

Boëthius and the Preface of Theodoricus’ *Historia* – *opinio* versus *oblivio* once again

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In the second part of their stimulating article «On Theodoricus Monachus’ Use of Late Classical Authors»¹ Espen Karlsen and Kyrre Vatsend (hence K. & V.) argue that my correction of *opinio* to *oblivio*² in the quotation from Boëthius³ in the preface to Theodoricus’ *History of the Old Norwegian Kings* (*Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium*) is questionable. In their view Th. may not have wanted his quotation to coincide with the original wording and accordingly I should have considered the possibility of a nice try at a logical improvement on Theodoricus’ part. Their treatment of the issue will be read to the effect that *opinio* should be kept in the text. I think they are mistaken in this.

The facts of the case are the following: Theodoricus quotes Boëthius’ sentence-like saying (*Philosophiae consolatio* 2. pr. 7. 13) according to which reputation has its temporal limitations in a nation not provided with written records⁴: *Sed quam multos clarissimos suis temporibus viros scriptorum*

¹ Karlsen & Vatsend 2003, esp. 255–59.

² The correction *oblivio* (instead of the transmitted *opinio*) is listed among my 80-odd proposed improvements (Kraggerud 2002) on the edition of Theodoricus by Storm 1880 (mentioned by K. & V.); previously I had discussed this case in some detail in Kraggerud 1994: 57–58 (not referred to by K. & V.) and rather succinctly in my review of D. McDougall and I. McDougall’s translation and commentary (Kraggerud 1998: 124; referred to).

³ P. 3, l. 20 in Storm 1880.

⁴ K. & V. (with many translators, cf. fn. 7 and 8) take *scriptorum* as gen. pl. of *scriptor* (‘writer’). Boëthius, however, more probably meant it as a genitive of the neuter pl. *scripta* (thus e.g. Büchner 1964 and Kraggerud 1981): ‘written records’, ‘documents’ or whatever. Cf. the ensuing sentence in Boëthius: *Quamquam quid ipsa scripta proficiant [...]?* As to Th., it is hard to tell whether he took *scriptorum* in the same way as Boëthius or as a gen. pl. of *scriptor*. The matter is of no importance for our issue, however.

*inops*⁵ *delevit oblivio!* This is admittedly somewhat artificially phrased: (literally) «But how many men, famous in their own time, has [not] oblivion devoid of written records extinguished?» The general thought, however, that fame in order to last is dependent on written records, is obvious enough.⁶

K. & V. concede that Theodoricus knew this saying with *oblivio* as the last word adding that the coinage *delevitoblivio* is not unusual, whereas *delevit opinio* seems to be unparalleled. The more surprising is therefore their defence of *opinio* as being in the last resort Theodoricus' own deliberate alteration: «[His] replacement [of *oblivio*] should ... be taken as yet another example of Th.'s creative reception of earlier authors.» The passage in question (clinching Theodoricus' argument for beginning his history with Harald Fair-hair) runs like this in their translation:

«Not because I have doubted that there even before his time have been men in this land who according to the standard of the present age were conspicuous in respect of prowess, but *whom* – although they were very famous in their own time – *estimation lacking writers extinguished*, as Boëthius said. To prove this I will call proper witnesses.» [my italics]

K. & V. think that Theodoricus reformulated Boëthius' phrase for the sake of clarity and logic in order to highlight the point that the (high) estimation combined with a lack of persons to record it destroyed the memory of such men. I fail to see how this or, for that matter, the similar rendering of David McDougall and

⁵ The most artificial element is the phrase *scriptorum inops oblivio*. I agree that it is unusual, but I doubt that it presented a problem to Th. (K. & V. p. 257 «problematical»). Latin has a propensity for using abstract nouns instead of personal agents (so-called *Abstractum pro concreto*, like e.g. *coniuratio* 'the conspiracy' for *coniurati* 'the conspirators'). In this case the author clearly means *hominum oblivio* ('people's forgetfulness'); the attribute *scriptorum inops* would logically belong to the elliptic personal element, but has become (by a sort of *enallage adiectivi*) attached to the abstract noun. The phrase would quite naturally be taken by a competent Latinist like Th. as: «the oblivionness of people without recourse to written records/ without writers has extinguished etc.».

⁶ That historiography is a prerequisite for preserving the glory of men is a topos in the prefaces of historians, see Vretska 1976 on Sallust ch. 8.4, pp. 183–84. In his homily on the shortcomings of *gloria* Boëthius was clearly inspired by a passage in Cicero's famous *Somnium Scipionis* (= *De re publica* 6. 20–25, cf. Boyancé 1936: 148–51); see especially ch. 25. 3: *sermo ... omnis ille ... obruitur hominum interitu et oblivione posteritatis extinguitur* («all that kind of talk [i.e. 'fame', 'reputation'] ... is buried when people die and is blotted out by the forgetfulness of posterity»).

Ian McDougall⁷ can be seen as an improvement of logic.⁸ On the contrary: the word *opinio* brings about a self-contradictory combination: ‘reputation’ extinguishing ‘fame’ (cf. *clarissimos ... viros*, i.e. ‘famous men’). The two notions are virtually synonymous and refer to more or less the same period of time. Quite another thing would be to say that famous men will have a short-lived reputation if nobody records their great deeds, but that is not in the Latin alleged to be that of Theodoricus. Antithetic notions, then, are required, and that is exactly what is provided by Boëthius’ text (and by Theodoricus’ own paraphrase later on in the preface, on which see below).

K. & V. ask how *opinio* could have crept into the text if it was not deliberately put there by Theodoricus himself. For one thing, the phonetic similarity of *oblivio* and *opinio* (o-i-i-o) is obvious. Secondly, *opinio* is a much more common word⁹ so that the *lectio facilior* factor may have been at play as well. But above all: An unattentive scribe may have been lured to think that the argument was about ‘reputation without records/ writers’ instead of oblivion following from the lack of ‘records’/ ‘writers’. But in view of Theodoricus’ own paraphrase of Boëthius’ thought a little later in the preface (Storm 1880 p. 4, l. 12–13) I have no doubt that he both wrote and understood *delevit oblivio* correctly. His paraphrase is: *sed ut diximus illorum [i.e. potentium virorum] memoria scriptorum inopia delevit* («But, as we have said, the lack of written records/ writers has extinguished the memory of them [i.e. ‘those mighty men’]. *Memoria* (‘memory’ being an approximate equivalent to ‘fame’) corresponds to Boëthius’ *clarissimos* and is an antithesis to *scriptorum inops oblivio* and *scriptorum inopia* respectively.»

⁷ McDougall & McDougall 1998: «reputation without authors has effaced those men who were very famous in their times.»

⁸ The Norwegian translators have got around the problem caused by the faulty textual transmission through imprecise, but basically logic and correct translations: «fordi det skorta på bokmenn, har minnet deira vorte gløymt, endå dei hadde stort namn i si tid» (Skard 1932: 8–9), «menn som ... var meget berømte i sin egen tid, men ble glemte på grunn av mangel på forfattere.» (Salvesen 1969: 47).

⁹ A search in the *Patrologia Latina* shows more than three times as many hits for *opinio* as for *oblivio*.

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