Abstracts

Domenico Accorinti: Nonnus and the Myth. Pagan Antiquity from a Christian Perspective

Nonnus of Panopolis (5th century), author of both the ‘pagan’ Dionysiaca, the largest poem known from antiquity with 21,286 lines in 48 books (more than the length of the Iliad and Odyssey combined), and a ‘Christian’ hexameter Paraphrase of St John’s Gospel (3660 lines in 21 books), is no doubt the most representative poet of Greek Late Antiquity. He composed two works that seem to clash/opposing works, an epic mythological poem on Dionysus and a metrical rewriting of John’s text. In the past, this was considered to be a sign for a likely conversion of a pagan author to Christianity. According to this view Nonnus would have written the Paraphrase after his conversion.

But recent scholarship has cleared up the conversion theory definitively – as well as the posteriority of the Paraphrase to the Dionysiaca – and generally acknowledges that Nonnus was a Christian. From this perspective, a valuable approach to the Egyptian poet should consist of a cross reading of both his works as evidence of a complex dialogue between the Classical and the Christian tradition in Late Antiquity.

After a summary of the various scholarly opinions concerning the religion of Nonnus and his use of mythology, this article deals with one of the most embarrassing – at least from a Christian point of view – episodes of the Dionysiaca: the treatment of Achille’s and Penthesileia’s love in Book 35 (ll. 21–78). Here Nonnus adjusts the famous instance of Achilles’ necrophilia to an anonymous Indian, who takes part in the massacre of Bacchants described at the beginning of the Book (ll. 1–20). After killing one of Dionysus’ followers with his spear, the Indian slayer falls in love with the Bacchant and would have had sexual intercourse with her dead body upon the ground, as Achilles did, had he not feared the orders of the king Deriades (ll. 27–30). Then the Indian soldier utters a pathetic monologue (ll. 37–77), that contains a list of various pagan healing methods, and in which the poet inserts the prosopopeia of the Bacchant (ll. 49b–53a).

Taking as a starting point the Appendix “De la virginité des Bacchantes”, which the late Bernard Gerlaud added to his Budé edition of Books 33–34 of Nonnus’ Dionysiaca, this essay suggests that Nonnus may have written this episode as a ‘pagan’ counterpart to the story of Drusiana and Callimachus in the apocryphal Acts of John (63–86), where we are told of an attempted necrophilia and multiple resurrections.

Thus, the emphasis of Nonnus on terms related to the notion of life and eternity signifies that the central theme of the whole episode is the resurrection of the body after death. On the other hand, the occurrence of the Noli me tangere motif in the prosopopeia of the Bacchant leads us to think that the poet may have seen an analogy between the death of the Bacchant and the Passion of Christ.
Clifford Ando: *Mythistory: The Pre-Roman Past in Latin Late Antiquity*

Historical writing in Latin Late Antiquity displays a new and widespread concern for the history of Italy before the foundation of Rome. The novelty of the moment is revealed both by the extent of the phenomenon and by its interest in the writing of systematic and internally coherent accounts (Section 2). Classical rehearsals of similar information convey specific data in response to exegetic or etiological demands and show no concern for the coherence or some totality of their data (Section 3). Typical was rather their focus on myth, and especially synchronicities in myth, as a means to advance political claims in the cultural sphere (Section 4). Likewise, classical Roman historiography not only began its narratives with the foundation of cities but structured them around the institutions of poliadic life. This is true despite the persistence in public memory of the pre-Roman past of colonial sites founded de novo as Roman cities. (Section 5). Outliers to this scheme might include classical chronology, but the degree of its deviance is now hard to assess (Section 6). One possible explanation for this interest in a pre-Roman, non-poliadic Italy lies in the prestige status accorded in Late Antiquity to an ancient narrative of a pre-poliadic people, namely, the people of the Torah (Section 7).

Sarah Bassett: “Curious Art”: *Myth, Sculpture, and Christian Response in the World of Late Antiquity*

This essay examines Christian attitudes towards mythological sculpture, defined as the representations of gods and heroes, in the later Roman world. It begins with a description of early Christian objections to myth and sculpture, noting that such objections did not seem to carry much weight with the general populace as the use of sculpture in public and private contexts persisted. It continues by examining the ways in which mythological sculpture was used in public and private settings in the city of Constantinople over the course of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries. It observes an early fourth-century phase of sculptured installation in which mythological figures are used in a manner consistent with the long-standing habits of Greek and Roman tradition to create civic history, a practice that seems to ignore Christian unease with the questions of idolatry posed by sculpture. It then suggests that this early phase gives way to a later fourth- and fifth-century interest in accommodating mythological sculpture to Christian attitudes by viewing it in purely aesthetic terms as art. It understands this interest in reconciliation and compromise as consistent with the desire on the part of late ancient Christians to find a means to integrate the great cultural legacy of the classical world with new Christian teaching. Finally, it observes the decline of an interest in mythological sculpture in the sixth century, as new, primarily Christian, concerns come to shape late Roman cities.
Fabienne Jourdan: Orpheus and ‘Orphism’ in the Christian Literature (in Greek) of the First Five Centuries

Contrary to the modern perception of the possible link between Orpheus and Christianity, the Christian writers of the first five centuries did not focus on Orpheus’ travel into the underworld to compare it to Christ’s descent into Hell. Neither did they consider Orphism as a kind of religion of the Book or a small sectarian group in competition with their Faith based on the Word at the heart of the Bible. For them as for the Pagans of their time, Orpheus was firstly the founder of the Mysteries and more generally of the Greek religion itself. Moreover, because of his Thracian origin, they considered him a Barbarian as they were themselves considered. This feature, together with the traditional journey to Egypt attributed to him, contributed to taking for granted that Orpheus was acquainted with the Ancient Wisdom and more precisely with the Mosaic doctrine. By the same token, the Jews had already ascribed to Orpheus a poem praising the One and Only God. The only thing the Christians had to do was appropriate these lines and use them for their own purposes to claim that the famous poet sang in agreement with their belief. Orpheus’s marvelous song was the last feature they adopted to describe and enhance Christ’s Word as a new and better Orphic song. The article shows in detail how they used these features of Orpheus and his Work in their polemics with the Pagans, sometimes to criticise this tradition and its followers (the Pagans, but also some “Heterodoxes”), sometimes to appropriate it and include it into their own discourse and their exhortations in favour of Christianity. In doing so, they outlined a portrait of Orpheus different from the one transmitted to us through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance where the picture of the Lover of Eurydice prevails.

Troels Myrup Kristensen: Dressed in Myth: Mythology, Eschatology, and Performance on Late Antique Egyptian Textiles

This paper explores the function of mythological imagery on late antique Egyptian textiles. Given that any study of this material is confronted with considerable methodological issues, it begins with an overview of the role and use of textiles decorated with figural images, as well as a discussion of the thorny issues of chronology and the reconstruction of the physical and visual environment in which the textiles were once an integral part. This first part provides important information on the viewing context in which the late antique textiles with mythological imagery functioned. It is furthermore argued that in order for this field of study to move forward, textiles must not be seen as exclusively decorative, daily-life objects; it is equally important to understand them as objects of performative display, self-representation, and as expressions of eschatological thinking within the funerary context. The second part focuses more explicitly on the use of mythology in late antique Egyptian textiles, and the interplay between art and text. The so-called “Shawl of Sabina”, now in the Louvre and with fragments in other collections, is given special attention.
Winrich Löhr: Christian Bishops and Classical Mythology in Late Antiquity
This paper analyzes the attitude of some Christian bishops to the myths of classical Greek and Roman Literature. The bishops’ stance was articulated in the context of two debates: i) the debate about the conceptualization of pagan religion as theologia tripartita (the myths representing the theologia fabulosa) and ii) the debate about the Christian attitude to the traditional literary culture (paideia). It is shown that in both debates classical mythology was largely unproblematic for these bishops and offered no or few occasions for open conflict or controversy between them and educated pagans. There was a consensus in late antiquity among educated pagans and Christians that classical mythology was of little religious importance. Nevertheless, it remained – sanitised, secularised – part of the traditional paideia: An alternative Christian paideia that may have redefined the school curriculum was envisaged and discussed but not realised. Late antique Christian polemics against the public presence of Greek and Roman myths was largely confined to its representation in sculptures or on the theatrical stage.

Mischa Meier: Heracles – Heraclius – Christ. Georgius Pisides and the kosmorhýstes
This essay investigates the function of the Heracles-Heraclius references in the work of the poet and panegyric Georgius Pisides. Primarily on the basis of an analysis of the early poem In Heraclium ex Africa redeuntem (610/11), the panegyricus In Bonum Patricium (626), the Heraclias (since 628) and the Expeditio Persica (after 622), the special meaning of Heracles for the emperor as an example is shown. Apparently, the Heracles analogies provided a rather harmless way to associate the ruler with Christ. This went as far as Georgius Pisides creating word of his own invention with the term kosmorhýstes. It is derived from the New Testament verb rhýsesthai and refers directly to Jesus Christ. The associations to Heracles were not the only way for Heraclius to evoke a close bond to Christ. For this reason, the results of the analysis of Georgius are put into a further literary and historical context in the final part of this essay. On the one hand, the essay inquires after basic possibilities that the example of Heracles opened in the context of imperial representation in Late Antiquity. On the other hand, questions are asked about the reasons why Heraclius made such an effort to associate himself with Jesus Christ and why he presented himself as the “Saviour of the World” (kosmorhýstes).

Jörg Rüpke: Shared and Contested History: The Chronograph of 354 and the Catacombe of the Via Latina
The luxurious diary, known as the Chronograph of 354, is the subject matter of this study. In just one document there are mythological and historical narratives in text and image representation to be found. These were all identified as either exclusively “pagan” or “Christian”. An analysis of the social position of both the code and its
addressee and a detailed examination of its composition and content shed light upon the range and structure of knowledge expected of a young senator and also upon the role that religious questions and controversies played in his world. The result shows how especially historicised religion provided a frame for the orientation of a young member of the senatorial class, who was to be introduced to the fine lines beyond the flat terms such as “paganism” and “Christianity”. Christian cults and traditions could be included in a framework, characterised by astrology, the ideas of gods and hundred-year-old Roman institutions. Distinguishing oneself strongly – for example from Novatianists – and passing over apparent contradictions – Christianity and paganism – were part of an individual acquisition of religion.


The Platonism of the 3rd and 4th century is one of the intellectual centres in which the debate about myth and its meaning is most tangible. Based on an analysis of the philosophical explanation of myth in Sallustius (De dis et mundo III 1–3) this article elucidates how the “extravagance” and “digressiveness” of classical myths were interpreted in classical – pagan and Christian – Platonism. Further, it explains where the Platonist authors saw limits for the allegorisation of mythical material. Next to Sallustius’ exegesis of myth the interpretations of Porphyry, emperor Julian, Celsus, Origen, and Augustine are examined in the essay.

Claudia Schindler: Pagan Myths and Christian Rulers. Myths and Mythology in Claudian’s Political Poems

The question of Claudian’s religious denomination has been discussed in scholarship intensively for some time. Next to the testimony of Augustine and Orosius, who deny the poet any association with Christianity, scholars point out the lack of explicit Christian references in the work of Claudian as an indication for his pagan orientation. Especially the numerous references to figures and events of Greco-Roman mythology found in Claudian’s compositions seem to let ancient traditions live on continuously. On the other hand, this essay shows that Claudian’s use of mythological examples is not as conform to traditions as first impressions might suggest. The ancient traditions of myth are functionalised by him in several ways. He places the protagonists of his poems in the roman literary and cultural tradition by using mythical names of peoples and locations so as to distinguish them as legitimate heirs of Roman reign. This argumentation couldn’t have been made using Christian material. Direct comparison of the addressee of Claudians poems with mythical figures such as Hercules or Apollo profit from the fact that these figures are established in ancient tradition as keys in political discourse and are sanctioned by Christian argumentation. However, in Claudian’s political poetry myth is also often the basis for a panegyrical exaggeration. Such panegyrical syncriseis are
known to the recipients from both the pagan and the Christian traditions. The supe-
riority of the late antique ruler in light of mythical figures contributes to the demon-
tation of the ancient myth. Furthermore, Claudian underlines the fictionality of the
myth over and over again and shows that the actions of his protagonists are true
by comparison. Finally, one can observe that he disavows actions of the mythical
heroes contrasted to those of the protagonists by unmasking the mythical actions
as representations of the primitive and uncivilised earlier times.

Ulrich Schmitzer: Sidonius Apollinaris – Unfertile Muse or the Renovation
of Poetry on the Base of Mythology?
The Gaulish aristocrat Sidonius Apollinaris was both a member of the political elite
of the Western Roman Empire during the middle of the 5th century and deeply rooted
in classical ancient education. For this reason, scholarship has seen in him until re-
cently a representative of a devotion to old forms and formulas that had become a
rhetorical gesture only. Sidonius himself seems to support this verdict by character-
izing his poems to be unfertile (Musa sterilis). However, a closer look that is also free
from resentment against late antique literature at especially the carmina shows that
myth wins a new significance for Sidonius. Furthermore, as a productive piece of the
pagan-ancient heritage it can be used for the development of a new form of literature
in which the old dichotomies are overcome. Not anti-pagan rigorousness is the scale
for this literate, but the integration of established elements that so contribute to the
fame of the addressee into the Christian world of late antiquity.