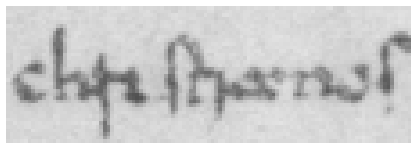


## The Chrestianos Issue in Tacitus Reinvestigated

by Erik Zara, Th.D. (rel. expt), © 2009

There has recently been an online discussion concerning the Cornelius Tacitus manuscript M.II (the so called *second Medicean*), which is kept in the Laurentian library, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, in Italy, where it has the library number 68.2. This is the earliest known extant manuscript of Tacitus, and is (probably) written in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, at the monastery of Monte Cassino, 80 miles southeast of Rome. The M.II is by many scholars regarded as the source from which all other extant MSS of Tacitus' *Annales* XI-XVI and *Historiae* I-V are derived,<sup>1</sup> and "if it was not copied directly from what remained of an ancient codex in rustic capitals, there cannot have been many intermediaries between it and that unique archetype" according to Revilo P. Oliver.<sup>2</sup> In *Annales* 15:44 (in folio 38 r of the manuscript) the author (probably Tacitus) writes about the Christians being blamed and punished for the great fire in Rome in 64 CE. The text begins: «*ergo abolendo rumori Nero subdidit reos et quaesitissimis poenis adfecit quos per flagitia invisos vulgus Christianos appellabat.*<sup>3</sup> *Auctor nominis eius Christus*<sup>4</sup> ...» (in translation: «*Consequently, to get rid of the rumor [that Nero ordered the fire], Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus [i.e. Christ], the author of the name ...*»). In the margin someone has written "Christiani", in *littera textualis*, next to this passage.

### Earlier scholarship



*Christianos*, from the Enrico Rostagno copy of folio 38 r of M.II (Leiden 1902), line 21.<sup>5</sup>

Some (like Richard Carrier, Ph.D.) have recently (autumn 2008) argued that earlier scholars like Harald Fuchs have erred, when they asserted that the word *Christianos* (Christians) originally was spelled *Chrestianos* (Chrestians), i.e. with an "e" instead of the now present "i". This view seems to be generally accepted, and is repeated in textbooks.<sup>6</sup> I will not detail all the arguments regarding the subject, but only mention a few. An argument in favor of the *Chrestianos*-position has been that the "ri" in the word is written in a different way than the "ri"-combination usually is, in the manuscript. Against this, it has been claimed that the scribe only "goofed" by writing "i" in a different style compared to what he normally did after the letter "r". Georg Andresen found in 1902 that there is an (unusual) gap between the "i" and the "s" in the word, and that this has been over bridged (in fact *under* bridged) by a hyphen, which led him to believe that the "i" was corrected from an original "e". According to Andresen, the "bulb" of the "e" filled out the now empty space.<sup>7</sup> Others, like Carrier, have claimed that the space isn't that unusual, and that the letter thus not of necessity was altered.

<sup>1</sup> Francis Newton, *The Scriptorium and Library at Monte Cassino 1058-1105*, 1999, p. 346.

<sup>2</sup> Revilo P Oliver, *The Second Medicean Ms. and the Text of Tacitus*, Illinois Classical Studies 1, 1976, p. 191

<sup>3</sup> In Codex Leidensis BPL 16 B, *appellat*, in Jesus College MS 160 *Chrestianos appellabant*, in Harley MS 2764 *christianus appellabant*.

<sup>4</sup> In the Wolfenbüttel MS Cod. Guelf. 118 Gud. lat. *eius nominis*.

<sup>5</sup> Enrico (Henricus) Rostagno, *Tacitus. Codex Laurentianus Mediceus 68 I. (II.)*, Du Bieu (W. N.) Codices Graeci et Latini phototypice editi, Leiden, 1902

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Theißen, Merz, *Der historische Jesus: ein Lehrbuch*, 2001, p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> Georg Andresen in *Wochenschrift für klassische Philologie* 19, 1902, p. 780f.



An “e” from “Tyberio” (Tiberio), in the sentence next to the Christianos sentence.

Harald Fuchs asked the then-director of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Dr. Teresa Lodi, to examine the document. She wrote to him: «*The “e”, written originally, of which there are still signs left at the erased area [Italian: rasura], was changed into “i” taking out the upper circle and the horizontal line, while the remaining part was corrected, in my opinion, with the same ink and the same hand, towards an “i”. Another hand added the dot above the “i” and the hyphen between “i” and “s”*»<sup>8</sup> I have not found any examination of the original manuscript refuting the conclusions made by Dr. Lodi, but still her study is at least 58 years old, and the technique has since become better.

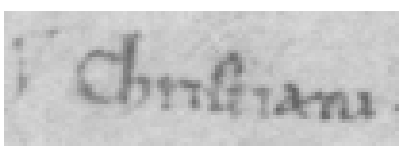
### A new examination

To find out whether or not earlier scholarship could have erred, I asked Dr. Ida Giovanna Rao, head of the manuscript office (*Responsabile Ufficio Manoscritti*) at Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, to redo the investigation made by Dr. Lodi, which she kindly did, for which I thank her greatly. With her friendly permission I will here quote her results (translated, by a linguist, if not written to me directly in English; her original English is kept). Her examination of the manuscript was conducted in October 2008.

She says that «*with a great effort [Italian: “con molta fatica”] it is possible to hypothesize that there was an “e” under the actual “i”, because the correction is really very clean and the only real pieces of circumstantial evidence—and not proofs—are the apex on the “i” and the hyphen linking “chri” with “stianos”, drawn with a less dark ink, identical to the one that makes the marginal correction [which is rather a bookmark, she says] “Christiani”, beyond to the “i”, which is overdrawn and darker than the other letters, in which the ink in general is more vanished.*» She adds (in English): «*By “con molta fatica” I mean that the correction was made with accuracy, so that it is not “visible a prima vista” [at first glance] but only if one looks exactly.*»

When asked if the circumstantial evidence (in Italian “indizi”) was enough for her to believe that there originally was an “e” instead of “i” in the word “Christianos”, Dr. Giovanna Rao answers (in English): «*I think there is enough “indizi” (3: [1.] the “i” written over again; [2.] the dot [like that: /] and [3.] the hyphen between the “i” and the “s”, both written in less dark ink as marginal gloss) to believe there was something different originally, i. e. an “e”, nearly entirely invisible even examined by recent Wood’s lamp.*» This «*means that there are some traces that are indeed, but hardly, visible to the eye, even when using Wood’s lamp, i. e. that they are invisible with the naked eye.*» A Wood’s lamp is a diagnostic tool using ultraviolet light onto skin (which the second Medicean manuscript is made of).

She states that «*the hand that [wrote the marginal gloss], in littera textualis, is clearly different from that of the scribe who, on the contrary, corrects a little above, also himself, sometimes, in the margin.*»

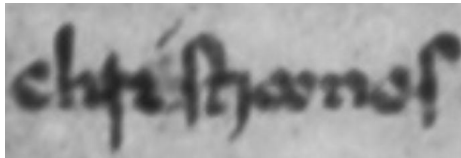


The marginal gloss *Christiani* next to the line in which the Christianos sentence is to be found

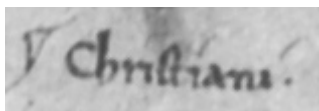
<sup>8</sup> Translated from Italian, from Harald Fuchs, *Tacitus über die Christen*, in *Vigiliae Christianae*, 1950, p. 70, n. 6

«It is impossible to say what ink is used to rewrite the "i" from "e" because the letter "i" is written over again and then the ink is dense«, she says (in English). It «can be the same ink as the marginal gloss, in littera textualis«. In her opinion there is «not a way to determine if the ink [which were used to add the hyphen and the dot above the "i"] is the same« as the ink used in the marginal gloss.

When I got an ultraviolet photograph of the manuscript, I could see that the change of the “e” into an “i”, was clearly visible. The traces of the erased “e” can be seen, and it is also visible that there is a dot (or rather a slash) above the “i” (a dot not visible in the Rostagno copy).



Ultraviolet photo of folio 38 r of M.II, by Donato Pineider. Provided by GAP s.r.l. - Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale Firenze. Used according to the principles of fair use.



I consider it now totally safe to say, in accordance with the examinations made by Andresen, Lodi and Rao, that the fourth letter in “Christianos” indeed has been changed from an “e” to an “i”. Accordingly, the scribe originally wrote Chrestiani, “Chrestians”, which might be what the Romans called the Christians, according to some scholars.<sup>9</sup> But who changed the word?

### Who made the change?

Harald Fuchs said:<sup>10</sup> «Not even with this examination [Teresa Lodi’s] by which Andresens conclusions in all parts were confirmed, the question whether or not the 'e' in the syllable 'chrest-' was changed already by the copyist himself, can be answered with full certainty.»

Dr. Rao says (in English) that she has three hypotheses, regarding the change:

- a) the "i" rewritten from "e" and the dot and the hyphen between the "i" and "s" [might] have been made by the scribe of the text itself
- b) the "i" rewritten from "e" [might] have been made by the scribe of the text itself and the dot and the hyphen between the "i" and "s" can have been made by the marginal corrector in less dark ink
- c) the "i" rewritten from "e" and the dot and the hyphen between the "i" and "s" [might] have been made by the marginal corrector in less dark ink«

After first hypothesizing that Dr. Lodi’s conclusion – b) – was the most probable statement, she considered the accuracy of the changed Latin text. She at first thought that, if the marginal glosser was indeed the one who changed the “e” into an “i”, he would also have incorporated the “Christiani” from the margin into the sentence. But “Christiani” in the margin is «in fact only a ‘note’ (bookmark)«, and no changer knowing Latin would have changed the text into

<sup>9</sup> Robert Renehan, *Christus or Chrestus in Tacitus?*, La Parola del Passato 122 (1968), pp. 368.

What has been believed to be the earliest usage of the term Chrestiani, “Chrestian”, is in a Latin inscription, dated to no later than the year 37 CE, which is interpreted as being about a “Chrestian” selling the right for his urn to be placed in a certain burial place; cf. my article *Chrestians before Christians? An Old Inscription Revisited* (2009).

<sup>10</sup> Harald Fuchs, *Tacitus über die Christen, Vigiliae Christianae*, 1950, p. 70, note 6 (my translation)

“*quos per flagitia invisos vulgus Christiani*”, which would have been grammatically incorrect. She consequently concludes that it is more probable that all changes might «*have been made by the scribe of the text itself and it is better, and right, to let Lodi's opinion drop definitively*». I told her that I regarded the matter as a mainly a matter about ink. She responded (in English) that «*thinking very carefully [:] if the ink which produced the hyphen and the dot is indeed the same as the ink that produced the margin notations, it is really possible that the margin notator changed also the "e"*».

The last conclusion I find important. I regard it as more probable, that the letter has been changed only once, than that it has been changed twice. If the same scribe who copied the Tacitus manuscript, only by error wrote *Chrestianos*, and then immediately changed this into the correct *Christianos*, why would a margin glosser a few hundred years later insert the hyphen and the dot? And why would the original scribe not have added such a dot above the “i” himself, which he does at other places in the text, but not always, if such a dot would indeed have been a necessity in combination with this specific “i”? Either, the letter change was shoddy, and thus a later change was needed, or there was only one change, I believe. And this change – visible only under ultraviolet light – does not seem shoddy to me, but rather very skillful. I do not think that a scribe, who was able to create an “i” from an “e” with such accuracy, would forget to add a dot above the “i”. I personally believe that there was only one change made, and that the person who changed the text changed the “e” and added the hyphen and the dot above the “i”.

Since it is, in Dr. Rao’s opinion, impossible to tell exactly what ink was used to add the hyphen and the dot, or to rewrite the “i”, it remains an open question whether it was the original scribe or the marginal glosser who changed the word. It seems though, that both Lodi and Rao think that less dark ink (than the text itself) was used to write the hyphen and the dot. If so, that would indicate that the margin glosser is the most probable changer of the letter. This glosser was, according to some, the humanist and Latin professor Zanòbi da Strada (1312-1361), who lived at Monte Cassino between 1355 and 1357, and was a friend of the author Giovanni Boccaccio, who had been said to have stolen and brought out the second Medicean manuscript from the monastery.<sup>11</sup> Since the letter “i” is not in the ordinary ligature form, «*it is likely that the corrector is not even Beneventan*» Charles E. Murgia of Harvard University once concluded.<sup>12</sup> The Beneventan script was used from the 8<sup>th</sup> century until the 13<sup>th</sup> century (the latest entire manuscript written in 1295), even if later usage is documented.<sup>13</sup>

For which intent and by whom the letter “e” was altered, we will probably never know for certain. We only know that the scribe originally wrote about *Chrestianos*, “Chrestians”, which could have been just a spelling error, but, as Fuchs says<sup>14</sup>: «*even if this change was made already by the copyist, the original 'e' does not lose its meaning. In that case the copyist, which Andresen has explained, could very well have found the form "chrestianos" in his original, and by himself changed the strange "e" into the familiar "i".*» (my translation)

For the sake of clarity, I will add that this particular manuscript of *Annales* does *not* contain the name *Chrestus*. No evidence of any alteration of the word “Christus” can be found in the ultraviolet photograph.

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<sup>11</sup> Robert H. F. Carver, *The Protean Ass*, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 111 (and references)

<sup>12</sup> Robert Renehan, *Christus or Chrestus in Tacitus?*, *La Parola del Passato* 122 (1968), p. 368, note 1

<sup>13</sup> Elias Avery Lowe, *The Beneventan Script. A history of the south Italian Minuscule*, Oxford 1914, pp. 41-46

<sup>14</sup> Harald Fuchs, *Tacitus über die Christen, Vigiliae Christianae*, 1950, p. 70, note 6