

“YOU CANNOT PICK GRAPES FROM THORNS”: Saint Augustine’s imagery – archaeological evidence and spiritual meaning.

Rev. Prof. Hubertus DROBNER¹

1. Grapes and thorns

“You cannot pick grapes from thorns” – we are all well acquainted with this image taken from the New Testament that has become proverbial over the centuries. We hear it and take its meaning for granted and even use it in our daily language seemingly in exactly the same way as Jesus first coined it according to the testimony of the gospels: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep as clothing

¹Hubertus DROBNER was born in 1955 in Mannheim, Germany. He was ordained priest of the Diocese of Mainz in 1982. In 1980, Fr. Drobner obtained a doctorate in classics from Mainz University. In 1984 he read for a second doctorate in Patristics at the *Augustinianum* in Rome and in 1985 he obtained a third doctorate in Christian Archaeology at the Pontifical Institute for Christian Archaeology in Rome. Between 1984 and 1986 he was assistant parish priest in the diocese of Mainz. Since 1986 he has been ordinary professor for Church History and Patristics at the Faculty of Theology of Paderborn and between 1990 and 1992 he was Rector Magnificus of the same. Since 1989 he has been guest lecturer at the faculty of Theology of the University of Pamplona in Spain, and since 1992 guest lecturer in Patristics at the *Agostinianum* in Rome. In 1988 Prof. Drobner lectured in Malta on the *Christology Of Saint Augustine* (“Outlines of the Christology of St Augustine”: in *Melita Theologica* XL/1(1989) 45-58; and “Outlines of the Christology of St. Augustine”: in *Melita Theologica* XL/2(1989) 143-154).

Among his publications are several works on Augustine and Saint Gregory of Nyssa, his special area of interest. *Gregor von Nyssa. Die drei Tage zwischen Tod und Auferstehung unseres Herrn Jesus Christus*, (Leiden 1982). *Person-Exegese und Christologie bei Augustinus*, (Leiden 1986); *Bibelindex zu den Werken Gregors von Nyssa*, Paderborn 1988; *Die Predigten Augustinus über das Bischofsamt*, (Würzburg 1993); *Lehrbuch der Patrologie*, (Freiburg 1994). At present Prof. Drobner is preparing a bilingual (Latin-German) critical edition of the *Sermones ad populum* of Saint Augustine of Hippo, and the critical edition of Gregory of Nyssa's *In Hexaemeron*.

In 1998, Prof. Drobner was invited to deliver the IV Annual St. Augustine Lecture at the University of Malta in collaboration with the Foundation For Theological Studies of the Archdiocese of Malta and the Maltese Augustinian Province. The Lecture was founded in 1994 and is coordinated by the Rev. Dr. Salvino Caruana OSA, STHD, Lecturer in Patristics at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Malta. This is one of four lectures delivered in 1998.

but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? So every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.”²

“For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.”³

But as it happens with most of the things we automatically take for granted in our lives, the very moment we stop to reflect upon them they no longer seem so self-evident as they appeared to us before. Who in the world would ever hit on the idea to go to a thornbush and look for grapes? No one, of course. Is this image, therefore, simply meant to illustrate the absurdity of the enterprise? But then, why thorns and grapes, why not other comparisons like milk from a bull or healing from a weapon? Because - you would immediately answer - this very image transported best the message Jesus wanted his listeners to understand. This image must have meant something to his hearers.

And with that we touch the very core, the very essence of an image without which it neither makes sense nor will it work. It needs must relate to the experience of the audience. An image people do not automatically connect to their known world cannot be understood. Imagine you tell someone “You cannot pick grapes from thorns” who in his life has never seen neither bramble bushes nor vineyards, he will have no possibility at all to “make head or tail of it” - to put it in another metaphor that only makes sense to us because we know animals with heads and tails and know that they are only complete with both of them attached.

That is, someone who does not know the actual surroundings from which an image is taken, will either not understand it at all or misunderstand it or comprehend it only partially. And saying that I speak of ourselves. Already the fact that hearing

2. Mt 7,15-20.

3. Lk 6,43-45.

the gospel say "You cannot pick grapes from thorns" we have to ask "Who in the world would ever hit on the idea to go to a thornbush and look for grapes?" shows that we ourselves are too far removed from the world it comes from as to understand it without explanation.

Let us turn to St. Augustine to get an explanation (*s.* 340A,10). "Here is another comparison for you to consider. Don't gather grapes from thorns; after all it is impossible for grapes to be produced from thorns. But haven't you noticed vine shoot getting into a hedge as it grows, and entwining itself in the thorns, and putting forth buds among the thorns, and producing bunches of grapes? You are hungry, and you are walking past, and you see a bunch hanging among the thorns; you don't do anything, you don't pick it. You are hungry and you want to pick it. Pick it then; stretch out your hand carefully and attentively; beware of the thorns, pick the fruit. In the same way, too, when a bad or worthless man speaks the teaching of Christ to you, listen to it, accept it, do not ignore it. If he is a bad man, the thorns are his; if he says good things, it is the bunch hanging among the thorns, it is not growing from the thorns."⁴

So then, if you are hungry, pick it, but watch out for the thorns. You see, if you begin to imitate his deeds while gladly listening to him, you have been careless in stretching out your hand; you have encountered the thorns before reaching the fruit. You emerge wounded, you emerge scratched and torn. The fruit coming from the grape is now no use to you, but the thorns, springing from their own proper root, are doing you damage. Notice, I mean to avoid being misled, where you have picked the fruit from; it is a vine branch. Keep your eyes on the branch, and see how it belongs to the vine, comes from the vine, proceeds from the vine, but encounters the thorns. So the vine does not have to draw back its branches, does it? In the same way too, the doctrine of Christ, as it has grown and made progress, has entwined itself with good trees, entwined itself with bad thorns. It is spoken by the good, spoken by the bad. It is for you to notice where the fruit comes from. Where what feeds you springs from, and where what pricks you springs from. They are mixed together in public appearance, but distinct from each other in their roots."

So, "Who in the world would ever hit on the idea to go to a thornbush and look for

4. Translations taken from Edmund Hill, in: *The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century. Sermons III/1-11*, John E. Rotelle (ed), (New York 1990-1997).

grapes?” Someone who is used to the fact that vineyards are surrounded by bramble bushes as fences in order to protect them from wild animals and the entry of unauthorised persons. But the branches of the vines growing next to the thorny hedges happen to entwine themselves with the branches of the thorn bushes so that to a fortuitous passerby it may seem as if the grapes stem from the brambles. A close inspection, however, will confirm the general experience that of course grapes only grow on vines and never on bramble bushes. It is an accidental outward appearance, but well known to the people Augustine is talking to: “But haven’t you noticed ...?”

This example of our reading or hearing ancient texts from the Bible or the Fathers of the Church using the imagery of their times, but not really understanding them fully while we are thinking to do so, constitutes rather a general phenomenon, caused by the fact that we do not longer live in the very same world those images come from. We have to make an effort to understand the ancient world in detail in order to understand its imagery fully – an effort we rarely undertake because we usually only look at the spiritual meaning of an image without asking for its actual background. But without that we do not fully realize the spiritual meaning either as Augustine’s or other Church Fathers’ audience did.

Just to give you an example from the more recent studies on the Fathers: In 1995 Reinhard Jakob Kees published a book on: “The Doctrine of the God’s *Oikonomia* in Gregory of Nyssa’s Catechetical Orator” and noted especially the numerous examples, images and comparisons from medicine, sciences and jurisprudence Gregory employs therein: “Gregory tries to illustrate and explain christian doctrine by departing from the daily experience of his audience and transporting them to a theological level by way of analog.” For this aim he uses the images of a rock rolling down a mountain; a clay pot that is ruined, because someone by way of a practical joke fills it with liquid lead, so that after its cooling the pot is of no use any longer and must be redone by the potter; the removal of warts; gold melted in the kiln; and many more images. Kees comments these images according to their theological and spiritual meaning, but he does not ask after their real background, e. g. “How did kilns look like in antiquity, how did they work and what does this contribute to the understanding of the image?” or “Do we have any information or even archaeological remains of pots filled with lead?”

This is the aim of this present paper: to make us aware of this usually totally neglected side of ancient images, their relation to the real world of their times and the impact

on their theological and spiritual meaning resulting from it, which I should like to demonstrate by a few further examples from the sermons of St. Augustine.

II. Glass, fragile and precious

In sermon 17,7 Augustine speaks of the fragility of human life and compares it to the fragility of glass: "Aren't we in fact more fragile than if we were made of glass? After all, even if glass is fragile, it lasts a long time if it is preserved, and you find goblets that belonged to grandfathers and great-grandfathers, from which grandsons and great-grandsons are drinking today. Such fragility, if protected, can reach a great age. But as for us human beings, not only do we walk around in our fragility among so many daily hazards, but even if sudden accidents do not happen, we are still not capable of living a long time."

There seems to be doubt about the full meaning of this image: Glass is by its very nature the proverbial most fragile substance of every day life we know. On the other hand it actually is a very hard substance and therefore, properly preserved, endures a very long time, so long in fact that even today antique glass is preserved. We know of those goblets (*calices*) Augustine speaks of, a few of them are even preserved in their entirety. Because of their fragility and the great difficulty of their manufacturing glass goblets and every other glass item understandably were extremely precious in antiquity. This is true for human life as well, every person has only one, it is one's most precious property, and because of the manifold dangers in life it is fragile and must be carefully preserved.

So far both the archaeological facts and the spiritual meaning of Augustine's image are quite clear. Only, however, if one inquires a little further both into the works of St. Augustine and the reality of the antique world one understands it even more deeply. In the *Adnotationes in Iob* Augustine quotes Iob 28,17 "Gold and glass cannot equal it". So, is gold and glass equally precious? No, in antiquity glass is much more valuable than gold, because it is much rarer and much more difficult to manufacture. First gold and then glass means a climax of value. This is made quite clear by a story Pliny the Younger relates in his *Naturalis Historia* 36,114; When Marcus Scaurus, Sulla's son-in-law, was aedile in Rome (1st century B.C.) he had a new theatre built, three stories high. The lowest he had lined with marble, the uppermost with gold, but the intermediate – "luxury unheard of even by later generations" – with glass. This type of glass lining of the walls originated in Egypt and was manufactured in Alexandria, Sidon and Tyros, where Marcus Scaurus got

to know it when he battled against Mithridates.

These “unheard of” luxury glass panels of the theatre of Marcus Scaurus have not been preserved, and nowhere in the whole antique world have any been preserved *in situ*. By an extraordinary strike of luck, however, a complete set of them were found during the excavations of the port of Corinth, Kenchreai, in the second half of this century. In 365 or 375 an earthquake destroyed Kenchreai. At this time a series of more than 100 polychrome glass panels were stored there in a warehouse in their wooden transport crates, most probably on their way either from Asia or Egypt to Rome. The earthquake broke the glass and buried the crates. Being enfolded in the crates, the fragments of the glass panels remained together and could thus largely be recomposed. The panels consist of multicoloured -green, yellow, red, brown, orange, white, grey, pink, purple, blue, and turquoise – scenes, depicting landscapes, animals, and persons, forming geometrical, floral, and architectural design.⁵

More recently a second discovery of the same kind was made, albeit not an as spectacular one. Excavating basilica C in Philippi dating from the second quarter of the 6th century, 747 polychrome glass fragments were found which most probably served as wall lining.⁶

Those glass panels therefore imitate the usual colourful *opus sectile* in marble which is known both in geometrical and figural forms, but in an even more precious way. For the glass panels do not simply consist of a composition of glass parts in various colours, but every single piece is already multicoloured in itself – a further development of the so-called “millefiori” technique. Thus it becomes quite clear how much more complicated and costly it was to produce glass than gold or marble.

Returning to Augustine, only this background makes it quite clear what it means to compare human life to glass. Fragile and precious at the same time, but not simply expensive but uniquely costly above everything else, even the most precious metal,

5. Leila Ibrahim/Robert Scranton/Robert Bell, *Kenchreai. Eastern Port of Corinth*. Results of Investigations by The University of Chicago and Indiana University for The American School of Classical Studies in Athens II. The Panels of *opus sectile* in Glass, (Leiden 1976).
6. Eutychia Kourkoutidou-Nikolaïdou, “Vitreaux paléochrétiens à Philipes”, in *XXXI Corso di cultura sull'arte ravennate e bizantina*. Seminario Internazionale di Studi su “La Grecia paleocristiana e bizantina”, Ravenna, 7–14 aprile 1984, 277–296.

gold. Here someone might object: "But the book of Job dates from a time much earlier than Greek and Roman glass production, so the quotation from it cannot possibly refer to it." True, the original does not, but Augustine does, because he uses and understands the quotation in the very same way we ourselves do nowadays: in relation to his own knowledge and times, because this constitutes one of the basic and indispensable elements of the usage of an image. Albeit all our attempt to explain images of past times in their context, if it is used centuries later it will always primarily be understood in the context of our own times, otherwise its use would fade away.

III. Silver spoons

The third example I would like to present goes both beyond the bounds of Augustine's sermons and even beyond the limits of St. Augustine himself in order to show how extremely important the archaeological evidence is for the interpretation of patristic texts and vice versa.

Since Giovanni Battista de Rossi (1868) it has been discussed whether antique silver spoons, often engraved with names of saints or prayers like "*Deo gratias*", were used during the liturgy in order to distribute the eucharist under both species as the Greek church does it until today, or if they rather had profane everyday use in a rather well-to-do household. The question arose from a curious state of archaeological findings. Up to today there have been excavated over five hundred silver spoons from tombs all over Europe and the Near East, dating from the second to the seventh century. This fact in itself would not have been surprising, what was most startling was the fact that all the rest of the table gear found in the very same tombs were made of far lesser material: wood, iron, bronze etc. And very often those spoons were engraved with religious names or symbols. The first reaction of scholars was to surmise that those spoons did not fit to the rest of the gear and did not therefore belong to profane but rather to liturgical use.

This controversy could not be resolved without texts which explained the use of these spoons as the archaeological evidence alone naturally remained ambiguous.

One of them is to be found in Possidius' *Vita Augustini* reporting Augustine's lifestyle (22): "His clothes, his shoes, his bed sheets were modest but decorous, neither too showy nor all too ragged ... he observed the way in the middle *without deviating from it neither to the right nor to the left*. He used to have a frugal and parsimonious

table, furnished with herbs and vegetables, and sometimes also with meat for guests or sick people, and always with wine, knowing and teaching, as the Apostle says, that all of God's creation is good and nothing needs be rejected what is accepted by saying grace; it is indeed blessed by God's word and prayer; ... What regards wine we have the Apostle's advice he wrote to Timothy: Do not drink water only, but use a modest quantity of wine for your stomach and your frequent illnesses." He used, however, only silver spoons, all the rest of the table gear used for serving the food were either made of clay or wood or marble, and that not because necessity compelled him to do so, but because he so wanted it. Always, however, he freely offered hospitality. And at his table he valued the reading or the conversation more than the food; and against a despicable human habit there was written on the table: "Whoever likes to slander with his words the lifestyle of someone not present, may know that at this table his own way of life is not considered worthy"! Thus he reminded everyone of his guests to abstain from superfluous and detrimental talk. When at one time some of his fellow bishops, who were his close friends, forgot this maxim and talked in disregard of it, he reproached them harshly by saying that those words either had to be cancelled from the table or he felt obliged to rise and to retire to his quarters in the middle of the meal."

Augustine therefore observed a simple, but dignified lifestyle without "showing off" his ascetism and monastic poverty. He himself was a vegetarian though he was not generally opposed to the consumption of meat on the grounds that nothing of the good God had made was to be despised on principle, as Holy Scriptures copiously attested. A reasonable daily amount of wine he regarded as healthy, following the advice given by St. Paul, and he enjoyed company at his table, readings and conversation, unless it became unpleasant because people started to talk badly about others not present. Then, even if they were fellow bishops, he reproached them harshly up to the point that he threatened to leave the table. Everything used at his table – platters, plates, cutlery – was made of simple materials, with the sole exception of the spoons which were made of silver.

According to Possidius' testimony there is therefore no doubt that silver spoons were indeed used at the table together with other gear of lesser value, and that not in a rich household, not even in a well-to-do one. Even a bishop like Augustine, leading an ascetic and adequately modest lifestyle did not consider them to be a luxury, and so they apparently were not. Up to today though I have not read or heard any convincing reason why this should have been so, as the spoon usually was the only instrument you used at the table – a fork is a modern invention, and

the knife was not needed as meat was usually cut before being set on the table – it might have something to do with the fact that all other material corroded, made food taste bad or even emitted poisonous particles into the food. Though one must clearly surmise that in really poor households these spoons must have been made of wood for the simple material value.

Be it as it may, “one swallow does not make a summer”; Augustine’s testimony alone does not prove the use of silver spoons at table to be the general case. Fortunately we have another one, and again from a bishop and monk, not from a rich nobleman. More than a hundred years later, the *Vita* of Caesarius of Arles (470/71-542) recounts the visit of Caesarius with king Theodosius in his capital Ravenna. Theodosius presented Caesarius with a large silver platter weighing 60 pounds to use it at his daily table in memory of the king. “Caesarius, however, who never used any silver at his table except of the spoons, had the platter sold and used the money to pay ransom for prisoners” (*v Caes* 1 37). So here again we have the same phenomenon: everything in the household of Caesarius is held simply with the exception of spoons. This double testimony – and some more are in fact known of the same kind – proves the profane, not liturgical use of silver spoons at the daily table next to other gear of lesser value and thus easily explains the finds made in the graves.

These two testimonies still suffer from one common disadvantage which limits their validity; they both come from the western church. And what about the east where especially we surmised a liturgical use of the silver spoons, because this tradition is observed up to today? It is very well conceivable that East and West followed different traditions so that the testimonies of Augustine and Caesarius of Arles need not mean anything for the Eastern church. Unfortunately up to very recently, no written testimony from the east was known. Only in 1996 was it discovered in the “Homilies on Ecclesiastes” by Gregory of Nyssa. He writes there in Homily 8: “it is as if someone has set out on a table all the preparations for a banquet where to put certain implements alongside suitable to help with eating, the sort of thing manufactured by specialized craftsmen, small knives with which the diners cut up some of the food offered to them, or silver prongs made with a hollow part attached to one end convenient for holding soup; then one of the guests at the dinner changes the function of what lies before him and uses each for the wrong purpose, and cuts with his knife either himself or one of the people sitting next to him, and with his prong pierces his neighbour’s eye or his own; you might say that this person misused his host’s cutlery, not because the one who provided it prepared

beforehand the cause of what happened, but because the wrong use of the things laid out led to this disaster the one used stupidly what lay before him.”⁷

Here again the aim of presenting this image of a table prepared for a meal and therefore laid with every item necessary for it is a spiritual one. Gregory of Nyssa wants to explain that not this God who by creating all things is responsible for human misuse of his creation, but man alone, as it appears absolutely plausible from the comparison with the host and his guests. But at the same time this imagery is only fully understandable if one knows how those implements, that cutlery, looked like. Gregory describes the spoon as “a silver prong made with a hollow part attached to one end convenient for holding soup”, and thus explains it in exact the opposite way we should have done. We should have said: “A spoon for eating soup with a handle formed as a prong in order to pick up the morsels in it”, but as Gregory’s point of comparison will be the misuse of the prong, he is first of all interested in this part of the spoon. And again, without intending it, Gregory gives the answer to the question as to what use was made of silver spoons in the eastern church, saying explicitly – and only for the spoons – that they were made of silver.

So it may be considered as a valid principle in general that only the combination of literary and archaeological evidence at the end provides a complete picture and satisfactory explanation. Archaeological evidence coming from excavations see only the material phenomenon without being able to interpret it; from the artifact alone one can only surmise regarding its use. Vice versa this is true, too. Literary evidence alone would only give an approximate idea about the actual appearance of the objects, and as – in the case of the cutlery – without the archaeological evidence that the combination of silver spoons with other gear of lesser value was the usual in antiquity, might interpret the texts quite differently.

IV. Sin, disease and physician

For the last paragraph of this paper let us return both to St. Augustine’s imagery and his sermons. It is well known that Christ himself introduced the image of sin as a disease and he himself as the saviour being the physician (Mt 9,12–13, see

7. Translation taken from Stuart George Hall and Rachel Moriarty, in: Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*. An English Version with Supporting Studies. Proceedings in the Seventh International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (St Andrews, 5–10 September 1990), 142.

parallelism [Mk 2,17, Lk 5,31-33]): "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners". But it is already less known that Christ quotes from the Old Testament. Immediately after the passage of the Red Sea, the salvation of Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and the song of triumph and thanksgiving to the Lord the people of Israel come to the bitter waters of Marah, where they first begin to murmur against Moses, and Moses through God's command turns it into sweet, drinkable water by means of a tree. At this point the text reads (Ex 15,25-26): "There the Lord made for them a statute and an ordinance and there he proved them, saying: 'If you will diligently harken to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon you which I put upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord, your physician'." Apart from this quotation it is well known that for Jewish faith righteousness and health and wickedness and sickness conditioned one another. We find it in 2 Sam 12,13-15, when King David sinned by desiring Bathsheba, Uriah's wife, and provoking her husband's death in battle; their firstborn son falls ill and dies because of it. David humbly recognises his sin before the prophet Nathan, and Nathan announces the death of his child to David as the punishment for his sin: "David said to Nathan: 'I have sinned against the Lord'. And Nathan said to David; 'The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child that is born to you shall die. ... 'And the Lord struck the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and it became sick.' The New Testament takes this concept up in various places, most famous probably John 9,2-3, when Christ meets the man born blind "and his disciples asked him; 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'

So far again, there does not seem to exist any difficulty to understand this image up to today; but again things rather change when analysed in detail. Certainly, there is no doubt that an antique physician and a modern medical doctor are hardly comparable, both in skills and function. The book of Jesus Sirach ch. 38,1-15 gives a rather good idea of it; "Honour the physician with the honour due him, according to your need of him, for the Lord created him; for healing comes from the Most High, and he will receive a gift from the king. The skill of the physician lifts up his head, and in the presence of great men he is admired. ... He gave skills to men that he might be glorified in his marvellous works. By them he heals and takes away pain; the pharmacist makes of them a compound. ... My son, when you are sick do not be negligent, but pray to the Lord, and he will heal you. Give up your faults and direct your hands upright, and cleanse your heart from all sin.... There is a time

when success lies in the hands of physicians, for they too will pray to the Lord that he should grant them success in diagnosis and in healing, for the sake of preserving life. He who sins before his Maker, may he fall into the care of a physician.”

So here again sin and disease are linked together, and the rôle of the physician is to remove pain through medicines, to heal, and to preserve life by his skills. But ultimately he is only God’s instrument. It is God who heals through the physician, God gave the physician his skills to do his will. Therefore the physician is highly honoured and princely paid for his services by kings, so much that he is even honoured among great men and he can proudly hold up his head high.

There are, however, allusions to medical procedures in Scripture that are not as easily recognisable, I even dare say, rarely recognised at all. In I Tim 4,1–2 Paul writes: “Now the spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, through the pretensions of liars whose consciences are seared” (*Revised Standard Version*). What does the expression “seared conscience” mean? The *New English Bible* translate “branded by the devil’s sign”, the *Jerusalem Bible*, however, “branded as though with a red-hot iron”, which comes closest to the Greek original *κεκαυθηριασμένον*; in Latin “*cauteriata conscientia*”. Without knowing what this *terminus technicus* means one will neither understand St. Paul fully, nor will one recognise it as an allusion to the medical profession. “Branded as though with a red-hot iron” certainly comes close to the original, but the exact translation would be “cauterized”.

What exactly is a *cautedum* (in Greek *καυτήρ* or *καυτήριον*) and how was it used? The classic description is given by Mario Tabanelli in his book *Lo strumento chirurgico e la sua storia. Dalle epochce greca e romana al secolo decimosesto*, (Forlì 1958) 101: “The *cauterium* is one of the most used instruments by ancient surgeons. It was usually made of iron, for which reason only few specimens have been preserved, but some were made of bronze, gold and silver as well. Their form and size differed, and it was used for the most various and unique applications: to stop haemorrhages, to remove tumors, to sterilize injuries and wounds, to cut fistulas and open cavities. Sometimes it served in cases of precise diagnoses, but otherwise it was just used experimentally. The Greeks and Romans often used it instead of a scalpel; its form was rather variable: either a long thin iron with a little olive-shaped plate at its end, or formed like a sickle, a paddle or tubular, like a nail, a needle or a wedge, shaped like a Greek Chi or an Obolos. Some

cauteria were inserted into a tube of clay in order to protect the surrounding tissue from its heat.”

The *cauterium* therefore was a surgical instrument used both for cutting and sealing wounds, but in any case, it left a scar. Unfortunately we have no testimony from St. Augustine on this point, but his contemporary Gregory of Nyssa makes it quite clear “This is like the case of a person who through excessive greed accumulates in himself a mixture of indigestible fluids, and then, when his body develops a fever, is treated with lancing and cauterization and has the disease as a sort of tutor in discipline for the rest of his life as he sees the scar of the cauterization on his body”.⁸

Augustine, however, does quote 1 Tim 4 time and again⁹, and in at least two cases gives a quite clear idea about how he understood Paul. In *Contra Faustum* 31,4 he refers to Tit 1,15 as an explanation: “their very minds and consciences are corrupted (*polluta*)”. And some chapters before in the same treatise (20,16) he describes those consciences as “*inusta*”, burned. So Paul and Augustine does not refer to the healing function of a *cauterium*, but rather to its harmful use – either by accident or on purpose – as it is attested by other sources.

Conclusion

After all these details on grapes and thorns, glass, silver spoons and cauterizing irons, they may not seem to be of great importance for our actual life. What, however, I wanted to achieve is to show how necessary it is to fully understand the actual background of an image to really appreciate it; I wanted to show how archaeology and theology serve one another reciprocally in order to understand both texts and findings; and if I did not present examples of sensational impact the reason for that is that this kind of research was scarcely begun, though there is no doubt that it will be fruitful for more than one field of studies.

8. Hom Eccl 3 (GNO V 317,5–9).

9. C Faust 15,10.30,1.3.4; c Fel 1,7.8; C Sec 2; C adu leg 2,32 etc.