

VERMILIUS ABSCONDITUS?
THE ICONOGRAPHY
OF PETER MARTYR VERMIGLI*

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In 1560, at the pinnacle of his distinguished and varied career as a reformed theologian and biblical scholar, Peter Martyr Vermigli sat to have his portrait painted in Zurich. The painting now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London. The presence of Vermigli's likeness in the Gallery stands as testimony to his distinction as the first Protestant reformer to occupy the Regius Chair of Divinity in the University of Oxford. While the portrait is unsigned, the evidence suggests strongly that Hans Asper (1499-1572), the leading portrait-painter of mid-sixteenth-century Zurich, was the artist.¹ Asper's authorship has not stood unchallenged. In his catalogue of the Gallery's Tudor and Jacobean portraits, Roy Strong refrains from ascribing the painting of Vermigli to Asper and characterizes the piece as of «workshop quality, perhaps once part of a set of reformers.»² More recently, however, Asper's title to authorship has been reaffirmed by Marianne Naegeli, Urs Hobi and their collaborators in a thorough and scholarly survey of Asper's Paintings. In their catalogue to an exhibit of art in Zurich after the Reformation held in 1981, the iconography of the Vermigli portrait is shown to be decisive in establishing authorship.³

* I acknowledge with gratitude the contributions made toward the research for this paper by Kurt Jakob Rüetschi, Joseph McClelland and Frank A. James III.

¹ In the judgement of Walter Hugelshofer «ohne jeden Zweifel ist Asper der Urheber.» See Zwingliana, vol. 3 no. 1 (1930), p. 128. See also Hugelshofer, Die Zürcher Malerei der Spätgotik: Mitteilungen der Antiquarischen Gesellschaft in Zürich 30, Heft 5 (Zürich, 1928/29), p. 102.

² Tudor and Jacobean Portraits (London, 1969), NPG 195 (Pl. 635), pp. 319, 320. Strong notes that the portrait of Vermigli was purchased for the NPG in 1865 from one John L. Rutley and that its previous history is unknown. Another version of the portrait hangs in the lodgings of the Regius Professor of Divinity in Tom Quad, Christ Church, Oxford.

³ Marianne Naegeli, Urs Hobi, with the collaboration of Bernhard Andere, Hans Christoph von Tayel and Katharina Vassella, Zürcher Kunst nach der Reformation: Hans Asper und seine Zeit: Katalog zur Ausstellung im Helmhaus, Zürich, 9. Mai bis 28. Juni 1981 (Zürich,

In the course of his career as *Stadtmaler* of Zurich, Asper painted as many as thirty known portraits of leading personalities of the city. Perhaps the most famous is his small portrait of Huldrych Zwingli, painted shortly before the reformer's death on the field at Kappel in 1531¹. It has often been observed that Asper's portraits show a marked similarity of style to those of Hans Holbein the younger². The portrait of Vermigli resembles the others in this respect as well. Dated 1560, the painting exhibits a remarkable iconographical resemblance to a series of portraits painted by Asper during the previous decade. In a letter to Rudolph Gwalthier dated 4 March 1550, a young Englishman named Christopher Hales had commissioned Asper to paint six portraits of prominent Zurich reformers: «I request you, my dear Rodolph, to procure your Apelles to paint for me the following portraits, those namely of Zwinglius, [Konrad] Pellican, Theodore [Bibliander], master [Heinrich] Bullinger, and yourself... And if the artist can paint a good likeness of Oecolampadius, I would have it in addition to the other five.»³ Hales does not mention Asper by name in his correspondence but also refers to the artist as «your Zeuxis;» both are references to notable Greek painters of the fourth century BCE⁴. Between September 1549 and February 1550, while recover-

¹ 1981). The exhibition was organised by the Präsidialabteilung der Stadt Zürich and the Schweizerisches Institut für Kunsthistorisch. The portrait of Vermigli is reproduced in «Katalog» nr. 31, pp. 68, 69.

² This painting hangs in the Kunstmuseum, Winterthur, Inv.-Nr. 133. See «Katalog,» Zürcher Kunst nach der Reformation, nr. 3, p. 46. For an account of Hans Asper's career as Stadtmaler of Zurich, see «Katalog,» pp. 45, 46.

³ Concerning the probable influence of Holbein on Asper see Hugelshofer, Die Zürcher Malerei der Spätgotik, p. 90. According to Lucas Wüthrich in «Die Zürcher Malerei im 16. Jahrhundert,» Zürcher Kunst nach der Reformation, P. 10: «Dass Asper Zugang zu Porträts von Holbein hatte, muß als sicher angenommen werden, denn seine Abhängigkeit von solchen ist offensichtlich.» Whether Asper actually studied the art of portraiture with Holbein is not known with any certainty. It is supposed that he was apprenticed to Hans Leu the younger (1490-1531) in Zurich.

⁴ Hastings Robinson, ed., *Original Letters Relative to the English Reformation Written during the Reigns of King Henry VIII, King Edward VI, and Queen Mary*: Chiefly from the Archives of Zurich (Cambridge, 1846), first portion, pp. 184-186; cited hereafter as Zurich Letters. See also Zürcher Kunst nach der Reformation, pp. 13, 64 and Paul Boesch, Die Wieler Glasmaler und ihr Werk, Reihe: Neujahrsblatt Historischer Verein des Kantons St. Gallen 89 (Wl, 1949), p. 21. Oecolampadius died 1 December 1531.

⁵ Pliny dates Apelles of Cophophon at c. 332 BCE on account of his famous portrait of Alexander the Great with the thunderbolt. Ernst Pfuhl, *Malerei und Zeichnung der Griechen* (München, 1923), p. 801; see T. B. L. Webster's entry in the Oxford Classical Dictionary, second edition (Oxford, 1970), p. 79. See also Zurich Letters, p. 193: «your Zeuxis shall be paid at my expense.» Zeuxis of Heraclea is dated by Pliny at c. 397 BCE. In his Poetics, 25 (1461b12), Aristotle refers to the paintings of Zeuxis as ideal: «It may be impossible that there should be such people as Zeuxis used to paint, but it would be better if there were; for the type should improve on the actual.»

ing in Zurich from a bout with consumption, Hales had been living in the household of Gwalthier, then Pastor of St. Peter's Church⁵. Hales correspondence with Bullinger and Gwalthier, preserved in the Archives at Zurich, reveals a warm friendship with «the most worthy ministers of your church and school.» In his correspondence with Gwalthier after his return to England, Hales refers with admiration to a pair of paintings by Asper, one of Gwalthier himself (now lost) and the other a remarkable 1549 portrait of Gwalthier's wife and Zwingli's daughter Regula with their daughter Anna⁶. The portraits of the six reformers were executed over a period of nine years⁷. Those of the two deceased subjects – viz. Oecolampadius and Zwingli – were eventually delivered to Hales in England through the offices of John Burcher, while those of Bibliander, Bullinger, Gwalthier and Pellikan remained behind in Zurich⁸. Apparently there was concern on the part of the living subjects that no occasion for idolatry be given to the faithful in the Church of England⁹. In yet another letter to Gwalthier, Hales expostulates in a tone of some impatience on doubts expressed concerning the idolatry of portraiture:

⁸ Christopher Hales's elder brother John played a prominent role in English politics during the reign of Edward VI and was a friend and hunting companion of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. See Diarmaid MacCulloch, Thomas Cranmer: A Life (New Haven, 1996), p. 196. The elder Hales was also an ally of John Hooper, Bishop of Gloucester, who studies theology in Zurich between 1547 and 1549, and who remained a close friend and associate of Bullinger and the Schola Tigurina. Christopher Hales' friend Richard Hilles, and English cloth merchant in Strasbourg, arranged Hooper's sojourn at Zurich. It appears that Hilles may also have arranged the younger Hales' stay with Gwalthier. Zurich Letters, p. 195.

⁹ Zurich Letters, p. 189.

¹⁰ Zurich Letters, pp. 189 and 194. «Malerei.» Zürcher Kunst nach der Reformation, nr. 23, pp. 62, 63. See also Walter Hugelshofer, *Die Zürcher Malerei der Spätgotik*, Zurich, Inv.-Nr. 5. Painting now hangs in Zentralbibliothek, Zurich, Inv.-Nr. 5.

¹¹ The precise dating of the portraits has been subject to some revision since the exhibit of 1981. While the exhibition catalogue lists the portraits of Bullinger, Bibliander, Oecolampadius as having been painted in 1550, recent research on the inscriptions suggests that dates later in the 1550s are more likely.

¹² Burcher, cloth merchant and partner of Richard Hilles, appears to have been Hales' agent in Zurich. See Zurich Letters, pp. 184 and 259.

¹³ In a letter to Bullinger dated 10 December 1550 Hales observes that Gwalthier had retained four of [the portraits] for two reasons: first, because there is some danger lest a door shall hereafter be opened to idolatry; and next, lest it should be imputed to you [i.e., Bullinger] as a fault, as though it were done by you from a desire of empty glory. But the case is far otherwise, for I desired to have them on this account, both an ornament to my library, and that your effigies might be beheld in the picture, as in a mirror, by those who by reason of distance are prevented from beholding you in person. This is not done, excellent sir, with the view of making idols of you; they are desired for the reasons I have mentioned, and not for the sake of honour or veneration.» Zurich Letters, pp. 190-191. See also Wüthrich, «Die Zürcher Malerei im 16. Jahrhundert,» p. 13; also Bruno Meyer, Thurgauische Beiträge zur vaterländischen Geschichte 103 (1966), pp. 97 ff.

I am greatly surprised that Burcher should persist in thinking that portraits can nowise be painted with a safe conscience and a due regard to godliness; since there is not a single letter in the holy scriptures with appears really to sanction that opinion. For, if I understand aright, images were forbidden in the sacred books for no other reason, than that the people of God might not be drawn aside from the true worship of one true God to the vain worship of many false gods. And if there be no danger of this, I do not see why pictures may not be painted and possessed, especially when they are not kept in any place where there can be the least suspicion of idolatry... Who bows himself before your Charles placed on the top of the tower? Who is so useless, as to worship a painting or picture deposited in the library? But it is said that times may occur, when there will be danger lest encouragement be given to idolatry by their means. Well then, it may in the same manner be argued, that no image or likeness ought to be made of any thing whatever! Indeed my worthy friend, if I thought it possible that the worship of idols could be re-established by such means, believe me, that if I had the pictures, I would tear them into a thousand pieces with my own hands.¹⁴

The portrait of Bibliander was apparently executed by Asper in secret without our a sitting, owing to the great linguist's firm opposition to the production of images¹⁵.

Sometime after the original commission Hales seems to have requested an additional portrait for the series, one of Peter Martyr himself. Although resident in Oxford at the time of the original commission of the portraits, the death of King Edward VI in 1553 compelled Vermigli to flee England and return to the continent. By 1556 Vermigli had been appointed to succeed Konrad Pellikan in the chair of Hebrew at Zurich. Thus Vermigli himself had come to be numbered among the eminent Zurich divines, which probably accounts for the extension of the commission to a seventh portrait¹⁶. The best evidence of this is the very close iconographical resemblance the National Gallery portrait bears to the others in the series commissioned by Hales. In his original commission Hales had been quite specific about the iconography: each of the reformers was to be portrayed in scholar's attire and holding a book; each portrait was to be inscribed with a text set in the form of a

tetrastich¹⁷. Vermigli's portrait is no exception. Like the other reformers, he is depicted in the current academical dress of a learned divine – cap, gown and tipper. He is shown seated at half-length and facing right with a three-quarter profile. His right hand is extended with the index finger pointing emphatically to a book with a crimson binding. The book rests on his left knee and is held upright by his left hand. His eyes are brown, hair white, and he wears a heavy moustache and a forked beard, the latter an especially distinctive characteristic that is faithfully reproduced in subsequent derivative images of the reformer. Missing from the picture of Vermigli, however, is Asper's monogram «HA» which is plainly visible in the portraits of Zwingli, Regula and Anna Gwalther-Zwingli, Oecolampadius, Bibliander and Pellikan. It should also be noted that Asper portrayed Bibliander, Bullinger, Pellikan and the earlier of two versions of Oecolampadius with a table-top in the foreground whereas this particular feature of the iconography is missing in the Vermigli portrait.¹⁸ A prominent feature of the iconography of the series is a verse inscription that appears together with the subject's name at the top of each likeness. The tetrastich inscribed above Vermigli's head in gold capitals reads

HVNC GENVIT FLORENTIA, NVNC PEREGRINUS OBERRAT
QVO STABILIS FIAT CIVIS APVD SVPEROS
ILLIVS EFFIGIES HAEC, MENTEM SCRPTA RECONDVNT
INTEGRITAS PIETAS PINGIER ARTE NEQVIT.

«Florence brought him forth, Now he wanders as a foreigner / That he might forever be a citizen among those above. / This is his likeness; the writings conceal his mind; / Integrity and piety cannot be represented by art.» It has been suggested that the terrastich was probably composed by Gwalther. The tetrastichs on the paintings of Bibliander, Bullinger, Oecolampadius and Pellikan have been definitely identified as Gwalther's.¹⁹ In the middle on the right-hand edge of the Vermigli portrait there is another inscription «ANNO: DNI: MD: LX / AEATIS LX.»²⁰ The latter reference may shed light on the long-held but mistaken view that Vermigli was born in 1500²¹.

¹⁴ Zurich Letters, pp. 191-192. The south tower of the Grossmünster at Zurich is called Charles' Tower, named for a statue there which is supposed to represent Charlemagne. The original statue is now to be found in the crypt of the Grossmünster.

¹⁵ Zurich Letters, p. 193: «I entreat you, my worthy friend, that should I not be able to obtain all the portraits, I may at least obtain the two others, namely that of Theodore, which You tell me was taken without his knowledge, and as it were by stealth, also your own; for I am well assured that you are of quite the contrary opinion [viz. Concerning the supposed idolatry of portraiture], unless you have lately very much changed it, or else you would never have had the portraits taken of your wife and little girl.» See «Malerei», Zürcher Kunst nach der Reformation, nr. 26, pp. 64, 65.

¹⁶ «Catalog.» Zürcher Kunst nach der Reformation, p. 69 (Fig. 1).

¹⁷ Zurich Letters, pp. 185-186.

¹⁸ Zürcher Kunst nach der Reformation, plates 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, and 28; see also plates 29 and 30, portraits of Heinrich Brennwald (1551) and Alexander Peyer (1554); pp. 62-68. Hales remarks that his commissioned portrait of Oecolampadius was taken from a copy in Bullinger's possession. Zurich Letters, p. 194

¹⁹ For Gwalther's manuscript drafts of the verses see Zurich Zentralbibliothek, MS D 152, 85v-86r. I am grateful to Kurt Jakob Rüetschi for this reference. See also Wüthrich, «Die Zürcher Malerei im 16. Jahrhundert», p. 13.

²⁰ In the year of our Lord, 1560, 60 years old.

²¹ Philip McNair notes that Vermigli himself probably did not know that he was born in 1499 rather than 1500. See McNair, Peter Martyr in Italy: An Anatomy of Apostasy (Oxford,

Walter Hugelshofer observes of the portrait that Vermigli appears a weary, prematurely aged man and that the reformer looks «dried-up, torpid, and even distinctly *petit-bourgeois*!» The overall impression of the picture is indeed disappointing. In this respect it somewhat ironic that Hales should have referred to Asper as «*Zenitus Tigurinus*.» The Vermigli of this portrait does not sparkle with vitality. Hugelshofer remarks that «the sun of Grace» does not illuminate this likeness, and concludes that the painting must consequently be relegated to the status of a merely historical rather than genuinely artistic representation of the reformer²². This is no idealised «type» of the reformer, no «improvement on the actual,» as Aristotle put it; indeed quite the contrary²³. While Hugelshofer's analysis is, on the whole, fairly convincing, it is nonetheless worth noting how remarkably fitting the second distich is to such a lacklustre image: «This is his likeness; the writings conceal his mind / Integrity and piety cannot be represented by art.» Hugelshofer goes on to suggest that the book held by Vermigli is most likely the Bible²⁴. This interpretation does not fit very well, however, with the insinuation of the distich. The verse intimates that while the painted figure represents Vermigli's *effigies*, that is his merely external appearance, *his mentem* remains concealed in the writings, presumably beyond the power of aesthetic representation. If we accept the guidance of the tetraslach in the interpretation of the painting, then the book which «conceals» the reformer's mind is more likely to be representative of his commentaries and treatises than the Bible itself. Whatever the painter's intention may have been, the author of the verse, at any rate, suggests that the most significant qualities of the reformer cannot be conveyed by the merely outward representation of the *effigies*. On this view, the true «icon» of the great theologian cannot be found in daubs of paint, but must be sought altogether elsewhere. Hugelshofer's interpretation proceeds from a classical aesthetic assumption that the external image properly ought to convey the underlying substantial reality of the subject. On this assumption the marked absence of spiritual and intellectual vitality in the likeness of Vermigli would seem to render the painting a failure. The hermeneutic implied by the inscription, on the other hand, nevertheless holds out the possibility that the painting may at some level «succeed» precisely by virtue of its failure to represent Vermigli's widely acknowledged intellectual and spiritual qualities.

²² Walter Hugelshofer, «Zum Porträt des Petrus Martyr Vermilius,» p. 129.

²³ See note 7 above.

²⁴ Hugelshofer, «Zum Porträt des Petrus Martyr Vermilius,» p. 128.

— «INTEGRITAS PIETAS PINGIER ARTE NEQVIT.» The latter interpretation might be described as a «negative iconography,» that is an interpretation of the portrait on the assumption of the essential hiddenness of the subject — *Vermilius Absconditus*. Have the suspicions of idolatry which surrounded Hales's commission from the outset informed the iconography of Asper's final portrait? Both distichs of the inscription appear to point the viewer beyond the *effigies* of the reformer to a hidden reality beyond mere images, *apud superos*.

Asper's portrait of Vermigli provides a pattern for numerous subsequent depictions of the reformer. In 1562, the year of Vermigli's death, a silver medal was struck in Zurich to commemorate the death of the great reformer²⁵. Designed by the Zurich artist and craftsman Hans Ulrich Stampfer II (1534–1580), the round medal bears the image of Vermigli on the obverse with the inscription «*Petrus: Martyr: Vermilius: Floruentius*.»²⁶ The image on the medal is a bust quite plainly derived from the portrait by Asper. The head is portrayed in the identical three-quarter profile facing right with the same detail of moustache, forked beard, academic cap and tipton. On the reverse of the medal is the first of the two distichs which appear on the portrait: «*HVNCGENVIT...APVD SPERO*S.» Underneath the distich is added «*OBIIT ANNO DOM. MDLXII. AET. 63.*»²⁷ The absence of the second distich is no doubt owing to the restricted space for a legible inscription on the face of the medal. More importantly, however, the reduction of the figure with the consequent removal of both the book and Vermigli's gesturing hand renders the second distich iconographically superfluous.

Within less than a year after Vermigli's death Josias Simler's Funeral Oration was published in Zurich by Christoph Froschauer the younger²⁸. A woodcut portrait of the reformer is printed as a frontispiece to the folio²⁹. It

²⁵ Naegeli und Hobi, Zürcher Kunst nach der Reformation, Katalog no. 258, p. 208 (Fig. 2).

²⁶ For an account of the artist Stampfer and his work see Hans-Ulrich Geiger, «Zürcher Münz- und Medaillenkunst im 16. Jahrhundert,» in Naegeli und Hobi, Zürcher Kunst nach der Reformation, pp. 27–31. See also Ulrich Thieme und Felix Becker, Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler von der Antike bis zum Gegenwart XXXI (Zwickau, 1964–66), p. 460.

²⁷ He died in the year of our Lord 1562, aged 63. Here the age is given correctly.

²⁸ Josias Simler, *Oratio de vita et obitu clarissimi viri et praestantissimi theologi D. Petri Martyris Vermillii* (Zürich, 1563). For an English translation of the Oratio see John Patrick Donnelly, ed. and trans., *Life, Letters and Sermons, The Peter Martyr Library 5* (Kirksville, MO, 1999).

²⁹ For a detailed description of the frontispiece to the Oratio see «Illustrierte Bücher,» in Naegeli und Hobi, Zürcher Kunst nach der Reformation, Katalog nr. 188, p. 170. Murer's woodcut portrait of Vermigli is also reproduced in Hans-Ulrich Bächtold, ed., *Schola Tigurina: Die Zürcher Hohe Schule und ihre Gelehrten um 1550*; Katalog zur Ausstellung vom 25. Mai bis 10. Juli 1999 in der Zentralbibliothek Zürich, Institut für Schweizerische Reformationsgeschichte (Zürich, 1999), p. 54 (Fig. 3).

bears the signature mark of Jos Murer (1530–1580), Glass-painter to the Council of Zurich, on the inner band of the oval border³⁰. Like Stampfer, Murer has based his design on the original portrait, once again omitting the lower portion of the painting along with the iconographically relevant second distich. In Murer's adaptation of Asper, however, the likeness is reversed. Although still in three-quarter profile, Vermigli is now looking to the left rather than to the right. Curiously each and every letter «S» of the inscription in the oval-shaped band which surrounds the likeness is also reversed in the print – perhaps a subtle, self-referential allusion by the sculptor to his reversal of the original portrait? Murer certainly displayed no similar evidence of dyslexia in the carving of the letter «S» in other, similar portraits³¹. The oval perimeter of the portrait is inscribed «PETRUS MARTYR VERMILIUS FLORENTINUS ANNO AETATIS SUAE LXIII»³². In the lower portion of the oval, underneath the image, there is the further inscription «OBIT ANNO DNI/ MDLXII. PRI. DIE IDVS NOV/ EMBRIS.»³³. Aside from the reversal of the image, the iconographical detail once again closely resembles the oil portrait. The effect of the sharp contrast between dark line and white background in the woodcut suggests a somewhat younger man, perhaps owing to a heightened sharpness of detail with respect to the hair and beard. Murer has somehow succeeded in conveying a spark of intensity in the reformer's gaze wholly lacking in the oil portrait.

The Murer woodcut firmly establishes the iconographical pattern for subsequent images. The most well-known portrait of Vermigli, published in the *Icones* of Theodore de Bèze in 1580, follows Murer closely, although the derivative is a somewhat less refined and exact image³⁴. It too shows a three-quarter profile looking to the left. The same iconographical *notae* are present: the academical cap and tippet, full moustache and forked beard. The brow is pensively knit. Like Stampfer's medal Beza's «icon» of Vermigli shows just head and shoulders. Like the Murer woodcut, the «icon» is presented in an oval shape though without an inscription. Surrounding the oval-shaped por-

³⁰ André J. Racine, Jos Murer: ein Zürcher Dramatiker aus der zweiten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts (Zürich, 1973), Nr. 49, p. 63. Bernhard Anderec, «Glasmalerei im reformierten Zürich.» Zürcher Kunst nach der Reformation, p. 19.

³¹ See Naegeli und Hobi, Zürcher Kunst nach der Reformation, Katalog nr. 189 and 190, p. 170.

³² Peter Martyr Vermigli, Florentine, in his 63rd year.

³³ He died in the year of our Lord 1562 on the day before the Ides of November (i.e. November 12th).

³⁴ Théodore de Bèze, Icones, id est, Veræ imagines virorum doctrina simul et pietate illustratum: quorum præcipu e ministerio partum bonarum literarum studia sunt restituta, partim vera religio in variis orbis Christiani regionibus, nostra patrumque memoria fuit instaurata; additis eorundem vitæ & operæ descriptionibus, quibus adiectæ sunt nonnullæ picturae quas emblemata vocant (Geneva, 1580).

trait is an elaborate rectangular Jacobean – style frame with fanciful gargoyle at the four corners.

Yet another early portrait of Vermigli – a hand-coloured, copperplate engraving – was shown at a recent exhibit devoted to the *Schola Tigurina* and held at the Zurich Central Library from May to July 1993³⁵. The engraving is closely modelled on Murer's woodcut and depicts Vermigli in three-quarter profile facing left with the same full moustache and forked beard. The detail of the visage follows the woodcut closely but the gown's appearance of richness, even elegance evokes the oil portrait directly. In the engraving the reformer is depicted clasping a quarto-size volume in both hands; this pose manages to convey a distinctly pious demeanour. As with the oil portrait, medal and woodcuts, this likeness of Vermigli impresses the viewer with a curious air of remoteness. A great deal more is concealed than revealed by the external effigies. No doubt Vermigli himself would have been pleased to refer the viewer to the contemplation of those things that are *apud superos*.

³⁵ Michael Baumann, «Petrus Martyr Vermigli: Der Kosmopolit aus Italien in Zürich (1556–1562),» in Bachthold, ed., *Schola Tigurina*, p. 34.