

## SOLOMON'S TEMPLE AS A LITERARY THEME IN CHRISTIAN BUILDING POETRY<sup>1</sup>

### EL TEMPLO DE SALOMÓN COMO TÓPICO LITERARIO EN LA POESÍA EDILICIA CRISTIANA

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Texto recebido em / Text submitted on: 27/09/2024

Texto aprovado em / Text approved on: 05/05/2025

#### **Abstract**

This work studies the Latin Christian poetry of Late Antiquity on the construction of monuments that is transmitted in anonymous inscriptions and in the works of authors from the Roman West, namely Paulinus of Nola, Prudentius, Sidonius Apollinaris and Venantius Fortunatus. The pooling of testimonies has led us to describe the different motifs that make up a new Christian creation topic that develops from the biblical image of Solomon's temple. This metaphor describes the beauty of the new churches, while at the same time expressing an allegory of spirituality.

**Keywords:** Building epigram, architecture, Latin, Christian literature.

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<sup>1</sup> This article has been developed within the context of the research project AVIPES-CM II (ref. PHS-2024/PH-HUM-45), funded by 'Consejería de Educación, Ciencia y Universidades, Comunidad de Madrid'; and the research project VIATOR: Poesía epigráfica. vías en su transmisión en el occidente romano (ref. PID2023-151763NA-I00), funded by 'Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades'. I am grateful for the helpful comments and suggestions of the reviewers, which have helped to improve this text.

### Resumen

Este trabajo estudia la poesía latina cristiana de la Antigüedad tardía (ss. IV-VI) sobre construcción de monumentos que se transmite en inscripciones anónimas y en las obras de autores del Occidente romano, concretamente de Paulino de Nola, Prudencio, Sidonio Apolinar y Venancio Fortunato. La puesta en común de los testimonios nos ha llevado a describir los distintos motivos que componen un nuevo tópico de creación cristiana que se desarrolla a partir de la imagen bíblica del templo de Salomón. Esta metáfora describe la belleza de las nuevas iglesias, al mismo tiempo que manifiesta una alegoría de espiritualidad.

**Palabras clave:** epigrama edilicio, arquitectura, latín, literatura cristiana.

Christian building poetry, heir to classical monumental epigraphy and the long tradition of Greco-Latin epigram, describes – from a literary dimension – themes related to architecture, to places of worship or to the spiritual and sensory experience that the faithful derive from the sacred space. This phenomenon, which spread considerably from the 4th century onwards thanks to the freedom of worship established by the Emperor Constantine I, opened the way to a new versified propaganda of doctrine.

The poems have come down to us in two ways: the first is in the form of inscriptions in verse, which, engraved in privileged places, formed part of the iconographic programmes of the new typology of buildings that arose under the protection of Christianity: churches, basilicas, monasteries, catacombs, baptisteries...; or they have even survived on some smaller structures, such as doors or liturgical furnishings. Other inscriptions, however, did not suffer the same fate and we have lost their material reality. Their texts, however, are known to us through manuscript transmission, thanks to the sylloges<sup>2</sup>.

The second way of studying Christian building poetry is through the works of well-known authors. Pope Damasus I established the origin of this genre in Rome through epigrams dedicated to martyrs and patron saints of churches. This literary mode flourished throughout the Roman West, thanks to authors belonging to the ecclesiastical sphere: Ambrose decorated the baptistery of Milan with versified inscriptions, as did Paulinus

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<sup>2</sup> The epigraphic sylloge *Turonensis*, for example, was produced in the city of the same name and reproduces the inscriptions found in the cathedral of Saint Martin of Tours in the 5th century. Several sylloges have been decisive for our knowledge of the poems that adorned the religious monuments of Rome, such as the sylloge of Lorsch (ms. Pal. Lat. 833) or of Einsiedeln (ms. Stiftsbibliothek 326 (1076)).

of Nola the basilica complex dedicated to Saint Felix at Cimitile; Prudentius dedicated hymns to the martyrs' places in Hispania; Sidonius Apollinaris wrote commissioned poems for the cathedrals of Tours and Lyon in the 5th century, as did Venantius Fortunatus, no doubt, for the various dioceses of Merovingian Gaul a century later. It is clear from his poems that they had three main functions: as a literary play imitating the inscriptions<sup>3</sup>, as an ornament for the places of worship in their cities or as commissions for other dioceses, and, finally, to be recited at important moments such as the consecration of churches after their foundation. This is why Meyer<sup>4</sup> called these texts 'poems of circumstance', because whatever their function, their main purpose was to celebrate the end of the construction and the personalities involved.

Therefore, based on the reading of different poems and the analysis of inscriptions with a building theme, we have observed the presence of recurring elements in both types of manifestations. Consequently, our starting point was to ask whether there were literary *topoi* that were transferred from one poem to another, whether there was a common behaviour among them that could define them as a literary unit. We compiled our own corpus of texts, consisting of 174 testimonies from Hispania, Gaul and Italy between the 4th and 6th centuries. A careful analysis of the poems has enabled us to define and describe a total of 26 main themes, which we believe recur with relative frequency. Among them is the one we define in this article.

The poetry of Late Antiquity is situated in a period of connection, but at the same time it has its own identity. For this reason, although the literary images and metaphors of Greco-Latin culture are repeated and adapted, religious literary sources predominate and new themes are developed that are entirely Christian, based on biblical events. The different themes explain the beauty and majesty of the newly built churches and the luxury of their materials. One of these new motifs is the architectural comparison with Solomon's Temple. This temple is one of the most important symbols in the Old Testament. In the Book of Kings (1,6) and in the Book of Chronicles (2,3) its long period of construction is described in detail in terms of its structure, dimensions, materials and lavish ornamentation. The Temple of

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<sup>3</sup> Velázquez Soriano 2006: 10-11, called this practice *carmina more epigraphico* and Rico Camps 2009: 14 *sub specie epigraphica*. They describe those late antique and medieval poems that use themes and form of epigraphy, without implying that they were intended to be inscribed on a material support.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Meyer 1901: 54-56.

Solomon, whose biblical description emphasises both its material wealth and its architectural perfection, is itself imbued with a profound symbolism. Built according to a model revealed by God to David and executed by Solomon, it housed the Ark of the Covenant, a sign of the divine presence among his people.

Typological exegesis, which originated in Hellenistic Judaism, was adopted by early Christian writers as a method of reading the Hebrew Scriptures in terms of their fulfilment in Christ. In the descriptions of Solomon's Temple in Late Antiquity, we observe a change of mentality brought about by this hermeneutic key: whereas Solomon's temple was accessible only to a few and was eventually destroyed; the Church is now conceived as universal and indestructible, because it is built on the cornerstone, which is Christ (Mt 16,18)<sup>5</sup>. The bishops - the authors of the poems we are analysing here - used the exegesis of Scripture to endow their speeches with a sacralised language and to unite the multitudes in a new community of thought and behaviour<sup>6</sup>. This is the conceptual context in which the theme we are analysing here emerges, nourished by the intellectual and spiritual knowledge of the poets. Prudentius uses these references to write a short epigram on the construction of the Temple, which could well have been an inscription<sup>7</sup>:

*Aedificat templum sapientia per Salomonis  
obsequium: regina Austri grave congerit aurum.  
Tempus adest, quo templum hominis sub pectore Christus  
aedificet, quod Graia colant, quod barbara ditent.*  
Prud. *Tituli* 21

In the first two verses, Solomon builds a temple to please Wisdom, while the last two verses point out that the time has come for each person to build a temple for Christ within himself. Solomon's Temple is regarded

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Goppelt 1982: 84.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Kannengiesser 2004: 673-674.

<sup>7</sup> Davis-Weyer 1971: 57 suggested that just as Paulinus of Nola had placed episodes with explanatory inscriptions from the Old Testament in the Basilica nova of St Felix at the Cimitile complex, these short epigrams by Prudentius were probably composed for the same purpose, since they deal with themes typical of early Christian iconography and the general title of the work (*Tituli Historiarum*) suggests that they were inscriptions intended to be engraved on the walls.



to the reader or listener. This configuration results in the newly constructed church appearing to be situated in close proximity, and on the same plane as, the faithful congregants. Consequently, the church becomes an architectural entity with a discernible presence.

Venantius Fortunatus also follows this fragment of Sidonius Apollinaris to describe the beauty of a new church built in Paris<sup>10</sup>, financed by King Childebert I in the 6th century<sup>11</sup>:

*Si Salomoniaci memoretur machina templi,  
arte licet par sit, pulchrior ista fide.  
Nam quaecumque illic veteris velamine legis  
clausa fuere prius, hic reserata patent.  
Floruit illa quidem vario intertexta metallo: 5  
clarius haec Christi sanguine tincta nitet.  
Illam aurum, lapides ornarunt, cedrina ligna,  
huic venerabilior de cruce fulget honor.  
Constitit illa vetus ruituro structa talento,  
haec pretio mundi stat solidata domus. 10  
Ven. Fort. Carm. 2,10,1-10*

If one remembers the structure of Solomon's Temple, this church may be similar in craftsmanship, but it is more beautiful in faith. For whatever was once closed beneath the veil of the old law is here unveiled and laid open. That one flourished, inlaid with various metals; this one shines more brightly, dyed with the blood of Christ. That one was adorned with gold, stones, and cedar wood; in this one, the most venerable honor of the cross shines forth. That ancient structure endured with perishable munificence, this home stands consolidated for the rescue of the world.

The author follows the dual antithetical structure established by Sidonius Apollinaris and in four elegiac distichs makes four comparisons between Solomon's Temple (*ille*) and the new Parisian church (*haec*) to

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<sup>10</sup> Herbert de la Portbarré-Viard 2023: 237 draws this parallel and suggests that in both cases the theme may be synonymous with the renovation of cathedrals, where the old is associated with Solomon's Temple and the new is the result of construction. For the Latin text we follow Reydellet 1994.

<sup>11</sup> Excavations on the esplanade of Notre-Dame in Paris have shown that beneath the present church there was another very large church with five naves on large marble columns. Cf. Dérens Jean 1977: 254.

demonstrate through hyperbole, that the latter building is superior. The narrative draws upon the scriptural account of the temple's construction, citing the materials utilized, namely gold and cedar: ...*et vestivit illud auro purissimo et fecit altare cedrinum* (1 Re 6,20)<sup>12</sup>. In order to present Solomon's Temple as a model building in the narrative, Venantius Fortunatus appeals to the reader's memory (*Si Salomoniaci memoretur machina templi*, v. 1), evoking this past image in order to connect it with the present church and implying that this temple was a cultural image recognised as synonymous with majesty in the society of his time. This appeal to the reader, invoking the memory of Solomon's temple, had been previously employed by Paulinus of Bordeaux to justify the installation of a series of fountains in the portico connecting the two basilicas in Nola, despite the fact that there was not enough water for them to flow normally<sup>13</sup>. Paulinus employs the verb *tenere* in the 2nd person singular to facilitate the reader's recollection<sup>14</sup> of the bronze Sea, which functioned as the antechamber of Solomon's temple, as delineated in 1 Kings 7:23-39. This reiterates the argument positing the aesthetic merits of the construction of new churches. The common denominator for the literary comparison, as in Fortunatus' poem, is the material, as both hydraulic constructions were made of bronze<sup>15</sup>:

*Quod si etiam interdum obveniat defectus aquarum,  
ordine disposito varias distincta figuras  
concharumque modis et pictis florida metis* 475  
*forte erit et siccis spectabilis area vasis.  
Namque tenes etiam magna Salomonis in aede  
quam fuerit decori siccum mare, quod sapiens rex  
aere dedit solido et tauris suspendit aenis.*  
Paul. Nol. *Carm.* 27,473-479

However, in the event of a water shortage, the square, adorned by a variety of figures in a deliberate arrangement and enhanced by the configuration of

<sup>12</sup> See also cf. 2 Cr 4,2.

<sup>13</sup> Herbert de la Portbarré-Viard 2006: 290-298 provides a comprehensive overview of the installation of the fountains in the basilica complex dedicated to Saint Felix.

<sup>14</sup> Roberts 2009: 91 points out that mental verbs in the second person are recurrent in Late antique poetry, with the purpose of alluding to optical illusions perceived by the visitor and formed in the architecture of buildings.

<sup>15</sup> For the Latin text I follow the edition by Dolveck 2015: 400-401.





Do not Solomon's stones, that were built up by hand, lie in ruins, his metal-work destroyed? That famous temple lies in ruins. And why? Because it was a craftsman's perishable hand that framed that perishable work of stone. Justly it has perished and now lies in ruins, since every work of art turns again to nothingness; that which admits of being made is bound one day to perish. If on the other hand thou wouldst learn what our temple is, it is one that no workman built up piece by piece with the skill of his craft, no fabric of hewn fir or pine, nor ever rose out of quarried marble. It is one whose mass does not rest high up on pillars, supported with delicate skill on curving arches. It is made from the Word of the Lord; not his loud-sounding voice, but his Word, which ever lived. The Word was made flesh. This is the temple that is everlasting and without end; this is the temple that thou hast attacked, seeking to take with it scourge and cross and gall<sup>17</sup>.

This theme emerged as a counterpoint to the *topos* of the ruins of pagan poetry, which conveyed the notion of destruction by the passage of time or the vengeance of the gods. The ephemeral nature of various cities is developed in this context, as illustrated by the case of Troy<sup>18</sup>. In the poetry of Late Antiquity, although religious literary sources predominate, the imagery and literary metaphors of Greco-Latin culture are repeated and adapted. In this sense, Christians displaced the symbolic value of pagan mythological destructions and adapted them to biblical destructions such as Sodom and Gomorrah, Babylon or, in this case, Solomon's Temple. The ephemeral character of the Jerusalem Temple is now appealed to in order to emphasise the miraculous character of the eternity of the Church under the leadership of Christ. This is why Prudentius downplays the importance of the existence of the Temple of Jerusalem, since Christians do not need a place to show their faith<sup>19</sup>; the city of Jerusalem loses its geographical value in favour of a symbolic abstraction, giving way to the "new Jerusalem"<sup>20</sup>. This literary motif of the imperishable church thus seems to give the faithful the hope of eternal life through churches that are described as indestructible.

The various literary motifs that formulate this theme help us to better understand the epitaph in verse of the Burgundy Queen Caretena, who died in 506. Funerary *carmina*, as funeral eulogies, usually record

<sup>17</sup> Translation: Thomson 1949: 159-161.

<sup>18</sup> Garaud 1966: 148-156 developed this analogy.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Markus 1994, 259.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. González Salinero 2010: 57-61.

the praiseworthy activities carried out by the deceased during his or her lifetime<sup>21</sup>, and it is very common for the work of financing buildings to be recorded. This epitaph, handed down in manuscript (ms. BnF Par. Lat. 2382, f. 112v), records the construction of a church dedicated to Saint Michael in Lyon, the actual existence of which is unknown. However, it is related to the church consecrated in Lyon by Avitus, Bishop of Vienne, in his homily XVII, since it is the only church of this saint known from this period in Gaul<sup>22</sup>. Unfortunately, we only have the title of the sermon, ‘Ex sermone in dedicatione ecclesiae Archangeli Michahelis’, so we cannot confirm this link. In this case, the Temple of Solomon also seems to have been the inspiration for the construction of this church in Lyon:

<i>Dotibus his pollens sublimi mente subire</i>	15
<i>non spreuit sacrum post diadema iugum.</i>	
<i>Cedat odoriferis quondam dominata Sabaeis</i>	
<i>expetiit mirum quae Salomonis opus.</i>	
<i>Condidit haec templum presens quod personat orbe</i>	
<i>angelicisque dedit limina celsa choris.</i>	20
<i>ICG 31,15-20</i>	

Mighty with these gifts, she did not disdain to face the sacred yoke behind the diadem with an exalted soul. Let her yield, who was once mistress of the perfumed Sabaeans, who visited the wondrous work of Solomon. Caretena founded the present temple, which resounds throughout the world, and gave a sublime entrance to the choirs of angels.

In order to idealise the image of the deceased, the epitaph records how Caretena decided to leave her position as monarch and devote her life to religious contemplation. The literary comparison is made here, not on the basis of the two churches, as in the previous examples, but through the figure of the two queens: the Queen of Sheba, who visited King Solomon in his temple<sup>23</sup>, and Queen Caretena, who, driven by the desire to lie for eternity in a work as majestic as Solomon’s temple, decides to build a church – described as *limina celsa*<sup>24</sup> – where she can be buried, as part of the customary practice of *tumulatio ad sanctos*.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Ingrand-Varenne 2017: 55.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Pietri y Heijmans 2013: 242-263.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. 1 Re 10 y Pro 9,1.

<sup>24</sup> I understand that the threshold ‘*limina*’ is used here as a synecdoche for the church.

In conclusion, it is observed that the beauty of the church as a building worthy of God, inspired by the biblical temple of Solomon, becomes a *topos* in Christian building poetry. Solomon's Temple is regarded as the epitome of aesthetic perfection, serving as a metaphor for a sacred and ideal space, constructed with unwavering dedication and the finest materials available. The literary theme is developed through various metaphors describing the architecture; the primary metaphor is that of the confrontation of the old temple with the new foundation, which is presented to the visitor through linguistic mechanisms. Furthermore, the reader's memory is invoked to evoke the image of Solomon's temple, thereby underscoring the notion of majesty. It is evident that the new church will always be superior in all respects. Indeed, it is presented as being eternally durable, in contradistinction to the temple that was destroyed, despite its remarkable nature. While the majority of testimonies conveying the *topos* originate from works by prominent authors, this motif is also observed in an anonymous metrical inscription, thereby underscoring the dissemination of this literary culture through diverse ways.

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