

The significance of Virgilian Intertext in Carolingian Poetry:
Walahfrid Strabo's *de Imagine Tetrici*

Walahfrid Strabo, monk, poet, exegete, gardener, and courtier, penned the puzzling poem *de Imagine Tetrici* during the reign of Emperor Louis the Pious, the son and successor of Charlemagne. This poem, which in many ways is a panegyric in praise of the emperor, is named for the statue of the late king Theodoric, whom Walahfrid Strabo names Tetricus (meaning gloomy or severe). Walahfrid, standing below the great equestrian statue of Theodoric which Charlemagne had brought to his royal court from Ravenna, uses the first part of the poem to describe how villainous Tetricus (Theodoric) was in life. Then he abruptly switches moods and begins to praise the current emperor, his family and his courtiers. Some scholars have postulated that the focus on the negative characteristics of Theodoric in the beginning of the poem is there to enhance, in contrast, the positive characteristics of Louis in the later half. Yet, in the closing of the poem, Walahfrid bids farewell to the statue, and blames it for marring his work.

The interpretation of this poem is tricky, yet there are guidelines to the astute scholar. First, of all, Walahfrid wrote in dactylic hexameter, and had studied Virgil extensively, which we know both from his letters, and the profuse sprinkling of Virgilian allusions in his poetry. Moreover, he was a young, low-ranking, yet shrewd courtier, just starting to work his way into the imperial circle, relying on the patronage of superiors, some of whom he mentions in the poem. Furthermore, his brilliance as a poet had astonished his clerical superiors since Walahfrid was a teenager in the monastery, when he wrote his first major work, *Visio Wettini*, a hexameter poem of over 900 lines describing a dream-vision of hell, purgatory and heaven.

This background can inform our reading of the *de Imagine Tetrici*. We can surmise that Walahfrid must have been careful to flatter Louis, as the emperor had been known to suddenly exile high-ranking courtiers (and, indeed, Walahfrid himself, despite all his caution, was himself exiled for a time, later in life). Walahfrid, therefore, must present a poem that seems to flatter. However,

upon close investigation of the panegyric passages, Walahfrid has interlaced several allusions to negative lines of Virgil, bringing the reader repeatedly to the Cyclopes passage (Aeneid 3), the gruesome discovery of the murdered Polydorus (Aeneid 3), the grisly meeting with Deiphobus in the underworld (Aeneid 6), and the deadly plague on humankind and beast (Georgics 3). Each of these Virgilian passages are alluded to more than once by Walahfrid in specific parts of the *de Imagine Tetrici* which seem to be praising the emperor.

The study of Walahfrid's use of intertext to paint a very different picture of the emperor in this poem is a key to understanding how Classical poetry may be used to interpret other Carolingian texts. The reign of Charlemagne, Loius, and their successors was marked by warfare, internecine struggle, and repression. In a political and religious context where a misplaced word could mean exile or death, poetic clues to deeper meaning add interesting sub-strata to the interpretation of text.