Index

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Index
Quaderni camerti di studi romanistici
International Survey of Roman Law
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per lo studio della civiltà giuridica europea e per la storia dei suoi ordinamenti».

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Index
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Gli autori sono invitati a inviare alla Rivista insieme con il testo da pubblicare un abstract in lingua diversa da quella del contributo e «parole chiave» nelle due lingue.

Il Sommario e gli Abstracts della rivista sono consultabili al sito: www.index.unina.it.
1. The pattern. – The act of beheading someone, referred to in the sources as *decollatio*, *decapitatio* and *capitis amputatio*, belongs to the most enigmatic of the punishments in ancient Rome. The written sources reveal surprisingly very little about the technical side of the act itself. It might be understood in the way that the fate of common criminals was considered not to be deserving any mention. However, many well-born persons were also executed by decapitation, including two icons of Roman jurisprudence – Papinian and Ulpian. Further, Paul of Tarsus opens up the long list of influential Christians who sacrificed their life for the faith. Still, very little evidence exists1.

It is possible that the details related to *decapitatio* were not written about due to the ‘aristocratic’ character of the beheading. The sad end of the criminals of noble birth cast a long shadow on the reputation of the whole social class. From the other side we know that an overwhelming majority of testimonies was created by the elites and for the elites. Even though their narration may leave us under the impression that it was conducted for the benefit of the whole community, it is a well prepared manipulation2.

On the basis of the fragmentary source materials and the reaching of conclusions *per analogiam*, occurring way too often, in the 19th century, there were attempts at the re-creation of a universal model, in accordance with which the Romans carried out the *decollatio*. Since the Roman material was then used in order to verify and confirm the existing penological theories, several ‘legal’ definitions of the execution by beheading were created. The author of the most extensive analysis, which for more than one hundred years delineated the way of thinking about the decapitation, was Theodor Mommsen3. An important role was also played by the entry from the Pauly-Wissowa *Realencyclopaedie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*4. Its author, Hermann Ferdinand Hitzig, followed the same method as Mommsen. He collected the sources and then on their basis he drew conclusions of an universal character.

Mommsen’s point of view and that of his followers for many years determined the line of thought on the Roman *decollatio*. One might get an impression that many authors believed that after Mommsen, there was

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nothing new to be said on the subject. The perspective had not changed until the new methods of research were allowed, those referring to the history of emotions and those based on linguistic evidence. In the case of the beheading, it is also helpful to ‘appreciate’ the Christian sources (the acts of the martyrs), as well as too include the iconographical material⁵ and archaeological findings.

2. The model. – The considerations from the 19th and early 20th century are largely quite schematic. Wilhelm Rein observes that the «beheading, initially executed with an axe and under the Emperors usually with a sword concerned mostly traitors, conspirators and rebels. In the time of the Empire the penalty was imposed for manslaughter, high treason, incest, marital infidelity, plagium, raptus, repetundae, peculatus, falsum, etc. It was the most popular punishment»⁶.

Theodor Mommsen in his canonical work entitled Römisches Strafrecht presents the most comprehensive description of the technical side of decapitation: «During the execution the hands of the convict were tied behind his back, he was tied to a pole, undressed and whipped. Then, he was placed on the ground and killed with a strike of an axe. It resembles exactly the ritual killing of sacrificial animals, which leads to the sacral origins of this sanction». Subsequently he adds: «Under the principate – it is hard to pinpoint exactly since when, but it seems that since the beginnings – the public officials disappear from the role of conducting the execution, and the civilian process is replaced by a procedure typical of military war courts. Hence, after the passing of the verdict of death sentence, it becomes a rule that an officer or soldier is given an order by the magistrate to escort the convict. The standard form of the death penalty remains the beheading. However, the axe is replaced by the sword. This becomes when the standard form of death penalty is juxtaposed with its qualified forms, which nevertheless could also be executed by soldiers. The execution itself was supervised by an officer of higher or lower rank and it was usually conducted by the speculator, who already in the times of the Republic appeared in a similar character and in the times of the Empire he could be found among the praetorian guards, as well as among the legions»⁸.

James Leigh Strachan-Davidson shares this point of view, even though he is more succinct on the matter: «the manner of death, whether outside the walls, in the camp, or in the subject territory, or as inflicted on the unprivileged male freeman within the city, is apparently always beheading with the axe. Beheading likewise appears as the regular method

of public execution under the principate, but the sword gradually supplants the axe as the instrument»9. In a similar vein, Jörg Rüpke claims that «the act of killing probably was accomplished by lictors under the supervision of the tresviri capitales. The delinquent is beheaded with an axe carried by the lictors as a symbol of the magistrates’ power (at least outside Rome). As Gladigow remarks, ‘in the Mediterranean world the axe ... is the sacral weapon par excellence ... the instrument of legitimate killing’»10.

The motif of decollatio often appears as a side note of other considerations. Wilfried Nippel associates beheading with coërcitio11. Peter Garnsey endows it with an important role describing the evolution of the so-called ‘dual penalty system’12. Also other authors, who assumed the perspective from the writings of Roman jurists, refer to the beheading as a ‘standard’13 and ‘ordinary’14 penalty.

3. The genesis of beheading. – It is true that the beheading of criminals has its roots in wartime traditions. Beheading was practiced on defeated enemies, decapitating the wounded on battlefield, after taking them into slavery15 and also after their death. Orietta Dora Cordovana is right in writing that «to cut off one’s enemy’s head was a glorious act for warriors of the upper classes during the Republic, but also for angry and ambitious private soldiers later during the Empire»16.

Beheading was a punishment for the lack of discipline in the army and in the archaic times this custom was transferred onto the civilian ground. A person who posed a threat to the community became its internal enemy. Referring to the practices regarding the disciplina militaris in

9 J.L. Sherwin-White, Mommsen’s Criminal Law, in The English Historical Review 16 (1901) 234. 10 J. Rüpke, You Shall Not Kill. Hierarchies of Norms in Ancient Rome, in Numen 39.1 (1992) 64. 11 W. Nippel, Policing Rome, in JRS. 74 (1984) 22: «… the general term for number of measures a magistrate could use to enforce obedience without insulting legal proceedings. It covers scourging and execution (by decapitation with an axe), arresting and carrying a disobedient person to prison, imposing a fine up to a multa maxima limit or seizing a pledge (pignoris capito). The gravest form of coercitio – scourging and execution – was banned by the provocatio laws». 12 P. Garnsey, Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire, in Past & Present 41 (1968) 13: «the ‘dual penalty system’, familiar to jurists of the age of the Severans, recognized the distinction between ‘legal’ and ‘non legal’ penalties … Execution which was rare for honestiores was by decapitation». 13 R.A. Bauman, Crime and Punishment in ancient Rome (London 1996) 19. 14 O. Robinson, Penal Practice and Penal Policy in Ancient Rome (London 2009) 106. 15 Por. Z. Várhelyi, The Specters of Roman Imperialism: The Live Burials of Gauls and Greeks at Rome, in Classical Antiquity 26.2 (2007) 294: «The last reported historical instance from the Republic, the supposed mutual killing of captured enemies in the fight between Tarquinii and Rome, dates to the 350s BCE; and in it the Romans responded to the bloody immolatio by the Etruscans with the beating and decapitation of 358 selectmen from Tarquinii, in a non-sacrificial manner, at least according to Livy’s later interpretation of the events, however compromised the interpretation may be due to the historical distance». Cfr. Liv. 7.15.10; 7.19.2-3. 16 O.D. Cordovana, Between History and Myth: Septimius Severus and Leptis Magna, in Greece & Rome 59.1 (2012) 65.
such cases came easily, since from the ancient times the consuls were in possession of complete civilian and military authority and the Roman society adopted the structure modelled on the organization of the army (comitia centuriata).

In the most ancient times, the beheading of a criminal was not – as Mommsen would have it – a sacrifice in a sacral sense, even though its execution might have been accompanied by a slight religious aura (in the archaic period the law remained in a strict association with religion, hence all the official practices necessarily had to have a religious dimension – not all of them, however, were sacrifices)\(^{17}\). They should be rather treated as a form of measure of an instant effect to discipline society. The decision to annihilate an asocial person was taken speedily and was executed without delay. Nevertheless, in the civilian life this model failed to succeed. In view of the occurring abuses, the *leges Valeriae de provocacione* to a large degree restricted the omnipotence of the officials in the area of deciding about the lives of citizens.

Wilhelm Rein claims that Roman law was based on two foundations: theocratic ideas and private revenge\(^{18}\). The genesis of *decollatio* shows that one component is missing here: the love of discipline and order.

### 4. Problems and questions.

– How can a person be beheaded with the use of the axe which was an attribute of authority of the highest Roman officials? On the coins and reliefs, we can see a tool, which definitely could be used for killing or hitting a person unconscious, but cutting off a person’s head with one single stroke of the axe would pose a problem. The blade is too small and the hand seems too short.

Similar doubts may be raised with regard to the sword, in so far as a standard legionary sword *gladius* was used, and the laws of physics existing then included Newton’s Second Law in which force equals mass times acceleration. The legionary sword seems to be too light and its blade too short to effectively decapitate a person with a single stroke. Further, all this should be considered in the light of the fact that at least until the 1\(^{st}\) century AD, *decollatio* was considered to be a ‘honourable’ form of execution. Its form was to save the convict from unnecessary pain.

The above concerns can be explained by making a single claim: the course of the ancient execution did not resemble the beheadings that we know from the Middle Ages and the modern era\(^{19}\). If we assume that the convict was first put to death and only then he was decapitated, it will turn out that all the instruments of death indicated above are a perfect fit for the task. In this regard Mommsen’s theory should be partly confirmed. The beheading was not a sacrificial act, but its form might have been in its essence modelled on it.

With regard to animal sacrifices, John Scheid explains that «the sacrificer gave the order to a ritual executioner to act (agere). In the case of cattle, this meant stunning the animal then bleeding it. Smaller animals simply had their throats cut»\(^{20}\). The procedure of public executions might have been shaped in accordance with the above pattern. The role of the priest-sacrificer was taken over by the military commander (and during a later period an official), whereas the role of the executioner was assumed by the lictor, *carnifex*, soldier or *speculator*. The convict was first put to death by a blow to the head (the Republic) or by the pushing of the sword (the Empire). Only then was it followed by the act of decapitation.

5. *The ‘democratization’ of beheading.* – Convicts were beheaded in prison, as well as outside its walls. «Hostes publici» – as Werner Riess observes – «were beheaded most commonly in *Tullianum*. It very often happened that even in the case of non-sacral crimes, the preferred form of execution was beheading as for example in the year 270 BC, when the rebel legionaries were executed on the forum».\(^{21}\) This form of punishment was also performed on the Campus Martius and then on the Esquiline Hill, where representatives of lower classes were executed and where their bodies were left unattended.\(^{22}\)

The replacement of the axe with the sword changed very little. Even though Jörg Rüpke observes that the change of the instrument of death is a demonstration of the ‘militarization of society’ under the principate, it does not seem to be a convincing thesis.\(^{23}\) Roman society was always militarized to a large degree and was used to thinking along the military categories.

The times of the Empire mark a specific process of the ‘democratization’ of beheading. The *decollatio* ceased then to be a punishment for the elites. The term *vilis sanguis* (cheap blood), popularized at that time, which Tacitus referred to gladiators,\(^{24}\) should also be referred to the beheading, which until then had been regarded as discreet and elegant. The *decollatio* could constitute «the only form suitable for *honestiores*»\(^{25}\). In fact, the beheading was practiced not only with regard to those of noble birth. Everybody could be beheaded.\(^{26}\)

The popularity of beheading indeed left its mark in the sphere of language. The phrase used in the Law of Twelve Tables *de capite civis*\(^{27}\) re-

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ferred to the execution through beheading. In the period of the principate, the expression poena capitis became a synonym of death penalty in general. The place located outside the city walls of Jerusalem, where people were deprived of their lives through different means was called Golgotha or Calvary ‘the place of the skull’. The right to sentence citizens to death (in whatever form!) by the governors of the province was called ‘the right of the sword’ (ius gladii). Further, in the period of the dominate, the expression gladius ultor (the punishing sword) evoking associations with beheading in the first place is nothing else than a metaphor denoting punishment in general.

6. The symbolism of beheading. – Sergio Bertelli rightly observes that «among the representations of authority one could point to two central symbols: the head and the penis. The first one denotes dignity and personal identity, the second human potency and power».

The conduct of the mythical Perseus became an example for the Romans who willingly cut off the heads of enemies for several centuries. «It was a highly symbolic and ritualistic act», says Orietta Dora Cordovana and she tries to prove that among the Romans there existed «the culture of decapitation». The Greek historian Polybius writes that it was their ethos. Jean-Louis Voisin refers to the Quirites as the ‘headhunters’ (‘chasseurs des têtes’).

Beheading denoted a complete annihilation of the enemy. It deprived the person of his identity and of the deserved status both in the world of the living and of the dead. In legal Latin the term caput referred not so much to the head as to a person’s status in society. The three types of capitis deminutio (maxima, media, minima) described different forms of the social degradation of an individual. Capitis amputatio definitively deprived the beheaded of his legal identity in the sphere of the law.

Beheading was a sanction of a final character. In as much as the death sentence passed in absentia might have been changed or one could escape from the burning stake, and the examples of taking convicts down from the cross are historically proven, the re-attaching of once severed head was impossible.

7. «Ostentatio capitis». – For the ancient authors, what was more important than the very act of decapitation was the public display of the severed head of the enemy (ostentatio capitis). A story of John the Baptist’s tragic end, told in detail, unnaturally accelerates when it came to the point of killing the prophet. However, the author distinctly slows down the narrative when he describes the delivery of the prophet’s head on a plate. Historians eagerly described the fates of the severed heads of social troublemakers, rebellious generals or usurpers. However, they are silent with regard to the fact as to how the heads were severed.

The one who defeated an enemy in the world of the living and cut off his head gained power over the deceased also in the world of the dead. The jurist Paulus observes: «Where interment is made in different places, both of them do not become religious, for the reason that two sepulchres are not created by the burial of one person; but it seems to me that place should be religious where the principal part of the body is laid; that is to say, the head, whereof a likeness is made by means of which we are recognized».

Representatives of the authorities were not always concerned as to the fact whether the head had been or should be properly buried. Orietta Dora Cordovana rightly observes that «by way of contrast, the severed heads of traitors and public enemies, like the severed head of the Gorgon, become monstrous masks that break the taboo of the eye in ways that go beyond the common and normal use of the mask in Roman tradition … In this sense, it follows that decapitation, both in myth and in historical experience as a symbolic and ritual act, exemplifies the total extermination of the enemy, as one guilty of arrogance for whom normal funerary rituals are not possible. By consequence, the ‘normal’ transition to the underworld, keeping the integral status of the body and its identity is not possible either: severed heads are monsters’ heads, since their decaying and putrefaction in death is horrifically visible».

The state has retained control over the fate of the heads of common criminals. It happened that they were marked also after death. Helen Busch and Ann Stirland in the study «Romano-British decapitation burials» remind readers that «an almost universal feature of Romano-British decapitation burials is the relocation of the severed head, frequently in the vicinity of the legs».

Appendix 1. – On the basis of the few fragments of literary sources Mommsen created the ‘decapitation rules’. However, the material at our
disposal does not allow for drawing general conclusions. We cannot know whether, during the executions, the convicts _lege artis_ should stand, kneel or maybe lie down. Were they executed individually or could they be killed in a ‘group manner’? Were their hands tied and if so – in what way? Were their eyes covered? Were the executions public?

A new light on the procedure of the executions is shed by Christian sources. The authors of the acts of the martyrs did not have any reasons to be silent about the conduct of the representatives of Roman aristocracy regarding their brethren who had been sentenced to death. On the contrary. This is why in the texts which in their form resemble court protocols it was possible to preserve numerous details, which had been disregarded until then.

The longest passus devoted to beheading can be found in the description of the suffering and death of bishop of Carthage Cyprian which is dated to 258: «then Cyprian was led out on the grounds of Sextus’ estate behind the proconsular residence. There, after removing his cloak, he spread it on the ground so that he could kneel on it. Next he removed his dalmatic and gave it to his deacons; then he stood erect and began waiting for the executioner. When the executioner came, Cyprian told his friends to give the man twenty-five gold pieces … The blessed Cyprian then bound his eyes with his own hand, but when he could not tie the ends of the handkerchief himself, the priest Julian and Julian the subdeacon fastened them for him. So the blessed Cyprian went to his death, and his body was laid out nearby to satisfy the curiosity of the pagans».

The story of Cyprian is a perfect illustration of the way in which _decollatio_ was performed on the representatives of the higher social classes and at the same time undermines the ‘regulation-based’ description of Mommsen. The Bishop of Carthage was neither undressed nor whipped. His hands were not tied either. He was allowed to preserve his dignity reserved for his position and birth. The execution was arranged in such a way so that he could accept death with dignity.

Appendix 2. – The technical side of the execution is also the theme of unique frescoes preserved underneath the basilica SS. Giovanni e Paolo in Rome. The church was erected in the location of what had previously been an ancient complex of tenement buildings (_insulae_). The temple was erected partly on top of the existing structures and partly on the rebuilt elements and this is why some of the rooms (not only from the lower

40 _Acta Cypr._ 5. _Et ita idem Cyprianus in agrum Sexti productus est, et ibi se lacerna byrro exspoliavit, et genu in terra flexit, et in orationem se Domino prostravit. Et cum se dalmatica expoliasset, et diaconibus tradidisset, in linea stetit, et coepit spiculatoriorem sustinere. Cum venisset autem spiculator, iussit suis ut eidem spiculariugiinti quinque aureos darent … Postea vero beatus Cyprianus manu sua oculos sibi texit. Qui cum lacinias manuales ligare sibi non potuisset, Julianus presbyter et Julianus subdiaconus ei ligaverunt. Ita beatus Cyprianus passus est; ejusque corpus propter gentilium curiositatatem in proximo positum est._
floors) have survived until the present. On the first floor of the eastern *insula* there is a small room resembling a typical *lararium*. The whole room was decorated with paintings. The frescoes are dated to the end of the 4th century AD. The original purpose of this room is subject to debate (it might have been a chapel or a private oratory which housed the remains of martyrs: Cyprian, Justin and Theoctistus)\(^41\).

On the upper stage to the right of the chapel (at the level of the niche) one can see a scene of the arrest of three figures: two men and one woman. Opposite, on the left side, there is a representation of a moment preceding the beheading of the same persons. There are neither tombs under the niche nor any place for the relics. Yet, there is no known iconographical analogy for the topic of the said paintings\(^42\). The images of saints holding the attributes of their suffering did not appear in Christian art until the late 5th century AD, when barbarian kingdoms settled on the ruins of the Western Roman Empire. The images of the martyrs created at that time are devoid of realism; they are highly stylized and idealized. The painting under discussion had been created a hundred years earlier and refers to the brutalities of everyday life. This is why it is of an absolutely unique nature.

From the point of view of the history of the Roman criminal law this source is priceless. On the fresco we can see three kneeling figures, blindfolded, with their hands tied behind their backs. All of them are dressed, which makes it possible to question Mommsen’s claim that the beheading was preceded by an obligatory undressing of the convicts, followed by the whipping. Naturally, no pole can be seen. Unfortunately, due to the damage in the upper part of the fresco, we cannot really determine what role is played by the male figures standing behind the victims. However, it can be clearly seen that one of the figures is wearing a tunic, which in turn excludes a thesis that the beheading was of a purely military character. In the lower right corner, there is a geometrical contour, which may suggest that the victims are on some sort of a platform or some other kind of elevation. It seems that this execution is of a collective character.

**Summary.** – Times have changed. The new materials, which enrich our knowledge on the subject of the Roman *decollatio*, without doubt encourage us to revisit this form execution in research and analyze it anew. However, it should not be done in order to create a new ‘legal definition’. In this regard, Mommsen and his followers should be allowed to have a monopoly.

Lublin. 

Maciej Jonca

Sommario

1 «INDEX»

INDEX PER WITOLD WOŁODKIEWICZ

3 Luigi Capogrossi Colognesi, Luigi Labruna, Marek Kuryłowicz, «Opinioni al Magnifico Rettore dell’Università di Varsavia concernenti il Prof. Dr. Witold Wołodkiewicz»

PERSONE

13 Francesca Reduzzi Merola, «Schiavi senza nome in un mimiambo di Eronda»

15 Luigi Capogrossi Colognesi, «Figli delle origini: i liberi tra poteri familiari e res publica»

23 Michele Pedone, «A proposito delle nuove acquisizioni testuali in tema di manumissio inter amicos»

47 Agnieszka Kacprzak, «Pactio ex senatusconsulto Claudiano»

61 Ulrico Agnati, «Sulla tolleranza: cristiani e altri»

DIRETTI REALI

83 Zuzanna Benincasa, «Dalla res nullius alla selvaggina come fructus fundi»

103 Donatella Monteverdi, «Tabula picta»

136 Paola Santini, «Aspetti del paesaggio agrario negli auctores divisionis»

144 Ella Hermon, «‘L’espace de liberté de l’eau’ de Rome à nos jours»

OBBLIGAZIONI

165 Maria Floriana Cursi, «Il concorso della colpa del danneggiato nel risarcimento e la rilevanza penale dell’azione aquiliana»
VIII SOMMARIO

195 Anna Tarwacka, «Le prestazioni delle prostitute alla luce delle commedie di Plauto»

201 Felice Mercogliano, «Betti, le fonti di obbligazione, il negozio giuridico»

PROCESSO

207 Laura Solidoro, «Nossalità e potestas: esigenze processuali come fattore di trasformazione del diritto sostanziale»

218 Mario Varvaro, «A proposito di translatio iudicii»

229 Alessandro Adamo, «Un’anabasi identitaria: l’Avvocatura, oggi e ieri»

LE COSTITUZIONI

251 Umberto Laffi, «Prefetti del pretore e prefetture»

258 Rosaria Mazzola, «Voto segreto e disordini politici nella tarda repubblica. Note a Sisen. Hist. frg. 118 P.»

285 Kaj Sandberg, «The senatus consulta between Roman republica and principate»

291 Felice Mercogliano, «Civis Romanus sum»

«IUS GENTIUM»

307 Pierfrancesco Porena, «I Germani, Arminio, Teutoburgo: audaci riletture moderne»

313 Pierangelo Buongiorno, «Roma dinanzi ai Germani»

DIRITTO CRIMINALE

321 Armando Torrent, «Quaestiones de lege Iulia de adulteriis coercendis»

339 Maciej Jorica, «Decollatio: new materials, new perspectives»

348 Alessandro Manni, «D. 48.19.28.3 (Call. 6 de cogn.) e la sanzione dei recidivi»

371 Francesco Fasolino, «L’evasione dalla condanna ai lavori forzati»
IX

LE FONTI

395 Jan Zablocki, «Parole e costumi in cui è racchiuso il senso delle leggi»

408 Valeria Di Nisio, «Una questione di ‘lana caprina’? Pilus e pili gaiani»

415 Mauro Osses Ardiles, «Antonio, Antonino, Antoniniano»

418 Fabiana Tuccillo, «Quod quisque iuris: spunti dal diritto tardoantico e bizantino»

TRADIZIONE ROMANISTICA

429 Maria Zablocka, «La legge delle Dodici Tavole nella ricostruzione di Hotman»

443 Joaquín Garrido Martín, «Derecho romano como ‘Muster juristischer Methode’: el modelo científico de Puchta»

483 Thomas Finkenauer, «Die Entwicklung der Interpolationenkritik»

490 Cosimo Cascione, «Uno strano dubbio a proposito di fonti delle obbligazioni: ‘diritto romano o classico’?»

502 Andrea Lepore, «Norma e interpretazione»

516 Carla Masi Doria, «Storicità del diritto, legalità, interpretazione. A proposito di un ‘rigore’ ... trasformato»

521 Maurizio d’Orta, «Dall’humanitas ai diritti umani. Storia di valori e categorie»

DA ROMA ALLA TERZA ROMA

547 Caterina Trocini, «Per una prospettiva giuridico-religiosa»

551 Pierangelo Catalano, Paolo Siniscalco, «Nota informativa per il XXXIX Seminario internazionale di studi storici ‘Da Roma alla Terza Roma’ La dottrina della Terza Roma: aspetti teorici e realtà sociali»

553 Adalberto Mainardi, «Messaggio dal Monastero di Bose»

557 Paolo Siniscalco, «Le Sacre Scritture nell’Epistola di Filofej»

563 Raffaele Farina, «San Costantino Imperatore e la pace»
Giorgio Vespignani, «Il matrimonio di Zoe Paleologhina con Ivan III di Mosca tra dottrina politica e realtà sociale»

Vladislav Zypin, «La Terza Roma nella storia e nell’attualità (apologia della dottrina del monaco Filofej)»

Caterina Trocini, «Cronaca del XXXIX Seminario internazionale di studi storici ‘Da Roma alla Terza Roma’»

Carla Masi Doria, «Dieter Nörr: ricordi italiani di un romanista senza frontiere»

Francesco Lucrezi, «Daniela Piattelli (1940-2019)»

LIBRORUM INDEX, a cura di Fabiana Tuccillo

«Operé in concorso all’XI Premio Boulvert»

«Bando del Premio di laurea Vincenzo Giuffrè»


655 ABSTRACTS, a cura di Paola Santini

675 «Libri discussi»
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