

## Metaphorical representations of virtues and vices in the Middle Ages

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**Abstract:** *The personification of virtues and vices was one of the important resources used, both as a tool in education and as a moral vision for mastering the biblical text, in the monastic communities, in the medieval period. In monastic culture, images of virtues and vices served monks to learn and memorize the moral teachings of the Church, and manuscript illustrations were intended to function as mnemonic devices, especially for monks who could not read. These images ranged from dynamic representations, which presented virtues and vices being in conflict, a conflict in which virtues prevailed and vices were defeated, to static representations of them, in antagonistic pairs or not. The images that represented the virtues acquired various aspects: anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, phytomorphic. Along with the dynamic or static personifications of virtues and vices, a series of metaphorical representations circulated, such as: the metaphors of the tree of virtues and vices, the garden of virtues, the wheel of virtues and vices and the ladder of virtues.*

**Keywords:** *virtues; vices; The Tree of the Cross; The tree of sin; Rota verae religionis; Rota falsae religionis; The ladder of virtues;*

### ● Introduction

The reflection on an iconographic approach to virtues and vices began in the context of late antiquity, in the fifth century, when the Roman Christian poet Aurelius Prudentius Clemens wrote the poem *Psychomachia*, which is an allegory of the battle of souls for the supremacy of faith, supported by virtues against idolatry, maintained by vices. Prudentius's *Psychomachia* Manuscripts, produced from the 5th to the end of the 13th century, show the first iconography of virtues and vices.

Prudentius' *Psychomachia* can be found as the earliest source containing portraits, accompanied by descriptions, of the personifications of virtues and vices. For the first time, Prudentius describes vices and virtues as opposing each other<sup>2</sup>; they are represented as being in conflict, a conflict in which virtues triumph and vices are defeated. The illustrations in the manuscripts of this poem, made since the fifth century, consist of human figures, usually female representations, engaged in violent struggles. The female characters are represented "as soldiers on the battlefield of the soul"<sup>3</sup> and they are dressed and behave in the same way as men. Prudentius's approach is both literary and artistic and involves both a historical and a moral

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<sup>2</sup> Gernot Wieland,. 1986. "Aldhelm's *De Octo Vitiis Princip Alibus* and Prudentius' *Psychomachia*". *Medium Ævum*, 1986, Vol. 55, No. 1, p. 89.

<sup>3</sup> S. Georgia Nugent. 2000. "Virtus or Virgo? The Female Personifications of Prudentius's *Psychomachia*". In Column Hourihane (ed.), *Virtue and Vice. The Personifications in the Index of Christian Art*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, p. 16.

dimension, and can be seen as a mixture of classical and biblical thinking, a reunion of the pagan and Christian imaginary<sup>4</sup>.

Prudentius' *Psychomachia* proposed a metaphor for the conflict between virtues and vices and would become "one of the literary cornerstones of medieval allegory"<sup>5</sup>. During the Middle Ages, the poem was an important resource in monastic communities, used both as a key tool in education and as a moral treatise for mastering the biblical text, as it began with a Genesis story and ended with apocalyptic allusions<sup>6</sup>. An important aspect of medieval monastic life was the practice of mnemonic learning techniques. In monastic culture, images of virtues and vices served monks to learn and memorize the moral teachings of the Church, and manuscript illustrations were intended to function as mnemonic devices, especially for monks who could not read.

The illustration of the *Psychomachia* manuscript has undergone various changes over time. A. Katzenellenbogen observed that in the 11th century figures began to be represented in contemporary clothing, and the miniaturist who in 1298 illustrated the latest known version of the manuscript represented virtues as nuns and vices as women in the city. Thus, the miniaturist placed the action in the world around him, in a context in which there was a tendency to apply the richness of everyday experience to the discernment of good and evil. In addition, there was a process of simplification of representations, which in the twelfth century meant limiting the representation of antagonistic pairs, which were removed from the context of the fight<sup>7</sup>.

On the static representation of virtues, which appears in the illustrated manuscripts of Prudentius' *Psychomachia* from the ninth century, in contrast to the dynamic representation of virtues and vices, M. W. Bloomfield stated that reached its peak of the *Cycle of Virtues and Vices* on the central façade of Notre Dame de Paris<sup>8</sup>. Thus, "the dynamic conception of psychomachy is complemented by a series of static representations. They no longer show groups of virtues participating with earthly weapons in a realistically described action [?!], which is to be interpreted symbolically, but are rather direct images of an intellectual scheme"<sup>9</sup>.

The static representations of the systems of virtue and vice did not develop as a unit, as in *Psychomachia*. Variations on the unique motive of the struggle for mastery of the human soul have been replaced by a series of themes that, due to their subtlety, have often involved rather complicated compositions, which required a certain insight from the viewer. In some cases, only certain images that accompanied the virtues were represented in human form, in others, certain allegorical representations were adopted for extensive and highly branched systems of virtues and vices, and other times the two types of representations merged.

<sup>4</sup> Marc Mastrangelo. 2009. "The Decline of Poetry in the Fourth-Century West". *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, Vol. 16, No. 3/4, p. 324.

<sup>5</sup> Danuta Shanzer. 1989. "Allegory and Reality: Spes, Victoria and the Date of Prudentius's *Psychomachia*". *Illinois Classical Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1, p. 347.

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Solivan. 2017. "Depictions of Virtues and Vices as Mnemonic Devices". *Imago Temporis. Medium Aevum*, XI, pp. 173–174.

<sup>7</sup> Adolf Katzenellenbogen. 1989. *Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Medieval Art: From Early Christian Times to the Thirteenth Century*. Toronto, Buffalo, Londra: University of Toronto Press și Medieval Academy of America (prima ediție Londra, Warburg Institute, 1939), pp. 7–8.

<sup>8</sup> Morton W. Bloomfield. 1941. "Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Mediaeval Art from Christian Times to the Thirteenth Century by Adolf Katzenellenbogen and Alan J. P. Crick". *Speculum*, Vol. 16, No. 4, pp. 494–496.

<sup>9</sup> Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

Along with the dynamic or static personifications of virtues and vices, a series of metaphorical representations circulated, such as: the metaphors of the tree of virtues and vices, the garden of virtues, the wheel of virtues and vices and the ladder of virtues.

- ***Arbor bona versus Arbor mala and Ecclesia fidelium versus Synagoga***

John Cassian (360–435) was the first to use the representation of a tree and its roots and fruits in connection with virtues or sins. The source of this metaphor can be identified in the biblical text, *Matthew 7:15–20*, where it is used to describe how we should recognize true prophets (associated with the tree that bears good fruit) as false prophets (associated with the tree that bears bad fruits) according to their actions (good fruits and bad fruits), because just as a bad tree cannot bear good fruit, false prophets cannot do good deeds. False prophets cannot do good acts. In *Luke 6:43–45*<sup>10</sup> states that a tree is known by its fruits, and that "A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth evil things; for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks"<sup>11</sup>.

He believed that if a person's will is rooted in God's love, then all that grows from that person will be virtue, and if a person's will is rooted in pride, it will produce a multitude of sins, pride being considered the source of all sins and "the root of all evil"<sup>12</sup>. John Cassian believed that every sin entails another and is the result of one who has been committed before.

The difference between good and evil was illustrated by the representation of two contrasting trees: the good, fruitful tree with its fruit, also called *Tree of the Cross*, which contrasts with the evil one, which is withered and which is also called *Tree of Sin*. The two trees have their roots in a virtue – Humility (*Humilitas*), respectively a vice – Pride (*Superbia*), and their branches are virtues or vices. Such writings are very numerous in the Middle Ages. For example, the illustrated encyclopedia *Liber floridus Lamberti*, written around 1120 by St. Omer, presents to the reader with an *Arbor bona* as a symbol of the *Ecclesia fidelium*, with an inscription referring to the personification of the virtues. The branched roots encompass half of the figure of Charity (*Caritas*), considered the mother of all virtues, and the branches bear two kinds of fruit, from which sprout young shrubs. The figures that represent moral forces are closely attached to the shrubs, which resemble a herbarium, because each virtue corresponds to a certain plant. On the other hand, it is represented an *Arbor mala*, also called *Synagoga*, which has its roots in Cupidity (*Cupiditas*) and which creates an impression of coldness and death by illustrating twelve vices, some of which were listed by St. Paul as "works of the flesh" and are considered "bad fruits"<sup>13</sup>.

*De fructibus carnis et spiritus* by Pseudo-Hugo presents a tree that has its roots in *Humilitas* and one that has its origin in *Superbia*. Pseudo-Hugo considers it appropriate to show the reader two different growing trees with their fruits, so that the reader to be able to decide between the two. *Humilitas*, together with the theological virtues (*Fides* – Faith, *Spes* – Hope, *Caritas* – Charity) and the cardinal ones (*Iustitia* – Justice, *Fortitudo* – Courage, *Temperantia* –

<sup>10</sup> Mari Eyice. 2018. "The tree and its fruit The problem of good deeds in the Swedish Reformation". In Andreas Hellerstedt, *Virtue Ethics and Education from Late Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, p. 79.

<sup>11</sup> The Gospel of Luke, 6:45.

<sup>12</sup> Bloomfield, Morton W. 1952. *The Seven Deadly Sins*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, pp. 69–70.

<sup>13</sup> Apud. Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *op. cit.*, pp. 63–65.

Temperance, *Prudentia* – Prudence), together with their subspecies, bring spiritual salvation, which it has its source in Humility, while *Superbia* along with the other six main vices (envy, anger, sadness, greed, greed and lust) and their subsidiary aspects are the source of all sins. One of the oldest surviving copies of the writing, dating from the second quarter of the 12th century, features the inscriptions *Arbor virtutum* and *Arbor vitiorum*, as well as numerous other inscriptions that interpret the meaning of the two images in detail. The branches on the trunk that grow from *Superbia*, the root of all evil, which first bore the fruit of original sin, are bent down to the earth, as they seek their base and turn from the divine, and attached to the branches are medallions with busts of vices, called *fructus carnis*, in a representation that resembles the representations of the tree of Jesse. On the other hand, the branches of the tree rooted in *Humilitas* twist upwards, towards the salvation that comes from the spirit, and from the branches are caught medallions in which are represented the virtues in the bust, considered *fructus spiritus*. At the top, considered closer to heaven, are the theological virtues, *Fides*, *Spes* and *Caritas*<sup>14</sup>.

- **The garden of virtues as a *locus amoenus***

The treatise on vernacular morality, *Somme le roi*, written in 1279 by the Dominican Frère Lorens for Philip III of France, contains an iconography of virtues and vices that introduces a rare subject illustrated until the thirteenth century, namely the garden of virtues<sup>15</sup>. Occasional references to what might be called gardens of virtue are found in scriptural texts as well as in patristic writings. In *Psalms I* it is written: "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful / But in the law of the Lord is his will, and in His law he will meditate day and night. / And it shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth its fruit in its season, and its leaf shall not fall off and everything he does will increase"<sup>16</sup>. Isaiah said: "I will give Egypt into the hand of a stern master, and a king without mercy will rule over them, says the Lord God of hosts. (...) The rivers of the Nile shall be dried up, and all the seed of the river shall be dried up, and shall be turned into dust, they will die"<sup>17</sup>. The Book of Numbers states: "These are the journeys of the children of Israel, which went forth out of the land of Egypt with their armies under the hand of Moses and Aaron. (...) And they journeyed from Marah, and came unto Elim; and at Elim were twelve springs of water and seventy finches; they camped there"<sup>18</sup>. Regarding patristic writings, for example, Jerome, addressing Rusticus, speaks of the "meadows of virtue"; St. Augustine speaks of the "fertile earth" and of the "fruit of the root of love"; John Climacus discusses of the transplantation of the trees of virtue and Hippolytus of Rome (c. 215) proposes a complex exegesis of the garden of Susanna and her husband Joachim, which is in fact the society of the saints who are like fruitful trees<sup>19</sup>.

The manuscripts at *Somme le roi* depict a garden in which seven leafy trees are associated with virtue. Each tree, corresponding to each virtue, is cared for by a young woman "who represents a

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 66–67.

<sup>15</sup> Apud. Ellen Kosmer. 1978. "Gardens of Virtue in the Middle Ages". *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 41, p. 302.

<sup>16</sup> Psalms, I: 1–3.

<sup>17</sup> Isaiah, XIX: 4;7.

<sup>18</sup> Numeri, XXXIII: 1; 9.

<sup>19</sup> Apud. Ellen Kosmer, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

petition of the Pater Noster"<sup>20</sup>, who feed them, watering them, each of a spring, of the seven represented in the foreground, which flows into a single river. An eighth tree in the garden, taller than all the others, symbolizes Christ himself. Some manuscripts also include a long legend illustrating the garden of virtue, but without identifying specific trees with individual virtues.

Although the purpose of the metaphor of the garden of virtues was didactic, the illustrations at *Somme le roi* can also be interpreted as images of gardens in the naturalistic style of the thirteenth century. Frère Lorens, who is believed to have been responsible for designing the iconographic program, used literary references rather than visual sources, which referred to the *locus amoenus*. The phrase has its origins in Homer and was a basic element in the pastoral writings of the poets Theocritus, Virgil and Horace. In the twelfth century it is mentioned in the *Elucidarium*, attributed to Honorius of Autun, in connection with the answer to the question "Quid est paradus?": "Locus amoenissimus in Oriente, in quo arbores diversi generis contra varios defectus erant consitae"<sup>21</sup>. One of the common features of *locus amoenus*, as well as classical and medieval groves, is the mixed forest, in which a number of different species of trees grow together, regardless of the horticultural difficulties that their coexistence could create.

The literary metaphor of man, or of the human soul, as a garden that can bear either profitable plants (virtues) or weeds (vices), is quite often found in medieval writings, but without, however, often being approached in detail. Hugh of St. Victor (1096–1141), for example, states that within man "there was a kind of land which had indeed been created good, and yet, if it were well cultivated, could still be better when cultivated it would produce good fruits but when neglected it would bring forth bad and harmful offshoots"<sup>22</sup>.

About the same time as Hugh of St. Victor, the French Benedictine monk Lambert of St. Omer (ca. 1061–1250) compiled one of the most famous encyclopedias of the Middle Ages, *Liber Floridus*. The text was written between 1090–1120 and compiled excerpts from about 192 different works. *Liber Floridus* contains a chronological presentation of events up to the year 1119 and deals with various topics: biblical, astronomical, geographical, philosophical or natural history. Among them a tree of virtue and a tree of vice are presented and at the same time represented, "the palm of ecclesia, the lily of knowledge, and eight other trees and flowers that symbolize the beatitudes and gifts of the Holy Ghost"<sup>23</sup>. There is no indication in the text that this vegetation grows together, Lambert rather proposes a gardener's catalog of what we might call spiritual vegetation, which includes the following: "Cedar – Humilitas, Cypress – Pietas, Palm – Scientia, Rose – Fortitudo, Olive – Concilium, Plane – Intelligentia, Terebinth – Sapiencia, Vine – Perfectio"<sup>24</sup>.

In the oldest manuscript of the religious textbook *Speculum Virginum*<sup>25</sup>, written for women who joined religious communities, dating from the late twelfth century, a proto-garden of virtue is described, the same iconography being found in other manuscripts, as Arras, Bibliothèque municipale MS 282 (Pl. 42c). The iconography shows, schematically, a garden with rivers, trees, virtues, happiness, evangelists and church doctors, all springing from the central figure of Christ, which illustrates a discussion about the mystical flowers of paradise.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 303.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 305.

<sup>22</sup> Roy J. Deferrari. 1951. *Hugh of St. Victor on the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*. Cambridge, Mass.: Mediaeval Academy of America, p. 109.

<sup>23</sup> Apud. Ellen Kosmer, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> British Library MS Arundel 44.

In another manuscript that can be dated as early as the 13th century, but which is based on a text that was dated to the beginning of the 11th century, a Greek garden of virtues is described, close to that of *Somme le roi*, in which the good man is the diligent gardener, Christ is the door, God the Father is the sun and the Holy Spirit the breeze that makes a melodious sound between the trees<sup>26</sup>. Every virtue is a certain species of tree: "The Greek garden has trees of purity, sweetness, spiritual joy, courage, moderation, justice, prayer, misericordia, knowledge and obedience"<sup>27</sup>.

An Easter candlestick, located in the Cathedral of San Pietro in Sessa Aurunca, Naples, dates from the 13th century, and its base have a relief sculpture with personifications of the virtues "holding flowers or branches and standing between ornate, ornamental trees"<sup>28</sup>.

Studies in the field so far have not identified in antithesis with the garden of virtues and a garden of vices. Only one clear example of derivation in this sense is preserved from the Renaissance period and it presents a grove of vices. It is an engraving from northern Italy, dating to about 1470, in which Pride is depicted as a crowned and horned woman sitting on a chair in front of a tall tree. In front of her stands a lion, and on each side of Pride are represented seven other vices, each represented by a young woman with horns, who is standing holding in one hand a tree and in the other a shield adorned with an animal's head. All the trees have roots that unite in a common root, and the image implies a visual correspondence with the seven streams in the garden of the virtues as it appears in *Somme le roi*<sup>29</sup>.

- ***Rota verae religionis versus Rota falsae religionis***

Another metaphorical representation of virtues and vices in the medieval period was that of the wheels of virtues and vices. It was used to describe the path taken by the virtuous, respectively the sinners, in their own existence. The suggestion of the path taken by sinners by the pattern of the wheel has its origin in *Psalms 11: 9*, which states: "The wicked walk in a circle". This passage was used in the Middle Ages to describe the movement of sin and of sinners, which may explain the frequent association of circles with sin and madness in medieval art<sup>30</sup>. This passage is also quoted by St. Augustine when he condemns the cyclical conceptions of history held by the heathen: "the wicked walk in a circle", but not because they are repeated, but because the path of their false doctrine is one that bypass the truth<sup>31</sup>. A few centuries later, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, in *De deligendo Deo*, noted that the wicked walk in a circle, foolishly neglecting the means by which they could approach their true end, that is of God<sup>32</sup>, and William of Saint-Thierry, in Book XI of the *Meditativae orationes*, based on the paradigm of the circle and centrality proposed by Plotinus, which he interpreted as moral, complains: "Alas! Alas! The Wicked walk around in a circle (...). We grow dizzy, turning in the circle of error, and we are unable to attain the center of

<sup>26</sup> Apud. Margaret H. Thomson. 1960. *Le Jardin symbolique: texte grec tiré du Clarkianus*, XI. Paris: Belles Lettres.

<sup>27</sup> Ellen Kosmer, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 303.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 307.

<sup>30</sup> Walter S. Gibson. 1973. "Hieronymus Bosch and the Mirror of Man: The Authorship and Iconography of the *Tabletop of the Seven Deadly Sins*". *Oud Holland*, Vol. 87, No. 4, pp. 212–213.

<sup>31</sup> Aureliu Augustin. 1998. *Despre Cetatea lui Dumnezeu [The City of God]*. București: Editura Științifică, pp. 397–398.

<sup>32</sup> Apud. Walter S. Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

unconcealment, the unchanging point of unity which, in its standing permanent, gives movement to all else. This center is Truth"<sup>33</sup>.

In the twelfth century, Hugo de Folieto, in his treatise *De rota verae et falsae religionis*, proposed a moral interpretation of the old metaphor of the wheel of destiny of Boethius, in the spokes of which are woven all living creatures, which he applied to monastic life. Hugo da Folieto had inscribed the name of many virtues on the spokes and rim of a wheel called *Rota verae religionis*, on the outer edge of which were six virtues: purity, benevolence, love, humility, sobriety and poverty. The vices or the sins were similarly presented on another wheel, called the *Rota falsae religionis*, on the outer edge of which were six of them: stinginess, greed, pride, neglect, sloth and laziness. Hugo da Folieto attributed moral significance to every detail of his work. The viewer is not faced with abstract representations of vices, but sees their effects on the life of the monks. In this respect, on the model of the wheel of *Fortune* are built *Rota verae religionis*, associated with the authentic monastic life of the monk who renounces his self of true humility, for perfection, and the *Rota falsae religionis*, associated with the sinful monastic life of the vicious monk, mastered by the whims of reprehensible deeds and thoughts. The reckless is caught in the motion of the wheel, which throws him down so that, through humility, he may repent of his sin. The idea is explained through the four laws of monastic calling and is represented pictorially, "the illustrations visibly following the usual images of the Wheel of Fortune, which controls the four phases of human wealth and misery, ascension and decline"<sup>34</sup>.

The wheels of virtue and vice appeared in later centuries in manuscripts, woodcuts or frescoes. In a 15th-century manuscript of St. Augustine's *De civitatis Dei*, the illustration of the City of Man is represented by the various tableaux representing the virtues and vices are divided by walls which radiate from the center of the city like spokes of a wheel.

In a woodcut from the *Book of Art*, published in Augsburg in 1477, the wheel of vices was transformed into the Wheel of Fortune, from which sinners fall into the pit of Hell, represented at the bottom of the image. The representation is reminiscent of Hugo da Folieto's *Rota falsae religionis*<sup>35</sup>.

The Seven Mortal Sins of a mural painting from Ingatestone Church, England were represented at the beginning of the 15th century. The center of the wheel is occupied by the cursed souls that burn in the mouth of Hell, and the vices are represented in a circular manner between the spokes of the wheel and on its outer edge<sup>36</sup>.

On a circular wooden board of German origin painted in the 15th-century which today is found at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nürnberg, in the center shows an enthroned figure surrounded by a row of various sorts of fools, who are separated by the columns of a continuous arcade. The columns resemble the spokes of a wheel, creating the impression that the figures revolve around the center. The image was associated with two conceptions of the Middle Ages: God as the ever-present witness of sinful world and God as the mirror that reflects the variety of his creation. References to God from above on earth frequently appear in *Old Testament*, in the Books of Job, Amos, or Ezekiel, but also in the *Psalms*. For example, the Book of Job states that "He looks at the ends of the earth and looks at all the things under the sky" (*Job 28:24*); in the

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Michael Tomasic. 1971. "The Three Theological Virtues as Modes of Intersubjectivity in the Thought of William of Saint-Thierry". *Recherches de Théologie ancienne et médiévale*, vol. 38, p. 94.

<sup>34</sup> Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *op. cit.*, pp. 70–71.

<sup>35</sup> Walter S. Gibson, *op. cit.*, pp. 212–213.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 210–211.

Book of Amos it is written: "Behold, the eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful kingdom, and they shall destroy it from off the face of the earth" (*Amos 9: 8*) or in Ezekiel it is written: "And my eye shall not spare, neither will I have pity; but I will put Your ways upon you and your abominations shall be in the midst of you" (*Ezekiel 7: 9*). These passages, as well as similar ones, were meant to remind the medieval man that every thought and every deed he committed witnessed the all-seeing God, who will come to judge him at the Last Judgment<sup>37</sup>.

- *The Ladder of Virtue as Scala humilitatis*

*The Ladder of Virtue* was another metaphorical representation of virtues in the seventh century. John Climacus, starting with the dream of Jacob, described in *Book of Genesis* (28:10), in which angels were seen ascending and descending a ladder between heaven and earth, proposed a representation of virtues and vices rooted in Neoplatonism, in connection with the ascent of a ladder, on the highest step of which are found the theological virtues: Faith, Hope and Charity<sup>38</sup>. The oldest surviving illustrated manuscript of this writing dates from the 11th century and illustrates, in a frontispiece, all the stages of the ascent of the ladder: "with the help of angels, the monks try to draw near to Christ and the Garden of Paradise, while the devils maliciously seek to pull them with long hooks into the jaws of hell"<sup>39</sup>.

The representation of *The Ladder of Virtues* as *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* was originally a response to a request from the abbot of Raithou Monastery, who asked to John Climacus to compile a spiritual guide for members of the monastic community to achieve perfection in their spiritual life<sup>40</sup>. The work was divided into thirty chapters or steps of the ladder, one chapter for each of the thirty years of Christ's life. The first three chapters dealt with the conditions of mind and spirit necessary for anyone thinking of devoting himself to religious life, and the other the steps to be followed concerned with the virtues to be cherished and nurtured and the vices to be eradicated<sup>41</sup>.

Apparently intended for a local audience in the Sinai Peninsula, Climacus' work spread throughout the Middle Ages to other monasteries, as well as in the private environment, in many countries and in many languages<sup>42</sup>. The work also reached Eastern Europe, dominated by the Orthodox Church. Greek manuscripts of the work dating from the 8th to the 14th century are preserved in the libraries of Greece and Eastern European countries. Some of these seem to have acted as show pieces, as they are abundantly illustrated with elaborate drawings of the ladder, showing some people climbing, others falling backwards, and very few fighting to the top<sup>43</sup>.

In a series of miniatures, dating from the 11th century, the ascendant of the monk to heaven is illustrated, who is usually represented after the end of a stage of ascension, each time standing on the top rung of a ladder that has an increasing number of steps. He is surrounded by allegorical female figures, dressed in the classical manner, who are either personifications of virtues, which

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 214.

<sup>38</sup> Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>40</sup> Cora E. Lutz. 1973. "Johannes Climacus' *Ladder of Divine Ascent*". *The Yale University Library Gazette*, Vol. 47, No. 4, p. 224.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>42</sup> John Duffy. 1999. "Embellishing the Steps: Elements of Presentation and Style in *The Heavenly Ladder* of John Climacus". *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 53, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> Cora E. Lutz, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

support him, or personifications of vices, which prevent him from ascending, visibly forcing him to descend. Facing every danger, the monk finally reaches the highest step, where Faith, Hope and Charity crown him<sup>44</sup>.

In a Swabian miniature from 1138–1147<sup>45</sup>, St. Benedict is depicted in a frame composed of *the Ladder of Jacob* and *the Ladder of Virtue*. *The Ladder of Jacob* is considered as the prototype of *the Ladder of Humility – Scala humilitatis*, which consists of twelve steps. *The Ladder of Virtue* is described in connection with "the fulfillment of the noblest task imposed upon man according to medieval ethics, that of subduing by the application of all his powers the evil of this world, of overcoming his sinful desires, to obtain the reward of eternal heavenly happiness"<sup>46</sup>.

In the Beinecke Library is kept a manuscript (MS. 237) designated so far as a treatise on virtues and vices, which contains the text of *the Ladder of Divine Ascension*. This manuscript was written sometime in the 13th century, in black ink, with initials and titles in red. The text is complete, and on the last two folios, in red, there are drawings of three separate ladders with an explanation of the significance of each step, without representing human figures, which indicates that this book was intended for study rather than exposition and it must have been used for a long time and studied constantly, because the parchment is yellow and discolored, and the front corners of the leaves are rounded and worn because of many turns. The early history of this manuscript is unknown, except that it was copied somewhere in the Byzantine East, most likely by a monk. At the beginning of the last century, through a series of sales documents, the manuscript reached the Beinecke Library<sup>47</sup>.

The representation of John Climacus has been gradually simplified and copied countless times by Greek artists. In the 12th century, when Byzantine representations entered the West, it was also adopted by Western art. Herrad of Landsberg took over the representation of the ladder of virtue and extended its meaning. On the scale of the virtues of Herrad of Landsberg are represented, striving to climb, representatives of various social classes, laity and clerics. Thus, the ladder of virtues is associated with a social ladder and it has an ethical dimension. Those who fall prey to their own spiritual weaknesses, to the attraction of earthly pleasures, fail to climb the ladder<sup>48</sup>.

The religious textbook *Speculum virginum*, which contains a representation of *the Ladder of Virtue*, also dates from the first half of the 12th century. Written as a guide for nuns, it consists of 12 chapters and 12 illustrations, which contain textual and visual allegorical representations of *the Ladder of Jacob*, considered the prototype of the 12-step humility ladder. The oldest copy of *Speculum Virginum* is considered to be the *Arundel 44* manuscript. It came into the possession of the Cistercian monastery of Eberbach in Rheingau before the end of the 12th century and then spread widely to a large number of copies. *Speculum Virginum* was written during the period of the reform and growth of monastic houses and the extraordinary increase in the number of women who joined or associated with religious communities. The pedagogical format of the writing, in which the man Peregrinus is the teacher and the woman Theodora is the student, suggests that the book was intended for monks and priests to use for the training of women associated with their communities. Thus, it provides an appropriate model for the interaction

<sup>44</sup> Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *op. cit.*, pp. 22–23.

<sup>45</sup> Stuttgart, Landesbibliothek, Cod. hist. Fob 415, fob 87 v (Löffler, pp. 56, 57; Reallexikon zur deutschen Kunstgeschichte I, illustration on fol. 696). Cf. Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>46</sup> Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>47</sup> Cora E. Lutz, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

<sup>48</sup> Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

between women and men in religious life. In addition, the Eberbach monastery was responsible for the administration of religious houses for women<sup>49</sup>. The twelve parts or chapters in which the text is divided, together with the twelve illustrations that introduce the chapters, describe the steps that Peregrinus instructed Theodora to follow in her journey to become the Virgin of Christ. Through text and images, Peregrinus urges Theodora to see herself in the Mirror of the Virgins, so that she can see her own virtues and vices reflected there. He emphasizes that Theodora must first seek humility, the root of any virtue, and combines a series of allegorical, biblical, and even pagan figures with spiritual counsel to inspire her to imitate the virtue. Peregrinus also advises Theodora to use *the speculum* in the biblical sense as a reflection of divine truth, and reminds her that in this life God can be known only indirectly, as a reflection, but that in the next life the soul will know the essence of God<sup>50</sup>. Peregrinus states quoting from the Corinthians: "When the 'enigma and mirror' by which we know God in part has passed away, what is now sought invisibly in the Scriptures will be seen 'face to face'" (*1 Cor 13:12*)<sup>51</sup>.

Climacus' Greek treatise was also translated into Syriac, Arabic, Armenian, and Church Slavonic, and then into Russian, Serbian, and Bulgarian. The Western world first saw *the Ladder of Virtue* through a Latin translation by Angelus de Cingulo in 1294. One hundred years later, a Latin translation with interpretations of the translator was made by the Italian humanist and monk of the Camaldolese order, Ambrogio Traversari. A later edition of this version, published in Cologne in 1583, is in the Beinecke Library. Ambrogio's translation had a large circle of readers and a number of translations into vernacular languages were made from his Latin text. An Italian translation was published in Venice in 1491, and seven Spanish translations appeared in the 16th century. One of them, *Escalera espiritual* de San Juan Climaco, translated by Fray Juan de Estrada, is of particular interest because, published in Mexico in 1535, it was one of the first books printed in America<sup>52</sup>.

The symbolism of the ladder of divine ascension that John Climacus used to represent the path of spiritual progress to perfection was also frequently used by later writers who had no knowledge of his work. For example, in the 11th century, St. Bernard used the allegory of *Scala Paradisi*, or in the 14th century, Walter Hilton recalled *the Ladder of Perfection*<sup>53</sup>.

## ● Conclusions

The personified representations of the virtues and vices, which spread in the medieval period from the fifth century, in manuscripts of Christian writings, described moral precepts on the ascension of the soul for spiritual progress to perfection or conflicts of passions and sins that attacked the soul, whom he could overcome by virtues. Present mainly in manuscripts, and occasionally in engravings, frescoes or reliefs, virtues and vices were first represented dynamically, in conflict with each other for the supremacy of the soul, then statically, in antagonistic pairs or not, and sometimes by metaphors, such as the metaphors of the tree of virtues and vices, the garden of virtues, the wheel of virtues and vices, or the ladder of virtues.

<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Bailey. 2010. "Judith, Jael, and Humilitas in the Speculum Virginum". In Kevin R. Brine, Elena Ciletti and Henrike Lähnemann (eds.), *The Sword of Judith. Judith Studies Across the Disciplines*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, p. 277.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 278–279.

<sup>51</sup> Apud. Elizabeth Bailey, op. cit., p. 278.

<sup>52</sup> Cora E. Lutz, op. cit., pp. 226–227.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 225.

Originating in the biblical or patristic writings, the metaphorical representations of virtues and vices were an expression of the path taken by the virtuous, respectively the sinners, in their own existence. Whether we are referring to texts or visual sources, their presence in the medieval context was intended to contribute to the development of spiritual guides intended primarily for members of the monastic community, or those who joined them, to achieve perfection in their spiritual life.

The evolution of the representations of virtues and vices in the Middle Ages led to the crystallization of various iconographic formulas, which, mainly through manuscripts, spread in various areas of the Western space, penetrating the artistic vocabulary and crystallizing over time in formulas that have become representative of both theological and political stakes.

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