

# Pietro Francesco Tomai (Petrus Ravennas) (1448 – 1510?)

He was born around 1448 in Ravenna and moved to Padua to study law. The extraordinary memory demonstrated during his studies earned him great fame, to the point that he was invited to demonstrate his mnemonic skills in numerous cities. He also taught law in Pavia, Bologna and Pistoia. He then returned to Padua between 1482 and 1483 to hold the teaching post of canon law; during these years he held the title of *equus auratus* and published an anthology of *Carmina* and the highly successful mnemonics manual *Phoenix*, one of the first texts to be granted the privilege of printing exclusivity, which was republished several times until the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the treatise, Pietro claimed to have more than a hundred thousand memory places that he had constructed, showing himself capable of reciting by heart the entire *codicem iuris civilis* including glosses. In November 1497, he was chosen by the Duke of Pomerania to teach civil and canon law at the University of Greifswald, where he remained until 1503. Following an epidemic that caused the death of some of his children, he obtained permission to return to Italy with his wife and surviving children. However, the Prince-Elector Frederick of Saxony offered him the teaching post of law at the University of Wittenberg, a position he held from 1503 to 1506. During this period he published in Ettlinger the *Lectio de potestate pontificis maximi et romani imperatoris* and the *Compendium iuris civilis*, and in Wittenberg the *Clypeus contra doctorem Caium*, the *Sermones extraordinarii et pulcherrimi* and the *Compendium pulcherrimum iuris canonici*.

To escape the plague he fled to Cologne, where he taught law from 1506 to 1508. Still eager to return to Italy, he moved to Worms, where he died between 1509 and 1510.

In this treatise on artificial memory, which will have great resonance, the author claims to have over a hundred thousand memory places that he had constructed over time in order to be superior to anyone in the knowledge of holy scripture and law. He recounts that he was able to recite by heart the entire *codicem iuris civilis* including glosses, his master's lectures, and sermons heard only once. There are also external testimonies, such as that of Boniface of Montferrat, that confirm his extraordinary talent, to which he refers several times in the text to inspire the admiration of his readers. The work became very influential and all Italian and German theorists of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century would refer to Pietro. It appears to be structured according to the patterns of the Ciceronian tradition, but Pietro, rather than focusing on the rules of researching places, turns his attention to the function exercised by images, which are supposed to act as "exciters of the imagination".