

A Mystery Divergently Interpreted: Revelation 13:18 in Victorinus of Poetovio's *Commentarius in Apocalypsin*

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1. Introduction

Despite the recent interest in the works of Victorinus of Poetovio, the Pannonian bishop remains an important but underexplored figure in the late third century. The importance of Victorinus stems from what he wrote, what he might have written, and what later editors added to his work. Explorations of Victorinus's writings have moved forward in the last three decades due in large part to the work of Martine Dulaey, whose monograph on Victorinus and edition of his writings in *Sources Chrétiennes* have made possible a slew of recent work.¹⁾ William Weinrich has since translated Victorinus's *Commentarius in Apocalypsin* into English,²⁾ while Roger Gryson has completed a critical edition of Victorinus's works that builds expertly on Dulaey's foundation.³⁾ Slightly

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1) M. Dulaey, *Victorin de Poetovio: Premier exégète latin*, 2 vols. (Paris: Institute d'études augustiniennes, 1993); M. Dulaey, *Victorin de Poetovio: Sur l'Apocalypse et autres écrits*, SC 423 (Paris: Cerf, 1997).

2) W. C. Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries on Revelation*, Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 1-22.

3) R. Gryson, *Victorini Poetovionensis opera quae supersunt: Explanatio in Apocalypsin una cum recensione Hieronymi, Tractatus de fabrica mundi, Fragmentum de vita Christi*, CCSL 5 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017).

further afield, Jonathan Armstrong has proposed that the Muratorian Fragment may stem from Victorinus's pen.⁴⁾ This persistent interest in Victorinus's work occurs in full knowledge of both the fluid state of the commentary text contained in medieval manuscripts and the esteem in which his commentary was held by late antique readers. Victorinus's commentary was edited by Jerome at the end of the fourth century and exists in additional recensions that date from the fifth century and later. Moreover, these recensions were known, read, and incorporated by late antique and medieval authors, sometimes at great risk to their own authorial projects.⁵⁾ For example, the Florentine recension of *Liber genealogus* 616-619 incorporated readings from the recensions of Victorinus's *Commentarius* even when Victorinus's reading of Revelation 13:18 (666) does not match the text of Revelation 13:18 used by the author of *Liber* (616).⁶⁾ Such willingness to quote from the recensions of Victorinus's *Commentarius* even when these quotations created difficulty for a later author indicate the high regard in which his commentary was held.

This essay likewise recognizes Victorinus's importance for late antique commentaries on Revelation by turning its attention to a single textual variant within the manuscript tradition of Victorinus's commentary, namely, that of his commentary on Revelation 13:18. The existence of alternative readings at this juncture (Victorinus, *Comm. apoc.* 13.3) has been recognized in earlier scholarship. Victorinus includes no names in his third-century interpretation of the riddle, while the later recensions offer possible solutions that fit an isophenic interpretation of 666.⁷⁾ Moving beyond an acknowledgement of the

4) J. J. Armstrong, "Victorinus of Pettau as the Author of the Canon Muratori", VC 62 (2008), 1-34. See also R. D. Heaton, *The Shepherd of Hermas as Scriptura Non Grata: From Popularity in Early Christianity to Exclusion from the New Testament Canon* (Lanham: Lexington, 2023), 94-104. For additional analysis of recent debates about the Muratorian Fragment, see C. K. Rothschild, *The Muratorian Fragment: Text, Translation, Commentary*, STAC 132 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 73-79.

5) On the reception of Victorinus's commentary within other commentaries on the New Testament Apocalypse, see R. Gryson, "Les commentaires patristiques latins de l'Apocalypse", *Revue théologique de Louvain* 28 (1997), 305-337, 484-502, here 312, 319, 324, 330, 332, 336, 485, 490, 492, 494.

6) See the text in T. Mommsen, *Chronica Minora Saec. IV. V. VI. VIII*, MGH 9 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1892), 194-195.

7) *Isophephy* refers to the practice of adding up the numerical value of letters in a word or words into a single sum. A good example can be found in *Sib. Or.* 1.327-329 in which the author alludes to Jesus (Ἰησοῦς) with the number 888. The sum of the letters I(10) + H (8) + Σ(200) +

differences in transmission, however, this essay draws from New Testament scholarship to explore how Victorinus and the authors of the later recensions operate with different hermeneutical assumptions regarding the social situations presumed by the riddle in Revelation 13:18. Craig Koester has argued that the interpretation of the riddle posed by the number in Revelation 13:18 differs depending on how one understands the purpose of the riddle.⁸⁾ He suggests that riddles were used in antiquity to challenge readers and hearers to connect what they already knew with what the speaker said.⁹⁾ Yet riddles might also occlude information from the eyes of the unknowing, particularly if the speaker gave insufficient information. When this social context is brought into view, some riddles are given with enough information to solve them, while other riddles are designed to remain mysterious. This essay argues that Victorinus understands the numerical riddle in Revelation 13:18 as occluding the precise name of the beast from readers. For Victorinus, then, the number remains mysterious. On the other hand, his more expansive editors employ an alternative strategy to interpret the passage because they believe that enough information has been given to solve the riddle. Both strategies may trace their roots to an ambiguity in Irenaeus's prior treatment of Revelation 13:18 in *Adversus Haereses*.

2. Victorinus's *Commentarius in Apocalypsin*

Victorinus's third-century commentary on Revelation is the earliest surviving commentary on the New Testament Apocalypse.¹⁰⁾ The commentary was likely

O(70) + Y(400) + Σ(200) is 888. *Isophephy* is thus related to and may often be synonymous with *gematria*. On numbers in early Christianity, see further F. Bovon, "Names and Numbers in Early Christianity", *NTS* 47:3 (2001), 267-288.

8) C. R. Koester, "The Number of the Beast in Revelation 13 in Light of Papyri, Graffiti, and Inscriptions", *Journal of Early Christian History* 6:3 (2016), 1-21; C. R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 38A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 605. For C. R. Koester, the author of Revelation offers enough information to be able to solve the riddle. "The literary description of the beast gives readers the clues needed to theorise that its name has some connection to Nero" (C. R. Koester, "The Number of the Beast in Revelation 13 in Light of Papyri, Graffiti, and Inscriptions", 10).

9) E.g. *Greek Anthology* 14.20, 135; *Sib. Or.* 1.324-329; 5.1-51.

10) Of course, "earliest surviving" need not mean that it was the first such commentary on Revelation. Irenaeus is purported to have written a commentary. Jerome (*Vir. ill.* 9) reports that

written when Gallienus was emperor, perhaps between 258-260.¹¹⁾ Victorinus understands the Apocalypse less as a prophetic book and more as a recapitulation of scripture in which the risen Christ perfectly reveals the meaning of scripture to the church.¹²⁾ As such, he stands in the theological line of Irenaeus. Victorinus treats all scripture as unified. Scripture speaks with a single voice because God is the one whose word scripture ultimately is. The New Testament Apocalypse recapitulates all scripture and is thus central to Victorinus's treatment.¹³⁾ Revelation employs multiple visions and images. Instead of reading Revelation as a successive progression, Victorinus interprets related motifs presented repeatedly. "The order of things said should not be looked at" (*nec aspiciendus ordo dictorum*; Victorinus, *Comm. Apoc.* 8.2). Rather, the reiteration of similar imagery completes and complements earlier images by enabling the Spirit to return to the same events for the sake of readers. As a result, Victorinus is a stylistically efficient commentator who does not feel bound to comment on every section of the Apocalypse. For example, after commenting on the seven seals and trumpets in Revelation 6:1-8:1 and 8:6-9:21, he does not offer detailed comments on the seven bowls in Revelation 16:1-21

Justin and Irenaeus interpreted (*interpretatur*) Revelation, although the form of this interpretation is unknown. Both Eusebius and Jerome attribute a work on John's Apocalypse to Melito of Sardis (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.26.2; Jerome, *Vir. ill.* 24). While nothing survives of these purported works, Hippolytus of Rome wrote a work entitled *Apology for the Apocalypse and Gospel of John* that argued both Revelation and the Gospel of John were written by the same author. The work survives in fragments that were published by Pierre Prigent. See P. Prigent, "Hippolyte: commentateur de l'Apocalypse", *Theologische Zeitschrift* 28 (1972), 391-412; P. Prigent and R. Stehly, "Les fragments du De Apocalypsi d'Hippolyte", *Theologische Zeitschrift* 29 (1973), 313-333.

- 11) On the dates of Victorinus's life, see A. v. Harnack, *Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur bis auf Eusebius*, vol. 2, part 2 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1904), 426-428; J. Haussleiter, "Victorinus von Pettau", *Realenzyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, 3rd ed., vol. 20 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1908), 614-615; J. Zeiller, *Les origines chrétiennes dans les provinces danubiennes de l'Empire romain* (Paris: Boccard, 1918), 65-67. On the date of the commentary, see A. v. Harnack, *Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur bis auf Eusebius*, 427; M. Dulaey, *Victorin de Poetovio: Premier exégète latin*, 219-221; M. Dulaey, *Victorin de Poetovio: Sur l'Apocalypse et autres écrits*, 15.
- 12) M. Dulaey, *Victorin de Poetovio: Sur l'Apocalypse et autres écrits*, 29-30.
- 13) Victorinus stands in the same line as Irenaeus, who likewise reads Revelation as a recapitulation of certain biblical themes. See further D. J. Bingham, "Apocalyptic and Social Identity in the Second Century: Irenaeus's Reading of John's Apocalypse", J. A. Draper, N. D. Pardee, and S. J. Wilhite, eds., *The Teaching of These Words: Intertextuality, Social Identity and Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Clayton N. Jefford*, BAC 16 (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 363.

(Victorinus, *Comm. Apoc.* 8.2).

Although scripture speaks with a unified voice, it is veiled and only opened by Christ himself. Victorinus's interpretation of Revelation is key to his understanding on this point. The two-edged sword (*gladium bis acutum*) that proceeds from the Son of Man's mouth (Rev 1:16) represents the Law of Moses and the gospel. Jesus grants knowledge of both the Law and gospel (Victorinus, *Comm. Apoc.* 1.4). When commenting on the ability that the Lion of Judah alone possesses to unseal the scrolls (Rev 5:1-5), Victorinus exegetes the meaning of the Apocalypse by declaring that Jesus alone can enlighten scripture for readers.¹⁴⁾ Reading Revelation 5 in dialogue with Exodus 34:33, Victorinus argues that even Moses recognized this reality and thus came down from Sinai with a veil over his face. Jesus lifts the veil on Moses's Law (Victorinus, *Comm. Apoc.* 5.2).¹⁵⁾ Exegetes are thus called to follow the images of scripture as Jesus interprets them. Because Jesus unravels the mystery of scriptural imagery, scripture can transcend the temporal boundaries of past, present, and future. Victorinus's reading of the Apocalypse acknowledges the future orientation of some prophecy, notably the millennium in Revelation 20, but he perceives the book to be of direct relevance to the readers of his commentary. While Revelation is the culmination of prophecy, it is also the recapitulation of all scripture and thereby addresses Victorinus's third-century audience directly.¹⁶⁾

When Victorinus comes to the beast of the sea (Rev 13:1-10), he acknowledges a future orientation to this prophecy while beginning his interpretation with reference to past emperors. After outlining the Roman emperors from the chaotic year of 69 through the time of Domitian, during whose reign Victorinus dates the composition of the Apocalypse,¹⁷⁾ he identifies

14) W. C. Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries on Revelation*, xxiii.

15) Readers may notice similarities to Paul's interpretation of Moses's veil in 2 Cor 3:13-16.

16) Thus, the letters in Rev chs. 2-3 are understood to be written to seven types of saints within the church. K. Berger understands Victorinus's treatment of the 144,000 similarly when he notices Victorinus's description of them as virginal (*virgineus*) in body and tongue (Victorinus, *Comm. Apoc.* 20.1). K. Berger (*Leih mir deine Flügel, Engel: Die Apokalypse im Leben der Kirche* [Freiburg: Herder, 2018], 215) asserts that Victorinus identifies the 144,000 as virgins because they will live on Zion, which is a virgin or bridal mountain.

17) Victorinus's reading of the emperors provides his interpretation of the seven heads or mountains in Rev 17:9-11. Victorinus mentions Otho, Vitellius, Galba, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian. Nerva is the emperor who is to come, while Nero is the eighth head and thus to be identified as the beast.

the beast as Nero by interpreting the beast of the sea alongside the beast on which Babylon sits in Revelation 17:9-11 (*Comm. Apoc.* 13.1-2).¹⁸⁾ In support of this reading, Victorinus understands the mortal blow that was healed (Rev 13:3) as a reference to Nero's suicide. The beast's subsequent resuscitation is then to be understood in terms of a Nero *redivivus* myth.¹⁹⁾ Victorinus thus makes clear that the beast of the sea represents Nero. As he nears the end of this section of his commentary, Victorinus appeals to the number in Revelation 13:18. Although he believes that Nero's persecuting activities will remain true to his character, he leaves open the possibility that Nero may be known by an alternative name when he comes again. Since it is possible that Nero will return as antichrist under a different name, "the Holy Spirit says, 'His number is 666.' He will fulfill this number according to Greek letters" (*ait Spiritus Sanctus: Numerus illius est DCLXVI; ad literam grecam hunc numerum explebit*; Victorinus, *Comm. Apoc.* 13.3). Victorinus provides no further guidance as to what 666 might refer.

Victorinus's treatment of the number indicates that he believes there is a correct answer to the riddle posed by the number in Revelation 13:18. The answer to the riddle is to be found in the Greek letters with which Revelation was composed. Victorinus may even allude to isophephy as the means by which the name is to be determined, even though he does not explicitly say it. Victorinus has identified the beast as Nero *redivivus* on account of other statements in Revelation 13:3 and 17:8-11. There is, then, an answer to the question of who the beast is. However, Victorinus does not attempt to answer the riddle posed by the number 666. If the text of Dulaey is accepted, the reason is due to the possibility that the name of Nero *redivivus* may change, even if his actions do not.²⁰⁾ A secondary reason may be that Victorinus here follows his

18) M. Kusio (*The Antichrist Tradition in Antiquity*, WUNT 2.532 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020], 139 n. 512) associates Victorinus's identification with other interpreters who perceive the antichrist in terms that are anti-Roman and anti-imperial.

19) On the myth of Nero *redivivus*, see D. E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, WBC 52B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 737-740; J. Malitz, *Nero*, A. Brown, trans. (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 109-113; T. Witulski, *Die Johannesoffenbarung und Kaiser Hadrian: Studien zur Datierung der neutestamentlichen Apokalypse*, FRLANT 221 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 206-218; A. Y. Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Harvard Dissertations in Religion 9 (Missoula: Scholars, 1976), 176-184. See also *Asc. Isa.* 4.2; Commodianus, *Instr.* 1.41.7-8; *Sib. Or.* 4.138-139; Suetonius, *Nero*, 57.

20) Victorinus introduces the number of the beast in relation to the Neronic antichrist by claiming

own advice from earlier in the commentary. While Victorinus seeks understanding, he recognizes the danger of false prophecy (*pseudeoprophetia*; Victorinus, *Comm. Apoc.* 8.2).²¹⁾ Victorinus may not guess at the name, then, to ensure the continued veracity of his prophecy. Thus, while the Holy Spirit has revealed the number and the means by which the mystery will be solved, its meaning remains opaque to Victorinus. The information required to answer the riddle is not given in the text. Accordingly, he does not solve the puzzle but anticipates it will be discovered by later readers who will solve it when the antichrist is revealed.

3. The Recensions of Victorinus's *Commentarius in Apocalypsin*

Late in the fourth century, Victorinus's commentary eventually came to the attention of Jerome by means of an interlocutor named Anatolius, who raised questions about the meaning of the Apocalypse and its meaning in dialogue with Victorinus's work.²²⁾ Jerome claims to have edited Victorinus's commentary quickly to return the commentary promptly to his associate. He writes, "I did not want to delay" (*nolui differre*; Jerome, *Prol. Victorinus, Comm. Apoc.*). His primary alterations are to be found with regard to Victorinus's millenarianism and are thus limited to the commentary on Revelation 20-21.²³⁾ Dulaey dates Jerome's recension to the spring of 398 CE, although a date any time in the late fourth century or the first decade of the fifth century would suffice for this essay.²⁴⁾

that the name may change (*nomine mutato*) but that the actions will not change (*actu immutato*). However, words regarding the immutability of the antichrist's actions are placed in brackets in M. Dulaey's edition, indicating that the words are not found in Ms. A but are reconstructed on the basis of Jerome's recension. See further M. Dulaey, *Victorin de Poetovio: Sur l'Apocalypse et autres écrits*, 44, 108.

21) Victorinus thus leaves open the possibility that the trumpets and bowls may represent multiple things and does not feel obliged to choose (Victorinus, *Comm. Apoc.* 8.2).

22) See the text in M. Dulaey, *Victorin de Poetovio: Sur l'Apocalypse et autres écrits*, 124-125.

23) M. Dulaey ("Jérôme 'éditeur' du Commentaire sur l'Apocalypse de Victorin de Poetovio", *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 37 [1991], 199-236) argues convincingly that J. Haussleiter overestimated the degree to which Jerome changed Victorinus's underlying commentary.

24) For further discussion, see M. Dulaey, "Jérôme 'éditeur' du Commentaire sur l'Apocalypse de Victorin de Poetovio", 203-207; R. Gryson, *Victorini Poetovionensis opera quae supersunt*:

Jerome's recension has not survived untouched. Subsequent attempts to edit the commentary were made in late antiquity. In his 1916 edition, Johannes Haussleiter divided these attempts into three recensions, which have continued to be utilized by later scholarship.²⁵⁾ The earliest recension is Y (upsilon). Due to the additional interpretation given to Revelation 13:18 that will soon be discussed, this recension should be dated to a time when Gaiseric was active in North Africa as king of the Vandals as well as when Procopius Anthemius was the western Roman emperor. Since Anthemius was emperor from 467-472 CE and Gaiseric died in 477, a date around 470 is plausible for the reworking of Jerome's adaptation in Y. It is more difficult to determine precisely when the recension in manuscript family Φ (phi) was made. Houghton's estimate of 500 CE for the appearance of Φ will suit well for this note.²⁶⁾ The final manuscript family that Haussleiter proposed is designated as S. It is both the latest and the longest of the three. It may be dated to a time in the early medieval period, perhaps around 700 CE.²⁷⁾ Although there is good reason to think that the order in which these recensions were made has been correctly identified, the dates of these recensions are difficult to determine with certainty. Nevertheless, these estimates offer a useful approximation as to when the variants in Victorinus's commentary on Revelation 13:18 entered the manuscript tradition.

The recensions take a hermeneutical approach to the number of the beast that differs from Victorinus's third-century commentary. Whereas Victorinus did not offer a possible solution to the riddle of the number in Revelation 13:18, the recensions suggest names whose letters would come to 666 by means of isophephy. While the recensions share with Victorinus a belief that the number must be calculated with reference to Greek letters, Y proposes that the answer to the riddle is to be found in the names of Anthemius (Ἀντεμιος) or Gaiseric (Γαισηρικός). Both names add up to 666 when written in Greek, and the manuscripts of Y typically spell this out in detail.²⁸⁾ Φ appeals to a more

Explanatio in Apocalypsin una cum recensione Hieronymi, Tractatus de fabrica mundi, Fragmentum de vita Christi, 45-49.

25) J. Haussleiter, *Victorini Episcopi Petavionensis Opera*, CSEL 49 (Vienna: Tempsky, 1916), xxiv-xxv.

26) H. A. G. Houghton, *The Latin New Testament: A Guide to Its Early History, Texts, and Manuscripts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 182.

27) *Ibid.*, 182.

28) ANTEMOS (A [1] N [50] T [300] E [5] M [40] O [70] Σ [200]); ΓΕΝΣΗΡΙΚΟΣ (Γ [3] Ε [5] Ν

traditional answer to the riddle when it suggests Teitan (Τειτάν).²⁹⁾ Φ then adds further clarification. Τειτάν is known to the Gentiles (*gentiles*) as Sol Phoebus. An equivalent name in Latin is also offered that likewise adds up to 666: Diclux.³⁰⁾ S demonstrates itself to be the latest recension by incorporating the readings of both Y and Φ into its explanation of Revelation 13:18. The name Τειτάν is given first, followed by the corresponding Latin name from Φ, Diclux. At this point, S incorporates the names found in Y: Ἀντεμος and Γεισήρικος. While additional minor variants may be found within the three manuscript families, the names hold true in the majority of witnesses in each family.³¹⁾

Although each of the interpretive additions are worthy of study on their own terms, comparison with Victorinus's earlier and sparser treatment of the riddle allows two significant conclusions to be drawn. First, the recensions follow Victorinus in his belief that the solution to the riddle is to be found by calculating the name of the beast with reference to Greek letters. Although, the recensions are, like Victorinus's earlier commentary, composed in Latin, they nevertheless acknowledge the interpretive significance of Revelation's composition in Greek when they solve the riddle in Revelation 13:18. Second, the insertion of names in the recensions departs from both Victorinus's original commentary and, most likely, from Jerome's recension in 398. In addition to a preface and epilogue, Jerome's alterations to Victorinus's commentary focused primarily on his millenarianism.³²⁾ Thus, the Bishop of Poetovio's interpretation

[50] Σ [200] H [7] P [100] I [10] K [20] O [70] Σ [200]). The collocation of these names provides strong evidence for the date of this recension. See M. Dulaey, "Jérôme 'éditeur' du Commentaire sur l'Apocalypse de Victorin de Poetovio", 218; H. A. G. Houghton, *The Latin New Testament: A Guide to Its Early History, Texts, and Manuscripts*, 182.

29) TEITAN (T [300] E [5] I [10] T [300] A [1] N [50]). For earlier uses of this name, see Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.30.3; Hippolytus, *Antichr.* 50. See also R. Gryson, "Les commentaires patristiques latins de l'Apocalypse", 309.

30) DICLVX (D [500] I [1] C [100] L [50] V [5] X [10]).

31) One example of a particularly noteworthy exception can be found in Ms. W (Madrid, Real Academia, Emilianese 80), which M. Dulaey ("Jérôme 'éditeur' du Commentaire sur l'Apocalypse de Victorin de Poetovio", 230 n. 144) says includes the long ending of S even though the manuscript generally aligns with Φ. Gryson ("Les commentaires patristiques latins de l'Apocalypse", 310) notes that Ms. O (Cambridge, University Library, Ff IV 31) does not add any names to its interpretation of Rev 13:18.

32) M. Dulaey, "Jérôme 'éditeur' du Commentaire sur l'Apocalypse de Victorin de Poetovio", 199-236. On chiliasm in the first three centuries, see C. E. Hill, *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 11-73.

of 666 is unlikely to have concerned his fourth-century editor. The authors of later recensions, however, appear to have perceived a lack in Victorinus's commentary when they found it without any attempt at a solution. Anthemius and Gaiseric would have provided timely interpretive possibilities in the fifth-century western Roman Empire, while Teitan and Diclux could claim, to varying degrees, historical precedents in the works of Irenaeus and Hippolytus.

4. Differing Social Contexts and their Irenaean Origins

Victorinus and the later editors of the hieronymic recensions differ in how they understand the social situation that supports their interpretation of Revelation 13:18. While some riddles are proffered in order to hide information, other riddles are put forward with enough information that the riddler expects the reader to solve it. For Victorinus, the riddle of 666 cannot be solved. He gleans only the rules for the solution from the Apocalypse. Although Victorinus identifies the beast, whom he also calls the Antichrist, as Nero, he does not do so on the basis of Revelation 13:18 but of Revelation 17:9-11 as well as Revelation 13:1, 3 and Daniel 7:8 (Victorinus, *Comm. apoc.* 13.2-3). While some recent interpreters of Revelation 13:18 have also found a reference to Nero,³³⁾ Victorinus interprets the riddle with an acknowledgement that the name may be changed when the Antichrist comes.³⁴⁾ When it comes to the numerical riddle posed by 666, then, Victorinus writes as if he does not think there is enough information available for it to be solved. His choice not to offer any further

33) E.g. D. E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 770-771; R. Bauckham, "Nero and the Beast", R. Bauckham, ed., *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 384-452; W. Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis*, KEK (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1906), 372-373; R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, 2 vols, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920), 1.367; H. Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, RNT (Regensburg: Pustet, 1997), 315-316; H. Giesen, "Das Römische Reich im Spiegel der Johannes-Apokalypse", *ANRW* 26:3 (1996), 2580-2582; C. R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 604-606; C. R. Koester, "The Number of the Beast in Revelation 13 in Light of Papyri, Graffiti, and Inscriptions", 9-11; C. C. Rowland, "The Book of Revelation", *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 12 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 659; H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indices* (London: MacMillan, 1906), 172-173.

34) *Qui tamen licet mutato <et actu immutato> veniat* (Victorinus, *Comm. apoc.* 13.3).

interpretive advice beyond alluding to the Greek alphabet is most easily explained if he reckons the riddle is unknowable. Since the riddle cannot be solved, there is no need to make further attempts at a solution.

The recensions assume a different social situation in which the riddle of 666 should be interpreted. On such readings, interpreters of both Revelation and Victorinus found solutions that they hoped were in line with the number's meaning in the New Testament Apocalypse. Likely written during the late-fifth century, Y offers a contemporizing interpretation of Revelation 13:18 in which living or recently deceased political figures are the answer to the number. Φ offers a spiritualized interpretation of the riddle in which semi-mythical figures answer the problem posed by 666. S, perhaps in an attempt not to miss a possible solution, accumulates all four names into a single interpretation. What all recensions have in common, however, is an underlying belief that the author of Revelation left enough information in the text for readers to solve the mystery of Revelation 13:18, even if they must acknowledge that these proposals are provisional.

The origins of this hermeneutical ambiguity can be pressed further. Both Victorinus and the authors of the later recensions of his commentary could claim to be writing in the Irenaeian tradition when it comes to their respective interpretations of the number 666. Victorinus could claim to be following the admonitions from Irenaeus against attributing a specific name to the number. When Irenaeus offered guidance about how to interpret the number in Revelation 13:18, he warned against certainty regarding the name signified by the number.³⁵ These warnings are especially forceful against those who are certain of the wrong number, that is, 616 (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.30.1).³⁶ However, Irenaeus urged even those who knew the correct number to wait for events to unfold that will fulfill eschatological prophecies. Only at that time would the relationship between the number and name become clear (*Haer.* 5.30.2). Irenaeus considered it safer for his readers to wait for the fulfillment of prophecy

35) D. J. Bingham ("Apocalyptic and Social Identity in the Second Century", 348 n. 25) rightly attributes Irenaeus's guarded comments on Rev 13:18 to his belief that Valentinian interpreters had impiously gone too far in their interpretation of numbers in scripture.

36) For more on the context in which Irenaeus's treatment of the number occurs within Book 5, see A. Rousseau, L. Doutreleau, and C. Mercier, *Irénée de Lyon: Contres les hérésies, Livre V*, SC 152 (Paris: Cerf, 1969), 183-186.

rather than to surmise wrongly about a matter that is likely to remain unsolved (*Haer.* 5.30.3). Whether consciously or not, Victorinus at least implicitly follows Irenaeus in his belief that the number of the beast should be calculated with reference to the Greek letters contained in the number (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.30.1; Victorinus, *Comm. apoc.* 13.3). Since Victorinus goes no further in offering suggestions for what those solutions might be, he could make a reasonable claim to have followed Irenaeus's warnings against attempting solutions to a riddle that remains unknown.

Despite Irenaeus's warnings against such proposed solutions, he proposes names that could potentially serve as solutions to the riddle posed by 666. He offers three names: Euanthas (Εὐάνθας), Lateinos (Λατεῖνος), and Teitan (Τειτάν; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.30.3). When the value of the Greek letters is calculated isophetically, each Irenaeian suggestion adds up to 666. The editors of the later recensions of Victorinus's commentary could thus make an equally legitimate claim to be following the interpretive practices set out by Irenaeus in *Adversus Haereses*. By offering names as solutions to the riddle, they are following a practice inaugurated by Irenaeus and continued by Hippolytus (*Antichr.* 50). The link between Irenaeus and the recensions of Victorinus's commentary is particularly clear in Φ and S because of the presence of Teitan as a potential solution to the riddle. Yet Y as well as the other names included in Φ and S might also claim Irenaeian support for their attempts to solve the riddle. They could claim to have simply updated Irenaeus's second-century surmises to fit their late antique context. The link to Irenaeus may be clearest in the case of Φ and S with their choice of Teitan as one possible name for the antichrist. However, Y likewise illustrates the ongoing significance of Irenaeus's treatment of the number in late antiquity by proposing an answer to the riddle solved in the same mode but with names relevant to fifth-century North Africa. When they assume that the apocalypse presents sufficient information to solve the riddle of Revelation 13:18, the recensions thus provide a late-antique alternative to Victorinus's earlier mode of Irenaeian exegesis.

Having drawn attention to the diversity of treatments of Revelation 13:18 in the various recensions of Victorinus of Poetovio's *Commentarius in Apocalypsin*, this essay has also highlighted how Victorinus and the editors of his later recension operated with different underlying hermeneutical suppositions

regarding the social context of the riddle surrounding 666. The divergence in how to interpret the mystery set out by 666 is evident elsewhere in the interpretive tradition, notably in Book 5 of Irenaeus's *Adversus Haereses*. Despite the divergent ways of treating the "solvability" of the riddle in the second and third centuries, interpreters of late antiquity increasingly interpret the riddle within a social context in which the riddle can be solved.³⁷⁾ However, the alternative ways of treating the number within the Victorinian tradition appears more sharply because they result in different interpretations of the verse within commentaries that are attributed to the same author.

<Keywords>

Hermeneutics, Recensions, Revelation, Social Context, Victorinus of Poetovio, 666.

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37) To be sure, these late antique interpreters did not agree on what the solution to Rev 13:18 is. Yet their increasing attempts at solutions suggest agreement in the belief that a solution can be reached. See further Tyconius, *Comm. Apoc.* 13.18; *Liber genealogus* 614-620; Oecumenius, *Comm. Apoc.* 8.4-5; Andreas of Caesarea, *Comm. Apoc.* 38.145.

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<Abstract>

**A Mystery Divergently Interpreted:
Revelation 13:18 in
Victorinus of Poetovio's *Commentarius in Apocalypsin***

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Writing in the second half of the third century, the writings of Victorinus of Poetovio have been a site of renewed scholarly interest. Recent editions, monographs, and articles have enabled fresh reflection on what Victorinus wrote, what he might have written, and what later editors added to his work. Although scholars have long recognized divergent treatments of Revelation 13:18 within manuscripts of Victorinus of Poetovio's *Commentarius in Apocalypsin*, less work has been done to consider the reason for these differences. This essay sheds light on different hermeneutical approaches used by Victorinus and the editors who added to his interpretation of the number of the beast. For the third-century Victorinus, the beast in Revelation 13 represents Nero *redivivus*. However, the social context of the riddle posed by 666 requires an acknowledgement that there is insufficient information to determine the name. While the beast's identity as Nero is clear, the solution to the riddle remains hidden to readers. Several editions of Victorinus's works exist in the manuscript tradition, dating from the end of the fourth through approximately the eighth centuries. Later recensions of Victorinus's *Commentarius* exhibit another means of interpretation by introducing names that add up to 666 when calculated isophepically. The solution to the riddle for later editors was thus clear because readers had enough information to solve it. These divergent interpretive pathways stem from alternative perspectives on the social context of the riddle. One interpretive avenue perceives the riddle in Revelation 13:18 to be written in order to hide information, while the other understands it to reveal information to readers who truly understand it. These divergent approaches to the riddle may be traced to earlier interpretations of Revelation 13:18, such as Book 5 of Irenaeus's *Adversus Haereses*. However, the manuscripts of Victorinus's *Commentarius* provide a striking example because they result in dual

interpretive strategies being attributed to a single author.