

POETS, PROPHETS, AND PHILOSOPHERS – THE END OF THE WORLD ACCORDING TO OTTO VON FREISING

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Introduction

The end of the world, immanent or otherwise, has been a much-discussed topic throughout human history, especially in the recent decades, where the topic has received broad media attention.¹ The scientific and public debates related to climate change and natural disasters are telling in this respect. This interest is also indicated by the high volume of eschatological popular culture, as evidenced in, for example, the large number of books, films, and songs about the “doomsday” predicted for the end of 2012. Such ideas about the destruction of the world seem to form a rather consistent theme in the history of humanity, as Michael Witzel points out in his comparative analysis of the world’s mythologies:

It may take place as a final worldwide conflagration – the Götterdämmerung or Ragnarök in the Edda, Śiva’s destructive dance and fire in India; by molten metal in Zoroastrian myth or by devouring the world; or by fire and water in Maya and other Mesoamerican myths; or as in the Old Egyptian tale of Atum’s destruction of the earth.

1 Rather innovative is the thought of a continued existence of the world after the great disaster but without humanity, as pointed out by HORN, 2014.

However, the end also takes other forms, such as ice and long-lasting winter, for example, in the Edda, or in Iran with Yima's underground world, or again, a flood.²

Focussing on ancient cultures in particular, it is possible to identify several imagined scenarios related to the end of the world that remain popular in the present day. For instance, several groups of philosophers in Greek and Roman antiquity developed theories about the end of the world. Such as several of the pre-Socratics (e.g., Anaximander and Empedocles), as well as adherents of Stoicism and Epicureanism.³ For example, Anaximander, who lived in the sixth century BCE, claimed that all actual things would finally fall back into an undifferentiated mass, called the *Apeiron*.⁴ Empedocles,⁵ conversely, taught that every existing structure consists of a combination of the four "roots" (*rhizōmata*) – water, fire, air, and earth. Through the two cosmic forces – love (*philotēs*) and strife (*neikos*) – those "roots" are locked in an eternal cycle of mixture and separation. In a phase of consolidation, they aggregate to form a structured world with living beings. But this is just a temporary status on the way to a perfect combination of all of the four "roots" under the absolute domination of the cosmic love. This mixture without synthesis is called the *Sphairos*. Under the increasing influence of cosmic strife, this *Sphairos* begins to dissolve, first into the differentiated world, again with living beings, and eventually into the absolute separation of the four "roots". When the cosmic love ultimately strengthens again, the never-ending cycle begins anew.

Among other ideas about the dissolution of the world – e.g., a global flood or the aging and decay of the world⁶ – is the imagination of a global flame catastrophe that transfers everything into pure fire. In Stoic thought, this destruction was most probably understood to be a cyclic event that had to occur due to natural necessity or law.⁷ Following the phase of pure fire is a phase involving a reconsolidation of the former state of the world, so that everything occurs again in everlasting periods.

The image of the end of the world featured prominently in early Christian literature, not least due to the expectation that Christ's return was immanent,

2 WITZEL, 2014, p. 181.

3 See SCHWABL, 1978, pp. 840-850; BURKERT, 1989, pp. 240-243.

4 See GREGORY, 2007, pp. 30-44.

5 See IBID., pp. 78-101.

6 Global flood: Seneca, *Naturales quaestiones* 3.27-29; Aging and decay: Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 2.1105-1174.

7 See LONG, 1985.

which would initiate a chain of events leading to doomsday. In contrast to the pagan ideas, that of the Christian is not a cyclic model of eternal recurrence, but the definitive end of time. For most early Christian authors, the almost prototypical idea how the world is going to end is a catastrophe involving a global fire, which – following pagan terminology for the cyclic destruction of the world – is called in Greek ἐκπύρωσις (*ekpyrōsis*) or Latin *conflagratio*.⁸ A statement by Augustine of Hippo, one of the great Western Church Fathers, can serve as an example. He claims in his work *De civitate Dei* that, on the day of the return of Christ, the world would be destroyed by a global conflagration (see the first contribution by Dominic Bärsch).⁹

This mention of Augustine leads us to the actual theme of this paper: how the final destruction of the world is described in the *Chronica sive Historia de duabus civitatibus* of Otto von Freising. This world chronicle is used to provide an insight into how the end of the world was imagined in twelfth-century central Europe. Although its title reveals that Otto's account of the world's history depends heavily on *De civitate Dei*,¹⁰ the present paper will determine which other literary sources Otto uses as authorities in his conceptualization of the end of the world. First, though, a few notes will follow on the life and work of the author in focus.

Nobleman and Churchman – The Life and Work of Otto von Freising

Born about 1112 CE as the fifth son of the Babenberger Margrave Leopold III and Agnes, daughter of Emperor Henry IV, as the half-brother of the later king Conrad III, Otto was *ab initio* provided with a commanding position within the social structure of the Holy Roman Empire. He received his first education with the chapter of canons in Klosterneuburg, which his father had founded in 1114.¹¹ In 1126, he was appointed to be the provost of the collegiate chapter

8 See for instance, DOWNING, 1995, pp. 107-109.

9 Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 20.16: [...] *tunc figura huius mundi mundanorum ignium conflagratione praeteribit* [...].
“[...] the figure of this world will pass away in a conflagration of all the fires of the universe [...]” (translation: DYSON, 1998, p. 1002).

10 See GOETZ, 1998.

11 See KIRCHNER-FEYERABEND, 1990, pp. 10-16.

there. In the same, or possibly the following year, Otto decided to study the new scholasticism in Paris, where he spent about six years and encountered the teachings of Peter Abelard, Hugo of St. Viktor, and Gilbert de la Porrée.¹² In 1132, he entered the Order of the Cistercians together with fifteen highborn German students, and went as a novice to the Morimond Monastery in Champagne. Six years later, in 1138 at the age of 26, he became the abbot of the same monastery.¹³ However, the day after, he was nominated by King Conrad III as bishop of Freising.¹⁴

That Otto was not just deeply involved in ecclesiastical and theological matters, but also in secular issues is indicated by his serving as a Prince of the Holy Roman Empire in the Second Crusade 1147-1149.¹⁵ The combination of both the history of salvation and the history of events is also part of his literary work, especially of his universal chronicle *Chronica sive historia de duabus civitatibus*.¹⁶ As the central literary device in this opus, Otto assumes two different communities (*societates*), the *civitas Dei* – the divine realm – and the *civitas terrena* – the earthly realm –, which have existed since the origin of the world (*exortus*) and progress until the end of time (*finis*).¹⁷ Thereby, he uses the concept of *civitas* with a double meaning. On the one hand, it refers to an actual state or a group of people. On the other hand, it alludes to an abstract symbol of eternity.¹⁸ Additionally, those societies are consistently affected by the mutability of all things (*mutabilitas rerum*), which results in the constant rise and decline of cultures and nations.¹⁹

Therefore, in the *Chronica*, Otto pursues the intention, on the one hand, to describe the most critical stages of the mundane history of humanity and the world, and on the other hand, to interpret these historical events using theological-philosophical tools. Furthermore, he focusses not only on past

12 See IBID., pp. 17-23.

13 See IBID., pp. 31-34.

14 See IBID., pp. 39-46.

15 See SCHWARZBAUER, 2005, p. 48. ROACH, 2013, p. 76 stresses that, in the High Middle Ages there existed a “dynamic contribution of eschatology to movements as diverse as church reform, the crusades and the missionary efforts of the mendicant orders”.

16 Hereafter, I will refer to this work as “Chron.,” while indicating book and chapter according to the standard edition by HOFMEISTER, 1912.

17 See GOETZ, 1998, p. 135.

18 See IBID., p. 162.

19 See KIRCHNER-FEYERABEND, 1990, p. 49.

happenings but also on the prospective end of the world, which he extensively describes in the eighth book of the chronicle:

The eighth book that describes the still absent final event, is therefore history-prophecy [...]. According to Otto's concept of history, the described events will occur with absolute certainty because history follows the divine plan of salvation. The course of the world's previous history and the recent critical developments and events that caused Otto to write a world chronicle, suggest in his view the imminent occurrence of the end times.²⁰

Consequently, the political crisis between the secular and ecclesiastical potentates of Otto's time – the so-called Investiture Controversy – serves as a reliable indication that the end of the world was seen as imminent at the time.²¹ This presupposition becomes apparent as early as the preface of the *Chronica*, when he discusses the value of his sources and considers himself and his generation as the “ones who live at the end of time” (*Nos autem, tanquam in fine temporum constituti*).²² In medieval thought, this kind of self-perception is relatively common, due to the fact that “Augustine of Hippo taught that the world had entered its sixth and final age upon the incarnation of Christ and authorities such as Gregory the Great expressed the expectation that little if any time remained before this.”²³ Therefore, the awareness of living in a time close to the end of the world fits perfectly in the visibility of this theme in different contexts of the Middle Ages.

20 IBID., pp. 49f.: “Das achte Buch, das das noch ausgebliebene Endgeschehen schildert, ist demnach Geschichtsprophetie [...]. Dem Geschichtsbild Ottos nach werden die geschilderten Ereignisse mit absoluter Gewissheit eintreten, verläuft doch die Geschichte nach dem göttlichen Heilsplan. Der Verlauf der bisherigen Weltgeschichte und die jüngsten krisenhaften Entwicklungen und Ereignisse, die Otto zum Abfassen einer Weltchronik veranlassten, deuten seiner Sicht nach auf ein baldiges Eintreten der Endzeit”.

21 IBID., pp. 175f.

22 Chron. 1 prologus. See also 2.13; 5 prologus; 7.9.

23 ROACH, 2013, p. 76.

The Middle Ages and the Apocalypse – Discourses about the End of the World

As stated above, Greek and Roman authors frequently discussed ideas about the end of the current world, and Christian apologists took a keen interest in evaluating and adapting these theories (see the first contribution by Dominic Bärsch). However, it seems – according to the evidence of the written sources – that the literate classes of medieval Europe were intrigued with eschatological issues. Additionally, the firm belief in an impending *Day of the Lord* as a day of divine judgment formed a basic framework for their perception of reality.²⁴

In religious contexts, as represented, for example, in homilies or theological treatises, ideas related to the return of Christ and the subsequent judgment feature strongly. At the Last Judgement, all people are divided into either those blessed with eternal life in happiness or those suffering penalties of hell, which represent the final states of the *civitas Dei* and the *civitas terrena* in Otto's model.²⁵ The imagining of such a division of humanity into redeemed and doomed people is already most relevant in the first Christian writings and underlies the primary focus of the ancient Christian doctrines of sin and redemption.²⁶ It is evident that the development of these central concepts of Christian identity cannot be treated at length in this article, but one has to stress that fear of being members of a doomed group of humanity led to social coping strategies aimed at evading an ultimate punishment. Therefore, “a whole system of resources for salvation with faith and sacraments, free will, virtues, good works and knowledge”²⁷ was established, which promised to grant personal redemption.

However, not only theological discourses considered various aspects of the coming end of the world. Even scientific and philosophical discussions about natural phenomena were intimately related to speculations about the end of the world. As Johannes Fried points out in his study of the correlation between

24 *The Day of the Lord* was already an important concept in early Judaism, but without the sense of it meaning of a final destruction of the world; see HOFFMANN, 1981.

25 Chron. 8 prologus.

26 See, for instance, LYONNET/SABOURIN, 1970.

27 GOETZ, 1988, p. 310: “[...] ein ganzes System von Heilmitteln mit Glaube und Sakramenten, freiem Willen, Tugenden, guten Werken und Wissen [...].”

medieval apocalyptic thinking and the development of modern sciences, contemporaneous intellectuals wanted to gain more precise interpretations of catastrophic events like floods, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, plagues, etc. In the process, their aim was to separate frequent devastating natural occurrences from the predicted, and therefore expected, end-time catastrophes that would announce the return of Christ. For this purpose, they required elaborate, especially astrological-astronomical, approaches.²⁸ Particularly popular was the attempt to calculate a fixed date for doomsday based on stellar constellations.²⁹

Apocalypticism could also have had significant influence within political contexts, particularly on the self-perception and self-presentation of medieval potentates, and the description of their opponents. For example, in the case of King Otto III, Levi Roach stresses the importance of apocalyptic belief in understanding individual decisions and acts in Otto's reign around the year 1000:

[H]is Lenten pilgrimages and penitential acts; the extraordinary sanctions and *arengae* in his charters; his love of Aachen and interest in empire; and, of course, his devotion to the memory (and possibly cult) of Charlemagne. Although not all of the evidence surveyed suggests acute apocalyptic angst, it certainly is indicative of a heightened interest in (and probably also expectation of) the end.³⁰

The “extraordinary sanctions” mentioned refer to the treatment of Otto's opponents in Italy: John Philagathos and Crescentius, who led a rebellion against him, beginning in 996. The contemporaneous pro-Ottonian sources – e.g., the *Annals of Quedlinburg*³¹ – portray them as the “servants of Satan” (*sathanae ministri*) and John Philagathos especially was – as a Greek – identified as the Antichrist, who was predicted to rise in the East.³² Additionally, in the *Book of Revelation*, it was foretold that a “falling away” (*discessio*) from the empire would happen, which would precede the reign of the Antichrist, so that the Roman revolt granted an appropriate occurrence reminiscent of that prediction.³³ Roach argues, therefore, that one needs to

28 See in detail FRIED, 2001, pp. 42-169.

29 See *IBID.*, pp. 58-68.

30 ROACH, 2013, p. 99.

31 *Annales Quedlinburgenses*, p. 998.

32 See ROACH, 2013, pp. 81f.

33 See *IBID.*, p. 81.

consider this connection between Otto's two enemies and apocalyptic ideas to understand why he punished both of them without any mercy. Such treatment of the enemies was uncommon in Ottonian politics; however, in this instance, Otto thought that "he was not dealing with men, but 'heresiarchs' and 'ministers of Satan'".³⁴ Conversely, Otto himself also believed in the concept of the Last Emperor, one brave hero who appears at the end of time to defeat the Antichrist and his servants. As a great admirer of Charlemagne, who in various narrations was believed to be that returning emperor, Otto could have connected himself with this savior-figure, just as other medieval rulers, e.g., Frederick II,³⁵ also apparently did.

Based on this evidence, it is possible to conclude that apocalypticism was a dominant aspect of medieval thought in central Europe. Therefore, it is not surprising that Otto of Freising made the question about the modalities of the end-time a subject of discussion in his eighth book of the *Chronica*. As a result of his study, Hans-Werner Goetz states that it was rather the chronograph's purpose to show his contemporaries the impact of the Investiture Controversy, that is, that the end of time would occur sooner, rather than later, with a view to restoring the peace on earth.³⁶

In my following close analysis of chapters eight and nine of the eighth book of the *Chronica*, where Otto argues that fire will destroy the world, I will focus mainly on the mechanics Otto uses to construct the knowledge of such matters as cannot be acquired by empirical observations. Regarding the overall questions of how different ideas and concepts are stated in various contexts, I am going to examine the authorities through whom Otto confirmed his conception of the world-destructing fire.

The Authorization of the End of the World

At the beginning of the eighth book, Otto initially reflects on the content-related structure of his universal history and, again, the theory about the two different communities within the world, the already mentioned *civitas Dei*, and the *civitas terrena*.³⁷ Additionally, he defends his formal approach of combin-

34 IBID., p. 83.

35 See SCHALLER, 1972.

36 See GOETZ, 1988, pp. 450-452.

37 Chron. 8 prologus.

ing historical – and therefore partly depressing – events with elements of salvation history by means of a procatalepsis: several biblical narrations would be based on the same scheme; for instance, the history of creation in Genesis explains that before God made a well-arranged cosmos, he created an undifferentiated amount of matter.³⁸ Consequently, Otto has the purpose of adding the narration of the expected completion of the *civitas Dei* as the “light” of his work, after the chronograph presents the “darkness” in the form of the world’s history.³⁹ To describe the coming events, he confesses his reliance on God’s benevolence (*quantum Deus permiserit*), whereby he substantiates his subsequent statements with elements of divine revelation that he had received from biblical scriptures. As a result, according to Otto, biblical evidence represents the first and foremost authority regarding the knowledge of the coming end of the world.

In chapter seven of the book, he once again invokes divine assistance for his argument when he begins the precise examination of the end of the world in fire. Thus, he inserts the claim for divine inspiration as an almost poetical *topos*. He does so firstly through the image of the salvific trumpet (*tuba salutaris*) to awaken him from the sleep of lethargy (*somnum pigrificiae*).⁴⁰ Secondly, as the primary source of inspiration for speaking about the still-hidden secrets of the end-time, he fervently evokes (*obnixè invocans*) Christ, whom he calls the one “who died for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (*qui propter delicta nostra mortuus est et resurrexit propter iustificaciones nostras*).⁴¹ This is a direct quote from the Latin Vulgate version of the *Epistle to the Romans* 4.25. Thus, Otto stages himself somewhat as a

38 Chron. 8 prologus: *Dominus quoque in principio caelum et terram creans invisibilem primo et incompositam materiem edidit ac postmodum in ordinem eam et lucem redegit.*

“Also the Lord who created heaven and earth in the beginning produced an initially invisible and disorganized matter and, soon after, put it in order and light.”

39 Chron. 8 *prologus*.

40 Chron. 8.7: *longo me iam otio torpentem et diversas ob occupationes quasi dormitantem ultimo de tempore locuturum tuba salutaris excitet. quis enim hac audita somno pigrificiae depressus non evigilet, per quam etiam exurgunt mortui?*

“The trumpet of salvation has aroused me, who remained in idleness and was almost asleep because of various activities, to talk about the end times. Since who could not wake up even if he immersed in the sleep of lethargy after he heard this [trumpet] through which also the dead rise up.”

The *tuba salutaris* most probably refers to the seventh trumpet in the *Book of Revelation* (11.15-17).

41 Chron. 8.7.

prophet for the ongoing divine plan rather than just a human author. Such an approach conspicuously reminds one of an ancient *topos* in Greek and Roman poetry, where at the beginning of his opus, the poet asks for divine inspiration from the Muses as the goddesses of the arts or invites them to sing directly through his mouth.⁴² This method of authorization is, in Otto's case, apparently necessary if one presumes to report the future course of history – something that is only known to the divine entity.

The factual treatise about the question of how the world will end starts in chapter eight. Otto begins this paragraph with a direct quote from the Latin Vulgate translation of the Pauline *First Epistle to the Thessalonians*, which states: “After they have said ‘there are peace and security’ the sudden demise will come.”⁴³ The bishop of Freising attributes this only to an unnamed apostle, whom his intended readers would have been able to identify as Paul due to their familiarity with biblical scripture. Therefore, an explicit naming is not necessary, and by the recognition that the allusion refers to the Apostle Paul, Otto provides a kind of common bond for his readers: those who understand the reference are part of the same intellectual group. In direct connection to this quote, he adds in the same sentence that “everything will burn through the vast force of the fire”,⁴⁴ which does appear in the biblical wording. As a result, he combines the biblical concept of the end of time with the specific image of a catastrophic conflagration leading to the destruction of the world.

Following this guiding principle, Otto ascribes the idea that fire shall be the force of the world's future destruction to two different groups: First, to the so-called *nostri* (which means “ours”), who have predicted the truth (*veridice*) using the prophetic spirit.⁴⁵ In my opinion, *nostri* in this context does not only include Christians because there is no part of the New Testament that deals with the idea of a cosmic conflagration – except the *Second Epistle of Peter* to which I shall turn later. However, this one writing would hardly justify the plural *nostri*. Rather, it seems to me that this also addresses the prophets of the

42 See, for example, SÖFFNER, 2008.

43 *First Epistle to the Thessalonians* 5.3: *cum enim dixerint pax et securitas tunc repentinus eis superveniet interitus*. Otto's word order is slightly different, but that can possibly be due to the wording of the biblical manuscript he used as an exemplar. Another possibility is that he cited the passage as from memory.

44 Chron. 8.8: [...] *terribilique ignis virtute cuncta cremabuntur*.

45 Chron. 8.8. Jochen Walter (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz) kindly pointed me to a similar passage in the *Divinae institutiones* (5.3.19) of the popular early Christian author Lactantius, who could be Otto's model for this rhetorical strategy.

Old Testament. For example, the prophetic book *Zephaniah* – or as called by its Vulgate name *Sophonias* – mentions in a passage the original Jewish concept of the so-called “Day of the Lord” when God is going to pass his judgment on the people of Israel.⁴⁶ The wording of the description of this scenario runs as follows: “In the fire of his passion, all the earth will be consumed; for a full and sudden end he will make for all the inhabitants of the earth.”⁴⁷ Modern scholars mostly agree that this image of the punishing God is not meant to describe a world-destructive fire, and therefore a concept of the world being consumed by fire is not intended. Instead, they assume that this is rather an exaggeration intended to emphasize the excess of God’s jealousy and, also, the punishment for idolatry.⁴⁸ The reason for this statement is that, in the prophetic narration, the world would still exist after the divine judgment.

However, for Otto’s argument, it is easy to invoke such vivid depictions and use them as prophetic support for the idea of an end of the world through fire. Another possible idea is that *nostris* in fact refers to Christians; in particular, to authors who wrote about the end of the world as coming about through a cosmic conflagration as an original Christian thought. For instance, one could consider early apologists like Tertullian in his *De spectaculis*⁴⁹ or after him, Otto’s valued source, Augustine in his *De civitate Dei*.⁵⁰

The second group of Otto’s interest consists of the so-called Gentiles (*gentes*). In contrast to the *nostris*, who predicted (*predicere*) the end of the world, they just dreamed of it (*somniare*) by using their mind (*subnixi ratione*) through natural assumptions (*physicae opinioniones*).⁵¹ I think the dichotomy is obvious. On the one hand, God himself gives knowledge to the *nostris* through divine revelation. This given knowledge, of course, has the higher value. However, on the other hand, the pagan thinkers also could have gained a hint of the truth by the observation of nature, which was created by God. In Otto’s thought, this pagan access to the veiled truth might not deserve the same epistemic status as divine revelation, but it also grants the possibility of leading to the right conclusions, as the example of the world’s imminent destruction by fire shows.

46 For that concept as an imagination of a purifying judgement, see HOFFMANN, 1981.

47 In the Vulgate version of *Zephaniah* 1.18: [...] *in igne zeli eius devorabitur omnis terra quia consummationem cum festinatione faciet cunctis habitantibus terram.*

48 See COLLINS, 2015, pp. 38f.

49 Tertullian, *De spectaculis* 30.1-5.

50 Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 20.16.

51 Chron. 8.8.

As a first demonstration of these two different ways of receiving accurate insights, he names the ancient philosopher Plato and his dialogue *Timaeus* as a pagan authority. Plato stated – according to Otto – that the world has to be purged because of hidden natural laws (*abditae naturae rationes*), first by water, and later by fire.⁵² In the original context of Plato’s writing, the character Kritias reports a theory to the audience that allegedly derives from the Egyptians (see the first contribution by Dominic Bärsch). However, that reference seems to be just a rhetorical strategy of Plato to legitimize an innovative. In fact, this theory is about the cyclic, and also partial, destructions of territories that make it necessary for the affected countries – in particular for the Greeks – to start from scratch with cultural development after the recurring catastrophes. Therefore, the Platonian theory did not intend a global cataclysm like the biblical flood of Noah or a global conflagration. Additionally, such thoughts relating to the destruction of the world would contradict the Platonian idea of a created, but in principle never-ending, cosmos.⁵³ However, Otto’s argument relies on a method employed by several early Christian apologists to interpret Plato and his teachings – particularly, about the creation of the world and the demiurge – as proto-Christian with the intention of using him for their teaching. Therefore, it is no surprise that Otto, whose knowledge about Plato is most probably sourced from Latin Christian authors, uses him to support his idea. For instance, the early Christian apologist Minucius Felix wrote in his dialogue *Octavius* the following passage (see also the first contribution by Dominic Bärsch):

*loquitur Plato partes orbis nunc inundare, [dicit] nunc alternis vicibus ardescere et, cum ipsum mundum perpetuum et insolubilem diceret esse fabricatum, addit tamen ipsi artifici deo soli et solubilem et esse mortalem. ita nihil mirum est, si ista moles ab eo, quo exstructa est, destruat.*⁵⁴

Plato mentions that parts of the world are, in turns, at one time under water, at another on fire; though he does say that the world itself was made everlasting and indestruc-

52 Chron. 8.8: *unde precipuus philosophorum Plato mundum abditis naturae rationibus, aqua prius, post igne purgandum in Tymeo suo asserit [...].*

53 Even though the *Timaeus* in 41a-b concedes that the demiurge, as the creator of the world, is able to dissolve it again, this is apparently not the demiurge’s principle intention. The ideas of cyclic devastations are also dealt with in Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 12.10.

54 Minucius Felix, *Octavius*. 34.4.

tible, he still adds that it is perishable and destructible but only for its maker, God Himself. It would not cause any surprise, then, should this vast structure be destroyed by the one who constructed it.⁵⁵

As a result, Otto can call on Plato due to his function as the oldest and most famous proto-Christian gentile and the greatest of all philosophers (*precipuus philosophorum Plato*).

As second piece of pagan evidence, the bishop of Freising adds an exact quote from the first book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* without mentioning the name of the poet. Instead, he just calls him "a certain one of the poets" (*quidam poetarum*). Otto's citation runs as follows:

*reminiscitur affore tempus,
quo mare, quo tellus immensaue regia caeli
ardeat et mundi moles immensa laboret.*⁵⁶

He remembers that the time will come when the sea when the earth and the immense castle of heaven burns and the immense mass of the world declines.

Even though the quote fits perfectly in Otto's argument, looking at the original context of the passage, there is at least one major problem with using it in a Christian line of argument: The narrator who remembers the world's eventual fate is Jupiter, the highest god of the ancient Roman religion. However, this does not hinder Otto from using Ovid's words to prove his argument. As Klaus Krönert stresses in his study about the reception of classical poetry in Otto's universal chronicle, the bishop apparently quotes several passages from memory without checking their original context again or looking up the correct order of words.⁵⁷ The first piece of evidence, in this case, is that Otto does not identify the poet by name. Thereby, *quidam* indicates that he had the verses, but not the name of their writer, in his mind. Because the works of Ovid were traditional school readings in the twelfth century,⁵⁸ it is understandable that learning an enormous amount of Latin passages by several authors by heart sometimes led to memorizing only the poetic verses rather than names of their

55 Translation: CLARKE, 1974, p. 115.

56 Chron. 8,8. The quote refers to Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.256b-258.

57 See KRÖNERT, 2002.

58 See GINDHART, 2014.

authors. This assumption is also plausible if one additionally contrasts the original Ovidian verses with the cited passage: *quo mare, quo tellus correptaque regia caeli/ardeat et mundi moles operosa labore*. Instead of Otto's twice added adjective *immensa*, the Ovidian pretext uses the participle *correpta* firstly and another adjective *operosa* secondly. The comparison shows that Otto's verses are a simplified version of the original passage, which are, consequently, easier to memorize.⁵⁹

The authority that Otto attributes to the cited verses derives apparently not from the name of a famous author who is, in this case, Ovid. Such a method of authorization – similar to the previously treated allusion to Plato – would not be surprising, because Ovid had been in particular, in the tradition of encyclopedism and didactic poetry, a recognized ancient expert of knowledge about natural phenomena,⁶⁰ even though he had been a controversial one.⁶¹ But it seems rather that Otto has formulated the versified saying as a short decorative aphorism that properly epitomizes his argument. It is easily comprehensible why Otto chose this image because it starkly describes the idea of the collapsing cosmic order.⁶²

Third, Otto refers to the pagan prophet Sibyl: one of the ten pagan women with prophetic wisdom, who are most probably first mentioned in the writings of the Roman author Varro.⁶³ Those Sibyls had a long tradition in Christian apologetics as proto-Christian prophetesses who had allegedly foretold the birth of the Messiah.⁶⁴ Therefore, the reference to the Sibyl as a remarkable prophetic instance is an appropriate argument. Consequently, he can allude to the ascribed prophecy that “the Sibyl in her prediction of Christ explicitly

59 See KRÖNERT, 2002, p. 51.

60 See HAYE, 1997, pp. 49f.

61 See GINDHART, 2014.

62 Even the Ovidian verses are an intertextual reference to a passage in the fifth book of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* (92-96), which similarly describes the collapse of the cosmos: *principio maria ac terras caelumque tuere;/quorum naturam triplicem, tria corpora, Memmi,/tris species tam dissimilis, tria talia texta,/una dies dabit exitio, multosque per annos sustentata ruet moles et machina mundi.*

“First, look at the sea, the earth, and the heaven; to their threefold nature, threefold bodies, Memmius, three so different species, three such textures, shall one day bring an end, and that massive form and fabric of the world – sustained so many years – shall crash.”

63 HOLDENRIED, 2006, p. XIX.

64 *IBID.*, pp. 93-97.

remembers the last burn and the final judgment”.⁶⁵ Although Otto does not explicitly say it, he apparently refers to the so-called Erythraean Sibyl; because, in the second book of the *Chronica*, he had already cited a significant part of the Sibyl’s prophecy.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Otto’s source for this acrostic poem is apparently the frequently mentioned *De civitate Dei* by Augustine of Hippo, who ascribes this poetry in the eighteenth book to the Erythraean Sibyl. In Chapter twenty-three, he quotes all twenty-seven verses and asserts that they are a Latin translation of the original Greek version. Of those verses, the following are the most relevant to Otto’s argument:

*Iudicii signum tellus sudore madescet.
E caelo rex adueniet per saecula futurus,
scilicet ut carnem praesens, ut iudicet orbem.
Unde Deum cernent incredulus atque fidelis
celsum cum sanctis aevi iam termino in ipso.
Sic animae cum carne aderunt, quas iudicat ipse,
cum iacet incultus densis in vepribus orbis.
Reicient simulacra viri, cunctam quoque gazam,
exuret terras ignis pontumque polumque
inquirens, taetri portas effringet Auerni.*⁶⁷

In sign of the judgment, the earth shall be bathed in sweat,
ever more to reign, a king from heaven shall come,
Sitting in judgment here, upon all flesh and the world.
our God shall unbelievers and the faithful see
Uplifted with his saints on high when this age ends:
souls, clothed in flesh, shall come to Him for judgment.
Choked with dense thorns, all the world lies untended;
rejected are the idols and all the toys of men.
Every land, and all the sea and sky, shall burn with fire,
invading even the dreadful gates of hell.⁶⁸

65 Chon. 8.8: *sed et Sybilla in prophetia de Christo habita ultimi huius incendii extremique iudicii manifeste meminit.*

“But even the Sibyl strongly remembers this last fire and the Last Judgment in the prophecy she had about Christ.”

66 Chron. 2.4.

67 Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 18.23.

68 Translation: DYSON, 1998, p. 850.

Thereby, Augustine provided the first transmitted Latin translation of the verses 217-250 of the eighth book of the *Oracula Sybillina*: a collection of redacted pseudo-predictions that were transmitted under the names of the several Sibylline prophetesses.⁶⁹ The afterlife of the translated poetic prediction as part of the flourishing Sibylline tradition is stunning. Therefore, a factor of transmission has notably contributed to the prominence of the verses: the manuscripts of the story of the Tiburtine Sibyl, which was most common in the Middle Ages,⁷⁰ additionally passed on this poem as an appendix.⁷¹ As a result, the versified prediction of the Eritrean Sibyl was closely associated with the narrative of the Tiburtine Sibyl. However, the updating and adapting interpolations of medieval copyists show that this Sibylline tradition is fairly fluent in form and content.⁷²

For this reason, I shall briefly outline this complex narration, summarizing the plot, as provided by Anke Holdenried.⁷³ One night, one hundred senators in ancient pagan Rome have the same dream, which shows them nine suns in the sky above Rome. To interpret the meaning of the dream, they send for the Sibyl, who was considered to be a wandering prophetess. In her explanation of the vision, the nine suns represent nine generations. Subsequently, she foretells that the fourth of these generations will witness the birth of Christ, while she can also foresee an increasing amount of violence over the next four generations, which will culminate in the ninth generation. During this last period, great wars will devastate the earth, and, among other incidents, the Last Emperor will appear, whose name is Constans, to fight against the unbelievers, as well as to baptize them. Furthermore, the Antichrist will arrive, and gain dominion over the world after the fall of the Roman Empire. After a phase of general persecution, the Archangel Michael will kill the Antichrist and the Day of Judgment will arrive for humanity. It is evident that the late antique and medieval copyists added the following prediction of the Erythraean Sibyl as a

69 See GAUGER, 1998, pp. 437-459.

70 HOLDENRIED, 2006, p. XVII: “The large number of surviving manuscripts from the mid-eleventh to sixteenth centuries reflects the popularity of this prophecy in medieval western Europe. At present 112 manuscripts of the Latin Tiburtina have been identified, preserving at least four versions of the text.”

71 See IBID., p. XXI.

72 See IBID. It was especially popular to refer to actual Lombard and German rulers as well as contemporary events.

73 See IBID.

summarizing paragraph to illustrate the Last Judgment and the recreation of the new earth.

Hence, Otto's reference to the Sibylline tradition grants his argument a firm text-based authority. In particular, the implicit allusion to the two verses which say that "the claiming fire shall burn the lands, the sea, and the sky and shall break open the gates of the horrible Avernus" is uniquely compatible with the previous quotation of Ovid. As even the wording of the Sibylline verses is similar to Ovidian quote, the reference emphasizes Otto's argument notably.

The last non-Christian authority Otto cites is the Hellenistic-Jewish historiographer Josephus Flavius, who mentioned in the first book of his *Antiquitates Judaicae* that Adam, as the first human on earth, had predicted two destructive catastrophes, one by water and the other by fire.⁷⁴ The argument for the reliability of Adam's prediction is that he – as the first human being – was so close to the creation itself that he was able to recognize every part of it. In this case, again, Otto alludes to a previously mentioned topic because, in the first book of the *Chronica*, he already cited at great length the translation of Josephus Flavius in the context of the Deluge.⁷⁵

Thus, Otto's argument suddenly takes a step back from pagan authorities and establishes a new perspective when referring to Josephus and, therefore, to Adam as his source. Citing the Jewish historian seems rather to be a point of transition to lead over to the Christian authorities who he subsequently addresses as part of his argument.

As a climax, the chronograph enters the ground of biblical authorization and cites a passage from the *Second Epistle of Peter*, which is the only writing of the canonical New Testament that explicitly claims the final destruction of the earth by fire. To show that Josephus, or rather Adam and Peter, agreed in their teaching about the end of the world, Otto quotes the Vulgate translation of the (pseudo-)Petrian epistle:

74 The Latin translation of the Greek passage (Josephus Flavius, *Antiquitates Judaicae* 1.4) is cited as follows: [...] *cum predixisset Adam rerum omnium exterminationem unam ignis virtute, alteram vero aquarum multitudine fore venturam* [...].

"[...] because Adam had predicted that one destruction of all things shall come by virtue of fire, and another one through a huge amount of water [...]."

75 Chron. 1.2.

*caeli erant prius et terra de aqua et per aquam consistens verbo Dei, per quem ille tunc mundus aqua inundatus periit. caeli autem, qui nunc sunt, et terra eodem verbo repositi sunt, igni reservati in diem iudicii et perditionis impiorum hominum. [...]*⁷⁶

The heavens have been before, and the earth consists of and through the water, due to God's word, by which the world deluged by water perished. But the heavens that are now, and the earth, are reserved by the same word, being kept for the fire on the Day of Judgment and the elimination of the infidels.

After this quotation, Otto closes his argument with an exegetical interpretation of the passage, which can be summarized as follows: Due to the parallel position of flood and fire, the final destruction of the earth will have the same quality and quantity as it had when the flood destroyed the earth and humanity in the past. From this point on, he deals with additional eschatological questions and biblical contradictions, but for our present purpose, which is to examine several intercultural methods of the construction of knowledge and its authorization, I assume the analyzed example to be sufficient. Thus, I will now summarize my thoughts on the passage.

Conclusion

First of all, the study has shown that Otto uses different sources of knowledge, from pagan philosophy to biblical scripture, to authorize the concept of the end of the world by fire. On the one hand, there are the kind of sources that, in his opinion, hold the highest epistemic value, because they rely on the divine revelation that the so-called *nostris* have obtained. On the other hand, the so-called Gentiles use natural observations and thought experiments to reach the same conclusion, but the way towards gaining this knowledge does not have the same epistemic status as divine revelation. As a result, the latter is declared as always being the superior way to the truth.

For his actual argumentation, he builds up a climactic line: starting with Plato, he positions his thought on a solid base, as Plato serves as an expert on natural philosophy and is also popular for his conception about the demiurge and creation. Hereafter, the poetic quote illustrates the image of destruction as

76 *Second Epistle of Peter* 3.5-7.

a vivid spectacle, even though Otto did not mark the verses to be part of the Ovidian *Metamorphoses*; they gain their authority by virtue of the poetic form rather than by their author. The mentioning of the Sibyl in her function as a prophetess – even though she is a pagan one – opens the way to divine revelation. Constructed as an impartial instance, she grants a neutral perspective on the coming of Christ and also on the demise of the world. The argument becomes closer to the biblical sphere when Otto cites Flavius Josephus and his reference to the prediction of Adam. Because Flavius Josephus used Adam as an authoritative figure to whom Otto may refer as well, he takes an intermediary position between the *nostris* and the Gentiles. The line of argument finally reaches its climax with the quotation from the New Testament ascribed to Peter, who is Otto's best example of previously mentioned *nostris*.

Therefore, the method of direct and indirect quotation of or allusion to prominent authorities, with whom his intended readers are familiar, grants the possibility to take several elements of knowledge out of their original context and to rearrange them in a new framework.

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