

**PROFEZIA E AUTORITÀ TRA BASSO MEDIOEVO
E PRIMA ETÀ MODERNA**
**PROPHECY AND AUTHORITY IN LATE MEDIEVAL
AND EARLY MODERN EUROPE**

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INTRODUCTION

Prophecy and apocalypse have been an essential part of Christianity since its origins, although the two phenomena have had multiple forms of expression and a very different impact on society over the centuries. The «Rivista di storia del cristianesimo» has actively promoted studies in this field: as early as 2004, the first issue of the journal included a contribution by Gian Luca Potestà on Dante and the prophecies concerning the Popes (the so-called *Vaticinia de summis pontificibus*¹), and in subsequent years other important contributions have appeared on the works and legacy of the medieval prophet *par excellence*, Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135 - 1202), and on other late medieval prophetic texts by specialists such as Robert E. Lerner and Marco Rainini, as well as Potestà himself².

Moving intentionally in a diachronic perspective, the journal has also hosted a number of notable contributions devoted to prophecy and apocalypse in early Christianity – particularly a recent special issue edited by Enrico Norelli on “Apocalypse as a genre”³ – and, to a lesser extent, on the modern age, with an article by Marina Caffiero on the role played by millenarianism between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in minor currents

¹ G.L. Potestà, *Dante profeta e i vaticini papali*, in «Rivista di storia del cristianesimo» 1(2004), pp. 67-88.

² R.E. Lerner - J. Roussanov, *The Jerusalem Rumors: The Earliest Stage of the 'Master of Rhodes' Letter on the Birth of Antichrist*, ibi 2(2005), pp. 157- 72 and R.E. Lerner, *The Jerusalem Rumors: An Addendum*, ibi 3(2006), pp. 541-43 (Italian translation: «Voci da Gerusalemme»: il primo stadio della lettera del Maestro di Rodi sulla nascita dell'Anticristo, in R.E. Lerner, *Scrutare il futuro. L'eredità di Gioacchino da Fiore alla fine del Medioevo*, Viella, Rome 2008, pp. 201-220); G.L. Potestà, *L'anno dell'Anticristo. Il calcolo di Arnaldo da Villanova nella letteratura teologica e profetica del XIV secolo*, in «Rivista di storia del cristianesimo» 4(2007), pp. 431-464; G.L. Potestà *Il domenicano Arnaldo e la "sentenza di deposizione" di Innocenzo IV*, ibi 9(2012), pp. 405-420 (now in Id., *Segni dei tempi. Figure profetiche e cifre apocalittiche*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2023, pp. 25-41); M. Rainini, *Gioacchino da Fiore esegeta. Acquisizioni e problemi aperti fra testi e «figurae»*, ibi 10(2013), pp. 421-436.

³ E. Norelli (ed.), *Apocalisse come genere. Un dibattito ancora attuale?*, ibi, Special Issue xvii, 1(2020). See also R. Cacitti - A. D'Incà, *Profeti e angeli in volo. Itinerari escatologici nel cristianesimo delle origini*, ibi 11(2014), pp. 17-42.

of Catholicism⁴. However, the Middle Ages and the early modern era seem to be the territories to which scholars, in recent decades, have devoted the most attention, as is revealed in, among others, the Special Issue edited in 2019 by Gian Luca Potestà dedicated to the “Visionary strategies” devised in the medieval and early modern ages to express different political and religious agendas⁵. The number of recent studies, as well as the multiplicity of their approaches, makes it difficult to give a comprehensive overview. Generally speaking, in recent decades scholars have proposed a less direct approach to the question of the relationship between prophecy and politics, and have paid more attention to the cultural aspects of prophecy, with important philological contributions (on the complicated transmission of texts) and a potentially global perspective, or at least an increasingly markedly interreligious one (between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam)⁶.

In this Special Issue prophecy is understood as a vision of hidden things (relating particularly, but not exclusively, to the future) by an individual who communicates them to those who are unable to see them. In this process of reception and communication (potentially repeatable and often repeated many times), two key aspects are on the one hand the authority of the prophet who sees and reveals such hidden content, and on the other the process of revising and adapting either these “prophetic authorities” or their messages to different audiences.

The amount of prophetic material that exists from the Late Middle Ages is so large, and the manuscript traditions so complex, that a great deal still remains to be discovered, edited, and published. Many prophetic texts underwent what Michele Lodone has termed «stratification», the intermingling of sources from different eras in a kind of layered cut-and-paste technique. One example of this process forms the subject of Lodone’s article, a prophecy reported to have been discovered around 1592 buried in the tomb of an abbot named Ubertino from Otranto⁷. The «discoverers» of the prophecy of the abbot claimed that it had originated centuries earlier and lain hidden in the tomb

⁴ M. Caffiero, *Pensare la storia del futuro. Millenarismo, profezia, ritorni del passato in età moderna*, in G. Filoramo - D. Menozzi (eds.), *Scrivere la storia. Narrazioni del cristianesimo nei secoli, ibi*, Special Issue XII, 1(2015), pp. 109-126.

⁵ G.L. Potestà (ed.), *Strategie visionarie tra alto medioevo e prima età moderna, ibi*, Special Issue XVI, 2(2019).

⁶ See D. Internullo - M. Lodone, *La storiografia sul profetismo: riflessioni sugli ultimi decenni*, in R. Michetti - A. Tilatti (eds.), *Dal “medioevo cristiano” alla “storia religiosa” del Medioevo: quarant’anni di storiografia (1974-2014)*, «Quaderni di storia religiosa medievale», n.s., Special Issue 1(2019), pp. 183-209. For more recent overviews see J.J. Martin, *A Beautiful Ending. The Apocalyptic Imagination and the Making of the Modern World*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2022; D. Tricoire - L. Laborie (eds.), *Apocalypse Now. Connected Histories of Eschatological Movements from Moscow to Cusco, 15th-18th Centuries*, Taylor & Francis (Routledge), London - New York 2022; J. Rubenstein - R. Bast (eds.), *Apocalyptic Cultures in Medieval and Renaissance Europe. Politics and Prophecy*, Brepols, Turnhout 2024.

⁷ M. Lodone, *Reperti profetici. Campanella e la rivelazione dell’abate di Otranto, infra*, pp. 84-110.

until the appropriate moment when it would be revived. This moment was the 1590s, and the prophetic text was understood as predicting the upheavals then occurring in Italy, as well as conflicts in France, Spain and the papacy. Lodone points out that aside from the conditions of Europe which made the text interesting, it capitalized on the widespread antiquarian taste of the end of the sixteenth century a «taste for a dark and mysterious archeology of sanctity, in years marked by the passion for the discovery (or invention) of relics or catacombs».

Lodone takes the reader through the reception of this text. Like many other prophetic texts, such as the *Vade mecum in tribulatione* of Johannes de Rupescissa, the prophecy of Abbot Ubertino of Otranto had a long and varied life, which was heralded at first by Tommaso Campanella's association of the prophecy with the Calabrian revolt of 1599. The prophecy soon spread across Europe and was included in hagiographic and scholarly works, reported in gazettes and chronicles, and copied into collections of letters and news. Its success was partially a result of its allusion to Christian Europe's struggle against the Ottomans and partially the result of what Lodone describes as the intentional vagueness of its predictions, which allowed it to be reinterpreted as referring to various circumstances. If the reception of the text was mixed, its origins were equally checkered. Lodone demonstrates that the prophecy of the Abbot of Otranto is a patchwork of much older prophecies stitched together. Its sources derived from the pseudo-Joachimite tradition, drawing particularly from two earlier prophets linked to the region of Calabria, Joachim of Fiore and Telesphorus of Cosenza.

The prophecy of the Abbot of Otranto is a useful case-study to understand the way that prophetic texts could become entangled. Entanglement is also an important theme in Eleonora Cappuccilli's contribution, which reveals that not only prophecies, but prophetic individuals and experiences could become entangled as well⁸. Cappuccilli traces the relationship between two prophetic women, the Dominican tertiaries Lucia da Narni (1476-1544) and María de Santo Domingo (1486-1524), in order to discover the overlaps in their lives and prophetic charisma. Just as prophetic texts traversed national and chronological boundaries, Cappuccilli reveals that prophetic experiences were also shared across distance and time. By noting the connections between the two prophetic women, one in Italy and one on the Iberian peninsula, Cappuccilli demonstrates the transnational scope of female prophecy and the circulation of models of sanctity and prophetic authority. In particular, Cappuccilli contends that Lucia and María were both influenced by a long-standing culture of prophetic women speaking out, authorized by their dialogues with God.

Cappuccilli focuses on the import of a possible meeting between these two women in the early fifteenth century, as recorded in a treatise of miracles attributed to Girolamo Savonarola. In her analysis of this meeting and

⁸ E. Cappuccilli, *L'importanza di un incontro. Lucia da Narni, María de Santo Domingo e la circolazione della profezia nell'Italia e nella Spagna del XVI secolo*, *infra*, pp. 47-66.

the two prophetesses' careers, she presents prophecy as a theological-political act, which could both legitimize and critique conventional systems of authorities, and, in the cases of Lucia and María, subvert traditional male dominance. Once again focusing on prophecy as a theological-political act, Joël Schnapp's article discusses the role of the Ottoman Turks in Catholic prophecy during Suleyman the Magnificent's reign, especially the 1520s⁹. Schnapp argues that the Turks and their threat occupied a substantial part of the European Christian prophetic imagination, describing the successful Turkish expansion in Europe and the conditions of Christian Europe which made it ripe for a recrudescence of prophecy.

Particularly in Italy, the fever for prophecy had already begun at the end of the fourteenth century, was exacerbated by the capture of Constantinople in 1453 and the French invasion of Italy at the end of the fifteenth century, and stoked once again by propaganda written against Martin Luther in the 16th century. In the 1520s, prophetic tension emerged again. Demonstrating another form of stratification and entanglement, Schnapp shows the way that the Turks became woven into existing prophetic traditions. Already in the 1400s, the capture of Constantinople had prompted prophetic speculation, and many authors had assimilated the Ottoman Turks to the impure peoples of Gog and Magog and Mehmet II to Antichrist. Schnapp reveals that these connections continued for at least a half century, and, for European Christians, fantasies of the defeat of the Turks were intimately connected to prophecy and the End.

Schnapp's article demonstrates that as Suleyman the Magnificent continued to expand into European territories, prophecies of the 1520s both revived older prophetic traditions and transformed them. One aspect which was revived was the goal of encouraging crusade. This appeared particularly in texts associated with the imperial propaganda of Charles v as a Last World Emperor, and drew from a centuries-old prophetic idea based on *John 10,16* («*et fiet unum ovile unus pastor*») that one Christian leader would remerge to unite all faiths. This also played into existing prophetic narratives about a Turkish ruler who would at first attack Rome, but then convert to Christianity. On the other hand, the employment of references to Antichrist faded in the sixteenth century, and the Turks came instead to be associated with the beast which rises from the sea (*Revelation 13,10*). Overall, Schnapp's article once again demonstrates the flexibility of prophecy and its continuous changing to accommodate different circumstances.

Theological-political intentions behind prophecy also appear in Victoria Flood's article, which explores the association between Welsh prophecy and Jewish misbelief¹⁰. Flood discusses another act of stratification: Geoffrey of Monmouth's engagement with earlier legends attributed to the sibyls as well

⁹ J.É. Schnapp, *Expansion ottomane et prophétisme au début du règne de Soliman*, *infra*, pp. 67-83.

¹⁰ V. Flood, *Sibylline prophecy and representations of the sibyl in insular (English and Welsh) prophetic texts*, *infra*, pp. 8-27.

as the sybilline text of Pseudo-Methodius, both of which appear, re-formed, in Geoffrey's *Historia regum Britanniae* (c. 1138). Geoffrey's use of these traditions was colored by his interest in sibylline predictions of the transferred imperial power of Rome, the *translatio imperii*, which he reimagined for Britain. However, Flood points out that at the same time that Geoffrey was using sibylline legends in his history of Britain, allusions to sibylline prophecies were also deployed by medieval Christians to express antisemitic sentiments regarding Jewish prophecy and collective mis/belief. In particular, several Christian writers contrasted gentile sybils with the unbelieving Jews: an ironic move, given the western Christian debt to Hellenistic Jewish sibylline writings. Geoffrey's purposes were different. He used prophetic elements found elsewhere in this volume – prophetic imaginings of a Last World Emperor who would unite the world in one faith, and who battles the forces of Gog and Magog, in this case understood as Arab Muslims – to envision a new British empire under the legendary Arthur and associated Britain with a new promised land. However, Flood reveals that some authors were suspicious of this tradition and came to negatively associate Welsh prophetic traditions with Jewish anticipation of the messiah and rejection of Christ. This, she argues, left «the Welsh, perceived, like the Jews of twelfth-century English chronicle writing, as a diminished subject population, defined by messianic superstition and perfidy». Thus, allusions to messianism acted as a strategy of marginalization, applied to both the Welsh and Jewish populations.

Frances Kneupper's article, too, focuses on the uses to which prophecies could be put¹¹. Kneupper explores the commentaries of medieval clerics on female prophets from the late fourteenth to the fifteenth century, considering how these writers treated the rise of female prophets as evidence that the world had declined and the End loomed. Kneupper demonstrates, as does Cappuccilli, that a trans-national shared model of prophetic authority existed specifically among women. The position of women on the margins allowed them to criticize existing powers and advocate for reform. Kneupper argues that this marginal position also inspired in certain men the belief that female prophets were a new spiritual force sent at the End.

Exploring the work of male clerics, Kneupper asserts that several prominent authors of the late Middle Ages celebrated female visionaries, arguing that God had ceased to offer his voice to men and instead spoke primarily to women. These reactions complicate the conventional scholarly narrative that spiritual women were virtually silenced in the fifteenth century, revealing instead that apocalyptic excitement of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in some circles opened new opportunities for prophetic women.

¹¹ F. Kneupper, *Female prophets as signs of the end in late medieval Europe*, *infra*, pp. 28-46.