

LECTIO II: GVILLELMI DE CONCHIS ACCESSVS AD AVCTORES (early twelfth century)

GLOSSES AND COMMENTARIES on classical and late-antique texts were an integral part of medieval learning. They transmit to us, perhaps more directly than any other genre, the manners, methods and intellectual preoccupations of the medieval schoolroom and its scholastic debates. Recasting old traditions in new molds, commentaries straddle, sometimes precariously, the fluid boundary between an *ad litteram* exposition of an authoritative text and an *ad sensum* re-interpretation of its argument and intent, a re-interpretation which often sought to reconcile classical *auctores* with contemporary doctrines (be they theological, philosophical, scientific, etc.). The introduction to a commentary is called an *accessus* (an ‘approach’); it presents a resumé of the work and follows a traditional six-part structure (which has its roots in Greek philosophical commentaries on Aristotle).¹ As a kind of ‘cliff-notes’ version of a given text, *accessus* were often excerpted and circulated independently; sometimes they were even composed as free-standing works. For instance, the *Accessus philosophorum VII artium liberalium*, a thematic collection of *accessus* to texts in the university curriculum, no doubt provided a welcome study guide for students in thirteenth-century Paris.²

We will read two early twelfth-century *accessus* to two popular late-ancient texts, Boethius’ *Consolatio philosophiae* (ed. L. Nauta, CCCM 158) and Macrobius’ *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis* (unedited), both from commentaries by William of Conches, a renown twelfth-century *magister*. William was born in Normandy, as he reveals in a learned reference to Juvenal, disguised as an off-hand, self-deprecating quip – *in patria ueruecum crassoque sub aere Normanniae sum natus*³ – and may have taught at Chartres and (perhaps) Paris. Among his many commentaries are glosses on Priscian’s *Institutiones*, Boethius’ *Consolatio philosophiae*, Macrobius’ *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, Plato’s *Timaeus* and Juvenal’s *Saturae* (only fragments of this last survive), as well as Martianus Capella’s *De nuptiis* and Boethius’ *De institutione musica* (though neither of the latter are extant and perhaps were never completed).

William devoted his energies less to theology proper than to the natural sciences in all of its branches: astronomy, meteorology, geology, optics, anatomy, physiology, etc. William’s pursuit of ‘scientific’ truth often led him to positions that proved worrisome to the defenders of orthodoxy. Another William, the Abbot of Saint-Thierry near Rheims, in a letter to Bernard of Clairvaux, denounced William as an ‘adder risen from the root of a serpent’ (cf. Isaiah 14:29). But the denunciation seems to have come to naught (unlike the similar denunciations and condemnations of Abelard and Gilbert of Poitiers). Nonetheless, William seems to have had enough with scholastic (or ecclesiastic) in-fighting and sought refuge as a tutor in the princely court of Geoffrey Plantagenet, count of Anjou and duke of Normandy.

¹ The classic study remains E.A. Quain’s “The Medieval *Accessus ad Auctores*,” *Traditio* 3 (1945), 215–264.

² See Cl. Lafleur and J. Carrier, *Quatre introductions à la philosophie au XIII^e siècle* (Montreal, 1988).

³ *Dragmaticon*, 6.1.1–11; CCCM 152, p. 179. Cf. Juvenal, *Satura* 10.5: “Veruecum in patria crassoque sub aere nasci.” *Vervex* is both a sheep, for which Normandy is rightly famous, and a derogatory term for a dullard.