



Origen's Views on Human Freedom and Dignity and Their Reception in the Latin West



Portrait of Origen in the Codex Monacensis Clm 17092 (12th century)

De Principiis III 1, on the topic of free will (as indicated by the introductory paragraph in red, Περὶ αὐτεξουσίας), in the Codex Marcianus 48 (14th-15th century)

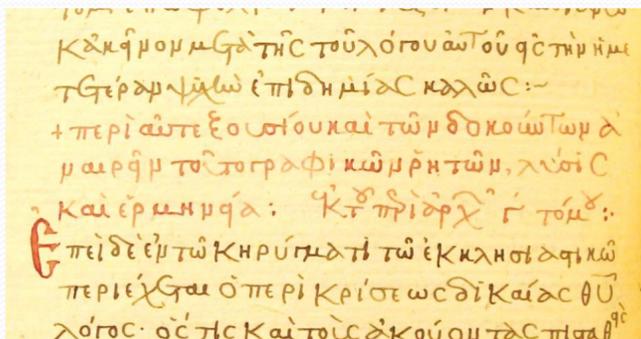
Background

- Origen "Adamantius" (185-254) was a Christian theologian, ascetic and exegete, active first in his native Alexandria of Egypt, the heart of the Hellenistic world, and then in Caesarea of Palestine.
- As Augustine for the Latin West, Origen is considered the greatest thinker of Ancient Christianity in the Greek-speaking East.
- While Origen's exegetical method never lost its authority, some key points of his systematic thought, such as the pre-existence of the souls or his eschatology, immediately sparked a debate that raged on in the entire Christian world for centuries, exacerbated by the Arian crisis, until his final condemnation during the Second Council of Constantinople in 553.
- The majority of Origen's vast output is lost, and only a small part of it has survived in the original Greek. Some of it has survived in late 4th century Latin translations by Rufinus, whose aim was to make Origen more palatable to the Western reader, and by Jerome, who approached Origen's texts in a polemic way.

- Due to his highly controversial status, the history of the reception of Origen is extremely difficult to trace, especially in the West, where Origen's ideas had to compete with a different theological tradition and in particular with the overwhelming influence of Augustine of Hippo (354-430). However, Origen's views and arguments continued to play a significant, if partly hidden, role in shaping the history of Western, as well as the Eastern, thoughts on the human and the divine.

Objectives

- To analyse the concepts of human freedom and human dignity in Origen's thought.
- To investigate the philosophical and theological traditions behind modern Western anthropology from as wide a disciplinary spectrum as possible.
- In particular, the two subprojects carried out at the University of Reading, under the supervision of the Head of the School of Humanities, Professor Karla Pollmann, focus on the analysis of Origen's works and their Medieval reception, with special attention to the themes of:
 1. Autonomy and freedom in Origen's thought.
 2. Submission and humility as true dignity in Origen's homilies on the Old Testament.



Significance

- The significance of this project aimed at retracing the steps in the evolution of the Western notions of human freedom and dignity, starting from the turning point of Origen's speculations, is to provide the public with a broader and more informed perspective on today's conception of those fundamental values.
- The Innovative Training Network involves 14 PhD students from the Humanities and the Social Sciences with very different backgrounds and research interests, 6 universities and 9 non-academic partner organizations, based in Denmark, Germany, Italy, the Czech Republic, Great Britain, Israel and Hungary. Thus, the project enables Early Stage Researchers (ESRs) to take their first academic steps within a framework that promotes international mobility and communication, as well as interdisciplinary dialogue. The ESRs are encouraged to complement their academic work with teaching and non-academic work experience.

- In particular, the two ESRs hosted at the University of Reading will complete a 3-month internship at a publishing house, one at Aschendorff (Münster) and the other at Mohr Siebeck (Tübingen), and a 3-month secondment at Charles University of Prague and Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster, respectively.

Methods

- Based on the analysis of evidence gathered from Origen's works, including his systematic treatises, commentaries and homilies on Scripture, the project members aim to arrive at an operative definition of Origen's concepts of human freedom and dignity that will refine previous research.
- The researchers explore how Origen's ideas on freedom and dignity have been received in the Latin West, employing a wide spectrum of data and scientific approaches, including reception studies and network theory.

Origen as a preacher and as a teacher (illustrations by Jan Luyken, 1700)



Further reading:

- Fürst, A., *Origenes: Griechen und Christ in römischer Zeit* (Stuttgart 2017)
- Jacobsen, A.-C. (ed.), *Origeniana Undecima. Origen and Origenism in the History of Western Thought* (Leuven et al. 2016)
- Monaci Castagno, A. (ed.), *Origenes. Dizionario: la cultura, il pensiero, le opere* (Rome 2000)