

***Vitaspatrum* – a short summary**

Text corpus.....	1
Latin transmission.....	2
Translations into the vernacular.....	3
German Transmission	4
Bibliography	8

Text corpus

The *Vitaspatrum* (also: *Vitas Patrum* or *Vitae Patrum*) are a variable corpus of narratives that deal with the old fathers and first monks, who lived in the oriental deserts during the early days of Christianity. Their legends, exempla and sentences were first written down in the fourth century. Originally, most of them were written in Greek, but they were translated into Latin between the fourth and seventh centuries. By Late Antiquity, the Vulgar Latin title *Vitaspatrum* was already being used to refer to this corpus, whose texts were widely disseminated throughout Europe during the Middle Ages.

The designation *Vitaspatrum* refers to three different genres which all deal with the stories and sayings of the old fathers. These genres were frequently transmitted together within the often changing corpus, although a thorough investigation into how the different corpora came together and how the Latin transmission functioned has not yet been carried out.¹ The three genres are:

- **Legends / Vitae:** The long legends about the first hermits and the founders of some of the monastic communities form the oldest part of the corpus. Probably the most famous legends are Evagrius' *vita* of Anthony (translated into Latin in about AD 370) and Jerome's legends of Paul of Thebes, Hilarion, and Malchus (all written down in Latin probably between AD 370 and AD 390).
- ***Historia monachorum:*** The *Historia monachorum* is also part of the older core of the *Vitaspatrum*. In the genre of a travelogue, this corpus consists of short legends and descriptions of the Egyptian monks. Its Latin translation by Rufinus of Aquileia stems from the

¹ Cf. Williams 1996, p. 6*: „Seit wann und in welcher Zusammenstellung die verschiedenen Texte der Wüstenväterliteratur jeweils zu einem Sammelwerk unter dem Titel *Vitaspatrum* vereint wurden, ist bisher nur in Ansätzen untersucht.“; Williams 1997, col. 1766: „Eine Gesch[ichte] der *V[it]as[p]atrum*, die das Zusammenwachsen der verschiedenen Texte der Wüstenväterlit[eratur] dokumentieren würde, steht noch aus.“; Williams 1999, col. 449: „Eine Überlieferungsgesch[ichte] des Gesamtwerks [...] steht noch aus [...].“

late fourth century. A similar corpus is Palladios' *Historia Lausiaca*, which was written down in Greek in about AD 419/420, although not translated into Latin until the sixth century.²

- *Verba seniorum* (or: *Apophthegmata*, *Sententiae*, *Dicta*): The *Verba seniorum* are a corpus of short sayings and narratives by the old fathers. They were translated into Latin in the sixth and seventh centuries to create corpora such as the *Adhortationes sanctorum patrum*, the *Sententiae patrum aegyptiorum* and others, all designated as *Verba seniorum*.

Latin transmission

The Latin corpus of the *Vitaspatrum* was edited in ten books by the Jesuit Heribert Rosweyde in 1615. Rosweyde's third edition from 1628 was printed in Migne's *Patrologia Latina*, esp. in PL 73, PL 74, and PL 21, col. 387-426. Even though Rosweyde's text is not based on a critical survey of the whole transmission of the *Vitaspatrum*, it still is the only full edition of the corpus. It is therefore regarded as the standard reference for research.³

At least for the German tradition of research on the *Vitaspatrum*, Rosweyde's books I to VII are of particular interest (and sometimes book VIII as well). Books IX (with 30 chapters) and X (with 219 chapters) are not normally included in research on the *Vitaspatrum*. The following list of contents for Rosweyde is based on Williams 1996, p. 3*-5*, and on Werbow 1967, p. 15f.:

- Rosweyde's book I (PL 73, col. 89–708) contains the longer legends of the *Vitaspatrum*: 16 *Vitae virorum*, and 11 *Vitae mulierum*;
- book II (PL 21, col. 387–462) contains Rufinus of Aquileia's *Historia monachorum*;⁴
- books III, V, VI, and VII have the subtitle *Verba seniorum* and contain short chapters with dicta, single sentences and short narratives;⁵
- book IV (PL 73, col. 815–874) contains the travelogue of a journey to the oriental Christians;
- book VIII (PL 73, col. 1091–1218) contains Palladius' *Historia Lausiaca*.⁶

There is a whole set of other texts dealing with the old fathers and containing their stories and dicta, but those texts are normally not considered to be part of the *Vitaspatrum*. This applies,

² Cf. Williams 1997, col. 1766.

³ There exist newer editions for parts of the corpus that replace Rosweyde for those parts, cf. notes below.

⁴ Critical edition of this corpus by Schulz-Flügel 1990.

⁵ For newer editions and additions, cf. Williams 1996, p. 4*f., note 7. Also see this for a more detailed division of the corpus.

⁶ Critical edition of this corpus by Wellhausen 2003.

for example, to the work of John Cassian (*De institutis coenobiorum; 24 Collationes*), even though parts of this corpus were sometimes included in the ‘original’ corpus. The title *Vitae et collationes patrum* often refers not to Cassian, but to the collection of *vitae* and *verba* from the *Vitaspatrum*.⁷

Translations into the vernacular

In light of the enormous importance of the *Vitaspatrum* for both spiritual and monastic life in the Middle Ages, it is not surprising that from the 13th century onwards, many translations into the vernacular arose. Before focusing on the German transmission, a few words on the transmission in other vernacular languages can be added. Since I have not studied the research on the *Vitaspatrum* transmission in languages other than German, the following information is based on Ulla Williams.⁸ Although the Germanist Williams has mainly worked on the German tradition, she does at least provide short overviews of other languages: Aside from German, Williams mentions *Vitaspatrum* translations in Dutch, French, English, Swedish, Italian, Catalan, Castilian, and Czech.⁹

We know of two translations of the *Vitaspatrum* from the Low Countries. One is from around 1360, when the so called ‘Bijbelvertaaler van 1360’, today identified as the Carthusian Petrus Naghel¹⁰, made a translation into South Middle Dutch prose.¹¹ Williams points out that this version, which is transmitted in about 30 manuscripts, consists of two individual sections, namely *Der vader boec* (i.e. the *Vitae*), and *Der vader collacien* (i.e. the *Verba seniorum*).¹² A second Dutch translation was made in the northern part of the Low Countries in the early 15th century. This version was mostly transmitted in the context of the *Devotio moderna*, and its source was a Latin compilation of the *Vitaspatrum*, which contained short legends and dicta.¹³ In addition to these two Dutch translations, a further Dutch *Vitaspatrum* tradition based on the German Alemannic print tradition of the late 15th century must be emphasised: The Dutch print by Pieter van Os in Zwolle from 1490 (which was revised by Henrick Eckert in Delft in 1498) is based on a Low German translation (or adaptation) of the Alemannic corpus that was first printed in Strasbourg before 1482. Furthermore, the Low German *Kölner*

⁷ Cf. Williams 1996, p. 5*, note 9.

⁸ Cf. especially Williams 1997, col. 1767f.

⁹ Cf. Williams 1996, p. 7*; Williams 1997, col. 1767.

¹⁰ Cf. Kors, Mikel (Ed.): *De bijbel voor leken. Studies over Petrus Naghel en de historiebijbel van 1361*. Turnhout 2007 (Publications de la fondation encyclopédie bénédictine 4), p. 17–31; p. 181.

¹¹ Cf. Williams 1997, col. 1767.

¹² Cf. Williams 1996, p. 8*.

¹³ Cf. Williams 1997, col. 1767. For further details see also the paragraph by Werner Hoffmann in Williams/Hoffmann 1994 on ‘Traductions en néerlandais et en allemand rhénan’, here col. 1045–1048.

Vitaspatrum is partly based on the North Middle Dutch *Vitaspatrum*. We therefore know of close connections between the German and the Dutch traditions, although this phenomenon has not been studied in detail.

For the medieval French tradition, Williams distinguishes five different prose translations. The earliest one was made by Wauchier de Denain for Philipp of Namur before 1212 and contains extracts from all three corpora: the *vitae*, the *Historia monachorum*, and the *Verba seniorum*. A second French prose translation was made for Blanca of Navarre before 1229. This version is enriched by a prologue written in rhyme. It was followed by three other prose translations, two more from the 13th century and one from the 15th century. However, the very earliest translations of the *Vitaspatrum* were not in prose but in verse. Regarding the Romanic languages, Williams mentions an Anglo-Norman verse version from the end of the 12th century and the Old French *Vie des pères* from the 13th century.¹⁴

Regarding the English Middle Ages, Williams states that mostly single texts of the *Vitaspatrum* were transmitted within collections of legends and sermons. However, there is one extensive English translation, made by William Caxton on the basis of a French incunable and printed for the first time in 1495.¹⁵

German Transmission

In Medieval German, one distinguishes between eight different translations of the *Vitaspatrum*. There is one translation in verse and seven in prose. The basis for this distinction was first put forward in 1967 by Stanley Werbow, who also stressed that the German prose translations are all independent to the verse version. The different German translations were finally and definitively distinguished by Klaus Klein in his doctoral thesis in 1985.¹⁶ Today, it is Ulla Williams' research in particular which publicises this knowledge. Williams' critical edition and her careful study of the Alemannic translations of the *Vitae* and of the *Verba seniorum* provide another important contribution to the research on the German transmission.¹⁷ Williams also refers to the other German translations in several articles in all of the important encyclopaedias, thereby confirming her work as being state-of-the-art in the field.

The earliest German translation of the *Vitaspatrum* is a verse adaptation known under the title *Der veter buoch / Väterbuch*:

¹⁴ Critical edition by Pinto-Mathieu 2009. The editor states the importance of the *Vitaspatrum* as a source for the *Vie des pères*: cf. Pinto-Mathieu 2009, p. 17f.

¹⁵ Williams 1997, col. 1767.

¹⁶ Klein's doctoral thesis from 1985 has never been published, but it was used for the extensive study on the Alemannic translations by Ulla Williams in 1996.

¹⁷ Cf. Williams 1996.

- *Väterbuch*:¹⁸ Generated in the last third of the 13th century, the *Väterbuch* is the earliest collection of legends in German verse. The translation was probably made in the East Middle German area in the context of literature for the Teutonic Order. The *Väterbuch* was probably produced by the same unknown priest who also wrote the *Passional*.

The seven German prose translations were produced in the 14th and 15th centuries.¹⁹ The two Alemannic translations form the oldest prose versions.

- Alemannic translation of the *Vitae*:²⁰ Williams assumes that the Alemannic translation of the *Vitae* was produced in the Upper Rhine region in the first third of the 14th century.²¹ A palaeographical analysis of the oldest manuscript²² points to the years 1320/1330. The text corpus was arranged by a brother called Peter Mul, whom we cannot now trace. In the fifteenth century, the *Alemannic Vitae* were mostly transmitted together with the Alemannic translation of the *Verba seniorum*. Williams' study and edition therefore also brings these two corpora together.
- Alemannic translation of the *Verba seniorum*:²³ The second Alemannic translation of the *Verba seniorum* can be dated to the middle of the 14th century. The language of the oldest manuscripts as well as the close connection to a Latin manuscript from the Dominican convent in Basel leads Williams to the hypothesis of a Basel origin for this translation.²⁴ The corpus of the dicta is extremely variable and exhibits significant differences throughout the transmission process.²⁵ However, thanks to Williams' detailed analysis and stemma, it is possible to situate the different manuscripts within the transmission.

¹⁸ Cf. Borchardt/Kunze 1999; Edition by Reissenberger 1914. The Handschriftencensus lists a total of 30 manuscripts: <http://handschriftencensus.de/werke/467> (26.11.2012).

¹⁹ Williams normally only speaks of six translations in German prose, because she excludes the *Kölner Vitaspatrum*: cf. Williams 1996, p. 7*–9*. I include this corpus in my list and speak of a particular German translation because it contains a new translation of the *Historia monachorum* and of the *Verba seniorum*, even though the rest of the corpus of the *Kölner Vitaspatrum* goes back to texts from the Alemannic and the Dutch translations. For the *Kölner Vitaspatrum*, see below.

²⁰ Cf. the study and critical edition by Williams 1996, especially p. 13*–15*.

²¹ Cf. Williams 1996, p. 13*.

²² Basel, Universitätsbibliothek, Fragm. N I 83.

²³ Cf. the study and critical edition by Williams 1996, especially p. 15*–18*.

²⁴ Cf. Williams 1996, p. 15*.

²⁵ For an example of the important changes in the corpus of the 15th century tradition in Strasbourg, cf. Studer, Monika: Antonius der Einsiedler trifft Caesarius von Heisterbach. Zur gemeinsamen Überlieferung von Exempla der *Alemannischen Vitaspatrum* und des *Dialogus miraculorum* in Straßburger Handschriften und Drucken. In: Mossman, Stephen/Palmer, Nigel F./Heinzer, Felix (Ed.): Schreiben und Lesen in der Stadt. Literaturbetrieb im spätmittelalterlichen Straßburg. Berlin/Boston 2012 (Kulturtopographie des Alemannischen Raums 4), p. 167–196.

Williams lists 74 manuscripts in total for the Alemannic tradition of the *Vitaspatrum*.²⁶ Since the publication of her book in 1996, a few more textual witnesses have been discovered.²⁷ Today, we now know of 78 manuscripts and manuscript fragments which either contain the Alemannic translation of the *Vitae*, or of the *Verba seniorum*, or of both corpora together.

- **Bavarian translation of the *Verba seniorum*:**²⁸ The Bavarian translation of the *Verba seniorum* was produced around 1400 and is transmitted in 29 manuscripts and 9 prints.²⁹ According to Schütz-Buckl, the corpus is primarily based on Rosweyde's books V and VI.³⁰ There is some interference between the Bavarian translation and the Alemannic translations, and at least parts of the corpora were often transmitted together.
- **Melker *Verba seniorum*:**³¹ The *Melker Verba seniorum* were produced in the context of the Benedictine reform in Melk in the first third of the 15th century (1418–1441). The corpus was probably translated by Johannes Speyer, Master of Novices and Prior in Melk. This collection is contained in five manuscripts, all of which are connected to Melk or other monasteries that were reformed by the Melk reform.
- **Kölner *Vitaspatrum*:**³² This Low German translation from the middle of the 15th century was probably produced in Cologne. It is partly based on the North Middle Dutch translation of the *Vitaspatrum* and partly on the Alemannic translations.³³ Its 13 manuscripts are described by Hoffmann 1993, p. 104-107.
- **Olmützer *Verba seniorum*:**³⁴ Only one single manuscript from the second half of the 15th century³⁵ contains a translation of 48 exempla from the *Vitaspatrum*, most of which are based on Rosweyde's book III. Since the manuscript now lies in the Czech town of Olomouc (Olmütz in German), the translation is called the *Olmützer Verba seniorum*. In ad-

²⁶ Misleadingly, on p. 7*, Williams speaks of 84 manuscripts, but if one counts her descriptions, there are only 74.

²⁷ Sarnen, Bibliothek des Benediktinerkollegiums, Cod. chart. 57 (cf. Bretscher-Gisiger, Charlotte/Gamper, Rudolf: Katalog der mittelalterlichen Handschriften des Klosters Wettingen. Katalog der mittelalterlichen Handschriften in Aarau, Laufenburg, Lenzburg, Rheinfelden und Zofingen. Dietikon-Zürich 2009, p. 273); Wolfenbüttel, Herzog-August-Bibliothek, Druck 10 Arithmetica, paper vaste (fragment), and München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cgm 836, fol. 51v–61v (both mentioned in WILLIAMS/HOFFMANN 1999, col. 453); Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Cod. 756,94a (fragment; reference in <http://handschriftencensus.de/news> on 25.02.2012).

²⁸ Cf. Williams/Hoffmann 1999, col. 455f.; Blumrich 1994.

²⁹ Cf. Williams 1996, p. 7*. Her figure unites the 16 manuscripts listed in Blumrich 1994 and 13 manuscripts of the so-called *Nürnberger Bearbeitung*: cf. Williams 1996, p. 7*f., note 18.

³⁰ Cf. Schütz-Buckl 1991, p. 60.

³¹ Cf. Kraume, Herbert: Johannes von Speyer (Johannes de Spira, Johannes Wischler). In: ²VL 4 (1983), p. 757–760, here col. 759; Williams/Hoffmann 1999, col. 456f.

³² Cf. Hoffmann 1993; Williams/Hoffmann 1999, col. 461f.

³³ Cf. Williams 1997, col. 1767.

³⁴ Edition and study by Schütz-Buckl 1991.

³⁵ Olomouc, Vědecká knihovna, Cod. M II 24.

dition to the *Verba seniorum*, the corpus contains 12 exempla from the *Vitas fratrum* by Gerhard of Frachete. With reference to Schütz-Buckl, Williams states that the translation was probably intended for a Dominican readership.³⁶

- Translation of the *Vitae* by Heinrich Haller:³⁷ Again found in just one single manuscript,³⁸ we have a translation of the *Vitae* from 1467 by the Carthusian Heinrich Haller.

³⁶ Cf. Williams 1996, p. 8*.

³⁷ Cf. Bauer, Erika: Haller, Heinrich: *Leben der Altväter*. In: ²VL 3 (1981), col. 415–418 + ²VL 11 (2004), col. 585; Williams/Hoffmann 1999, Sp. 457.

³⁸ Innsbruck, Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. 635.

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³⁹ The following bibliography only lists literature with a general interest in the transmission of the *Vitaspatrum*; some other literature without a focus on the transmission is only mentioned in the appropriate footnotes within the text. The bibliography is not complete and is mostly based on German scholarship.