

SARA CONTINI

Human Dignity
in the Latin Reception
of Origen

*Studien und Texte zu
Antike und Christentum*

135

Mohr Siebeck

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Introduction

It is difficult to describe what “human dignity” is, and what it entails. However, there are some elements that are consistently associated with human dignity in modern discourses, at least since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Although the UDHR does not provide a definition of dignity, it conveys that dignity is inherent to each and every member of the human species.¹ As noted by Oliver Sensen (2011) and Miriam Griffin (2017), the idea of a universal, inalienable, inviolable, and unmerited human dignity emerging from modern texts such as the UDHR is in stark contrast with the views expressed in ancient texts featuring *dignitas*, i.e. the Latin noun from which, as per the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “dignity” is derived (by way of the French “dignité”).² In fact, in most of the extant Latin texts written before the 5th century AD, *dignitas* is mainly attributed to individuals (rather than to all human beings), and it refers to one’s contribution to public life, in the context of hierarchical institutions such as the Roman State and the Church. Thus, this study examines a particular stage in the history of the idea of dignity, in order to shed light on the development of the meaning of this term which led it to also include a universal sense that it did not express before. The role played in this shift in the meaning of dignity by Early Christian thought on humanity as created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27) will be assessed.

¹ UDHR Preamble: “Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. [...] The peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women [...]”. Article 1: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood”. Art. 22: “Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization [...] of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality”. Art. 23 c. 3: “Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection”. Available at <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> (last accessed on 13/05/2023).

² Other studies, such as Hennette-Vauchez (2011), focus instead on the existing links between rank-based *dignitas* and modern views on human dignity in jurisprudence.

To achieve this, the meanings attributed to the term *dignitas* in the Latin translations of Origen of Alexandria made by Rufinus and Jerome will be investigated, as well as other Latin Christian texts of the 4th century which, to different degrees, show the reception of Origen's exegesis of Gen 1:26–27. Particular focus is placed on instances where “dignity” refers to humanity as a whole, as is the case with Rufinus' translation of Origen, *On First Principles* (*De Principiis*) 3.6.1. The aim of this study is to shed light on the way in which Origen's thoughts on the relationship between God and human beings, as mediated by the Latin translators, problematised Classical views on *dignitas* and contributed to a shift towards a universalising understanding of the term.

The 21st century has seen a rise in the number of publications investigating the idea of human dignity, both scholarly and meant for a wider public.³ The concept of dignity has undergone heavy scrutiny, and coming to a sufficiently convincing definition of what “dignity” actually means has proven to be elusive. While some scholars declare it to be the “linchpin of the modern self-understanding of the human person”,⁴ others have concluded that “dignity” cannot be more than “an empty and flawed signifier”.⁵ The definitions and qualifications of dignity in contemporary scholarship are countless:

[Dignity] has been described as powerful (Beyleveld and Brownsword 2001), yet useless and vague (Macklin 2003); arbitrary (Van Steendam et al. 2006), yet addictive (Wetz 2004); elusive (Ullrich 2003), yet widely used (Van Steendam et al. 2006); groundless (Rachels 1990), yet revolutionary (Wood 2008); of supreme importance, yet without reference points.⁶

Many of the scholarly works dedicated to human dignity have attempted to shed light on this complex notion by studying its development throughout history: notable examples are the collected volumes edited by Remy Debes (2017) and by John Loughlin (2021). Christopher McCrudden (2013) remarks on the difficulty of selecting an appropriate methodology to investigate the historical development of an abstract notion that is not nearly univocally understood.⁷ This is especially true for the study of dignity in ancient texts such as those by Origen; in the introduction of his book on human dignity in Early Christian literature, Ulrich Volp (2006) identifies three possible methodological approaches.⁸ The first is to focus on the occurrences of terms such as *dignitas* and

³ One example is the debate “In Pursuit of Dignity”, aired on BBC Radio 4 on 18 Aug. 2012. Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b011v26v> (last accessed on 07/01/2022). The discussion showcased different perspectives on what “human dignity” is, what it is based on, and how it affects various aspects of the life of each member of contemporary society.

⁴ Ammicht-Quinn, Junker-Kenny, and Tamez (2003): 2.

⁵ Douzinas (2007): 8.

⁶ Schroeder and Bani-Sadr (2017): 3.

⁷ McCrudden (2013): 5–6.

⁸ Volp (2006): 10–13.

investigate how their meaning changes throughout history. The second is to focus on anthropological notions expressed by a specific ancient philosophical school – for example, the Stoic concept of self-determination – and assess their presence in Early Christian authors. The third approach, which Volp prefers, is to identify not a term or a specific philosophical school but rather a fundamental research question. In the case of his study, the question is:

To what extent is the idea of a common human nature endowed with a special dignity, which distinguishes humans from animals and from animate and inanimate matter, found in the writings of the ancient Christian thinkers, and how is this nature conceived and justified?⁹

Thus, in the introduction of his study Volp provides a working definition of human dignity (*Würde*) as a distinctive attribute of the collective human nature in comparison to the rest of created nature: this concept of dignity is traced back by Volp to Early Christian texts. When it comes to Origen, Volp concludes, based on *Princ.* 3.6.1 and especially on passages in Origen's treatise *Against Celsus* (preserved in Greek), that Origen contributed to the development of this concept of human dignity by maintaining that, unlike animals, human souls, endowed with reason, are created with the capacity to attain the likeness with God through their virtue and their humility.¹⁰

My approach is complementary to Volp's. I primarily follow the first of the three methodologies he identifies, meaning that I use the presence of the Latin noun *dignitas* in texts as the main criterion to select and organise the ancient evidence. In my study, the contribution offered by the Latin translators of Origen to the history of dignity is evaluated by assessing how these ancient authors use the term *dignitas* in different contexts, and what it means for them to attribute *dignitas* to individuals, to God, or to humanity as a whole. In the case of the Latin texts that I will examine, having *dignitas* as the starting point of the research presents three advantages: first, it helps to define the object of the research and the selection criterion as univocally as possible. Second, approaching the subject of human dignity from the point of view of the occurrences of *dignitas* does not require to postulate a definition of dignity in advance; instead, an evolving definition of dignity between Origen and his Latin readership will emerge at the end from the range of contexts and usages of this term. Thirdly, and most importantly: because *dignitas* is such a distinctive and highly codified term of Roman political culture, investigating each of the occurrences of *dignitas* in the translations of Origen allows for a comparison with

⁹ Volp (2006): 13, "Inwieweit findet sich in den Schriften der antiken christlichen Denker die Vorstellung einer mit einer besonderen Würde ausgestatteten gemein-menschlichen Natur, die die Menschen von Tieren und von belebter und unbelebter Materie unterscheidet, und wie wird diese Natur gefasst und begründet?" (my translation).

¹⁰ Volp (2006): 143–153. The view that for Origen human dignity resides in the capacity for moral progress established with the creation "according to the image" of God (Gen 1:27) is also expressed by Hengsternann (2010): 47–53.

the traditional understanding of Roman *dignitas* that Rufinus, Jerome, and their audience were familiar with.

The Classical understanding of *dignitas* has a relatively clearer meaning when compared with modern notions of “human dignity”, as it generally denotes the elevated social standing – often connected to a public office – awarded to an individual or to specific groups (such as families or social classes), in comparison with others.¹¹ This traditional usage of individual *dignitas*, emerging from the majority of the Early Christian texts taken into consideration, will be compared in this study with the few occurrences of *dignitas* referring to the entirety of humankind. As will be shown in parts III and IV of this study, during the 4th and early 5th centuries these exceptional occurrences are mainly found in texts involving the creation of human beings “according to the image of God” (as told in Gen 1:26–27), such as Hilary of Poitiers, *Tract.118Ps.* 10.3–8; Jerome, *Comm.Isa.* 14.11, and especially Rufinus’ translations of Origen, *Princ.* 3.6.1 and of Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orat.* 16.8,15.

Scholars such as Bonnie Kent (2017) or Emmanuel Rehfeld (2021) have demonstrated that the relationship between Early Christian discourses on the creation of humanity in the image of God and modern views on inalienable human dignity should be understood as complex and to a certain extent even contradictory. The significance of Late Antique and Medieval discourses on humanity created in the image of God for the development of a notion of dignity as the inherent worth of the collective human nature, endowed with the faculty of reason and with freedom of choice, was evaluated in studies such as Gaetano Lettieri (2010) or Ruedi Imbach (2014).¹² The role played in this process by Origen and his Latin reception is not widely acknowledged in the scholarly works on dignity and its historical developments. For example, Andreas Großmann¹³ notes the difference between the traditional understanding of dignity as part of a social hierarchy, associated with status, reputation, and prestige, and the more recent idea of an inviolable and indestructible human dignity (*Menschenwürde*). Großmann quotes Ambrose of Milan, Leo the Great, and Gregory the Great as Late Antique and Early Medieval authors who contributed to a shift in the understanding of *dignitas*, based on the Christian notion of the human soul as “image” of God, without mentioning Origen. Similarly, many studies on human dignity in Late Antiquity focus mainly on Greek texts by the Cappadocians, sometimes in connection with Latin authors such as Augustine.¹⁴

¹¹ For definitions of Roman *dignitas*, cf. Sensen (2011): 75–76; Griffin (2017): 50, and Sangiovanni (2017): 16.

¹² For previous studies cf. the literature review in Volp (2006): 5–10.

¹³ S.v. “Würde”, in Ueding (2009): 1459–1466.

¹⁴ Cf. Harper (2016); Mikhaylov (2019). Guerrero van der Meijden (2019): 267–281; Müller (2020): 30–36; Pfordten (2023²): 22–23.

Origen and his Latin tradition are rarely taken into consideration.¹⁵ However, Origen's interpretation of Gen 1:26–27 impacted significantly on Christian anthropology both in the Greek and the Latin Church, as will be discussed in part IV of this study. Theo Kobusch (2008), Alfons Fürst (2012), and Pasquale Terracciano (2018) showed that the reception of Origen's anthropology can be seen not just in Late Antiquity, but also in later authors whose works are considered turning points in the history of human dignity, like the Italian philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and other Renaissance thinkers. There are many studies on Origen's anthropology and its reception, and some of them use the expression "human dignity" in reference to his views on humans as rational beings originally created "according to the image" of God (Gen 1:27). Namely, John Solheid (2023) examines Origen's arguments (particularly as expressed in *Princ.* 3.1 and in the *Homilies on Psalms*) on freedom of choice and on the kinship between God and human beings, and concludes that Origen's views on human persons as spiritual beings provide a valuable theological framework to appreciate the intrinsic dignity of every human being.¹⁶ However, a textual analysis clarifying what *dignitas* means in the Latin reception of Origen in the 4th century and assessing its significance in the shift from traditional Roman to Christian dignity has yet to be done.

Thus, I will address a gap in scholarship on the history of dignity by assessing the way in which the aristocratic understanding of *dignitas* prevailing at the time was challenged not just by Origen's thought on humanity, but also by the mediation of his thought through its Latin reception. In this sense, I study *dignitas* in the Latin translations of Origen as a moment of intercultural dialogue, by investigating how a Greek Christian discourse on humanity as God's creation is transmitted to a Latin audience by employing a familiar term of Roman political culture. Even if the objective of this study cannot be to provide a conclusive definition of "human dignity" in Early Christian literature, clarifying the extent of continuity and innovation in the use of *dignitas* as displayed in the Latin reception of Origen will shed light on the history of dignity as both a social/divisive and as a universal/uniting notion.

This study is divided into four parts, following this introduction. Part I, titled "Linguistic Issues", deals with the matter of translation, investigating which Greek terms and expressions were perceived by the Latin translators of Origen as equivalents of *dignitas* (chapter 1). A related linguistic issue that will be

¹⁵ An overview on human dignity in Early Christian writings is provided in Soulen and Woodhead (2006): 3–8; Origen is mentioned in passing, with a reference to *Princ.* 3.6.1.

¹⁶ Cf. Klöckener (2021): 80; Rizzi (2010): 32, "Origen seems to belong at full title to the classical philosophical tradition, according to which human beings' dignity consists in the presence and activity of the *logos* – i.e. rational capability – within them". For Origen's views on freedom of choice, cf. Sfameni Gasparro (1998): 151–176; Caruso (2012): 11–175; Fürst (2019); see section 3.4 in this study.

examined in chapter 2 is the specificity of the term *dignitas* in Rufinus' translations of Origen, i.e. the question of whether Rufinus perceived *dignitas* as a unique and irreplaceable term (and, if so, in which context), or if he regarded it as at least partly interchangeable with similar Latin terms such as *honor* or *status*.

Part II, titled "Dignity in Origen", examines all occurrences of *dignitas* referring to specific individuals or classes in the Latin translations of Origen. The texts examined in chapter 3 refer to *dignitas* as attributed to human beings and other rational creatures, and I analyse the connection between rank and merit: section 3.1 deals with *dignitas* as social status; section 3.2 with *dignitas* denoting a position of authority within the Christian Church; section 3.3 concerns the high *dignitas* awarded to worthy individuals in their afterlife, and section 3.4 focuses on a particular usage of *dignitas* which is connected to Origen's thought on the progress of rational creatures based on their freedom of choice.¹⁷

A central theological concept that emerges from the texts analysed in chapter 3 is the participation of rational creatures in Christ: the theme of participation is significant in Origen's thought and so there is ample literature on the matter.¹⁸ To summarise: when "Christ" is mentioned in this study, unless a distinction is explicitly made between "the soul of Jesus" and "the Logos", I refer to the incarnate Son, the union of both the second hypostasis of the Trinity (which Origen calls Logos, Wisdom, or Image of God) and the created human soul (and body) of Jesus Christ.¹⁹ The expression "participation in Christ" refers to Origen's view that, because human souls as rational creatures share a natural affinity with the Logos,²⁰ when they choose to respond positively to the pedagogical activity of Christ (supported by the angels, the apostles, and the saints)²¹ human beings set themselves on a path that ultimately will lead them to achieve the same unity with the divine Logos that was attained by the soul of Jesus.²² This progress is achieved through prayer, through the practice of the virtues which have their ontological foundation in the Logos (such as wisdom, justice, etc.),²³ and especially through the study of Scripture as the medium through which the Trinity communicates with humanity. The Greek term

¹⁷ For the theme of the progress of rational beings in Origen and its reception, cf. Lettieri, Fallica, and Jacobsen (2023), especially the contributions by Lettieri (pp. 17–53) and by Jacobsen (pp. 55–64).

¹⁸ For the human soul and its relationship with the Logos in Origen, cf. Crouzel (1989): 92–98; Simonetti (2004): 29–50, and Prinziavalli (2005); furthermore, cf. Evers (2019): 40–46, for the intermediary role played by the Logos in the creation, fall, and restoration of rational creatures in *De Principiis*; Maspero (2016) for the participation of the human *logoi* in the divine Logos in Origen's *Commentary on John*.

¹⁹ Origen's views on the incarnation are discussed in section 4.2.2.

²⁰ See sections 5.1; 6.5.

²¹ Cf. Rizzi (2010): 36–41.

²² Fernández (2019).

²³ Cf. Orig. *Comm.Jo.* 32.11.127; *Hom.Isa.* 3.3; *Hom.36Ps.* 2.1.

employed by Origen to refer to the “participation” of human souls in the Logos is normally *μετοχή*: this is the case for example with *Cels.* 7.17, examined in section 4.2.2. In *Hom.36Ps.* 2.4, which is extant both in the original Greek and in Rufinus’ translation, *μετοχή* is rendered as *participatio*. Alternatively, Origen speaks of *κοινωνία* (cf. *Cels.* 3.28).²⁴ In Rufinus’ translations, this concept is expressed mainly as *participatio* (cf. *Princ.* 1.3.6–8) or as *consortium* (cf. *Hom.Num.* 20.2). The concept of participation is introduced in sections 3.3–4 and plays an important role especially later in part III of this study.

Chapter 4 deals with the dignity of God, and how it relates to the dignity of the creatures examined in the previous chapter. Section 4.1 examines passages in the Latin translations of Origen where *dignitas* and correlated adjectives such as *dignus* are used as technical terms of Origen’s exegesis, in reference to the hermeneutical principle of *θεοπρέπεια*, i.e. the notion that everything that Scripture says about God must be interpreted by the spiritual exegete in a way that fits the dignity of the incorporeal God.²⁵ The same exegetical notion of *dignitas* of God that we find in the Latin translations is also expressed in Greek texts by Origen, using the noun *ἀξίωμα* and other derivatives of *ἄξιος*, identified in chapter 1 as the closest Greek equivalents to *dignitas*. These Greek passages (mainly from *Against Celsus* and the *Homilies on Psalms*) are analysed in sections 4.2–3 so as to complete the assessment of Origen’s views on the dignity of God as a hermeneutical criterion for spiritual exegesis.

The purpose of chapters 3 and 4 is to establish a “baseline” of what “dignity” normally means in Origen’s writings, in order to demonstrate why the expression “dignity of the image” (*imaginis dignitas*), found twice in Rufinus’ translation of Origen, *Princ.* 3.6.1, constitutes an exception. Part III of this study, titled “A Turning Point in the Usage of *Dignitas*: Universal Human Dignity”, aims at clarifying the meaning of “dignity of the image” in the context of Origen’s interpretation of Gen 1:26–27, and to investigate possible parallels for this exceptional occurrence of *dignitas* in Latin literature prior to Rufinus’ translation of *De Principiis*, made in 398.²⁶ Chapter 5 is dedicated to *Princ.* 3.6.1, whereas chapter 6 deals with Cicero, *On Duties (De Officiis)* 1.106. Reading these two texts in comparison with one another is aimed at identifying in which way the “dignity of the image” in *Princ.* 3.6.1 is truly an innovation compared to non-Christian understandings of dignity. *Princ.* 3.6.1 and *Off.* 1.106 have in common the usage of *dignitas* as referring not to an individual (as it was in the texts analysed in the previous chapters) but rather to the whole human species, by virtue of its rational nature. However, as will be clarified in chapter 6, the single occurrence of *dignitas* referring to human nature in Cicero,

²⁴ For Origen’s terminology for participation, cf. Biriukov (2017).

²⁵ This principle of Early Christian exegesis has been examined by Sheridan (2000).

²⁶ Grappone (2007): 18–21. In general, for the dating and the transmission of Origen’s texts, cf. the *Clavis Origenis* (forthcoming).

Off. 1.106 does not truly represent a shift in the meaning of the term in relation to humanity in the way that later Christian discourses do.

The investigation of possible parallels for the occurrence of universal *dignitas* in *Princ.* 3.6.1, initiated with *Off.* 1.106 in chapter 6, continues in part IV, titled “The Usage of the Term *Dignitas* and the Reception of Origen’s Views on Humanity in the Cultural Environment of Rufinus and Jerome”. The Latin texts examined in part IV are examples of usages of *dignitas* which do not correspond to the traditional understanding as the social, political, or ecclesiastical rank of an individual. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 give an overview on *dignitas* in texts written before 398. Chapter 7 deals with Latin Christian authors: the texts are divided among those where *dignitas* refers to a rank awarded to all human souls since their creation according to the image of God (section 7.1), and those who instead use *dignitas* to denote a spiritual rank available to all beings made according to the image of God once they decide to become true Christians (section 7.2). Chapter 8 deals with the Cappadocians and with their Latin translations. The following chapters focus on the occurrences of *dignitas* in two Latin authors as case studies: chapter 9 deals with Filastrius of Brescia and his views on the progress from image to likeness (which was also present in Origen, *Princ.* 3.6.1), while chapter 10 examines Jerome’s writings, assessing the different ways in which he uses *dignitas* in reference to human beings and other rational creatures.

The main findings of this study will be summarised in the conclusions, evaluating the contribution offered by Origen’s thought on the relationship between human beings and God through Christ, as mediated by 4th century authors and translators, to the spread of a novel, counter-cultural understanding of *dignitas* not just as individual rank in a social hierarchy but also as universal potential of all humans as rational beings created in the image of God.

Part I

Linguistic Issues

The aim of this part of the study is to assess what semantic areas are covered in the Latin translations of Origen by the adjective *dignus*, “worthy” (or the adverb *digne*, “worthily”), and by the noun *dignitas*, “dignity”, and also to clarify whether these areas are exclusively covered by these terms. Chapter 1 will assess which Greek terms were presumed by Rufinus and Jerome as equivalents to *dignus* and *dignitas*, by comparing the Latin translation with the extant Greek texts. Chapter 2 will investigate the matter of whether *dignitas* was perceived by the Latin translators of Origen as a distinctive and irreplaceable term (and, if so, in which contexts), or if the role of *dignitas* could also be played in the translations of Origen by other closely related Latin terms.

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