

**TAKING A NEW LOOK  
AT THE ANCIENT TRADITION OF  
SUETONIUS-DONATUS' BIOGRAPHIES**  
(A 9-th century biography of Aelius Donatus)

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ABSTRACT. The article treats a medieval text *Vita Donati grammatici* (*The Life of Donatus*), containing biographical information concerning [Aelius] Donatus, a Roman grammarian of Late Antiquity. The history of the scholarship of this text, as well as its contents, possible reasons of creation, its genre, and some eccentric and parodic features are under consideration. The study is accompanied by an English and a Russian translations of the Latin original text.

KEYWORDS: Donatus, biography, the Ancient tradition, medieval texts.

\* Research for the present paper was carried out as a part of the Russian Foundation for the Humanities project (# 14-06-00123a) *The Educational Text in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Contents and Structure of a School Canon of the 3<sup>d</sup> - the n<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. This publication is based on my paper: *A 9-th century biography of Aelius Donatus*, delivered at the International Medieval Congress (UK, Leeds, 6-9 July. 2015).

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This article treats a medieval text *Vita Donati grammatici* (*The Life of Donatus*), containing biographical information concerning [Aelius] Donatus, an author of *Ars grammatica* (the *Art of grammar*) and commentaries on the texts of Terence and Virgil. The history of the scholarship of *Vita Donati*, as well as its contents, possible reasons of creation, its genre, and some eccentric and parodic features are under consideration.

Regrettably, we do not have any evidences about the life of Donatus.<sup>1</sup> For this reason it is possible only to reconstruct the major milestones of his life on the basis of a comparison of indirect evidences and references about him by his contemporaries.<sup>2</sup> So, he was born about the year of 310 in North Africa. In his mature years, in the middle of the 4-th century, Donatus taught grammar in Rome and held a high position in society, having the title “vir clarissimus”. Donatus was a teacher of Jerome. Marius Victorinus was one of his senior colleagues. Donatus died around the year of 391.<sup>3</sup>

In the Middle Ages the name of Donatus was not only very well known, but he had an established image as an outstanding teacher of his time. However, there were many gaps in the medieval “biography” of Donatus, so medieval scholars desired to fill them. An example is the *Life of Donatus*, composed by a Carolingian scholar named Flaccus Rebius (9-th c.). The author of this biography wrote that he was often asked<sup>4</sup> about the identity of the grammarian, in connection with which he decided to answer the questions put to him. He dedicates his narration to a certain Minucius Rutilus, probably his pupil. The author, on the one hand, wants to give his due to Donatus, highlighting his indefatigable industry, on the other — to instruct in such diligence his disciple.<sup>5</sup>

Briefly, the manuscripts of *The Life of Donatus*, publications and investigations of this text, its genre and connotations should be mentioned. This text is preserved only in three manuscripts:

- 1) MS Parisinus Latinus 7730 [saec. IX<sup>2</sup>] (henceforth, P);
- 2) Landesbibliothek und Murhardsche Bibliothek der Stadt Kassel Philologus 4<sup>o</sup> 1 [saec. XI] (henceforth, K);
- 3) Codex Berniensis 189 [saec. XVI] Petri Danielis philological (henceforth, B).

A French scholar and church leader Pierre Daniel Huet (1630–1721) was the earliest scholar of this text. He compared two early manuscripts of the 9-th and 11-th centuries and took into account the notes, which had been written down in the margins of the Paris Codex.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For other people, known as the “Donatus”, see Hugh et al. 1971–1992, 1, 268-9.

<sup>2</sup> Keil (1822–1894) 4, xxxi-xli; Holtz (1981) 15-23.

<sup>3</sup> Holtz (1981) 15 ff.

<sup>4</sup> It is possible to describe these phrases as literature features, which were traditional for medieval authors. E.g. Cassiodorus. *De anima* 1.1., Fridh–Halporn (1973).

<sup>5</sup> It is also a literature feature for medieval (and antiquity) authors.

<sup>6</sup> These glosses were written by French philologist Pierre Pithou (1539–1596), see Munzi (2003–2004) 263.

At first, the biography of Donatus was published by Johann Fabricius in 1773, in a series of books, named "Bibliotheca latina".<sup>7</sup> Then, it was published in 1870 by Hermann Hagen in the eighth and final volume of series of books "Grammatici latini",<sup>8</sup> the first seven volumes of which were published by Heinrich Keil. Both of these researchers (Fabricius and Hagen) took the Paris manuscript (P) as a basis for their publications, offering their own reading.

Since 1989, this text has attracted the attention of Italian scholars. Giorgio Brugnoli<sup>9</sup> not only published this biography of Donatus (using the same Parisian manuscript as his predecessors), but accompanied it by additional reading, and also considered the sources of this text and the reasons for its appearance. In 2003–2004 there appeared a new edition of *The Life of Donatus*, published by Luigi Munzi. He analyzed the previous readings of J. Fabricius, H. Hagen and G. Brugnoli and offered a number of new ones.<sup>10</sup> In 2005 and 2007 this biography of Donatus was explored by Silvia Conte,<sup>11</sup> who was complementing preceding studies (in particular, the works of G. Brugnoli and L. Munzi) and published the text of *The Life of Donatus* in that form in which it was written in the codex of the 9th century (K).

The genre of this text is obvious. This is a biography, which is built according to the rules of the genre. Initially the origin and lifetime of Donatus are discussed, then – his activities and occupation, death, place of burial. There is a traditional physical description of his character, his social status, clothing, personal traits. However, this biography has some unusual features, that do not allow adoption of this text as authentic evidence. These features begin to appear from the beginning of narration. It is no coincidence that H. Hagen after H. Keil called this text as curiosity;<sup>12</sup> and most of all subsequent scholars regarded it as an eccentric fantasy and parody.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Fabricius–Ernesti (1774) 3, 408-9.

<sup>8</sup> Hagen (1870; repr. 1961) 8, cclx-i.

<sup>9</sup> Brugnoli (1989) 291-5.

<sup>10</sup> Munzi (2003-2004) 275.

<sup>11</sup> Conte (2005) 285-311; Eadem (2007) 289-306.

<sup>12</sup> Hagen (1870; repr. 1961) 8, cclix (with reference to H. Keil [1822-1894] 4, xl).

<sup>13</sup> Conte (2005) 289 ff. It should be added that this text might not seem unusual or a parody for medieval "readers", because there were many, not very nice descriptions of characters' appearance and / or purity of body in Antiquity and in the Middle Ages. See Suetonius. *The life of Horace* 6 [Rolfe (1914) 2, 489], or for Greek examples, see: Porphyry. *On the life of Plotinus* 1 [Armstrong (1969) 1, 1]. In this context a phrase of an Irish monk, named Dicuil, is very interesting. This is from a geographical treatise *In the measurement of the circle of the earth*, that summer nights in Iceland (?) are so bright, that "it is possible to strip the lice with the shirt". See *Dikuili Liber de mensura orbis terrae* VII, 7-13, Tierney–

G. Brugnoli took *The Life of Donatus* in the tradition of Suetonius-Donatus's biographies, citing the fact that, on the one hand, this text is compiled in burlesque genre, and on the other hand, it contains expressions similar to those of Suetonius.<sup>14</sup>

L. Munzi suggested that the medieval author had attempted to create an image of a martyr, ignoring the image of the great teacher.<sup>15</sup>

It was also observed that the biography (and this is typical for the Middle Ages) is characterized by anachronisms and the ambivalence of the image (in which are presented simultaneously love and hate, dirt and cleanliness, and so on<sup>16</sup>), which is also present in *The Life of Donatus*.

In my opinion, it is important to pay attention to the names of the author of this "biography" (Flaccus Rebius) and its intended recipient (Minucius Rutilus). They are more like Roman names than German ones (such as Moduin, Muredak, Angilbert, Geyrik, Raban, Valafrid Strub and so on), or Anglo-Saxon ones (such as Alcuin), or Irish ones (such as Seduly Scott, John Scott), which belonged to those, who were in the courts of the Carolingian rulers and in the monasteries of Francia.

It is quite possible that in the biography composed by a person, belonging to some academic circle, say this created at the court of Charlemagne, personages were given nicknames: Biblical names or the names of the Latin poets.<sup>17</sup> Then the purpose of the author – a member of this academic circle – could be the creation of a text, somewhat imitating ancient biographies (e.g. those of Suetonius<sup>18</sup>), or a text written in the genre of defilement<sup>19</sup> (although this is not a classic *psogos*).

As an attachment, we offer the Latin original as well as an English and a Russian translations of the *Vita Donati*.

Bieler (1967).

<sup>14</sup> In detail see Munzi (2003-2004) 265-6.

<sup>15</sup> Op. cit. 261-2; 266-75.

<sup>16</sup> For example, the same author Walafred Strabo wrote a prologue to Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne*, calling him a wise, glorious and powerful ruler, – see Walafred Strabo. *Prologue* [7-8, Dutton (1998)], – and a poem, condemning his mode of life, – see Walafred Strabo. *Visio Wettini* vv. 394-434, 446-64, David Traill (1974).

<sup>17</sup> E.g. Charlemagne had a nickname of David; Alcuin – of Flacc; Angilbert – of Homer, Einhard – of Veseleel.

<sup>18</sup> See Suetonius. *De illustribus grammaticis* (*Lives of the grammarians*); Idem. *De claris rhetoribus* (*Lives of the rhetoricians*); Idem. *De poetis* (*Lives of the poets*). See C. Suetonius Tranquillus. *De Grammaticis et Rhetoribus*, Kaster (1995).

<sup>19</sup> See the story of the wicked Maxim of Palestine, who propounded a blasphemy against their savior and lost his tongue – Brock (1973) 299-346.

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## INCIPIIT VITA DONATI GRAMMATICI

FLACCVS REBIVS MINVTIO RVTILO SALVTEM

Rogatus a consodalibus uitam Donati grammatici breuiter commentaui, ne cuiquam esset incognita nobiscum degentium, tibi que obtuli legendam. Ita enim se habet eius vita et conuersatio, ut subiecta docet narratio.

Donatus natione Romanus grammaticae professionis industria claruit σύγχρονος ut fertur rhetoris Victorini. Hic perpauculo<sup>20</sup> conductus peculio cuiusdam uiduae capellas paucinúmero pascendas<sup>21</sup> excepit, septa sibi ab urbe miliario secundo uindicans. Huic operae pretium infetigatum promulgare labor est. Hic dum in alendis capellis moraretur, aestu calente tempore laborabat intolerabili, utpote capillorum ab aure usque ad aurem defensione priuatus. Et quia remotior erat a Tiberi, sitim sibi ingruentem lacunis e cloaca fluentibus capellarum quoque temperabat urina. Hiemis autem tempore solo canente pruina carice compacto solabatur tugurio. Frequentius autem humi accubabat sub diuo permodico obsonatus edulio, quae nimirum frugalitas non innata, sed egestate concreuerat. Quia vero effetis uisceribus paene cutis desuper laxa rigebat, frigoris ut uitaret enormitatem partim teterrima partim rufa induebatur pellicia. Oculum autem ei iuramentum Martis ademit, quod persoluit, ut peculatus aboleret infamiam. Quadam namque die Aeolicum ingressus consistorium digna sibi nacta cauillatione cum magno pudore delituit, quem ita quidam Graeco lepore insultans suapte aggressus est: Ἀγροικε ἀπαλλάττου οἰῶν μηλοβοτήρ ἰσχρᾶν<sup>22</sup>, quod dicitur Latine: ‘Cede loco rustice modicarum opilio ouium’. Qui maturato rediens<sup>23</sup> discendae pueritiae studens aedili innotuit Ciceroni, a quo toga donatus est, quod erat signum libertatis. Eadem igitur tempestate Aemilius senator hominem exiit, cuius in locum pilleatus meruit subrogari et a Cicerone ordinatim<sup>24</sup> sextum in senatu subiit locum. Igitur quia habitum corporis eius breuiter perstrinximus, libet per singula eum paene membra designare. Erat quippe statura pusillus, capite rotundo in modum uesicae porci capillis admodum rasis<sup>25</sup> et sca-

<sup>20</sup> pauperculo — the reading of Luidgi Munzi (farther — L. M.)

<sup>21</sup> capellas pascendas — L. M. declines the marginalia “paucinúmero”.

<sup>22</sup> ΒΑΡΕΩΚΣΩΑΜΟΝ ΠΙΟΥΣ ΤΟΥ ΜΗΛΟΔΟΣ ΑΠΙΝΣΙΝΑΝ — the reading of L. M. instead of the reading of Hagen: Ἀγροικε ἀπαλλάττου οἰῶν μηλοβοτήρ ἰσχρᾶν.

<sup>23</sup> Romam adiens — L. M., instead of “rediens”.

<sup>24</sup> ordinatus — L. M., instead of “ordinatim”.

<sup>25</sup> raris — L. M., instead “rasis”.

biosis<sup>26</sup> atque melancholico<sup>27</sup> humore madentibus. Facie adeo rustica, uno oculo luscus, altero lippus, collo gracili et grosso, brachiis breuibibus et contractis, genibus latis, tibiis oppido curtis et grossis, pedibus latis et spissis, et quid morandum? Omnia habitudine seruo consimilis. Hic calaumaco caput<sup>28</sup> fouens super quavis ratione consultus breuiter omnia et furibunde explicabat, ita ut nec quidem a discipulis interrogari auderet. Quocirca dum saepe furore perstreperet, quippe cui a naso obscenitas defluebat assidua, senatu pulsus cuiusdam macellar-ii famulitio susceptus est. Plura pudet referre. Obiit XIII Kal. Ianuarii et proiectum est cadauer eius in fossam quo peregrini aggregabantur.

Explicit VITA DOMNI DONATI GRAMMATICI

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<sup>26</sup> sabiosis — L. M., instead "scabiosis".

<sup>27</sup> melanconico — L. M.

<sup>28</sup> capud — L. M.

## THE LIFE OF DONATUS\*

(translated from the Latin by MAYA PETROVA\*\*)

*Flaccus Rebbius greets Minutius Rutillus*

At the request of like-minded colleagues (consodalibus) I summarized the life of the grammarian Donatus, so that it did not remain unknown to us nor to any others among the living, and thereby presented it to you for reading. His life and deeds (conversatio) were as consistent as this brief narration teaches.

Donatus, a native of Rome, was famous for his diligence in grammar classes, and as it is said, was σύγχρονος (a contemporary) of the rhetorician Victorinus. Hired for little money, he agreed to graze few goats that belong to certain widow (viduae), renting for this purpose a corral located two miles away from the city. It is hard to say if the small fee was worth of this difficult work. While goats fed themselves slowly under his care [ab aure ad aurem], he, being completely bald, was languishing because of the unbearable summer heat. As the Tiber was far away, he had to satisfy his thirst, drinking from the troughs filled with filth and goat urine. In the winter, when the ground was silvery frost, he hid from the cold in a hut built of marsh reeds. Quite frequently his mensal bed was put on the ground in the open air, and he consumed scarce victuals. Such moderation, of course, was not innate, but resulted from his poverty. Since his loose skin had stiffened with cold because of thinness, he, trying to escape the intense cold, wore a cape made of the skins of wild beasts, partly dirty, partly a mixture of colour.

To repay a debt to the god of war, in which he lost an eye, he redeemed the shame of embezzlement of public money. One day, being among the Aeolian Greeks from whom he received deserved ridicule, he, being greatly ashamed, has retired, when someone began to sneer at him and ridiculed him in the Greek style like this: "Αγροικε ἀπαλλάττου οἰῶν μηλοβοτῆρ ἰσχῶν", which in the Latin means: "Go away, a redneck and a shepherd of skinny sheep" (Cede loco rustice modicarum opilio ovium).

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\*\* This translation was achieved using the edition of Hagen (1870; repr. 1961) with consideration to the edition of Munzi (2003–2004).



Having returned to his homeland and only in his adulthood having learned what normally should be absorbed in adolescence, he had been noticed by an edile Cicero, who granted him a toga, which suitable only for free peoples. At that time, Aemilius the senator expelled somebody from the Senate, and Donatus as a freedman, was awarded an election in his stead. Later on he had been receiving this position in the senate from Cicero for six consequent periods.

As we have already mentioned his physical image, let us do an inventory. He was stunted; his head was round like a pig's bladder; almost all his hair fell out and was covered with scabs, sweating because of the predominance in his body of black bile (*melancholico humore madentibus*). His face was quite rustic, one eye was blind, the other one was festered, neck was skinny, with a rough skin; his hands were twisted and short; his knees were thick, his legs were very short and thick, his feet were wide and strong.

However, enough of this. I have described completely his slave-like appearance.

He always sported a head cap made of camel wool. Whatever question he was asked, he answered quickly and violently, so that his disciples did not dare to ask him. In view of the fact that when he often quarrelled furiously, all sorts of rubbish constantly ran from his nose, he was expelled from the senate and accepted into the service of one butcher. Anything further one is ashamed to tell.

He died on December 20 and his body was thrown into a pit in which strangers were demolished.

*The end of The Life of Monsieur Donatus the Grammarian.*

ЖИЗНЬ ГРАММАТИСТА ДОНАТА<sup>29</sup>

(Перевод с латинского языка М. С. Петровой)

*Флакк Ребий  
приветствует Минуция Рутила*

По просьбе единомышленников (*consodalibus = concors*) я вкратце изложил жизнь грамматиста Доната, дабы она не осталась неведомой ни нам, ни кому-либо из живущих, и представил её тебе для чтения. Его жизнь и дела (*conversatio*) были такими, как учит сие изложение.

Донат, уроженец Рима, прославился своим усердием в грамматических занятиях и, как говорят, был *σύγχρονος* (современником) риторика Викторина. Нанятый за небольшие деньги, он взялся пасти немногочисленных коз некой вдовы (*viduae*), заняв для этого загон в двух милях от города. Непросто сказать, стоил ли сей труд предложенной платы.

В то время как козы неторопливо кормились под его присмотром [*ab aure ad aurem*], он, будучи совсем лысым, изнывал от летнего, невыносимого зноя. Поскольку до Тибра было далеко, он, когда ему хотелось пить, утолял жажду из впадин, заполненных нечистотами и козьей мочой. Зимой же, когда земля серебрилась инеем, он укрывался [от холода] в построенном из осоки шалаше.

Часто бывало, что его застольное ложе находилось на земле под открытым небом, потреблял он скудную снедь — такая умеренность, конечно, была не врожденной, но происходила от бедности. Так как от худобы его дряблая кожа коченела, он, чтобы спастись от сильного холода, облачался в сделанную из шкур диких зверей накидку, местами грязную, местами порыжевшую.

Отдав долг богу войны, на которой он лишился глаза, он искупил тем позор растраты государственных денег. Однажды, оказавшись среди эолийских греков и получив заслуженные насмешки, он, сильно устыдившись, удалился, когда некто стал глумиться над ним, высмеив его на греческий манер так: *Ἀγροικε ἀπαλλάττου οἰῶν μηλοβοτῆρ ἰσχυᾶν*, что на латинском означает: «Иди отсюда, деревенщина и пастух тощих овец» (*Cede loco rustice modicarum opilio ovium*).

Вернувшись на родину и в зрелом возрасте изучив то, чему учатся в отрочестве, он был замечен эдиллом Цицероном, который пожаловал ему тогу,

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<sup>29</sup> Перевод «Жизни Доната» выполнен по изданию Г. Хагена (GL VIII), с учетом издания Л. Мунци (2003–2004).

отличавшую людей свободных. В это время сенатор Эмилий изгнал из сената одного человека, и Донат, как вольноотпущенник, был удостоен избрания на его место, и потом в сенате шесть раз подряд он принимал эту должность от Цицерона.

Поскольку мы уже упоминали о его телесном облике, рассмотрим его по порядку. Росту он был крохотного, голова его была кругла, как мочевой пузырь у свиньи, волосы почти все выпали и были покрыты паршой, потные из-за преобладания в его теле чёрной желчи (*melancholico humore madentibus*). Его лицо было совершенно деревенским, один глаз слеп, другой гноился, шея тощая, с грубой кожей, руки скрюченные и короткие, колени толстые, очень короткие и толстые голени, ступни широкие и крепкие.

Впрочем, довольно об этом. Всю его рабскую наружность я описал полностью.

Голову он всегда укрывал шапкой из верблюжьей шерсти. По какому бы вопросу с ним не советовались, он отвечал быстро и яростно, так что ученики не осмеливались его спрашивать. Ввиду того, что, когда он часто бранился в ярости, у него из носа постоянно текла всякая дрянь, он, изгнанный из сената, был принят в услужение к одному мяснику.

Далее стыдно рассказывать.

Умер он 20 декабря, а тело его было брошено в яму, в которую сносили странников.

КОНЕЦ «ЖИЗНИ ГОСПОДИНА ДОНАТА ГРАММАТИКА»