

Themes and Motifs in the Letters of Aldelmo of Malmesbury. The Man, The Literature, The Society

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Abstract. Among the epistolary collections that have come down to us, the epistolary of Aldelmo of Malmesbury, of which the first Italian translation is in progress, is of interest. This paper deals with some key themes which occur in the letters of this bishop, related to society and human behavior.

Rezumat. Printre colecțiile epistolare pstrate, cea aparinând lui Aldelmus din malmesbury prezintă un interes aparte. În acest articol autorea tratează câteva teme-cheie din scrisorile acestui episcop, legate de societate și de caracterul uman.

Keywords: Aldelmo of Malmesbury, epistles, Anglo-Saxons, solidarity.

In recent years, late antique epistolaries have been the subject of numerous investigations, aimed at deducing information on the historical, political and religious context as well as obtaining information on the Fortleben of classical and Christian authors.

As is known, epistolography constitutes the obligatory channel of distance communication in the ancient world, but it is also the virtual meeting place that allows its users to find and profitably cultivate common ground of cultural interests, ideologies and principles. It is an exquisitely literary meeting ground, where social relations find almost natural elements of nourishment and development and with it, also other constraints and shared attitudes in the face of new situations and emerging historical issues. Among the epistolary collections that have come down to us, the epistolary of Aldelmo of Malmesbury, of which the first Italian translation is in progress, is of interest.

Aldelmo abbot, bishop and man of letters, is a symbolic figure of 7th century England, characterized by wars between the different kingdoms and clashes between pagans and Christians, which resulted in acts of atrocities on both sides. However, the England of that period was also characterized by the presence of cultured rulers, who favored the birth of important schools (such as that of Canterbury) and by an anti-dogmatic Church, which saw disputes between the monastic current of Celtic tradition, more intransigent and less open to

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agreements with the Anglo-Saxons, and the current of Augustine's missionaries, who carried out an evangelization campaign from Canterbury.

Aldelmo was the first Anglo-Saxon author who wrote in Latin and was one of the most read authors in British schools from the generations immediately following his death until the Norman conquest of 1066. A considerable corpus of his writings has been handed down, both in prose and in verse, masterfully published in Rudolf Ehwald's edition in the *Auctores Antiquissimi* section of the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*², in which the scholar meticulously reports the results of the collations of the manuscripts, an exhaustive documentation of Aldelmo's sources and a careful historical reconstruction of the events gradually evoked³.

ALDELMO'S LETTERS

Aldelmo's epistolary consists of thirteen letters (three of which are addressed to him) written in different years and addressed to bishops, kings, his preceptors, which constitute a precious testimony of Aldelmo's life, of his pastoral activity, of his times. They take up standardized typologies typical of the classical canons: they open with the heading containing the greeting to the recipient, accompanied by a praise, sometimes contrasted with a rhetorical spirit from the sender; the motivations of the letter follow, sometimes not without cultural references and numerous references to the Holy Scriptures.

The dating of the letters is uncertain, although some clues can be deduced approximately from the formulas with which Aldelmo refers to himself. At least three of the thirteen letters probably date back to the period preceding his abbey: in fact in the epist. 1 to Leuterio, 2 to Hadrian and 3 to Wihthfrith Aldelmo calls himself *supplex bernaculus*. He declares himself abbot in epistle 4 (*sine meritorum praerogativa abbatis officio functus*); in epistle 6 (8), dedicated to his beloved sister Sygegyth, he is *supplex indigno abbatis vocabulo functus*, while in letter III (9), addressed to him by Cellano, abbot of Péronne, he is defined as *archimandrita*. The expression *extremus servorum Dei* in epist. 8 (11) would indicate that Aldelmo is a bishop, in epist. 10 (13), which is of uncertain attribution⁴, Aldelmo defines himself as *servus servorum Dei*, a clear expression of episcopal dignity.

Aldelmo's letters have a historical-political and religious-paideutic character: they are aimed at thanking those who helped him in his rise to the episcopate (epist. 1), at interceding with kings, at giving credit to those who trained him (epist. 2)⁵, to protect those he loves (his

² EHWALD 1919.

³ See also LAPIDGE, HERREN 1979.

⁴ EHWALD, *MGH* cit., 502, n.1.

⁵ *REVERENTISSIMO PATRI MEAOVE RVDIS INFANTIAE VENERANDO PRAECEPTORI HADRIANO ALDHELMVS BERNACVLVS FAMILIAE CHRISTI ET VESTRAE PIETATIS SVPPLEX ALVMNVS SALVTEM. Fateor, mi carissime, quem gratia purae dilectionis amplector, postquam a sodali contubernio vestro ante triennium circiter discedens a Cantia sequestrabar, quod nostra parvitas hactenus ad consortium vestrum ardenti*

sister, disciples and brothers), to evangelize the still pagan population (epist. 4), to push his disciples to study at the prestigious Angliic schools, where excellent tutors taught (epist. 5).

These epistles shed light on the relationships that Aldelmo forged with some influential figures, English and foreign, both religious and civil, chosen with the criteria of affection and esteem but also with those of practical opportunity. Among the focal points that emerge from the letters arises Aldelmo's aspiration for a Britain to be unified under the sign of the Church of Christ and of Rome in its universal function as the center of Christianity, as a factor in the unification of Anglo-Saxon Britain. Rome, where pagan temples and Christian basilicas coexist, is the city at the crossroads of the traditions of the empire and the papacy: even lay people such as the kings of Wessex or Mercia went there on pilgrimage to be baptized or to enter monastic life. Aldelmo's love for the study of the Bible was Roman-Christian, to which he dedicated many of his energies, without ever neglecting the study of pagan authors, including Virgil and late ancient authors; it is not a coincidence that Aldelmo's Latin⁶, which became his second language, is rich in lexical and rhetorical references to classical culture, which he saw as an indispensable tool for the Angles to make cultural and civil progress⁷

Another element that emerges from reading the epistles is the attachment to the social group and the sense of cohesion belonging to the Germanic peoples. The letters reveal a strong ethnic pride, the full awareness of belonging to a people that already has common traditions and culture, even if it has not yet organized itself into a unitary nation. Aldelmo is therefore configured as the heir to the common cultural heritage of his gens.

Furthermore, the attitude of the Anglo-Saxons towards women is more Germanic than Christian, inspired by affection and respect for their qualities: no mention of the inferiority of women is found in the writings of Anglo-Saxon authors. Filled with sweetness and imbued with love towards a woman of his family who is about to receive the sacrament of baptism is the letter to his sister Sigegyth 6 (8)⁸. In the more traditional Christian culture, women have a

desiderio flagrabat. Quod etiam iam dudum cogitarem, quemadmodum in votis est, adimplens perficere, si rerum ratio ac temporum vicissitudo pateretur, et nisi me diversa impedimentorum obstacula retardarent praesertimque corporeae fragilitatis valitudine medullitus tabentia membra coquente non sinerer, qua quondam, dum post prima elementa iterum apud vos essem, domum redire coactus sum...

⁶ LAPIDGE-HERREN 1979, 4: «Aldhelm's Latin is extremely difficult, and sometimes impenetrable». M. Winterbottom, *Aldhelm's prose style and its origins* «Anglo-Saxon England» 6, 1977, 40 redeems the fame of Aldelmo as author of difficult prose: «Almost all Aldhelm's sentences, like his individual words, are long; but never loses an essential simplicity of structure ». RUFF, ARTHUR (2006, 165-177) demonstrate how productive the tension between clarity and darkness in Aldelmo's prose is.

⁷ MALMESBURY (2007, 195, 2-4) states that the Greeks usually wrote intricately, the Romans with splendor, and the English with ostentation.

⁸ *DILECTISSIMAE ATOVE AMANTISSIMAE SORORI ET MIHI SINCERO CARITATIS AFFECTU VENERANDAE <SIGEGYTHAE> ALDHELMVS SVPPLEX INDIGNO ABBATIS VOCABVLO FVNCTVS IN DOMINO SALVTEM. Cognoscat vestra almitas de baptismo sororis me interrogasse pontificem, qui licentiam dedit baptizari illam sanctimoniam, sed tamen clam et latenter. Saluto te diligenter, o Sigegyth, ex intimo cordis*

completely different position: daughter of Eve and heir of original sin, she is an instrument of damnation, a vessel of all wickedness, an ally of the devil: in fact the Fathers and above all Augustine did not begrudge her their invectives. The Germans, far from the Judeo-Christian myths, were of a different opinion and Aldelmo demonstrates this in the course of his other works.

Among the qualities that Aldelmo shows himself to appreciate in many characters in his letters is the typically Anglo-Saxon gift of solidarity and loyalty. In epist. 9 (12) Aldelmo urges abbot Wilfrid's brothers to support him during his exile. The young people, whom he trained and educated, must not separate from that holy man who held them in a merciful embrace: may they be reproached, dishonored and looked at with horrendous disgust if they forget the grace received, preferring idleness in their beloved homeland to the rigors of a sad exile⁹. Aldelmo then shows energetic firmness towards the king of Dumnonia Geraint (epist. 4), when the latter does not take a position towards the bishops of his region who do not align themselves with the dictates of the Catholic faith but who follow the Byzantine tradition: they, with their excesses and verbal conflicts, they risk bringing the Church of Christ into a serious schism¹⁰.

Another theme concerns cultural relations between England and Ireland. In some letters, the phenomenon that began in the 7th century and continued in the 8th century is outlined in advance: emigration from England to Ireland for study purposes. Aldelmo, who does not deny the validity of the Irish schools, forcefully defends the doctrine of the English masters: in epist. 3 (a. 675) warns Wihtfrith, who has traveled to Ireland, not to be attracted by the temptations he may encounter: the rantings of philosophers, the reading of classical pagan myths and the

cubiculo subnixis precibus obsecrans, ut assidua scripturarum meditatione mentem tuam occupare non desistas, quatenus psalmigrafi sententiam compleas dicentis: In lege eius meditabitur die ac nocte et idem psalmista hoc item testatur dicens: Quam dulcia faucibus meis eloquia tua et reliqua. Orationum vero mearum ut memores sint, omnes sorores per Christum suppliciter obsecro, quia dicit apostolus: Multum valet deprecatio iusti assidua. Vale, decies dilectissima, immo centies et milies; te Deus valere faciat!

⁹ *...Nuper furibunda tempestatis perturbatio, sicut experimento didicistis, fundamenta ecclesiae sicut quodam immenso terrae motu concussit, cuius strepitus per diversa terrarum spatia velut tonitruali fragore longe lateque percrebuit. Et idcirco vos viscerales contribulos flexis genuum poplitibus subnixa exposco prece nequaquam huius perturbationis strofa scandalizari, ne quisquam vestrum inertis segnitiei fide torpescat, etiamsi rerum necessitas exigat cum praesule proprio pontificatus apice privato tellure paterna propelli et quaelibet oporteat latorum regnorum transmarina aggredi rura. Quis enim, quaeso, tam durus atroxve labor existens ab illo vos antistite separans arceat, qui vos ab ipso tirocinio rudimentorum et a primaeva tenerae aetatis infantia usque adultae pubertatis florem nutriendo, docendo, castigando paterna provexit pietate et quasi nutrix gerula dilectos alumnos extensis ulnarum sinibus refocilians sic caritatis gremio fotos clementer amplexus est?*

¹⁰ *...Auditum namque et diversis rumoribus compertum nobis est, quod sacerdotes vestri in catholicae fidei regula secundum scripturae praecepta minime concordent et per eorum simultates et pugnas verborum in ecclesia Christi grave scisma et crudele scandalum nascatur...*

easy allurements of bodily pleasures¹¹. After a few years in epist. 5 to Eahfrith (a. 686/90)¹², Aldelmo admonishes his friend, who went to Ireland for study for six long years, not to keep to himself but to share within the community his knowledge¹³. In the course of the letter he asks himself why large masses of disciples go to Ireland, when in Britain one can find masters, citizens of Greece and Rome, capable of revealing the dark mysteries of the celestial library to disciples eager to study them: an exaltation of the masters of the Canterbury school, Theodore is portrayed as a "luminous image of the flaming sun and moon", surrounded by a crowd of Irish students and Hadrian is "equally endowed with unspeakable finesse"¹⁴. Michael Herren

¹¹ ...*Porro tuum discipulatum ceu cernuus arcuatis poplitibus flexisque suffraginibus feculenta fama compulsus posco, ut nequaquam prostibula vel lupanarium nugas, in quis pompulentae prostitutae delitescunt, lenocinante luxu adeas, quae obrizo rutilante periselididis armillaque lacertorum tereti utpote faleris falerati curules comuntur, sed magis edito aulae fastigio spreto, quo patricii ac praetores potiuntur, gurgustii humilis receptaculo contenta tua fausta fraternitas feliciter fruatur necnon contra gelida brumarum flabra e climate olim septentrionali emergentia neglecto, ut decet Christi discipulum, fucato ostro, potius lacernae gracilis amictu ac mastruca tegmine incompto utatur...*

¹² ...*Fateor, sodalitatis fraternae cliens altique municipatus municeps, postquam vestram repedantem istuc ambrosiam ex Hiberniae brumosis circionis insulae climatibus, ubi ter bino circiter annorum circulo uber sofiae sugens metabatur, territorii marginem Britannici sospitem applicuisse rumigerulis referentibus comperimus, ilico, ut flammiger flagransque flagitabat amor, ineffabiles altithrono grates pansis in edito utrimque volis tripudiantes obtulimus, potissimum quod te exulem almus arbiter priscam paterni visitantem clientelam ruris caerulea trans ponti glauca inormesque dodrantium glareas atque spumiferas limphae obstirpationes circili carina procellosum sulcante salum reducere ovante nauarco dignatus est, ut, ubi dudum incunabulis tirocinii editus rudibus adulto tenus pubertatis aevo pubertatis aevo adoleveras, nunc versa vice superna opitulanti praerogativa affatim fultus ab incolatu externi ruris repatrians praeceptoris vocamine indepto sortitoque fretus fungaris...*

¹³ LAPIDGE, HERREN 1979, 145-146 observe: «Letter V to Eahfrith is a central document for the study of the cultural relations between England and Ireland in the last quarter of seventh century. Aldhelm is the leader of a national awakening of the English in the domain of letters. Irish teachers and monks had dominated English education from the early part of the seventh century. Irish contacts with the continent, especially with Spain, greatly stimulated Latin studies, particularly in the fields of grammar, biblical exegesis, and theology. One could fairly say that the Irish were at least a generation advanced over the English in most educational areas». STELLA (2009, 435-436) analyzes the reasons that push Aldelmo to write this letter. See also GWARA 1966, 84-134; LAPIDGE 2007, 15-69.

¹⁴ ...*Sed haec misellus homuncio dictando volvens scrupulo ancipiti extemplo quatiens angebar. Cur, inquam, Hibernia, quo catervatim instinc lectitantes classibus advecti confluunt, ineffabili quodam privilegio efferatur, ac si istic, fecundo Britanniae in cespite, dedasculi Argivi Romanive Quirites reperiri minime queant, qui caelestis tetrica enodantes bibliothecae problemata sciolis reserare se sciscitantibus valeant? Quamvis enim praedictum Hiberniae rus discentium opulans vernansque, ut ita dixerim, pascuosa numerositate lectorum, quemadmodum poli cardines astriferis micantium vibraminibus siderum, ornetur: ast tamen climatis Britannia occidui in extremo ferme orbis margine posita verbi gratia ceu solis flammigeri et luculento lunae specimine potiatur, id est Theodoro infula pontificatus fungenti ab ipso tirocinio rudimentorum in flore philosophicae artis adulto necnon et eiusdem sodalitatis cliente Hadriano dumtaxat urbanitate enucleata ineffabiliter praedito! Et audacter in propatulo contestans pellaci falsitatis fribulo neglecto aequa veritatis censura trutinante discernam: etiamsi [beatae memoriae] Theodorus summi sacerdotii gubernacula regens Hibernensium globo discipulorum, ceu aper truculentus molosorum catasta ringente vallatus, stipetur, limato perneciter grammatico dente iactura dispendii carens rebelles falanges discutit et utpote belliger in meditullio campi arcister legionum falangibus saeptus aemulorum spissis: mox nervosis tenso lacertorum volis arcu spiculisque ex faretra*

observes how Aldelmo defends these beliefs by using a language consisting of "convulsive phrases and a bombastic vocabulary which tends to demonstrate that the English are not second to the Irish in verborum copia"¹⁵.

Regarding Aldelmo's evangelizing mission which went beyond the borders of Britain, reaching the land of the Franks, epist. III (9)¹⁶ and 7 (10)¹⁷, which concern the correspondence between Cellanus of Péronne and Aldelmo, show Aldelmo's sagacity, political diplomat. There is also a letter, 10 (13) to Wynberht¹⁸, which concerns a legal question in which possession of a productive property is claimed, land particularly suitable for fishing which had been acquired by the Malmesbury monastery and subsequently lost.

We can conclude by stating that Aldelmo, of royal birth and trained thanks to the teaching of masters such as Theodore and Hadrian, undoubtedly led a comfortable and ambitious life. As emerges from the letters, he had direct and frequent relationships with influential figures of the Church and State, with whom he knew how to deal as equals, also to obtain privileges, lands, properties for his monasteries and for the Churches he founded. The letters, although written with a particularly elaborate language and style¹⁹, show that Aldelmo knew how to adapt the paideia acquired during his years of study to the new needs of evangelization. If the Christian Britain of Aldelmo was still characterized by rude simplicity that was nourished by sovereign naivety and superstition, it cannot be denied that our bishop

exemptis, hoc est chronographiae opacis acutisque syllogismis, turma supercilii tyfo turgens amissa ancilium testudine terga dantes latebras antrorum atras triumphantem victore praepropere petunt.

¹⁵ LAPIDGE, HERREN 1979, 146.

¹⁶ DOMINO LECTRICIBVS DITATO STVDIIS MELLIFLVSQVE ORNATO LVCVRATIVNCVLIS ALDHELMO ARCHIMANDRITAE, SAXONVM MIRIFICE REPERENTI IN ORIS, QVOD NONNVLLI CVM LABORIBVS ET SVDORIBVS IN ALIENO AERE VIX LVCRANTVR, CELLANVS IN HIBERNENSI INSVLA NATVS, IN EXTREMO FRANCORVM LIMITIS LATENS ANGLVO EXVL, FAMOSAE COLONIAE CHRISTI EXTREMVM ET VILE MANCIPIVM, IN TOTA ET TVTA TRINITATE SALVTEM...*Quasi pennigero volatu ad nostrae paupertatis accessit aures vestrae latinitatis panagericus rumor, quem agiliam lectorum non horrescunt auditus, sine sanna aut amurcali impostura notus propter alburnum dictricis Romaniae decorum. Etsi te praesentem non meruimus audire, tuos tamen bona lance constructos legimus fastos diversorum deliciis florum depictos; sed si peregrini triste reficere vis corculum, paucos transmittite sermunculos illius pulcherrimae labiae tuae, de cuius fonte purissimo dulce dirivati rivi multorum possint reficere mentes, ad locum, ubi dominus Furseus in sancto et integro pausat corpore...*

¹⁷ [CELLANO...ALDHELMUS...SALVTEM] ...*Miror, quod me tantillum homunculum de famoso et florifero Francorum rure vestrae frunitae fraternitatis industria interpellat Saxonicae prolis prosapia genitum et sub Arctoo axe teneris confotum cunabulis...*

¹⁸ DOMINO IN DOMINORUM DOMINO DILECTISSIMO WINBERHTO ALDHELMVS SERVVS SERVORVM DEI IN ANGLVARI DVORVM TESTAMENTORVM LAPIDE DE SVMMIS MONTIVM VERTICIBVS ABSCISO, QVI STATVAM QVATERNI METALLORVM GENERE FABRE FACTAM QVATERNI POPVLORVM REGNA SIGNANTEM CONTRITO CRVRATENS AVRATO CAPITE OPPRESSIT, SALVTEM. *Gerulum litterarum ad vestrae pietatis praesentiam destinavimus, qui vobis viva voce de causa nostrae necessitatis imminente plenius promulgabit id est de terra, quam nobis venerandus patricius Balredus possidendam accepto pretio obtulit, praecipue pro captura piscium apta et competenti loco. Et idcirco, dum in vestri regis potestate data et collata esse videtur, obnixae precamur, ut eandem agri partem per terrae tuae caritatis patrocinium obtinere et habere firmiter valeamus, ne eadem possessione per violentiam privati, quia plerumque iustitiae iura vacillant, fraudemur...*

¹⁹ What Traube defined *latinitas artificiosa* to the choice of *vocabula rariora* (1911, 175).

contributed with the means most congenial to him, that is, with the strength of his great doctrine and his humanity to make its population more cultured and civilized and to evangelize territories beyond the borders of Britain, also overthrowing the Irish dominance that had brought so many monks and teachers to England.

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