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## IMAGES OF ANIMALS FROM *HISTORIA NATURALIS* IN POLITICAL RHETORIC OF LATE ANTIQUITY: BLOSSIUS AEMILIUS DRACONTIUS' LION

**Аннотация.** Проблематика статьи связана с репрезентацией Плиниевых образов животных, известных по «Естественной истории», в эпоху поздней античности. В частности, речь идет об образе льва, показанного самым благородным и милосердным среди хищников в восьмой книге сочинения Плиния. Именно в таком виде его в целом приняла античная традиция, однако я пытаюсь показать, что в ряде случаев, связанных, в частности, с творчеством карфагенского поэта V в. Блоссия Эмилия Драконция этот «благородный» образ использовался лишь как маска, необходимая, чтобы скрыть критический настрой произведений, являющихся по сути политическими памфлетами и направленными против вандалских королей, которые захватили в то время власть в Северной Африке.

**Ключевые слова:** Плиний, «Естественная история», поздняя античность, рецепция классической традиции, Драконций, вандалская Африка

**Для цитирования:** *Nikolsky I. M. Images of animals from *Historia Naturalis* in political rhetoric of Late Antiquity: Blossius Aemilius Dracontius' lion // Шаги/Steps. Т. 6. № 1. 2020. С. 158–167. DOI: 10.22394/2412-9410-2020-6-1-158-167.*

*Статья поступила в редакцию 25 сентября 2019 г.  
Принято к печати 16 октября 2019 г.*

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## IMAGES OF ANIMALS FROM *HISTORIA NATURALIS* IN POLITICAL RHETORIC OF LATE ANTIQUITY: BLOSSIUS AEMILIUS DRACONTIUS' LION

**Abstract.** The main subject of the paper is the representation of Pliny's 'bestiary' in Late Antiquity. In particular, it concerns the image of the lion depicted in Book 8 of *Historia Naturalis* as the most gentle and merciful of carnivores. I try to argue that a Carthaginian 5<sup>th</sup> century author, Blossius Aemilius Dracontius, used this image to construct political allegories, but not in a complimentary way; rather, it served as a kind of 'camouflage', an instrument to disguise the criticism present in his texts, which were, in essence, political pamphlets.

The main idea is that texts of different genres, written by Dracontius at different times, can be treated as one system, constructed by using of cross-cutting terms, characters and images in each poem. The image of a lion is one of the most popular in this sequence: it appears both in early works by the Carthaginian poet (dedication to Felicianus Grammaticus, known as *Romulea 1; Controversia de statua viri fortis*) and in later ones (*Satisfactio; De Raptu Helenae; Orestis Tragoedia*). Analysis of intertextual links shows that with the help of this image Dracontius tried to depict Vandal kings as rude and bloodthirsty creatures — not directly, because this could be too dangerous, but rather implicitly: the lion image, traditionally associated with Pliny's description, served here as a kind of mask.

**Keywords:** Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, Late Antiquity, reception of classical tradition, Dracontius, Vandal Africa

**To cite this article:** Nikolsky, I. M. (2020). Images of animals from *Historia Naturalis* in political rhetoric of Late Antiquity: Blossius Aemilius Dracontius' lion. *Shagi / Steps*, 6(1), 158–167. DOI: 10.22394/2412-9410-2020-6-1-158-167.

Received September 25, 2019

Accepted October 16, 2019

This paper deals with the question of how ideas and views concerning the surrounding world that had appeared in Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* were adapted in Late Antiquity. It is examined on the basis of works by Blossius Aemilius Dracontius, a poet of the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century — beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, who wrote in Latin, and lived in Carthage, capital of the Vandal kingdom in North Africa. The textual heritage of this author is distinguished by presence of stable connections between motifs and images in works of different genres and written at different times; some of these recur consistently. Among such images, one of the most frequent is the image of the lion as the most noble predator.

The main source for such a conception, as researchers repeatedly have noted [Tizzoni 2012: 287; Marrón 2017], was the description by Pliny in Book 8 of his *Historia Naturalis* (NH VIII.41–50). Pliny actually does distinguish between the lion and other predators, noting its unique nobility (42; 50: *generositas, praecipua generositas*), in comparison, for example, with leopards: these, most tellingly, lack a mane, an external sign of this nobility (VIII.42)<sup>1</sup>.

The main quality where this leonine nobility is manifested is clemency (*clementia*). The lion doesn't attack first or without a reason; it spares children and women. Only armed enemies (typically, hunters) are able to provoke its aggression), and even then only if it has been wounded. As soon as they stop attacking, the predator loses interest in the battle<sup>2</sup>.

Such views concerning the lion as a noble and brave animal, already found, among ancient authors, in Aristotle's works, appeared in political rhetoric with the

<sup>1</sup> *leoni praecipua generositas tunc, cum colla armosque vestiunt iubae; id enim aetate contingit e leone conceptis. quos vero pardi generavere, semper insigni hoc carent; simili modo feminae...* (The lion is specially high-spirited at the time when its neck and shoulders are clothed with a mane, for this occurs at maturity in the case of those sired by a lion, though those begotten by leopards always lack this characteristic; and the females likewise — trans. of Pliny hereinafter by H. Rackham, W. H. S. Jones, D. E. Eichholz).

<sup>2</sup> NH VIII.48: *Leoni tantum ex feris clementia in supplices. prostratis parcit et, ubi saevit, in viros potius quam in feminas fremit, in infantes non nisi magna fame. credit Iuba pervenire intellectum ad eos precum; in captivam certe Gaetuliae reducem audivit multorum in silvis impetum esse mitigatum adloquio ausae dicere, se feminam, profugam, infirmam, supplicem animalis omnium generosissimi ceterisque imperitantis, indignam eius gloria praedam...* (The lion alone of wild animals shows mercy to suppliants; it spares persons prostrated in front of it, and when raging it turns its fury on men rather than women, and only attacks children when extremely hungry. Juba believes that the meaning of entreaties gets through to them: at all events he was informed that the onset of a herd of lions in the forests upon a woman of Gaetulia who was captured and got away again had been checked by a speech in which she dared to say that she was a female, a fugitive, a weakling a suppliant to the most generous of all the animals, the lord of all the rest, a booty unworthy of his glory...); NH 50: *generositas in periculis maxime deprehenditur, non illo tantum modo, quo spernens tela diu se terrore solo tuetur ac velut cogi testatur cooriturque non tamquam periculo coactus, sed tamquam amentiae iratus* (The lion's nobility of spirit is detected most in dangers, not merely in the way that despising weapons he protects himself for a long time only by intimidation, and protests as it were that he is acting under compulsion, and rises to the encounter not as if forced by danger but as though enraged by madness...); NH 51: *vulneratus observatione mira percussorem novit et in quantalibet multitudine adpetit; eum vero, qui telum quidem miserit, sed non vulneraverit, correptum rotatumque sternit nec vulnerat. cum pro catulis feta dimicat, oculorum aciem traditur defigere in terram, ne venabula expavescat...* (When he has been wounded he marks down his assailant in a marvellous way, and knows him and picks him out in however large a him but fails to wound him he seizes and whirling him round flings him on the ground, but does not wound him).

assistance of Pliny's contemporary, Seneca, who used the lion's character as an example for Nero in his treatise *On Clemency*, a work composed slightly earlier than the *Historia Naturalis* (*De clementia* I.5.5)<sup>3</sup>. This image was developed in Martial's epigrams, in the so called 'lion-hare cycle' (Marc. I.6, 14, 22, 48, 51, 60, 104), and later was found, for example, in the works of Claudian, again in a political context (*Carmina minora* 22.18–26).

Dracontius is the latest in this series of authors, and his interpretation of the lion image is of particular interest, because this image passed from one of his works to another, appeared in texts belonging to different genres and, to a certain extent, united them. This allows us to consider his entire literary heritage as a single system.

Before turning to this, central part of our paper, a few words about Dracontius' biography and its connection with his creative work<sup>4</sup>. It is known that he was descended from a noble Roman family (perhaps, senatorial); was educated by Felicianus Grammaticus; and for a time was a successful lawyer and orator. He had access to the political establishment, dominated by the Vandals: following their conquest of North Africa they had preserved the general framework of the Roman administrative system, at a minimum on the local level. At some point in his life Dracontius fell into disfavor and was arrested, it is believed, for political reasons; the most popular view<sup>5</sup> is that this took place during the reign of king Gunthamund (484–496). A hint about the reasons for his arrest can be found in a work he wrote in prison, *Satisfactio*. Written in verse, this was a plea for pardon addressed to the king of the Vandals: Dracontius asked to be forgiven for writing another panegyric, dedicated to an 'unknown lord', *dominus ignotus*, perhaps some political opponent of Gunthamund<sup>6</sup>. The appeal was unsuccessful; the poet obtained his release only from the next Vandal ruler, Thrasamund (496–523), supposedly after composing another, appropriate panegyric, the text of which has not survived.

Consequently, the literary career of Dracontius also can be divided into three phases<sup>7</sup>: before prison, during his imprisonment, and after it. To the earliest phase some initial works from the compendium *Romulea*<sup>8</sup> may be assigned, including two dedications to his teacher, Felicianus Grammaticus (*Romulea* 1; 3), and *Controversia de statua viri fortis* (*Romulea* 5). To the prison phase — *Satisfactio*, mentioned above, and the largest known work by Dracontius, *De Laudibus Dei*. To the last,

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<sup>3</sup> *Elephanti leonesque transeunt, quae impulerunt; ignobilis bestiae pertinacia est* (Elephants and lions pass by those whom they have struck down; inveteracy is the quality of ignoble animals — trans. by A. Stewart).

<sup>4</sup> Not all details of Dracontius' life are known, but its main points are reconstructed in the scholarly literature. See, for example: [Romano 1959: 10–52; Bright 1987: 14–20; Kaufmann 2005: 19–20].

<sup>5</sup> See [Romano 1959: 16–23; Bright 1987: 14–20; Schetter 1990: 90; Obermeier 1999: 59–61; Edwards 2004; Merrills 2004].

<sup>6</sup> See *Satisfactio* (hereinafter *Sat.*) 93–94. It is traditionally considered that the role of this *dominus ignotus* was played by one or another foreign ruler (Anastasius, Zeno or Theodoric — see studies by D. Romano, D. Bright, W. Schetter, A. Obermeier, M. Edwards from the previous note). A Merrills [2004] assumed that it was not a foreign ruler, but a Vandal one, perhaps Huneric, Gunthamund's immediate predecessor.

<sup>7</sup> For a chronology of Dracontius' works see, for example [Shanzer 1986: 20; Bright 1999].

<sup>8</sup> This compendium is also known as *Carmina Profana*. The fullest editions can be found in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica (Auctores antiquissimi series, vol. 14)* and in the Les Belles Lettres series, published during the 1980–1990's. For more details see the bibliography.

post-prison phase, a series of *epyllia* that includes, for example, *De Raptu Helenae* (*Romulea* 8), *Medea* (*Romulea* 10), and *Orestis Tragoedia*.

The image of the lion is particularly prominent in *Satisfactio*, Dracontius' most biographical and most intensely rhetorical work, in which he appeals to his addressee for mercy and brings up the lion as a prime example of this quality. According to Dracontius, the lion is noble and merciful for two reasons: it doesn't attack a hunter who has given up<sup>9</sup>, and has no interest in easy prey, small animals<sup>10</sup>. Both these characteristics (the second one refers, to a greater extent, to Martial, but its base model is still Pliny's description of the lion as the least bloodthirsty animal, one that is not too eager for food) appear, correspondingly, in *Controversia*<sup>11</sup> and in *De Raptu Helenae*<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> *Sat.* 137–148: *Sic leo terribile fremit horridus ore cruento / Unguibus excussis dente minante neces; / acrius iratus crispato lumine ferri / et mora si fuerit, acrius inde furit; / at si venator trepidans venabula ponat / territus et iaceat, mox perit ira cadens. / Temnit praedo cibos, quos non facit ipse cadaver; / ac ferus ignoscit, ceu satis accipiat, / et dat prostrato veniam sine vulnere victo / ore verecundo deiiciens oculos. / Sic tua, regnator, non impia frangitur ira, / cum confessus erit crimina gesta reus* (So a horrible lion terribly roars with a bloody mouth, with claws coming out, threatening to kill. And he becomes angrier because of [the hunter's] swinging a sword, and [the hunter's] slowness makes him even more aggressive. But if a hunter becomes frightened, and in fear drops a spear, the anger soon will pass — for the predator rejects all prey killed not by itself. And this wild beast is able to forgive, as if accepting an apology, and shows mercy to the prostrate and the defeated, does not wound, turns away from the confused [victim's] face. Thus, o ruler, your not unrighteous anger dies down when the malefactor repents of his misdeeds). Trans. of Dracontius from Latin is mine.

<sup>10</sup> *Sat.* 265–270: *Ut mi irascaris, quis sim <qui> dignior ira / tam magni regis iudicer esse tua? / Quando per aetherias aquila volitante rapinas / praeda cibusque fuit passer hirundo picus? / Quando fames rabidi quamvis ieiuna leonis / ut sit, adoptavit faucibus esca lepus?* (Who am I, that you are angry with me? To be thought the most deserving of your anger — the anger of so great a king? Could it be that a sparrow, swallow or woodpecker would become a meal and prey for an eagle, soaring in the sky, searching a prey? Could it be that hunger, even very great, made a hare food for a furious lion?)

<sup>11</sup> *Romulea* 5 (*Controversia*) 306–311: *Si ratio te nulla movet, si mente cruenta / humana pietate cares, imitare leones / quos feritas generosa iuvat: super arma tenentes / ingruere fremitusque dare procul ore cruento / nobilis ira solet, subjectis parcere gaudent / et praedam rabies contempsit fulva iacentem* (If there are no arguments for you, if because of your bloody spirit you are deprived of human pity, imitate lions! Their generous savagery supports them. The habit formed by their noble anger is to attack those who are armed, and to growl at them from afar with a bloody mouth. But they are glad to spare the submissive, and the red ferocity ignores prone prey).

<sup>12</sup> *Romulea* 8 (*De Raptu Helenae*) 350–364: *Sic magna leonis / ira fremit, cum lata procul venabula cernens / venantis crispate manu iam verbera caudae / cruribus incutiens spargit per colla per armos / erecta cervice iubas, jam tenditur altus / dentibus illis et pectus grande remugit / (flumina tunc resonant, montes et lustra resultant); / ast ubi venator reiecta cuspidе sollers / sponte cadit pronusque iacet, perit ira leonis, / turpe putans, non dente suo si praeda iacebit; / temnit praedo cibos, quos non facit ipse cadaver; / ignoscens feritate pia, veniale precatus / venator si cesset iners: sic rector Achivus / frangitur et Phrygibus convivia laeta parari / per septem iubet ipse dies* (So a lion's anger thunders when it sees from afar spears quivering in hunters' hands. It beats its sides with the tail, now the lion raises its head, disperses its mane over its neck and shoulders. It rises having snapped its teeth. It emits a loud roar from his breast (so rivers resonate; so mountains and meadows answer with an echo). But when a skillful hunter drops his spear, voluntarily falls flat on the ground and lays there, the lion's anger passes away, as it considers unworthy prey lying dead not because of its bites. And the predator rejects all prey, killed not by itself, forgiving in its pious wildness, if a hunter lying motionless begs for mercy. So the Achaean ruler calms down and gives an order to prepare a seven-day feast for the Phrygians).

At first glance, as in the Plinian ‘original’, the lion in *Satisfactio* and in the other two already mentioned works, embodies nobility and serves as a ‘positive’ model. However, if we look at the structure and the system of characters in these works (particularly in *Controversia* and *De Raptu*), and at other works by Dracontius, in which a lion appears — where comparisons with this animal are not so detailed, but are no less telling — the conclusions may turn out to be directly opposite.

Thus, the plot of *Controversia*, centers on a conflict between a poor man and his rich opponent, ‘brave man’ (*vir fortis*), who tries to rob him — deprive him of his last possession, a statue, — and then kill him. A comparison with the lion, addressed to the wealthy man, turns out to be the last peaceful argument in the dispute. From then on — a civil war, and the *vir fortis* is shown to be its main potential culprit and instigator: his behavior is described as “rage”, *furor*<sup>13</sup>. The author clearly has no sympathy for him.

In turn, in *De Raptu Helenae*, the main antihero appears to be Paris, who kidnapped Helen and by this deed provoked the war between the Greeks and the Trojans<sup>14</sup>. Yet, in fact, Telamon, the ruler of Salamis, who is also compared to a lion, is no less villainous: according to the plot, he has been holding Hesione in captivity and has refused to return her to Priam<sup>15</sup>.

By themselves, these arguments might be insufficient, but the contexts from other works by Dracontius, where a lion appears, indicate that this is more likely the correct line of reasoning.

In the dedication to Felicianus Grammaticus, the earliest work by Dracontius, the predators, including a lion, serve as a political allegory for the Vandals in their conflict with the Romans, ‘Romulus’s successors’, *Romulides*, who are depicted as herbivores. Accordingly, Felicianus is compared to Orpheus, the only one able to stop the violence, to reconcile the two warring camps of animals. The lion here is no different from other carnivores; Dracontius “awards” him the same epithets with negative connotations as he does the other predators (*fera, cruenta bestia*)<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> *Romulea* 5.1: *Quis iste furor novus...* (What new kind of madness...).

<sup>14</sup> Such is the opinion of most researchers. See [Romano 1959: 30–37; Bright 1987: 85–137; Simons 2005: 285–306; Van Zyl Smit 2010; Wasyl 2011: 31–39; 52–59].

<sup>15</sup> *Romulea* 8 (*De Raptu Helenae*) 45–52: *Damnatur gentes, damnatur Graecia sollers / heu magnis viduanda viris; orbatur Eous / Memnone belligero, damnatur Thessalus heros / et Telamone satus, pereunt duo fulmina belli. / Pro matris thalamo poenas dependit Achilles / (unde haec causa fuit), forsitan Telamoniui Ajax / sternitur invictus, quod mater reddita non est / Hesione Priamo; sic est data causa rapinae* (Tribes are condemned, condemned to lose her great men is cunning Greece. The East will be deprived of bellicose Memnon; condemned is the Thessalian hero, and Telamon’s children will die, two lightnings in battle! For the mother’s marriage Achilles bears punishment (it was the root cause of all), and, most likely, Ajax, Telamon’s son dies undefeated, because his mother hadn’t been returned to Priam. Here is the cause of the kidnapping).

<sup>16</sup> *Romulea* 1: *Orpheum vatem renarrant ut priorum litterae / cantitasse dulce carmen voce nervo pectine / inter ornos propter amnes adque montes algidos, / (quem benignus grex secutus cum cruenta bestia / audiens melos stupebat concinente pollice: / tunc feras reliquit ira, tunc pavor iumenta, tunc / lenta tigris, cervus audax, mitis ursus adfuit, / non lupum timebat agna, non leonem caprea, / non lepus iam praeda saevo tunc molosso iugiter; / artifex natura rerum quis negat concordiam, / hos chelys Musea totos Orpheusque miscuit): / sancte pater, o magister, taliter canendus es, / qui fugatas Africanas reddis urbi litteras, / barbaris qui Romulidas iungis auditorio, / cuius ordines profecto semper obstupescimus, / quos capit dulcedo vestri, doctor, oris maxima...* (As our forefathers’ books tell us the poet Orpheus sang a sweet song with his voice, with strings and plectrum among the ash trees, near rivers and as far as the cold mountains



This piece of fiction, in terms of polemical style the most uncompromising of all texts produced by Dracontius, cannot but influence our understanding and interpretation of his other works, in which the same images and characters are used. Willy-nilly we have to consider them in a political context, and a lion as a part of such an allegory is no longer seen as so positive.

In *De Laudibus Dei* (*LD*) the author mentions lions when he speaks about the prophet Daniel, who was tortured and thrown into their den<sup>17</sup>. Here the piety (*pietas*) of the prophet, who chose to serve God and not the ‘Scythian Diana’, i. e. refused to participate in barbarian rites, is contrasted with the “ferocity” (*rabies*) and “rage” (*furor*) of the lions — in this instance they clearly are not on the “light side”.

The allegory is continued and developed in *Orestis Tragoedia* (*OT*), where Orestes and Pylades, after Clytemnestra’s murder, are compared to ‘lions with a dark red mane’ (*OT* 796–797). The principal ethical question raised in this work deals with the admissibility of matricide if the mother was responsible for the father’s death, if she betrayed him and was the accomplice of an usurper. The answer is more likely negative. The matricide is described as a result of a ‘blessed rage’ (*pious furor*, *OT* 19), i. e., the madness of the hero, and Orestes himself — after this murder — suffers from episodes of insanity, also termed *furor* (*OT* 844–850). Thus, Orestes here is a thoroughly unpleasant personage, and the image of a lion fits that.

It’s interesting that in the other epyllion by Dracontius, *Medea*, the theme of comparison of a negative character and a lion, as it had been depicted by Pliny, was further developed, even if rather implicitly. Medea, depicted by Dracontius as a priestess of the ‘Scythian Diana’, was obliged to sacrifice Jason to this goddess, but, after falling in love with him, refused to do it, justifying her decision by saying he is unworthy of being such a sacrifice (*Medea* 243–244)<sup>18</sup>. This rhetoric closely resembles the ‘leonine’ motif of disdain for small game. Here it is articulated by the antiheroine, who ultimately kills all the other characters, including her sons and Jason himself (this is how Dracontius depicts it).

On the basis of the preceding, the following conclusions may be drawn:

1. Starting with Dracontius’ earliest work, the dedication to Felicianus Grammaticus, and continuing in his subsequent writings, the lion is the most important link between different images (the barbarian in the dedication — the *vir fortis* in *Controversia* — Gunthamund in *Satisfactio* — Telamon in *De Raptu Helenae* — Orestes in *Orestis Tragoedia*).

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(the meek herd that followed him, as well the bloodthirsty beast, on hearing his song and the accompaniment of his fingers fell into a stupor. Then anger left the wild beasts and fear [left] the cattle; then slow became the tiger, brave the deer, the bear gentle; the ewe lamb no longer feared the wolf, the gazelle [no longer feared] the lion, the hare is no longer always prey for savage Molossian dogs. Those to whom the creator, the nature of things, denied concord, Orpheus and the Muses’ lyre mingled them all): o holy father, o master, so you are deserving of praise, you, who return banished learning to the African city, you, who bring together Romulus’s descendants and barbarians in the classroom, whose lessons leave us transfixed, when we are caught unaware by the surpassing sweetness of your words, learned teacher...).

<sup>17</sup> *LD* 3.188–192: *Saeva Danielem rabies atque ora leonum / non tetigere pium... amphitheatrales qui non tremuere furores...* (Severe ferocity and the mouths of lions didn’t harm pious Daniel... [you], who weren’t be afraid of the madness of the amphitheatre).

<sup>18</sup> *Non est haec victima digna...* (This victim is unworthy).

2. All these characters, compared to a lion, like the lion itself, act as a political allegory, through which one sees an image of the Vandal, a force that Dracontius judges to be hostile. Accordingly, all the conflicts, on which the plots of his works are based, are likewise allegories of the Roman-Vandal conflict (herbivores vs. carnivores in the dedication to Felicianus — the poor man vs the *vir fortis* in *Controversia* — the poet vs the king in *Satisfactio* — the Trojans vs the Greeks in *De Raptu* — Orestes vs Clytemnestra in *Orestis Tragoedia*).

3. The ‘nobility’ of the lion, which Dracontius takes from Pliny, turns out to be illusory: it hides the true wild, predatory, ‘barbarian’ nature of this animal. Accentuating it was only a tactical move in the author’s anti-Vandal rhetoric. Over time, this rhetoric softened — by comparison to the dedication to Felicianus — but every time referred precisely to it, implicitly showing that the lion’s nobility is a falsehood.

### **Editions of Dracontius’ works, used in the paper**

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Moussy, C. (Ed., Trans.) (1988). *Dracontius. Œuvres*, (Vol. 2) *Louanges de Dieu, Livre III. Réparation*, 7–140. Paris: Les Belles Lettres. (In Latin and in French).
- OT = Vollmer, F. (Ed.) (1905). Blossius Aemilius Dracontius. *Orestis Tragoedia*. In *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Auctores antiquissimi* (Vol. 14), 197–226. Berlin: Weidmann. (In Latin);  
Bouquet, J. (Ed., Trans.), Bouquet, J., Wolff, É. (Intro.) (1995). *Dracontius. Œuvres*, (Vol. 3) *La Tragédie d’Oreste. Poèmes profanes I–V*, 87–130. Paris: Les Belles Lettres. (In Latin and in French).
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