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**Giambattista Vico’s Biblical Scholarship**  
**Giants as “Translators” of the Gentile Sociability\***

**Abstract**

*The paper deals with the ways Giambattista Vico approaches the Baroque erudite gigantology and Biblical account of the Babylonian confusion of tongues. Focusing primarily on Vico’s treatise The Constancy of Philology (second part of De constantia jurisprudentis), we set ourselves the goal to point out the line of historical development located between two major tracks of the Vichian history of nations – that of the gentiles and that of the Jews. Our study made it possible to consider the Vico’s science as resulting of an interaction of various disciplinary palimpsests and discursive splinters, cut short and not written to the end – Protestant exegesis or historiography of the prisca sapientia among them.*

**Keywords**

Giambattista Vico, Samuel Bochart, Biblical exegesis, Baroque gigantology

Despite Giambattista Vico’s pronounced wish to keep his distance from theology and a glossing over of Jewish history in the *New Science*, the attentive reader of the Vichian writings, starting from the earliest, the *Orationes inaugurales*, gradually grows aware of the importance of the biblical background for the Vichian history of nations. Vico’s civil science interacted, as oddly as it may sometimes appear, with a vast array of Biblical disciplines: chronology, geography, poetry, and politics, as well as with the most important branches of early modern oriental studies.<sup>1</sup> As in a palimpsest, the presence of the sacred history diminished over the course of time, from the treatise *On the Constancy of the Jurist* (1721) to the ultimate version of the *New Science* (1744). In spite of recent historiographical efforts,<sup>2</sup> the problem of the function of biblical argument in early modern civil sciences still requires further investigation. Sheldon Wolin once called Hobbes’ state of nature “a kind of political version of Genesis, without sacred overtones and without sin”,<sup>3</sup>

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A useful survey of Vico’s attitude on the Biblical studies of his time is: Giuseppe Mazzotta, *La nuova mappa del mondo. La filosofia poetica di Giambattista Vico*, Torino, Einaudi, 1999, pp. 246–266.

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See, e.g.: Andreas Pecar, Kai Trampedach (eds.), *Die Bibel als politisches Argument*, München, Oldenbourg, 2007.

the same can be extended to the Vichian “most certain criticism of the human arbitrary actions” as well. In contrast to Hobbes, Vico explicitly presents his “philosophical philology” as an apology of the sacred history against Isaac La Peyrère’s preadamism, the heterodox version of sacred chronology represented by John Marsham, John Spencer and Georg Horn, Spinosist biblical criticism and Cartesian biblical physics.<sup>4</sup>

Our study will focus on one particular line of Vico’s biblical interests concerning the status of the postdiluvian men, their role in the primordial history of mankind and their function in the whole construction of the Vichian new science. Our analysis will be set against the background of the newborn Baroque discipline – *geographia sacra*, invented by the erudite French Protestant Samuel Bochart (1599–1667). This “neglected scholar”, “hardly attractive as an intellectual”, who produced “lengthy, dusty volumes”,<sup>5</sup> which still constitute the reference point for historians of Old Testament onomastics and zoology, flourished in Caen in the first half of the 17th century.<sup>6</sup> He was a disciple of the most prominent Orientalists and scriptural philologists of his day: Louis Cappel, known first of all because of his active participation in the *querelle* around the vowels in the Masoretic Torah and Erpenius, under whose supervision Bochart learned Arabic and Syriac. Traveling around the different cities of the European *Republic of Letters*, he visited Oxford and Leiden, was introduced to Vossius, Heinsius, and Saumaise, and learned about a dozen of languages, including Celtic, Coptic, Ethiopian, Persian, English, and Italian. In addition to his extremely broad scientific interests, Bochart wrote verses in Greek and was highly praised as a poet. In nearly each of the fields embraced by his tremendous erudition Bochart left some significant scientific heritage; thus, he fruitfully studied Celtic antiquities and reviewed, in 1637, the *Histoire des anciens Gaulois* of Antoine Gosselin. Together with his compatriot Daniel Huet, Bochart was a pillar of the famous Caen school of Biblical studies; according to Pierre Bayle’s famous judgment, “il n’y a point d’académie dans le reste de l’Europe, qui soit composée de plus habiles gens que celle de Caen”.<sup>7</sup> Inspired by Bochart’s intellectual grandeur, Christine of Suede personally invited this incomparable *objet d’admiration européenne* to her court.

Bochart was one of the first modern intellectuals to draw scholarly attention to the remnants of the Phoenician language in Greek tragedy (Plautus, *Poenulus*, V act) and to have thoroughly studied the history and geography of the Punic colonies. His contemporaries sarcastically observed that “il ne voyait que le phénicien partout”.<sup>8</sup> He gained glory across Europe for two opera magna: *Hierozoicon* and *Geographia sacra*, constituting two parts of a natural history of the Bible. Bochart’s treatise, which grew out of a single chapter, takes as its point of departure the same aporia as in Vico’s case: the absence of any reliable sources dating back to the primordial stage of human history, Varro’s *adelon* (*neque enim aliud quicquam superest unde priscarum gentium origines exsculpamus*).<sup>9</sup>

In the whole body of Vichian opera, Bochart was mentioned explicitly only twice, and both references have been significantly omitted in the final cut of the *New Science*. Once the author of the *Sacred geography* was quoted approvingly; the second time, Vico denounced Bochart’s Hebrew-centered conception of the history of languages. In the correspondent fragment, Vico reconstructs and rejects in one stroke a tremendous and highly consistent epistemological project of Protestant biblical scholarship: Bochart’s reconsideration of the literal sense of Scripture, Daniel Huet’s evangelical demonstration

as opposed to the Cartesian method, and Selden's rooting of the natural law in the biblical text.<sup>10</sup> Bochart's *Faleg and Canaan* presents one of the most fascinating historical-geographical embodiments of the protestant literalism. The abundance of historical and etymological details, the variety of characters and grandeur of the plot makes Bochart's *Faleg* a rival of the *New Science* to be reckoned with in its historical aspect.

"These ideas should, all at once, overturn the system of John Selden, who claims that the natural law of eternal reason had been taught by the Hebrews to the Gentiles, based on the seven precepts bequeathed by God to the sons of Noah; they should overturn the *Faleg* of Samuel Bochart, who maintains that the Sacred tongue had been spread by the Hebrews to the other peoples and then deformed and corrupted in their midst; and, finally, they should overturn the *Dimostrazion evangelica* of Daniel Huet (who follows closely upon the *Faleg* of Bochart, just as the *Faleg* of Bochart follows upon the system of Selden) in which the most learned gentleman attempts to make one believe that the fables are sacred tales altered and corrupted by the Gentiles, and especially by the Greeks."<sup>11</sup>

As Arnaldo Momigliano justly noted, Vico's interest in ancient history was outdated and fit in the Protestant scholarship of 1660–1670 rather than in the contemporary discussions on Etruscan antiquities and *acta martyrum*.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, Vico and such erudite Baroque writers as Bochart had a lot of shared premises and problems; for Bochart, as well as for Vico, the sacred history, in contrast to the historiography of the Gentiles, provides the certain

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See: Helen Thornton, *State of Nature or Eden? Thomas Hobbes and His Contemporaries on the Natural Condition of Human Beings*, Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2005, p. 4.

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Paolo Rossi, *The Dark Abyss of Time: The History of the Earth and the History of Nations from Hooke to Vico*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp. 123–131; 168–194.

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Zur Shalev, *Sacred Words and Worlds. Geography, Religion, and Scholarship, 1550–1700*, Leiden, Brill, 2012, p. 146.

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A comprehensive epitome of the Bochart's work see in: Guy G. Stroumsa, *A New Science. The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason*, Harvard, Harvard UP, 2010, pp. 82–84.

7

Edward Herbert Smith, *Recherches sur la vie et les principaux ouvrages de Samuel Bochart*, Caen, 1833, p. 21.

8

Ibid., p. 356.

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Samuel Bochart, *Geographia Sacra seu Faleg et Canaan*, Lugduni Batavorum, Apud Cornelium Boutesteyn, & Jordanum Luchtmans, 1692, praefatio, s.p.

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On these authors see: April G. Shelford, *Transforming the Republic of Letters. Pierre-Daniel Huet and European Intellectual Life 1650–1720*, Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2007; April Shelford, "Thinking Geometrically in Pierre-Daniel Huet's 'Demonstratio evangelica'", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63 (IV/2002), pp. 599–617.

11

"Le quali cose tutte ad un colpo devono rovesciar il sistema di Giovanni Seldeno, il quale pretende il diritto naturale della ragione eterna essere stato dagli ebrei insegnato a' gentili sopra i sette precetti lasciati da Dio a' figliuoli di Noe, devono rovesciare il *Faleg* di Samuello Bocarto, che vuole la lingua Santa essersi propagata dagli ebrei all'altre nazioni e tra queste fossesi diffornata e corrotta; e finalmente devono rovesciare la *Demostrazion evangelica* di Daniello Uezio, che va di seguito al *Faleg* del Bocarto, come il *Faleg* di Bocarto va di seguito al sistema del Seldeno nella quale l'uomo eruditissimo s'industria di dar a credere che le favole siano sagre storie alterate e corrotte da' gentili e sopra tutti da' greci". Paolo Cristofolini, Manuela Sanna (eds.), *Correzioni, Miglioramenti, ed Aggiunte* published in *Scienza nuova 1730*, Naples, Alfredo Guida Editore, 2004, p. 415 (translation by A. Momigliano).

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Arnaldo Momigliano, "Vico's *Scienza nuova*: Roman 'Bestioni' and Roman 'Eroi'", *History and Theory* 5 (1/1966), p. 4.

foundations of the *status exlex* of mankind.<sup>13</sup> The certainty of the historical records is manifested by the essence of the Hebrew language as such, which presupposes the use of the historical (past) tense as the basis for Hebrew grammar.<sup>14</sup> Even more important is the epistemological priority of the sacred history over the obscure myths of the Gentiles in Vico – according to *The Constancy of Philology*, biblical history performs the emanation of the “geometrical truth” (*verum geometricum*) in the social world, making it possible to achieve the main objective of the new critical art – to ‘discern the truthful’ (*discernere il vero*) in the history of nations, countervailing the ‘uncertainty of human nature’ (*incertitudo naturae humanae*).<sup>15</sup>

For Bochart, who was an heir to a long tradition of Protestant hermeneutics and epistemology, the biblical text was a cornerstone of certainty, turned to ‘ridiculous fables’ by the Greeks (*ad ridiculas fabulas devolvuntur*). The methodological departure point that Bochart’s geography proceeds upon – “the truthful is always the initial, the adulterous comes always after”<sup>16</sup> – was borrowed from Tertullian. While tackling the issue of the very first beginnings of the history of nations, Bochart derides the most notorious pagan myths of the origins:

“Atque alii se ex quercibus aut lapidibus, alii ex fungis, alii ex cicadis, alii ex formicis, alii ex draconis dentibus se fabulantur ortos. Quis porro gentium aliarum incunabula & primordia edoceri posse se putet ab iis qui de propria origine talia mentiuntur? Itaque hoc restat unicum, ut ad sacram anchoram hoc est ad Scripturam confugiamus (...) ex uno capitulo Mosis, si modo recte intelligatur, multo plura & certiora possint erui de populorum originibus, quam ex omnibus quotquot supersunt vetustissimarum gentium monumentis.”<sup>17</sup>

This attitude should be compared with a famous passage from Vico’s chapter “On Method” from the *New Science*:

“To complete the establishment of the principles which have been adopted for this Science, it remains in this first book to discuss the method which it should follow. It must begin where its subject matter began, as we said in the Axioms. We must therefore go back with the philologists and fetch it from the stones of Deucalion and Pyrrha, from the rocks of Amphion, from the men who sprang from the furrows of Cadmus or the hard oak of Vergil. With the philosophers we must fetch it from the frogs of Epicurus, from the cicadas of Hobbes, from the simpletons of Grotius; from the men cast into this world without care or aid of God, of whom Pufendorf speaks, as clumsy and wild as the so-called Patagonian giants, who are said to be found near the strait of Magellan; which is as much as to say from the cyclopes of Homer in whom Plato recognizes the first fathers in the state of the families. (This is the science the philologists and philosophers have given us of the beginnings of humanity!)”<sup>18</sup>

This bold statement is consciously opposed to an array of the principles-of-humanity theories, and embracing them all, simultaneously finds itself in a striking contrast to the above-quoted dismissing of the profane historiography and mythology in Bochart. Vico was extremely sensitive to the provocative essence of the *principia* question; thus, the radical rethinking of the Gentile account of the first principles in Vico comes hand-in-hand with the derision of the rival *principia*-theory, developed by the “Brucker-style” history of ideas.<sup>19</sup> In the “Corollaries Concerning the Principal Aspects of This Science”, as well as in the “explanation of the poetic wisdom” – the most important methodological sections of the *New Science* – Vico famously calls his science the “history of ideas” (*terzo principale aspetto è una storia d’umane idee*) and divides all the principles of his science into two parts: one referring to the history of ideas, and the other to the history of language (*principi divisi in due classi, una dell’Idee, un’altra delle Lingue*). At the same time, the main representatives of the nascent history of philosophy as an autonomous literary genre in the 17<sup>th</sup> century intellectual landscape – Jacob Brucker and

Georg Horn – are harshly criticized in the Vichian *opus magnum*. Whereas Brucker is mentioned anonymously – Vico contents himself with quoting the title of Brucker's major text, *Historia doctrinae de ideis* – Horn makes part of the pandemonium of the negative characters of the *New Science* on a par with Machiavelli, Hobbes, Selden and other *bêtes noires*. In the section "On Poetic Geography" Horn comes under attack because of his anachronistic representation of the Scythian Anacharsis, transformed by the *prisca sapientia* into one of the founders of philosophy.<sup>20</sup> We can find the not only explicit, but also implicit criticism directed against Brucker's version of the history of philosophy associated with natural science. Among the remarks to the Chronological table under the letters "Kk" we find the mention of Thales the Milesian – the founding-father of Ionic philosophy (*secta ionica*) and, *eo ipso*, of philosophy as a whole for such historians as Brucker. The Protestant historiography made it a commonplace to begin the history of philosophy with the figure of Thales<sup>21</sup> (it is clear that this genealogy in the final analysis dates back to Diogenes Laertius, but in Diogenes we can find a number of "Oriental" predecessors of Thales, who were not worthy of the canon of the critical history of philosophy). Vico also claims that Thales was the founder of philosophy and considers him as a physician. But the discovery of the physical first principle – water – by Thales has been consciously located in a trivial context: "Thales began with too simple a principle: water; perhaps because he had seen gourds grow on water" (*e cominciò da un principio troppo sciapito – dall'acqua, – forse perché aveva osservato con l'acqua crescer le zucche*).<sup>22</sup> The birth of the physics turns out to be a casual and ridiculous event, and Thales – rather a comic character and hardly deserving the high

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"Nulla profanarum historia genus humanum exlex, tum ante, tum post Diluvium, ante omnes republicas fundatas omnesque leges positas, sub theokratia egisse, explicatus narret" (Samuel Bochart, *Geographia sacra*).

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Alterum: quod ipsa historia ipsis linguae perpetuitatem servarit, quod illud evincit – hebraeae linguae eruditus in eius caussis hactenus inobservatum – quod rectum verborum, uti graecis latinisque est tempus praesens, ita hebraeis est praeteritum, tempus proprium historicorum, et tertiae quidem personae" (ibid.).

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"Atque has ipsas res – praecisa licet divina fide, quae tamen omni demonstratione maior est – tradere humanis argumentis, quantum haec res ad verum geometricum propius accedere patiat, demonstratas" (ibid.).

16

"Id esse verum quodcunque primum, id esse adulterum quodcunque posterius (Tertullian versus Praxeas). Necessè enim est ut veritas sit prior mendacio, cum mendacium nihil aliud sit quam corruptio veritatis" (ibid.).

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Samuel Bochart, *Geographia Sacra*, praefatio, s.p.

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*The New Science of Giambattista Vico. Unabridged Translation of the Third Edition (1744) with the Addition of "Practic of the New Science"*, tr. by Th. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch, Ithaca – New York, John Hopkins University Press, 1976, p. 89.

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On the early modern history of ideas see: Gregorio Piaia, Giovannii Santinello (eds.), *Models of the History of Philosophy. Vol. II: From the Cartesian Age to Brucker*. Springer, Dordrecht – Heidelberg – London – New York, 2011; Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, Theo Stammen, *Jacob Brucker (1696–1770): Philosoph und Historiker der europäischen Aufklärung*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1998.

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*The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, p. 46.

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Constance Blackwell, "Thales Philosophus: The Beginning of Philosophy as a Discipline", in: Donald R. Kelley (ed.), *History and the Disciplines. The Reclassification of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe*, New York, The University of Rochester Press, 1997, pp. 61–82.

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*The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, p. 43.



place in the pantheon of the founders of the positive science assigned to him by such authors as Brucker. Here irony turns out to be the major instrument for discrediting the first principles of the rival “new sciences”.

One of the key-figures Vico borrowed from Bochart's erudite gigantology and re-used for the needs of his innovative civil science was Nimrod, son of Chus and grandson of Noè. Some pagan and Christian authors claimed that Nimrod participated at the construction of the tower of Babel, but Bochart finds the chronological inconvenience which makes such an interpretation impossible: the future “great hunter” was a little child or was even not yet born, so, he was not responsible for the *peccatum Babel*. The error originates from the confusion of notions used by different authors in their description of Nimrod on the one hand, and of the constructors of the tower on the other: the constructors being called giants, the same name has been extended to their leader as well by misunderstanding; the tradition calls giants the sons of the earth – and Gen. 10, 11 says the same of Nimrod;<sup>23</sup> then, according to the tradition, the giants waged war against God – and Scripture applies the same thing to Nimrod, who is called “venator coram Domino” – that is, according to some authors “bellator contra Dominum” (Bochart does not name the authors seeking to denigrate Nimrod's memory – probably because of their incontestable authority; among them was, for instance, saint Augustine). Then, the pagan tradition asserts that the constructors of the tower wanted to reach heaven by climbing on it. But this opinion contains evident contradictions – to common sense and to the scriptural text as well. We can hardly imagine that the men who were able to erect such an enormous building were idiots who did not take account of the foolishness of their idea. Bochart seeks to sew together the torn pieces of an ancient tradition, reconstructing the mythical universal, the common imagery of the Hebrews and Gentiles. While describing the tower and the dispersion of the people, Moses uses words which can be translated in Latin as “dissipare et confringere”; Bochart refers to the Chaldaic tradition according to which the Babylonian confusion was accompanied by a series of events strikingly similar to those described in the Ovid's *Fasti* (1,5, 35) and Lucretius *De rerum natura*: lightning, thunderbolts, and hurricane.<sup>24</sup>

According to Bochart, Nimrod was the best hunter in the world from the point of view of Almighty God – and it was enough. The Hebrew passage Bochart proposes to translate as “coepit esse potens גַּבְרָא בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן” – and rejects the Greek version: ἤρξατο εἶναι γίγας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, *he began to be a giant in the earth*, moreover, in the following verse – γίγας κυνηγὸς ἐναντίον κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ, *he was a mighty hunter before the Lord* – he excludes the word γίγας for the above-mentioned reasons and reduces the meaning of ἐναντίον (“against” or “before”) to “in God's eyes”. According to Bochart, the LXX version would be valid if Moses had meant only the physical form of Nimrod, but in the Mosaic account he “undertook the greatest deeds, not only by his body, but by the forces of his soul as well” (*res gessit maximas, non tam corporis quam animi viribus*). In order to corroborate his opinion, Bochart criticizes the Greek version of the biblical text, examining the Greek comments on the words by which Nimrod is described and proposing his own variants of translation which seemed to him closer to the author's intention. In the chapters dedicated to the construction of the Tower of Babel, Nimrod is presented as rather a positive character, a cultural hero rather than an arrogant and foolish giant. Before his arrival in Babylonia, men lived in a miserable condition in the forests and plains' they lurked in their shelters persecuted by ferocious animals. Nimrod, being a hunter, first saved the people from these beasts,

gathered them and established his power upon them, founding civilization instead of the vagabond life of the primitive men. So, Bochart cleans his character from any accusations – and in the first place he contests the translation of the title “venator coram Domino” as “bellator contra Dominum”, and states that the etymology of his name – Nimrod from *marad*, *ribellio*, should be rethought. The mighty lord of the Chaldeians obtained his name because of a number of military expeditions, directed against “the more or the less powerful” in comparison with him.<sup>25</sup>

The appearance of Nimrod constituted a turning point in the history of mankind, performing the transition from the silver to the copper age – *ab eodem initium sumpsit teria illa aetas quam aeneam Poetae vocant*.<sup>26</sup> “First hunter, then warrior, he turned his strength from the beasts to the men and established his power by the means of tyranny” (*primo venator, mox bellator, vim suam a feris convertit in homines, & per tyrannidem imperium sibi erexit*) – Nimrod, moving from Arabia, used the skills acquired during his hunting practices for “conquering and unarming” (*ad debellandos*) the peoples of Babylon, Susiana, and Assyria.

“Et qua industria, quo animo, quibus viribus aggressus est imanes feras, iisdem utitur cum res postulat ad debellandos homines. Qua benevolentia fretus, & expedita manu juvenum quorum opera usus fuerat ad ferarum ventationes, ausus est majora moliri, & et conversis viribus a feris in homines, imperium in vicinos populos usurpare, Babyloniam scilicet & Susianam, & Assyriam.”<sup>27</sup>

Another great achievement connected with the name of Nimrod was that of the division of camps. In the epoch of Nimrod’s great-grandfather Noe, identified by Bochart with Saturn, the whole land remained in common possession (*arvis nondum divisis*). The cultural importance of Nimrod dates back to a number of medieval authors, Dante among them – let us remember that in the Divine Comedy the giants are characterized as combining the faculty of understanding with evil will and power (*dove argomento de la mente / S’aggiunge al mal volere e a la possa*); thus Nimrod is described as “a foolish soul” (*anima sciocca*), because, being bestowed with the faculty of reason (*scientia*), he was totally deprived of wisdom (*sapientia*). We also find this combination of features in Vico though not expressed openly. In Bochart we can discern overtones which remind us of Vico’s exegetical palimpsest – but the outlines are somewhat different. Though pretending to unveil the truth of the ancient myths, dismissed by such short-sighted scholars as Bochart, Vico (in contrast to his fellow Pietro Giannone, for instance) was by no means trying to undermine the authority of the sacred Scripture. Quite the contrary: he

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Samuel Bochart, *Geographia sacra*, p. 52.

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“Sequitur Deum ventis immissis tam ipsum opus quam opifices dissipasse. Sumptum id ex historia Chaldaica in qua legebatur facta fuisse haec dissipatio *per quattuor ventos coelorum*, id est in quattuor mundi plagas, vel *super faciem omnis terrae*, ut habetur Gen. II.8.9. Sed interpretes sic acceperunt, ac si dissipatio facta fuisse diceretur ventorum ministerio. 6. Denique quia  $\aleph$  vel  $\aleph$ , quo verbo hic utitur Moses, non dissipare solum sed & confringere significat, unde est quod fulmen vocatur  $\aleph$  Esa 30,30. Ajunt totum opus confractum & subversum fuisse. Nec

multo aliter Benjamin. *ignis in medium turris coelitus delapsus est*” (ibid., p. 106).

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“Nempe qui a rebellione qua vel in superiores vel in pares insurrexerat, dictus fuerat Nimrod, id est rebellis, idem a dominio baal & bel, id est dominus, post stabilitum imperium vocari coepit” (ibid., p. 264).

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Ibid., p. 256.

27

Ibid.

presents himself as its defender. But actually the epistemological status of the biblical argument is far from clear and unambiguous in Vico – as we tried to show in another essay on the example of the “diluvian axiom”.<sup>28</sup> His constant effort to cut off the Jews from the Gentiles stumbles at one substantial obstacle – the historical development and legacy of the Chaldeans. The ancient Oriental peoples – Assyrians, Chaldeans and Persians – presented a paradoxical admixture of impiety and scientific development:

“The Assyrians, and accordingly the Persians, maintained the abominable sexual practices from this savage way of life; but giants disappeared among them, because astrology soon restored the civilized arts. And I hope that these facts concerning giants, which up to now have been told in fables which didn't square well with sacred history, will in the future lend support to the science of philology, and not empty erudition.”<sup>29</sup>

Against this background should be set also the Vichian account of the Babylonian confusion of tongues:

“And this fact proves the Babylonian confusion of tongues as well, [because the language of even the Chaldeans was impoverished,] in spite of the fact that they had discovered the arts at an early date, due to the preservation of the memory of antediluvian humanity by the Semites. For although they knew the things, after the confusion they were unable to call each thing by its proper name; therefore, driven by the same necessity as the mute men in the rest of the world, they designated them by heroic characters.”<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to other Gentile nations, the Chaldeans experienced not a catastrophe, not a thunderbolt, but a gradual linguistic decline, due to the event of the confusion of tongues. The impious arts of magic, somehow resembling to the divination and auspices of the Japhetic peoples, preserved science, sociability and humanity even in the middle of religious apostasy. Moreover – via the Chaldeans – the “antediluvian humanity” and “arcane disciplines” (*interiores disciplinas*) were transmitted to their neighbors – first to the Phoenicians, then to the Egyptians. Alongside the Greek mythology, the Chaldean letters laid the foundations of all languages: “we should call the magical characters of the Chaldeans and the fables of the Greeks the original ancestral tongue of each people”.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the Chaldeans had a kind of analogue of the thunderbolt-mechanism of the birth of humanity in other nations – their divinity revealed its not via a roar and thunder of the sky, but due to a perverted judgment of reason during the almost scientific contemplation of heaven: “ita caelum a syderum motibus sibi finxere deum, atque in id, etsi non verum, saltem doctum divinationis genus concessere, magiam”.<sup>32</sup> So, for the Chaldeans not fear, but science turns out to be the impetus of sociability.

Given this peculiarity of the Chaldean civilization located somewhere in between the Gentile and the Hebrew worlds, the biblical event of the confusion of tongues becomes even more intricate. First of all, in order to grasp the meaning of this event in Vico, we must take into account the specificity of the biblical giants (as far as one of them, Nimrod, initiates the construction of the Tower of Babel): in contrast to the famous *bestioni*, pushing through the great forest of the Earth, the Biblical giants, antediluvian as well as postdiluvian, appear as the founders of the greatest cities of the ancient world (*idolatri giganti, divisi per le città*).<sup>33</sup> In the treatise *On the Constancy of Philology* Vico borrows from Bochart and iteratively uses the idea according to which the giants born from the “sons of God” were not *demoni incubi*, but the product of interbreeding between the posterity of Seth and the impious children of Cain. Curiously they turn out to be more civilized (“had a certain refinement”) and attractive to the pious posterity of Seth than their relatives:



“These women must have been descendants of Cain, since Cain had founded cities, as sacred history also relates, and the women of his race must have had a certain refinement, not to mention being cleaner. And we must imagine too that these women burned with desire for these descendants of Seth, since they were held to be the true heroes of the golden age, who protected themselves and their herds and crops from wild beasts not with walls, but with valor.”<sup>34</sup>

Thus the Biblical giants does not look like the *bestioni* born from the filth – and this Cainite *urbanitas* will somehow be transferred to the postdiluvian world.

As Antony Grafton justly observes, Vico took his giants very seriously. Being part of the country's long erudite gigantology, from saint Augustine to Augustin Calmet, the Neapolitan presents his giants as “composite figures, historical golems patched together from different sources”.<sup>35</sup> Thus, fear of thunder and gigantic size date back to the fifth book of Lucretius; some of the gigantologic commonplaces are contested or omitted: thus, Vico does not accept either the theory of the mystical provenience of the giants, nor the “rather acute than sound” idea according to which the giants should be interpreted only metaphorically, as “tyrants of peoples”. Vico does not refer to the famous Og of Bashan and seems to have no idea of the “survival-cruX”.<sup>36</sup>

Vico glosses over the most of Bochart's argumentation concerning Nimrod. In contrast to the Caen scholar, Vico attributes gigantic stature (*gigantea statura*) to this character; we can find no traces of him being aware of the Bacchus/Zagreus/Nimrod theory sustained by Bochart. The above-mentioned methodological discrepancy concerning the ways of analyzing the mythology in Vico and Bochart as well as passing over in silence some of French's arguments at odds with the Vichian way of reasoning may be explained in different ways: we can ascribe it to Vico's famous “almost infinite capacity for misquotation”<sup>37</sup> and misreading his sources, or we can suggest that he did not know Sacred Geography at first hand, or, finally, that he consciously glossed over the most “unfitting” pieces of argumentation. The most characteristic omission concerning Babel is the effacing of the imagery of wind and thunder surrounding the destruction of the Tower in the *Chaldaica traditio* quoted by Bochart – a probable reason for that is that this tempest-like entourage

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Pavel V. Sokolov, “Giambattista Vico's *discreta domanda*: between Cartesian hypothesis, biblical demonstration, and mathesis politica”, in: Julia. V. Ivanova, Fabrizio Lomonaco (eds.), *Investigations on Giambattista Vico in the Third Millennium. New Perspectives from Brazil, Italy, Japan and Russia*, Rome, Aracne editrice, 2014, pp. 67–78.

29

Giambattista Vico, *The Constancy of the Jurist*, <http://www.ipa.net/~magreyn/vicoeng.htm#1>.

30

Ibid.

31

Ibid.

32

Giambattista Vico, *De constantia jurisprudentis*, <http://www.ipa.net/~magreyn/vicolat.htm#1>.

33

Giambattista Vico, *Principi di una Scienza Nuova intorno alla natura delle nazioni per la quale si ritrovano i principi di altro sistema del diritto naturale delle genti (1725)*, Naples, Diogenes editore, 2014, p. 54.

34

Giambattista Vico, *The Constancy of the Jurist*.

35

Antony Grafton, *Bring out your Dead. The Past as Revelation*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 275.

36

Walter E. Stephens, “‘De historia gigantum’: Theological Anthropology before Rabelais”, *Traditio* 40 (1984), pp. 43–89.

37

Arnaldo Momigliano, “Vico's Scienza nuova: Roman ‘Bestioni’ and Roman ‘Eroi’”, p. 9.

would remind the situation of Jove's revelation and thus confuse these series of events.

The first mention of Nimrod in Vico is quite early and quite traditional – he accuses him of the “dissociation” of his people:

“Numen primi parentis peccatum puniit, ut humanum ab eo propagatum genus dissociaret, disiceret, dissiparet. Nam tot linguarum generibus in impiis, Nemrotis poenam inventis et per universonum terrarum orbem diffusis gentes alias ab aliis seiunxit: et unoquoque in aevum variante et incerto, in iisdem quoque nationibus maiorum linguas posteris voluit ignoratas.”<sup>38</sup>

But in the ulterior Vico's writings, Nimrod appears as a strange giant; first, he is the only giant mentioned by the sacred history who lived immediately after the Flood, and Vico accounts him to the “peoples called *emim* and *zomzomim*, which Hebrew scholars take to mean giants, one of whom was Nimrod”.<sup>39</sup> Originating from the race of Ham, he takes power upon the Semites; despite his gigantic stature and rebellious temperament, he rules not over the “feral” *bestioni* hardly able to speak, but on the nations of astronomers. In the figure of Nimrod “the infamous nefas of the outlaw world” meets civilization in the state of decline:

“The first warriors in the east, since they conducted wars only with land forces, drove before them throughout the earth both the wild beasts and the humans who wandered like beasts, and so the Assyrians extended the first kingdom throughout the eastern continent of Asia. It is for this reason that Nimrod is called in sacred history ‘a mighty hunter,’ just as in profane history Hercules is called ‘a slayer of beasts.’”<sup>40</sup>

In the *New Science* the giants are famously described as a civilizing force, founding cities and dividing camps, establishing their paternal power on the plebeians etc., but Nimrod establishes his power not only over *bestioni*, but on the civilized and numerous (“*tens of thousands of people can be born*”, calculated Vico) Chaldeans – thus a society governed by degenerating reflection met a ferocious cultural hero.

Among the Assyrians the Chaldeans, headed by Nimrod, formed the intellectual elite (*chaldaei inter assyrios (...) soli legum linguam callebant*) and put at the disposal of the history of nations the remnants of their civilization (*frantumi dell'antichità*<sup>41</sup>). The intervention of Nimrod caused a strange political-linguistic event: the Chaldeans lost their capacity to designate things with their proper names and their language of “magical characters” was substituted by that of “heroic characters”; this description sounds odd if confronted with that given below of the “heroic tongues, which described things according to their nature and, as far as possible, properly” (*lingua heroica, quae res apposite ad rerum naturas et, quantum fieri posset, proprie significabat*). So it remains unclear, whether the heroic ensigns designated things properly or not; in the *New Science* this ambiguity is resolved, and the heroic emblems are identified with tropes: “similitudes, comparisons, images, metaphors, and natural descriptions”.<sup>42</sup> But it can be stated with certainty that these signs were used for the division of property – the act Bochart assigned to Nimrod. Even more important, the fact that the Babylonians started using heroic emblems meant that inside, in the womb of this people emerged new nations, mute in respect to each other:

“In the time of mute nations the great need answered by ensigns was that for certainty of ownership. Later they became public ensigns in time of peace, and from these were derived the medals, which, with the introduction of warfare, were found suitable for military insignia. The latter have their primary use as hieroglyphs, inasmuch as wars are waged for the most part between nations differing in speech and hence mute in relation to each other.”<sup>43</sup>

Alongside their delimitating and disintegrating functions, the emblems gradually acquired the social-economic functions as well: “medals, the first ensigns of the peoples, which later became military ensigns and finally coins, which here stand for the extension of trade to movable goods by means of money”;<sup>44</sup> thus the new, profane humanity, relying upon various kind of commerce, constantly grew in Babylonia, substituting the syncretic civilization of idolatrous astronomers. But the influence of this civilization extended to other nations as well, and another aporia caused by the intermediary essence of the Chaldean civilization is the duplicity of the *principia humanitatis* in its neighbors. Where did the first thunderbolt happen? In the last *New Science*, Vico locates this event in Upper Mesopotamia, but in his earlier writings he states that the most ancient Jove stemmed from Egypt:

“Egli sia ragionevole per fisiche ragioni che, dopo il Diluvio lunga età la terra non avesse mandato esalazioni secche ovvero materie ignite in aria ad ingenerarsi de’ fulmini; e, come le regioni furono più vicine agli ardori dell’equinoziale, quale sono la Grecia, l’Italia, così più prestamente o più tardi vi avesse il cielo tuonato. Quindi tante nazioni gentili cominciarono dalle religioni di tanti Giovi, de’ quali il più antico egli fu Giove Ammone in Egitto.”<sup>45</sup>

But what exactly put the Egyptian civilization into motion – the thunderbolt, revealing them Jove/ Ammon in the tremendous wrath of Heaven, or peaceful reception of the antediluvian wisdom and humanity via Chaldeans “on account of their proximity”? Let us remember that according to the NS axiom “every Gentile nation began with its own Jove”; then the ancient Egyptians find themselves stuck along between the *prisca sapientia* line conducting to the Chaldeans and the autonomous event of the “Jove intervention”. This “double principle of humanity” in the history of the Egyptians shows us the collision of two power lines in the history of nations and to opposes the rhythms of degeneration to the periodical structure of *corsi* and *ricorsi*.

The analysis of the biblical gigantology and the peculiar history of Chaldean nation in Vico made it possible to single out an alternative, half-deleted and finally almost abandoned power line in the Vichian history of nations between the poles of sacred and Gentile history. The Vichian science emerges as an interaction of palimpsests or discursive splinters, cut short and not written to the end – Protestant exegesis or historiosophy of the *prisca sapientia* among them. The most fascinating Vichian character, a giant, played an important role in the Vichian account of the *Turris Babel*. The giants are considered to be transitory figures (“*traduces*”, to use Vico’s own expression) between two geometries – the “pure” geometry of the Jews and the “sensible” geometry

38  
Id., “Orationes inaugurales. Oratio VI”,  
[http://www.intratext.com/IXT/LAT0595/  
P1.HTM](http://www.intratext.com/IXT/LAT0595/P1.HTM).

39  
*The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, p. 102.

40  
Giambattista Vico, *On the Constancy of the  
Jurisprudent*.

41  
Giambattista Vico, *Principi di una Scienza  
Nuova intorno alla natura delle nazioni per  
la quale si ritrovano i principi di altro sis-  
tema del diritto naturale delle genti (1725)*,  
p. 52–53.

42  
*The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, p. 18.

43  
Ibid., p. 146.

44  
Ibid., p. 22.

45  
Giambattista Vico, *Principi di una Scienza  
Nuova intorno alla natura delle nazioni per  
la quale si ritrovano i principi di altro sis-  
tema del diritto naturale delle genti (1725)*,  
p. 55.

of men, between two anthropologies, and between two ways of Providential intervention in history – but Nimrod's case is a particular one. The arrival of the warriors, the giant Nimrod and his train consisting of men and *bestioni*, transformed the magic characters of the intellectual elite (Chaldean astronomers) into the heraldic signs which became a sort of standards in the civil war (the confusion of tongues), and finally laid the foundations of a new, purely profane sociability grounded on *commertium* in the broadest sense of the word. The intervention of Nimrod fatally dis-balanced the Chaldean society; more exactly, it broke the equilibrium between philosophy based on reason (astronomy) and philology founded on will (via Nimrod's excessive impiety). Nimrod, a giant with a shade of *urbanitas*, infused the seeds of the civil war in a society which stood closer to the "barbarism of reflection" than to the patriarchal state of families (identified by Vico with the state of nature) – and introduced this hybrid society to the course of the *mondo civile*.

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### **Proučavanje Biblije u Giambattista Vica**

#### **Divovi kao »prevoditelji« poganske društvenosti**

#### **Sažetak**

*Članak se bavi načinima na koje Giambattista Vico pristupa baroknoj eruditskoj gigantologiji te biblijskom prikazu babilonske pomutnje jezika. Fokusirajući se prvenstveno na Vicovu raspravu O konstantnosti filologije (drugi dio djela De constantia jurisprudentis), namjera nam je ukazati na liniju povijesnog razvoja koja se nalazi između dva glavna puta vikovske povijesti naroda – poganskog i židovskog. Naša studija omogućuje razmatranje Vicove znanosti kao rezultata interakcije različitih disciplinarnih palimpsesta i diskurzivnih krhotina, naprasno prekinute i nedovršene – uključujući i protestantsku egzegezute historiozofiju priscae sapientiae.*

#### **Ključne riječi**

Giambattista Vico, Samuel Bochart, biblijska egzegeza, barokna gigantologija

**Julia V. Ivanova, Pavel V. Sokolov**

### **Giambattista Vicos Bibelwissenschaft**

#### **Giganten als „Übersetzer“ der heidnischen Geselligkeit**

#### **Zusammenfassung**

*Der Artikel befasst sich mit der Arten und Weisen, wie Giambattista Vico an die barocke gelehrte Gigantologie und den biblischen Bericht über die babylonische Sprachverwirrung herangeht. Indem wir Vicos Abhandlung Über die Beständigkeit der Philologie (zweiter Teil des Werks De constantia jurisprudentis) vorzugsweise zu unserem Fokus machen, setzen wir uns das Ziel, die Linie der historischen Entwicklung aufzuzeigen, die sich zwischen zwei Hauptwegen der vicoschen Völkergeschichte befindet – dem der Heiden und dem der Juden. Unsere Studie bietet die Gelegenheit, Vicos Wissenschaft als ein Ergebnis der Interaktion von unterschiedlichen disziplinären Palimpsesten und diskursiven Splittern zu betrachten, die abrupt abgebrochen und nicht bis zu Ende geschrieben sind – unter ihnen auch die protestantische Exegese oder die Historiosophie der priscae sapientia.*

#### **Schlüsselwörter**

Giambattista Vico, Samuel Bochart, biblische Exegese, barocke Gigantologie

**Julia V. Ivanova, Pavel V. Sokolov**

**L'étude de la bible chez Giambattista Vico**

**Les géants comme « traducteurs » de la sociabilité païenne**

**Résumé**

*Cet article se penche sur les façons dont Giambattista Vico approche la gigantologie érudite baroque et sur l'explication biblique de la confusion babylonienne des langues. En nous concentrant en premier lieu sur le débat Sur la constance de la philologie (seconde partie de l'oeuvre De constantia jurisprudentis), notre intention est de mettre en avant la ligne de développement historique qui se situe entre deux voies de l'histoire vichienne des peuples – celle du peuple païen et du peuple juif. Notre étude nous permet d'examiner la science de Vico comme le résultat d'une interaction entre différents palimpsestes disciplinaires et fragments discursifs, subitement interrompus et non terminés, comportant également l'exégèse protestante et l'historiosophie de priscae sapientiae.*

**Mots-clés**

Giambattista Vico, Samuel Bochart, exégèse biblique, gigantologie baroque