

I. M. Nikolsky

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6428-5357>

✉ [ivan.nikolsky@mail.ru](mailto:ivan.nikolsky@mail.ru)

Российская академия народного хозяйства  
и государственной службы при Президенте РФ  
(Россия, Москва)

## IMAGE OF HERCULES BY DRACONTIUS: ON POLITICAL INTERPRETATION OF MYTHOLOGICAL POEMS (*ROMULEA* 2 & 4)

**Аннотация.** Речь в статье идет о проблеме политической интерпретации сочинений Драконция, римского поэта из Карфагена конца V в. Тезис о социально-политической подоплеке его поэм получает все большее распространение в последние годы. Основания для этого дают многочисленные отсылки к современным ему событиям: становлению вандальского королевства в Северной Африке, прежде римской, и сопутствовавшего конфликту старой и новой элит. Тем не менее позиция автора по отношению к этому конфликту, оценка им его сторон пока остается предметом дискуссий. Ключ к их разрешению во многом кроется в правильном понимании авторских симпатий и антипатий по отношению к собственным персонажам, заимствованным из традиционных античных мифологических сюжетов, чье поведение оказывается проекцией на современные Драконцию события. Один из таких персонажей — Геркулес. Он возникает сразу в двух поэмах, *Romulea* 2 и 4. Его образ в них ломает многие стереотипные представления о героической и трагической природе этого персонажа; в статье предпринимается попытка дать этому объяснение. В своей работе я стремлюсь доказать, что этот герой представлен как амбивалентная модель. С одной стороны — как воплощение римской стороны в римско-вандальском противостоянии — для римской аудитории, а с другой — как образец правильного поведения в конфликте в принципе. В этом смысле связанный с ним дидактический пафос мог быть обращен и к вандалам.

**Ключевые слова:** Рим, вандалы, Драконций, латинская поэзия, Геркулес

**Благодарности.** Статья подготовлена в рамках гранта, предоставленного Министерством науки и высшего образования Российской Федерации (№ соглашения о предоставлении гранта: 075-15-2022-326).

**Для цитирования:** *Nikolsky I. M. Image of Hercules by Dracontius: On political interpretation of mythological poems (*Romulea* 2 & 4) // Шаги/Steps. Т. 10. № 2. 2024. С. 217–224.*

Поступило в редакцию 28 ноября 2023 г.; принято 6 апреля 2024 г.

I. M. Nikolsky

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6428-5357>

✉ [ivan.nikolsky@mail.ru](mailto:ivan.nikolsky@mail.ru)

*The Russian Presidential Academy  
of National Economy and Public Administration  
(Russia, Moscow)*

## IMAGE OF HERCULES BY DRACONTIUS: ON POLITICAL INTERPRETATION OF MYTHOLOGICAL POEMS (*ROMULEA* 2 & 4)

**Abstract.** This paper deals with the problem of political interpretation of the works of Dracontius, a Roman poet of the late 5th century from Carthage. The thesis about the socio-political background of his poems has become increasingly widespread in recent years. The grounds for this are provided by numerous references in his works to contemporary events: the formation of the Vandal kingdom in North Africa, formerly Roman, and the parallel conflict between the old and the new elites. Nevertheless, the author's view of this conflict and his assessment of its sides remain a matter of debate. The key to solving it largely lies in a proper understanding of the author's sympathies and antipathies towards his own characters, borrowed from traditional ancient mythological plots, whose behaviour appears to be a projection onto contemporary events. One such character is Hercules. He appears in two poems at once, *Romulea* 2 and 4. His image in them breaks many stereotypical ideas about the brutal and tragic nature of this hero; the present article is an attempt to provide an explanation for this. I aim to prove that Hercules is represented as an ambivalent model: on the one hand, he is the embodiment of the Roman side in the Roman-Vandal confrontation for a Roman audience, and on the other hand, he is the model of correct behaviour in conflict in principle. In the latter sense the didactic pathos associated with him could also be addressed to Vandals.

**Keywords:** Rome, Vandals, Dracontius, Latin poetry, Hercules

**Acknowledgements.** The article was prepared within the framework of a research grant funded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation (grant ID: 075-15-2022-326).

**To cite this article:** Nikolsky, I. M. (2024). Image of Hercules by Dracontius: On political interpretation of mythological poems (*Romulea* 2 & 4). *Shagi / Steps*, 10(2), 217–224.

*Received November 28, 2023; accepted April 6, 2024*



This paper deals with texts by Dracontius, a Carthaginian poet of the late 5<sup>th</sup> century. This period is sometimes called the “Vandal Renaissance”<sup>1</sup>: a paradoxical time when Latin literature, especially poetry, in the North African region experienced a dramatic rise despite the collapse of the Roman Empire. Besides Dracontius, the names of his contemporaries, Luxorius, Felix, Florentine, and other writers are widely known. But it is the legacy of Dracontius that appears the most extensive, being represented by over a dozen poems of various genres and subjects, the largest of which, *De Laudibus Dei*, consists of more than 2,300 hexameter verses.

It’s far from a secret that peaceful coexistence with the new Vandal regime proved to be a problem for the Roman aristocracy, and in the case of Dracontius this problem was reflected even in personal experience — as is easy to see if one looks at the poet’s biography, reproduced from his own writings.

A key event in his life was the loss of favor of the Vandal King Gunthamund (484–496), leading to arrest and many years of imprisonment. This period is closely linked to the central, so to say the program work by Dracontius, *Satisfactio*. In this work, close in genre to Ovid’s *Tristia*, the poet apologizes to his Vandalic reader for a eulogy dedicated to an unknown *dominus ignotus* (*Sat.* 93–94), asks for forgiveness and release from prison. Simultaneously, by referring the recipient of his petition to examples from Holy Scripture and Roman history, the poet tries to imbue him with basic Christian virtues: mercy (*Sat.* 120–210) and fear of God, alien to pride (*Sat.* 31–38).

The claim to political didacticism in one work suggests its presence in others. Dracontius’ poems are conventionally divided into two parts according to subject matter, the Christian-theological (*carmina Christiana*) and the secular mythological (*carmina profana*)<sup>2</sup>. The first includes *De Laudibus Dei* and *Satisfactio*, the latter apparently because of the numerous appeals to God’s mercy. The second includes *Romulea* (hereafter — *Rom.*), a collection of ten poems that play on the plots of classical pre-Christian antiquity, as well as *Orestis Tragoedia*.

Trying to date Dracontius’ work, researchers distinguish three periods: early, mature and prison, attributing the entire Christian block to the prison part, and assigning the rest, the mythological poems, to the first and second periods<sup>3</sup>. Among the mature ones one usually includes the poems with the most tragic content: *Medea* (*Rom.* 10), *Orestis Tragoedia*, and *De Raptu Helenae* (*Rom.* 8); to the early — the first piece of *Romulea*, the dedication to Felicianus Grammaticus (*Rom.* 1), the *Controversia de statua viri fortis* (*Rom.* 5), and several other works, including those discussed below, *Rom.* 2 and 4.

In any case, regardless of the chronological order, which can only be reconstructed approximately on the basis of circumstantial evidence, internal links, common ideas and motifs are found throughout Dracontius’ works. The first

<sup>1</sup> On the term see: [Hays 2004; Hen 2007: 59–93].

<sup>2</sup> E. g. see this division in Dracontius’ Zwierlein editions: [Zwierlein 2017; 2019].

<sup>3</sup> It’s a question, if the second, ‘mature’ period was before prison or after. See the discussion on this subject in: [Romano 1959: 26–51; Bright 1987: 20; 1999: 193–206; Bouquet, Wolff 1995: 24–28].

indication of an emblematic conflict for the poet can be marked in his earliest text, the dedication to his teacher, Felicianus Grammaticus (*Rom.* 1). In it the Romans are openly opposed to the barbarians, situationally to the Vandals, despite being united under the mentor's authority. The same opposition, this time personified, is also built up in *Satisfactio*, regardless of its apologetical tone. In my view, this is also the context in which the conflicts depicted in the author's other works should be seen.

As a rule, the common line in them is the same: one side commits an act of treachery, usually adultery, and the opposite side retaliates disproportionately cruelly. This is the case in three of the major mythological poems: *Medea*, *De Raptu Helenae*, and *Orestis Tragoedia*, where Jason, Helen and Clytemnestra act in such a way. All three instances echo at least the rhetoric of *Satisfactio*, where the author complains about the excessive punishment for political treachery<sup>4</sup>.

It turns out that greater sin in Dracontius' system of coordinates is not treachery or even betrayal, but excessive (and often senseless) cruelty in response<sup>5</sup>. This idea is also articulated in *De Laudibus Dei*, where the targets of the poet's criticism are the ancient Greeks and Romans, who allowed unjustified sacrifices "for their own glory, for another's reign"; *pro laude sua, pro alieno regno* (*LD* 3.257–261)<sup>6</sup>.

In this article, I'd like to focus on two poems in which Dracontius demonstrates an alternative model of conflict resolution, i. e. without blood. These are the epyllion *Hylas* (*Rom.* 2) and the ethopoeia *Verba Herculis cum videret Hydrae serpentis capita pullare post caedes* (*Rom.* 4). The texts are united by the figure of Hercules, the protagonist. Even in *Hylas* he shows himself much more vividly than the character stated in the title.

Hercules behaves the same way in both cases: in particular, he complains endlessly. According to the plot of *Hylas*, the main (formally main) hero, Hercules' companion, is kidnapped by nymphs; so, Hercules is left without a squire. That is, he becomes in his own way a 'cheated lover', like Medea, Menelaus and Agamemnon from the mythological poems listed above. But unlike them, he does not arrange acts of vengeance, but only laments: no one else is there to "wipe away the sweat after the battle" (*Rom.* 2.157: *Quis mihi sudorem lasso post proelia terget?*); everything was in vain, all the exploits (*Rom.* 2.150–155).

---

<sup>4</sup> *Sat.* 120: *Tempore tam longo non decet ira pium* (It's not so good for a pious person to be angry for so long); *Ibid.* 282–285: *Ecce etiam insontes noxia poena petit. / Si ipse ego peccavi, quatenam est, rogo, culpa meorum, / quos simul exagitat frigus inopsque fames?* (Even the innocents suffer from the severe punishment. If I myself have committed a crime, what my loved ones are guilty of? Why are they tormented by cold, hunger, poverty?).

<sup>5</sup> M. de Gaetano [De Gaetano 2009: 369–419] is of quite opposite opinion. From her point of view, Dracontius created a pamphlet against adultery, which in a broader sense can be understood as an allegory of usurpation of power. According to the Italian researcher, the main object of criticism in the mythological poems, including *Hylas*, considered here, were the Vandals, who first seized power in North Africa and then assimilated Roman habits, including a passion for luxury, excess, and debauchery in the proper sense of the word.

<sup>6</sup> See the argumentation for this thesis in [Nikolsky 2019a; 2019b; 2021].

The same pattern is followed by Hercules in the ethopoeia: the hero's indignation is caused by the endlessly growing heads of Hydra, directly proportional to his military activity, as if he was fighting against himself (*Rom.* 4.35–36: *Vincere peius erit: propriis nam viribus ipse / Impugnor. Saevos gladius mihi suggerit hostes...*).

There are different interpretations of this image among scholars. J. M. Díaz Bustamante evaluates it in terms of the 'world upside down' (*mundo al revés*) concept that he applied to Late Antiquity [Díaz de Bustamante 1978: 148–154]. According to D. F. Bright and A. M. Wasyl, Hercules was intentionally depicted as wretched: either to mock pagan mythology [Bright 1987: 42], or vice versa, in the tradition of classical antiquity, where he was partly assigned a comic role [Wasyl 2011: 52]. V. N. Yarkho suggests that Dracontius was confused by his own rhetoric and Hercules turned out this way accidentally, while he was conceived as a tragic character [Yarkho 2001: 11–14]. A. Stoehr-Monjou, on the contrary, considered the character positive, seeing Hercules himself as a symbol of Roman resistance<sup>7</sup>, and his fight against the Hydra as a motif of Roman-Vandal confrontation and an inspirational signal for the Roman audience [Stoehr-Monjou 2016].

The rightness of A. Stoehr-Monjou in her "positive" view is confirmed at least by the fact that both poems conclude with a happy ending, not specific for Dracontius. Hercules is reconciled to the loss of Hylas and even rejoices that Hylas has gained immortality (*Rom.* 2.162–163: *Exulta, genetrix, nimum laetare, beata / Ante parens hominis, pulchri modo numinis auctor*). Then, he defeats the Hydra, thanks to Minerva's advice to burn the monster's neck (*Rom.* 4.50–53). On the other hand, veneration of Hercules in Roman tradition, from the legend of the founding of the City to ideological speculations of the emperors who used this image to legitimize their own power<sup>8</sup>, is an argument for such political interpretation<sup>9</sup>. There is also the fact that a pro-Roman tone can be found in other works by Dracontius, and not only in the dedication to Felicianus, or in *Controversia de statua viri fortis*, where A. Stoehr-Monjou also notes it in context of anti-Vandal rhetoric [Michel d'Annville, Stoehr-Monjou 2008]. For example, one can see it in *De Raptu Helenae*, where the author holds the Greeks no less

<sup>7</sup> A similar idea was expressed earlier by B. Weber, in the context of the analysis of *Hylas* [Weber 1995: 248–257]. However, as a means of struggle of Roman provincial elite against the Vandal *homines novi* she calls not the concrete images and their possible projections, but the existence of high-intellectual literature, incomprehensible to barbarians, at that period as a fact.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, [Hekster 2001]. It was used, among others, by Commodus, whom Dracontius sets as an example for the Vandal king to emulate, calling the odious emperor 'a man of great piety' *vir pietate bonus* (*Sat.* 187–190).

<sup>9</sup> This is indirectly indicated by the sequence of Hercules' opponents that include, besides the Hydra, the boar (*Rom.* 2.94–96; 2.153–155) and especially the Nemean lion (*Rom.* 4.28: *Hostes deesse mihi dixi post bella leonis...*). A lion appears practically in all the works of the Carthaginian poet in a negative light, and is directly compared with the Vandals in the dedication to Felicianus Grammaticus — among other predators (*Rom.* 1.8: *non lupum timebat agna, non leonem caprea*). In this case, Hercules, fighting the wild beasts, is the embodiment of the Roman side of the conflict, fighting the barbarian predators. For more details see: [Nikolsky 2020].

responsible for the outbreak of the Trojan War than the “pre-Roman” Trojans<sup>10</sup>. Or in *De Laudibus Dei*, where the Greek heroes are devoid of even a shadow of sympathy, unlike the characters of Roman history — and the latter stand out even against the black background of the pre-Christian world<sup>11</sup>. However, if we take a closer look at what was the key to the happy ending of the ‘Herculean’ poems, the picture is more complex, both in terms of the purpose of the image and the audience.

The main qualities that Hercules possesses are forgiveness and the ability not to give in to provocations. That allows him to emerge from the story of Hylas’ abduction with dignity and in harmony with himself, and actually helps him defeat the Hydra. Moreover, the monster from *Rom.* 4 could be considered a double allegory altogether, the embodiment not only of the Vandals, enemies of the Romans, as Stoehr-Monjou thinks, but of violence itself: while it is fought by its own methods, it multiplies (the heads, of which Hercules so complained, are growing), but when turning to wisdom (Minerva) everything is immediately resolved safely.

Appealing to the goddess for advice, i. e., trusting in the divine will, becomes the second component of victory. Here it is appropriate to recall that this very combination of qualities — mercy and piety — is what Dracontius tried to teach Gunthamund. Using the image of Hercules for the same purpose does not seem impossible also because since late Roman times his figure has been associated in political propaganda with the first persons of the state, as mentioned above, which Vandal kings tried to imitate.

With the help of his character, the poet could send different signals to different readers. On the one hand, for the Romans: to show in *Rom.* 4 that victory over the invaders was just around the corner, and in *Rom.* 2, meanwhile, to formulate its necessary condition — internal unity based on compromise, the absence of internecine strife, at least in the face of a common enemy. (It is noteworthy that Dracontius saw the main historical tragedy of Roman society as resolution of inner conflicts by blood, a point he particularly lamented in his poem *De Laudibus Dei*<sup>12</sup>). On the other hand, if even while in prison he tried to “educate” the barbarian king — nothing prevented him from acting the same way in a less extreme setting, appealing to the peacefulness of the Vandal audience. The image of Hercules can also be seen in this context.

<sup>10</sup> *Rom.* 8.45–52: *Damnantur gentes, damnatur Graecia sollers / heu magnis viduanda viris; orbatur Eous / Memnone belligero, damnatur Thessalus heros / et Telamone satus, pereunt duo fulmina belli. / Pro matris thalamo poenas dependit Achilles / (unde haec causa fuit), forsan Telamonius Ajax / sternitur invictus, quod mater reddita non est / Hesione Priamo; sic est data causa rapinae* (Tribes are condemned, condemned to lose her great men is cunning Greece. The East will be deprived of bellicose Memnon; condemned is the Thessalian hero, and Telamon’s children will die, two lightnings in battle! For the mother’s marriage Achilles bears punishment (it was the root cause of all), and, most likely, Ajax, Telamon’s son dies undefeated, because his mother hadn’t been returned to Priam. Here is the cause of the kidnapping).

<sup>11</sup> For more details see: [Nikolsky 2021].

<sup>12</sup> See: [Diederich 2019: 268].



Civil peace in North Africa, the achievement of which can be considered the main political goal of Dracontius, the main intention in his work, was conceived by the poet in two ways. Ideally, the party dictating the terms of this peace would be the Romans, and in particular the Roman intellectual elite, to which he referred himself and his entourage. It was not without reason that his role model was Felicianus Grammaticus — a peacemaker who had united the barbarians with the descendants of Romulus in a classroom (*Rom.* 1.14: [tu], *barbaris qui Romulidas iungis auditorio*). Being a pragmatist, however, Dracontius did not count entirely on such a scenario. The minimum programme seems to have involved patient coexistence with the invading barbarians, under conditions of their loyalty in exchange for a semblance of his own — and waiting for changes.

## References

- Bouquet, J., & Wolff, E. (1995). *Dracontius. Œuvres, Vol. 3: La Tragédie d'Oreste. Poèmes Profanes I–V*. Les Belles Lettres.
- Bright, D. F. (1987). *The miniature epic in Vandal Africa*. Univ. of Oklahoma Press.
- Bright, D. F. (1999). The chronology of the poems of Dracontius. *Classica et Mediaevalia*, 50, 193–206.
- De Gaetano, M. (2009). *Scuola e potere in Draconzio*. Edizioni dell'Orso.
- Díaz de Bustamante, J. M. (1978). *Draconcio y sus Carmina profana: Estudio biográfico, introducción y edición crítica*. Universidad de Santiago de Compostela.
- Diederich, S. (2019). Dracontius auf Konfrontationskurs: Widerständige Positionen in *De laudibus Dei*. Dichtung zwischen Römern und Vandalen. In K. Pohl (Ed.), *Tradition, Transformation und Innovation in den Werken des Dracontius* (pp. 261–272). Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Hays, G. (2004). 'Romuleis Libicisque Litteris': Fulgentius and the 'Vandal Renaissance'. In A. Merrills (Ed.), *Vandals, Romans and Berbers: New perspectives on Late Antique North Africa* (pp. 101–132). Ashgate.
- Hekster, O. (2001). Commodus-Hercules, the people's princeps. *Scripta Classica Israelica*, 20, 51–83.
- Hen, Y. (2007). *Roman Barbarians: The royal court and culture in the Early Medieval West*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Michel d'Annoville, C., & Stoehr-Monjou, A. (2008). Fidélité à la tradition et détournements dans la controverse de Dracontius (*Romulea* 5): un poème à double sens. In M. Sartre, & C. Sotinel (Eds.), *L'usage du passé entre Antiquité tardive et Haut Moyen Âge. Hommage à Brigitte Beaujard* (pp. 29–45). Presses universitaires de Rennes.
- Nikolsky, I. M. (2019a). Politicheskii diskurs v "Pokhishchenii Eleny" Drakontsiia: istoricheskie zametki [Political discourse in Dracontius' *De Raptu Helenae*]. *Dialog so vrememem*, 67, 273–282. (In Russian).
- Nikolsky, I. M. (2019b). Politicheskii smysl "Medei" Drakontsiia [Political meaning of Dracontius' *Medea*]. *Vestnik drevnei istorii*, 79(2), 327–334. <https://doi.org/10.31857/S032103910005037-3>. (In Russian).
- Nikolsky, I. M. (2020). Images of animals from *Historia Naturalis* in political rhetoric of Late Antiquity: Blossius Aemilius Dracontius' lion. *Shagi/ Steps*, 6(1), 158–167. <https://doi.org/10.22394/2412-9410-2020-6-1-158-167>.
- Nikolsky, I. M. (2021). Khristianskii apologet ili rimskii patriot? Drakontsii i exempla viro-rum v ego "Khvale Gospodu" (*LD* III.250–467) [Christian Apologist or Roman Patriot?

- Dracontius and the Exempla Virorum in his 'De Laudibus Dei' (*LD* III.250–467). *Vestnik drevnei istorii*, 81(3), 649–658. <https://doi.org/10.31857/S032103910011314-8>. (In Russian).
- Romano, D. (1959). *Studi Draconziani*. U. Manfredi.
- Stoehr-Monjou, A. (2016). Die Götter in der Ethopoïe des Dracontius (*Romul.* 4). Ein Versuch doppelbödiger Rede in der „Sprache des Romulus“? In *Colloque international sur Dracontius: "Reddere urbi litteras": Wandel und Bewahrung in den Dichtungen des Dracontius* (Nov 2016, Wuppertal, Germany). <https://hal.science/hal-01900073>.
- Wasył, A. M. (2011). *Genres rediscovered: Studies in Latin Miniature epic, love elegy, and epigram of the Romano-Barbaric age*. Jagiellonian Univ. Press.
- Weber, B. (1995). *Der Hylas des Dracontius: Romulea 2*. Teubner.
- Yarkho, V. N. (Intro., Trans., Comment.) (2001). *Emilii Blossii Dracontsii. Mifologicheskie poemy* [Aemilius Blossius Dracontius. Mythological poems]. Labirint. (In Russian).
- Zwierlein, O. (2017). *Die 'Carmina profana' des Dracontius: Prolegomena und kritischer Kommentar zur Editio Teubneriana. Mit einem Anhang: Dracontius und die 'Aegritudo Perdicae'*. De Gruyter.
- Zwierlein, O. (2019). *Die 'Carmina christiana' des Dracontius: Kritischer Kommentar*. De Gruyter.

\* \* \*

## Информация об авторе

### **Иван Михайлович Никольский**

кандидат исторических наук  
доцент, кафедра всеобщей истории,  
Институт общественных наук,  
Российская академия народного  
хозяйства и государственной службы  
при Президенте РФ  
Россия, 119571, Москва,  
пр-т Вернадского, д. 82  
✉ [ivan.nikolsky@mail.ru](mailto:ivan.nikolsky@mail.ru)

## Information about the author

### **Ivan M. Nikolsky**

Cand. Sci. (History)  
Assistant Professor, Department of World  
History, Institute of Social Sciences,  
The Russian Presidential Academy  
of National Economy and Public  
Administration  
Russia, 119571, Moscow, Prospekt  
Vernadskogo, 82  
✉ [ivan.nikolsky@mail.ru](mailto:ivan.nikolsky@mail.ru)