which leads to the second aspect, which is the role of language as a simulacrum. Language in Salisbury's view is just as important if not more important than facts, it is just as relevant and effective in terms of influence upon the political aspect. This perspective is not limited to verbal language, as non-verbal language was extremely significant in the Middle Ages. An example in this sense is the case of the Norman Conquest. It has been long debated whether William the Conqueror's invasion of Britain was in fact a legitimate act of taking into possession his heirloom or not. The legitimacy of

⁷ Salisbury, p. 24, "Quae vero ad rem pertinentia a diversis auctoribus se animo ingerant, dum conferrent aut iuvarent, curavi inserere, tacitis inter dum nominibus auctorum, tum quia tibi utpote exercitato in litteris pleraque plenissime nota esse noveram, tum ut ad lectionem assiduam magis accenderetur ignarus".

⁸ See Grellard, pp. 5–6.

the conquest lies in whether the gestures that took place between William and Eduard the Confessor had been executed correctly, using genuine relics or not. Thus non-verbal language had the power of law during the Middle Ages, if the context and the protagonists were the appropriate ones.

Salisbury's Knowledge of Law

Law itself was not an unknown aspect to John of Salisbury, as he had become familiarized with it through his contacts from Chartres "Beyond this circle of clerics, John perhaps knew the Bolognese master Vacarius, who resided in Canterbury and who may have been one of the masters who provided him with knowledge of Roman law"⁹. John's familiarity with law did not stop here, but was continued after his studies, when he started working for Theobald, the Archbishop of Canterbury at that time.

In 1154, John appears as secretary and personal adviser to Theobald. Before that date, as Julie Barrau shows in the following pages ("John of Salisbury as ecclesiastical administrator"), his precise role in the archbishop's entourage remains vague, and he seems to have been employed mainly on missions to the papal Curia. As early as 1149 he was sent to Pope Eugenius III in Rome. In the prologue to *Metalogicon 3*, written in 1159, he states that he has travelled extensively in France and England, and that he has crossed the Alps ten times, even staying in Apulia for a lengthy period. This means that during these ten years of service he would have travelled to Italy on average once a year and stayed there for considerable lengths of time. These travels are significant both socially and intellectually. John was able to create or strengthen links with some influential men in the Church or in lay circles. It was, for instance, during one of his journeys to the Curia that he became close friends with Cardinal Nicholas Breakspear, a fellow Englishman who became pope in 1154 under the name of Adrian IV and with whom John stayed for a long period, as he narrates in the *Policraticus* and in his letters. This friendship, which John mentions on several occasions (e.g. *Letter 50*; *Metalogicon 4.42*), probably strengthened his position at the Curia, but it did not enable him – for lack of time, unless it was because Adrian IV did not wish to displease Henry II – to get promoted to the cardinalship, a position John seems to have coveted. These travels were also intellectually significant. John may have acquired some of his legal knowledge in Italy, contrary to what is often assumed.¹⁰

⁹ Grellard, p. 8.

¹⁰ Grellard, p. 8.

Relationship With the Papacy

As it can be seen, it is not only the lay law that was known to John, but also the clerical law and the papal environment. However, his consistent contact with the papacy led to his conflicts with the English crown prior to his supporting Becket against Henry IInd "it was also this very proximity that damaged his position in the eyes of King Henry II".¹¹ John was perceived by the king as working in the interest of the papacy and not the English crown, being suspected as a spy for the Pope.

From what John says, one of the accusations made against him was that he had lowered the royal dignity: this probably means that John was considered to have worked in favour of Theobald's interests at the expense of those of the English Crown. But in reality it was Adrian IV who was the great victor in these negotiations: John had obtained for the king the authorization to invade Ireland, but it seems that this was to be placed under the authority of the papacy. Furthermore, the reference in the discussions to the Donation of Constantine raised implicitly the status of England itself – another insular land – in relation to the papacy. The favour shown to John by the Pope in Benevento probably fed suspicions concerning the former's attitude.

In opposition to the accusations the English king brought against John, the latter's *Policraticus* is written from a balanced point of view in what the relationship between the crown and the church is concerned. John criticizes the frivolities that appear both at the court and in the church in the same degree. Furthermore, he does not bring arguments in favour of a state governed by the church, but instead for a state in which the two are equal in power.

Concluding Remarks

All in all, it can be concluded that John of Salisbury's political philosophy as well as his philosophy of language were highly influenced by his personal experience. Thus his biography becomes an intently symbolical one, representing an argument in itself in favour of John's theories.

¹¹ Grellard, p. 9.

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