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**Religion and Competition
in Antiquity**



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10. The Conquest of the Past. Christian Attitudes towards Civic History

Aude Busine

In memoriam Simon Price

1. Introduction

Late Antiquity constitutes a fascinating period as far as competition between paganism and Christianity is concerned. From Constantine's reign onwards, Peter Berger's 'religious supermarket' seems destined to disappear as the cults labelled as 'pagan' were gradually forbidden by imperial authorities.¹ By the same token, Christian orthodoxy was progressively imposed upon all other religions that were not recognized as such. Pagans got converted to the official religion or kept illegally worshipping their god(s) in private at least until the eighth century.² The traditional cults were then removed from the 'official supply' and restricted to the 'underground market'.

However, as Graeco-roman religion was part and parcel of the surrounding culture, creating a Christian monopoly on the whole society was not an easy task. Indeed, Christians had to modify not only faith, cults and behaviour, but they also needed to find alternatives to all the aspects of what they considered as 'paganism' and which were actually embedded in every sphere of private and public life. In this regard, Christians could not avoid investing the local political structures, that is to say the cities (*ciuitates/poleis*).³

Scholars tend generally to emphasize the importance of external factors for the evolution of the post-classical city, such as imperial or ecclesiastical policies imposed upon cities, and they stress, at the local level, the importance of bishops in the evolution of their cities.⁴ However, ruling a Christian city did not only

¹ See the introduction to this volume by D. Engels and P. Van Nuffelen.

² On the permanency of pagan practices, see for example GREGORY (1986), MACMULLEN (1996), 13-49, ROTHBAUS (2000), 135-140.

³ In this volume, I. Jacobs explores other aspects of this phenomenon.

⁴ WARD-PERKINS (1998), 371-410 (esp. 384-382), LIEBESCHUETZ (2001).

involve shifts of political authority: in order to impose itself within the Empire, the Church needed to provide Christian communities with new references and identities. For this purpose, the Church had also to conquer civic culture, which enabled Christians to claim a room in the structural world of the classical cities. This necessity leads among others to a fierce competition aiming at controlling civic space and time at the local level.⁵ These processes of Christianisation of civic culture were essential to the self-definition of those who wanted to be both Greek and Christian citizens.

In this programmatic paper, I will propose a first sketch of the different ways in which Christian local authorities tried to compete with the local histories of the Greek *poleis*.

2. Local myths and civic identities

From the archaic period onwards, civic communities have always referred to local stories about gods, heroes and founders in order to locate their glorious history into the common roots of Greek culture. As Graeco-Roman myths had no single canonical version of the past, each city could and did claim a place for itself in the commonly held mythic traditions. These variations on well-known stories created among the citizens a shared sense of the past, from the heroic ages up to the more recent times, which enabled to distinguish their *polis* from the others. In this way, local myths contributed to build civic identities and, at the same time, they allowed prestigious families to trace back their ancestry to legendary figures.⁶

With the Second Sophistic, the imperial period shows a spectacular revival of Greek local myths.⁷ The attempt to create genuine Greek roots was an important part of the integration process of the Greek elites into the ruling of Rome's oriental provinces.⁸ When two cities, even small or modern, sought to seal new contacts, civic authorities used to refer to common foundation myths. As such, claiming a legendary kinship with a more prestigious city was a way to create a connection between the two and to enjoy new privileges.⁹ Romans also took this cultural habit in order to get involved into the rich and prestigious Greek cities.¹⁰ At Ephesus, the famous bequest made in AD 104 to the *boulè* by a wealthy

⁵ See MARKUS (1990), SALZMANN (1999).

⁶ See, e.g., MALKIN (1998), LARSON (2007), SCHEER (2010).

⁷ See CAMERON (2004), JONES (2010).

⁸ See BOWIE (1970), SWAIN (1996), 66-100, ROMEO (2010).

⁹ CURTY (1995), 259-263, CAMERON (2004), 224-228, PRICE (2005), PATTERSON (2010).

¹⁰ JONES (2010).

Roman equestrian, Vibius Salutaris, serves to illustrate this. The inscription reveals how the Ionian foundation of Ephesus and the birth of Artemis were wielded as a tangible source of power by the new municipal establishment.¹¹

Literary evidence shows that traditional discourses about gods, heroes and founders were still carried on in Late Antique Greek cities.

In 356, Libanius delivered his famous *Oration in praise of Antioch* at the occasion of the celebration of the local Olympic games, certainly attended by many Christians. The first part of the *Antiochikos* is devoted to the early history of Antioch and the story begins with the Argive mythological origins of the city, which were the consequences of Zeus and Io's adventures.¹² Similarly, when he praises Nicomedia, Libanius recalls the foundation myth of the Bithynian city.¹³

Since the classical period onwards,¹⁴ rhetors used to glorify the remote origins of a city in order to cement civic communities around several classical urban ideals. As such, Libanius' speech scrupulously follows the rules of the tradition of the *enkômion poleôs* defined in Menander Rhetor's treatises, which advocate that every praise of a city should recall first its position and then its prestigious origins.¹⁵

Libanius intended to show the pride that his fellow citizens should gain from this glorious past: 'Let a man consider our nobility of birth, and remark that the best elements in any place have come together here as though to some land chosen by the gods to hold men worthy of admiration. We alone have origins which have brought together what is admired in each race: the antiquity of the Argives, the Cretan respect for law, a royal race from Cyprus and the line of Heracles' (transl. Nock).¹⁶ The point is not whether Libanius would have morally approved the indiscretions of the characters he was telling the story of. According to him, Antioch's well-known mythical history should be understood here as references to the common secular culture that should be shared by Pagans and Christians and could strengthen their membership to their prestigious city.

¹¹ *IE* 27. See ROGERS (1991).

¹² *LIB.*, *Or.* 11.44-58. See SALIOU (1999-2000).

¹³ *LIB.*, *Or.* 26.92-94.

¹⁴ For instance, ISOCR., *Panath.* 24.

¹⁵ MENAN. 1.353-359. See PERNO (1993), 209-2010, BOUFFARTIGUE (1996), Saliou (2006).

¹⁶ *LIB.*, *Or.* 11.57: σκοπεῖτω δὴ τις τὴν εὐγένειαν καὶ ὡς ὅτι περ κράτιστον τῶν ἑκασταχοῦ, τοῦτο ἐνταυθοῖ συνερρῦηκεν, ὡς περ εἰς τι χωρίον ἐξηρημένον ὑπὸ τῶν κρειττόνων εἰς ὑποδοχὴν ἀνδρῶν ἀξίων θαυμάσαι, καὶ μόνοις ἡμῖν αἱ ῥίζαι τὰ παρ' ἑκάστοις σεμνὰ συνήγαγον εἰς ταῦτό, τὴν Ἀργείων παλαιότητα, τὴν Κρητικὴν εὐνομίαν, γένος ἐκ Κύπρου βασιλείων, τὴν Ἡρακλέους ἀπορροήν.

Mythological works were still being composed in the fifth century, the most important of them being the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus of Panopolis, a Christian Egyptian writing in the 460s AD. The forty-eight books of the poem refer to many cities in connection with Dionysus' trip to India and his triumphant return to the West. The odds are that each city visited by Dionysus had propagated its own version of the god's *Odyssey* that the author incorporated in his work.

In book 40, Nonnus recalls an imaginary banquet where the Syrian god Melqart would have told him the foundation myth of the city of Tyre: according to the author, two wandering rocks floating over the sea would have indicated the place for the location of the future Tyre, after the sacrifice of an eagle following an oracle.¹⁷ In book 41, Nonnus describes at length Berytus, and devotes nearly two books to the legend of Beroe, after whom the Phoenician city is named. The details that Nonnus supplies about these two Phoenician cities might suggest that he was familiar with these accounts, implying that they still prevailed in Late Antique Tyre and Berytus. As such, Nonnus' poem can be seen as a compendium of local mythologies of many cities.¹⁸

Similarly, the literary genre of the *Patria* was extremely popular during the fifth and the sixth centuries. These works gathered foundation myths besides accounts of the customs, institutions and religious festivals for each city they were devoted to.¹⁹

One may wonder how the Christians seeking integration into the civic world could deal with the literary accounts of the cities' glorious pasts, which were full of (un)glorious references to the traditional religion that they wanted to eradicate.

3. The reappropriation of pagan myths

A first attitude was to accept the discourses on the cities' past without any apparent attempt to intervene. Like in Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*, numerous local myths were still recorded by Christian authors, who do not seem seriously troubled by their pagan features. In the sixth century, Macedonius Consul, who was in all likelihood Christian,²⁰ wrote an epigram in which Sardis is praised for its mythical traditions, as well as for its idyllic natural setting and its production of wine. In the first two verses, Late Antique Sardis is paraphrased in the same

¹⁷ NONNU., *Dionys.* 40.311-505. On this episode, see BIJOVSKY (2005).

¹⁸ LIEBESCHUETZ (1995), SARADI (2006), 53-54.

¹⁹ SARADI (2006), 55. On the development of the *Patria* from the third century onwards, see JANISZEWSKI (2006), 165-327.

²⁰ MADDEN (1977).

poetic wording as it used to be.²¹ The poem refers then to the traditional civic mythology of the Lydian city, associated with Zeus, Rhea and Bromius.²²

In the *Ethnica*, Stephanus of Byzantium put together his lists of cities, with numerous citations regarding their mythical pasts. For instance, quoting Herodian, the author recalls the pagan origins of Aizani, in Phrygia, whose past goes back to the eponymous hero Aizen, son of Tantalus.²³

In some cases, the glorious past of a city was still evoked by Christians through fanciful etymologies of its name. For instance, the city of Damascus could be linked to Dionysus' cycle as Stephanus recalls that its ancient name was thought to have been *Darmaskos* (Δαρμασκός).²⁴ This alleged old appellation was the result of the combination of the words *derma* (δέρμα, 'skin') and *askos* (ἄσκός, 'wineskin'), which refers to Dionysus making a wineskin with the skin of the giant Ascus during his war against Lycurgus.²⁵ These Late Antique etymological explanations aimed at reinforcing the traditional Dionysian association with Damascus, dating in all likelihood from the early Hellenistic period.²⁶

As far as John Malalas is concerned, he made the traditional foundation myths compatible with Christian History by presenting gods and heroes as mortal great rulers or inventors.²⁷ For example, Helios is considered as the king (*basileus*) who ruled over Egypt during twelve years and ninety-seven days after the dead of his father Hephaestus.²⁸

All this shows that Christians continued without any problem to convey traditional mythological accounts that contributed to the glory of their cities, as did their pagan fellow citizens. Since the second century onwards, Christian

²¹ *Anth. Gr.* 9.645, v. 1-2: Τμώλω ὑπ' ἀνθεμόεντι ῥοῖην πάρα Μαίονος Ἑρμοῦ / Σάρδιες ἢ Λυδῶν ἔξοχος εἰμι πόλις. 'I am Sardis, the chief city of Lydia, who stands under flowery Tmolus, by the stream of Maeonian Hermus' (translation by Paton). Cf. EUR., *Bacch.* 520-536.

²² *Anth. Gr.* 9.645, v. 3-5: μάρτυς ἐγὼ πρώτη γενόμην Διός, οὐ γὰρ ἐλέγγειν / λάθριον υἷα Πέης ἤθελον ἡμετέρης. / αὐτὴ καὶ Βρομίῳ γενόμην τροφός: ... 'I (Sardis) witnessed first the birth of Zeus, for I refused to betray the secretly born son of my own Rhea. It was I, too, who nursed Bromius' (translation by Paton). See WEIB (1995), 86-87.

²³ STEPH. BYZ., *Ethn.* A 72, s.v. Αἰζανοί (ed. Billerbeck): Αἰζὴν Ταντάλου παῖς, ἄφ' οὗ ἐν Φρυγίᾳ πόλις Αἰζανοί.

²⁴ STEPH. BYZ., *Ethn.* s.v. Δαρμασκός (ed. Meineke).

²⁵ STEPH. BYZ., *Ethn.* s.v. Δαρμασκός (ed. Meineke): πόλις Συρίας, ... ὠνομάσθη δὲ ὅτι εἷς τῶν Γιγάντων Ἀσκός ὄνομα ἅμα Λυκούργῳ δῆσας τὸν Διόνυσον ἔρριπεν εἰς τὸν ποταμόν, ὃν λύσας Ἑρμῆς τὸν Ἄσκον τοῦ δέρματος ἐγύμνωσεν, ὅθεν πρὸς οἶνον ἐπιτήδειον τὸ δέρμα.

²⁶ See ALIQUOT (2009), 189-191 with other etymologies of the name Damascus, BUTCHER (2010), pl. 6.

²⁷ HÖRLING (1980), SCOTT (1990), JEFFREYS (1990), BEAUCAMP (2006).

²⁸ MALAL., *Chron.* 2.1 (ed. Thurn).

apologists, like Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and Minucius Felix, had long used the doctrine of Evhemerus, which enabled them to accept the reality of the gods as historical, while denying them the status of immortal super-human beings.²⁹ Accordingly, local myths could be considered as part of the secular realm and therefore acceptable for Christian authors and their Christian readership.

In the same way, archaeological evidence reveals the permanence of references to mythological scenes in Late Antiquity. During the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries, numerous cities kept monumentalizing their mythical past.³⁰ In Aphrodisias and Ephesus, reliefs on theatres and porticoes still depicted mythological scenes inspired by the legendary foundations.³¹ As the reliefs of Ares and Athena found on the North-West Gate of Sagalassos suggest, some representations of gods might have underlined the ancestral nature of the inhabitants of a city.³²

In other cases, Christians willing to gain an historical foothold in the city proposed to give a new – and Christian - perspective to an old local tradition. The Christian development of the foundation myths of the small Thracian city of Byzantium illustrates the truth of this. In his *Patria* of Constantinople, the sixth century pagan author Hesychius of Miletus records the history of Byzantium from its mythical foundation to the time of its re-foundation by Constantine.³³ In the first part, Hesychius recalls at length the foundation of the city by Byzas, its eponymous king, son of Poseidon and Ceroessa, herself daughter of Zeus and Io.³⁴ After having recalled the adventures of Byzas, the author tells the re-foundation of the city as Antonina by Septimius Severus, and finally as Constantinoupolis by Constantine. Later on, Hesychius' *Patria* were integrated in a Christian work with an identical title.³⁵ Adding the first Christian Emperor

²⁹ See PÉPIN (1981).

³⁰ See JACOBS (in press).

³¹ For example, the frieze of the temple of Artemis and Hadrian of Ephesus (block B. Selçuk Museum inv. no. 714), dated from the early fourth century, depicts a scene of the foundation of Artemis' sanctuary by the Amazons. See PRICE (1999), 23, PRICE (2005), 116.

³² See JACOBS (2006), who links these reliefs to Sagalassians' reputation as a warlike people, as already depicted in ARR., *Anab.* 1.28: ἐδόκουν πάντων Πισιδῶν μαχίμων ὄντων αὐτοὶ εἶναι [οἱ] μαχιμώτατοι 'They (Sagalassians) were thought to be the most warlike people among all the warlike Pisidians'.

³³ KAZHDAN (1991), 1135.

³⁴ HESYCH., *Orig. Const.* F 4 = *Scriptores originum Constantinopolitarum* p. 4, 10 (ed. Preger). See DAGRON, p. 68-69.

³⁵ DAGRON (1984), 23-29.

to the list of Byzantium's heroes should emphasise the continuity between the remote glorious acts of Byzas and those of the founder of the Christian Empire.

At the same period, the Tübingen Theosophy records a prophecy given to Aemus asking whether to wage war on the king Byzas. The oracular verses, probably genuine, warned him to not attack Byzas who will be the victor.³⁶ In his commentary, the anonymous Christian author explicitly sees in the pagan oracle a sign of the extraordinary destiny of the city.³⁷ Undoubtedly, this reuse of original past evidence aimed at legitimizing the leading position of the new imperial capital, Constantinople.

In the same perspective, some Christian authors could recount a local history by adding some Christian elements to the traditional versions. The legendary meeting of Jason with the eponymous king Kyzicus as related by Malalas deserves attention. As they were attacked by Kyzicus, Jason and the Argonauts came to a place called Pythia Therma, made sacrifices and questioned the deity.³⁸ According to Malalas, an oracle revealed then the future transformation of the temple of Rhea/Cybele into a church of The Virgin Mary: when asked about the future of his place of worship, Apollo would have prophesied: 'Do whatever leads to virtue and order, I prophesy a single triune God ruling on high whose imperishable Logos will be conceived in a virgin. Like a fiery arrow he will course through the middle of the world, gather up everything and bring it as a gift to the Father. This house will be hers. Her name is Maria'.³⁹ Afterwards, Jason and his companions would have 'inscribed the oracle in bronze letters on a marble stone, and placed it over the door of the temple, calling it "House of Rhea, mother of the gods".' We are told that the disastrous destiny of the pagan place of worship became true when 'many years later, this house was turned into a church of The Holy Maria Theotokos by Emperor Zeno'.⁴⁰ The play on words on the Kyzicene mother of the gods and the Virgin Mother of God clearly aimed at showing the continuity of cult between the old temple of Cybele, and the newly built church of Maria.

The *interpretatio christiana* of local myths allowed the Christians to win civic histories and all citizens, pagan and Christian, to keep claiming deeply

³⁶ *Theosophy* 1.16 (ed. Beatrice) = § 19 (ed. Erbse), v. 2: οὐ σέ γε Φοῖβος ἄνωγεν ἀμείνονι φωτὶ μάχεσθαι. See BUSINE (2005) 420-421.

³⁷ *Theosophy* 1.16 (ed. Beatrice) = § 19 (ed. Erbse): τοῦ θεοῦ θαυμαζῶ τὴν ἄνωθεν περὶ τὸ Βυζάντιον πρόνοιαν.

³⁸ MALAL., *Chron.* 4.8 (ed. Thurn): καὶ γράψαντες τὸν χρησμὸν ... ἐν λίθῳ, ἤτοι μαρμάρῳ, χαλκείοις γράμμασιν, ἔθηκαν εἰς τὸ ὑπέρθυρον τοῦ ναοῦ, καλέσαντες τὸν οἶκον Ῥέας μητρὸς θεῶν.

³⁹ On this oracle, see FOSCHIA (2005), 96-97, AGOSTI (2008), BUSINE (2012).

⁴⁰ MALAL., *Chron.* 4.8 (ed. Thurn): ὅστις οἶκος μετὰ χρόνους πολλοὺς ἐγένετο ἐκκλησία τῆς ἁγίας καὶ θεοτόκου Μαρίας ὑπὸ Ζήνωνος βασιλέως.

anchored myths. As a result, traditional stories and civic pride were made suitable for the Christians' need to gain a civic identity.

4. The creation of a new Christian civic past

A very different attitude towards civic history was the rejection of the classical past as a source of civic pride.

From the second second century onwards, some Christian authors have repeatedly denounced the absurdity and vulgarity of pagan myths, while extolling the virtues of the biblical stories. At the beginning of the fourth century, Eusebius severely attacked pagan theology, the mythical one passed on by poets, the physical one, containing the allegorical interpretations of philosophers, and the civic one established in the cities, 'which they call political, or state-religion, which also is especially enforced by the laws, as both ancient and ancestral'.⁴¹ Eusebius' critique on Greek political theology as historically rooted was clearly a reaction to the attempted explanations of the origins of the gods by which the *poleis* defined themselves.⁴²

In this context, some uncompromising Christians could not reasonably find in the local myths the basis of their civic identity. By consequence, they sought to provide their worshippers with new local histories able to compete with the traditional mythologies.

Firstly, some cities could draw from the canonical corpus of the Old Testament stories that could constitute a source for the city's identity.

By way of illustration, some cities managed to anchor their history in the Biblical times by putting forward a christianised alternative of the traditional etymologies of their name. In Late Antiquity, at least three rival explanations of the name of the metropolis of Arabia, Bostra, circulated at the same time: first, Photius quotes Damascius' *Vita Isidori* according to which Bostra was said to derive from the words *boos* (βοός, 'cow') and *oistros* (οἴστρον, 'gadfly').⁴³ once Io, transformed into a cow, had been stung by a gadfly, which made her crazy; second, the Arabian city would have been called Bostra after the name of the

⁴¹ EUS., *Praep.* 4.1.2: τοῦτο δέ ἐστι τὸ κατὰ πόλεις καὶ χώρας συνεστῶς, πολιτικὸν αὐτοῖς προσηγορευμένον· ὁ καὶ μάλιστα πρὸς τῶν νόμων διεκδικεῖται, ὡς ἂν παλαιὸν ὄμου καὶ πάτριον.

⁴² JOHNSON (2006), 156-157.

⁴³ DAMASC., *V. Isid.* F 136 B (ed. Athanassiadi) = PHOT., *Bibl.* 242, 196-197 (ed. Henry): Ἀκούσας τὴν Ἰῶ θρυλουμένην καὶ τὸ ὄνομα τῆς πόλεως εἰς τὸν οἴστρον τῆς βοός ἀναλυόμενον. On the association of Io's cycle with Bostra in Libanius, see GATIER (1982).

general Bostras sent by Augustus in the country;⁴⁴ third, Bostra was said to be the Biblical Bosor mentioned in *Deut* 4.43,⁴⁵ sometimes associated with Job's mother, Bosora.⁴⁶ In the same way, Late Antique Palmyra was connected with the Biblical times through a similar explanation: Solomon would have built the city in memory of David's victory on Goliath. Therefore, he would 'have called Palmyra 'Past Fate' (πάλαι - μοῖραν) because in the past the village had been fatal for Goliath whom his father had slain there.'⁴⁷

Secondly, some cities mentioned in the New Testament could boast their ancestry up to the apostolic age. This is certainly the case of Athens whose conversion to Christianity relied mainly on references to the famous account in Acts 17 of Paul's visit to Athens.⁴⁸ In the fourth and fifth centuries, this episode also provided themes for narratives about the meeting of Greek and Christian traditions in Athens, as for example, the philosophico-theological poems circulating under the name of Dionysius the Aeropagist, known as the only and first named disciple of Paul in Athens, and the apocryphal *Acts of Philippos*, which are inspired by the model of Paul's coming in Athens.⁴⁹

Let us recall that, during the fifth and sixth centuries, Christians proposed various explanations for the Altar of the Unknown God mentioned by Paul as a proof that the victory of Christianity had been predicted long before the coming of Christ. In his sermon *On the Mother of God and the Nativity*, Theodotus of Ancyra, for example, quoted an oracle about the transformation of a pagan temple into a Church of the Virgin Theotokos, the same which was given to Jason in Malalas' version (see above). According to Theodotus, the prophecy would have been 'carved in Athens on the altar of the Unknown God, the same as the one mentioned by the Apostle Paul'.⁵⁰ In this context, giving new

⁴⁴ See MALAL., *Chron.* 9.16 (ed. Thurn): καὶ ἐτείχισε κώμην ἣν ἐκάλεσε Βόστραν εἰς ὄνομα Βόστρου τοῦ πεμφθέντος ὑπ' αὐτοῦ στρατηγοῦ; GEORGIUS MONACHUS, *Chron.* p. 294 (ed. De Boor 1904, [1978]): τὴν δὲ Βόστραν εἰς ὄνομα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτὴν στρατηγοῦ Βόστρου.

⁴⁵ For instance, EUS., *Onom.* s.v. *Bosor*: Βοσόρ (*Deut* 4, 43) ... πόλις ἰερατικὴ τῶν φυγαδευτηρίων. αὕτη ἐστὶ Βόστρα, ἡ νῦν μητρόπολις τῆς Ἀραβίας; PROCOPUS, *Commentarii in Isaiam* PG 87.2, col. 2672, line 9-10: Ἐδώμ δὲ λέγει τοὺς υἱοὺς Ἡσαῦ, Βόσορ δὲ τὴν βόστραν; JUL. SCR. ECCL., *Comm. in Job.* p. 312 (ed. Hagedorn): Βοσόρ τῆς Ἀραβίας ἡ νῦν καλουμένη Βόστρα.

⁴⁶ JUL. SCR. ECCL., *Comm. in Job.* p. 315 (ed. Hagedorn).

⁴⁷ MALAL., *Chron.* 5.39 (ed. Thurn): ἔκτισε δὲ καὶ ἐν τῷ λιμίτῳ πόλιν, ἣν ἐκάλεσε Παλμοῖραν διὰ τὸ παλαιὰ μοῖραν γενέσθαι τὴν κώμην τῷ Γολιάθ τῷ παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ φονευθέντι.

⁴⁸ KALDELLIS (2009), 53-59.

⁴⁹ See DI BRANCO (2005), 67-69, 73-78.

⁵⁰ THEODOTUS OF ANCYRA, *Oratio in Sanctam Mariam Dei Genitricem*, PO 19. 3, n° 93, 333-334. See KALDELLIS (2009), 50-51; BUSINE (in press).

meanings to Athenian pre-Christian religious material was a way to create a Christian History capable to compete with the well-known mythological History of Cecrops' venerable city.

The case of Antioch is also well documented thanks to the numerous speeches of John Chrysostom. Praising his mother city in the *De Statuis*, the bishop referred to the proto-Christian times when he wanted to demonstrate the real origin of the Antiochenes' virtues: quoting Acts 11, he recalls that it was at Antioch that Christians were so named: 'Do you wish to learn the dignity of thy city? Do you wish to know its ancestry? I will tell it exactly; not only that you could know, but that you could also emulate. What then is after all the dignity of our city? "It came to pass that the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch." This dignity, none of the cities throughout the world possesses, not even the city of Romulus itself!'⁵¹

This reference to the early history of Antioch could help at reconstructing a Christian mythology that would rival the Greek foundations myths. The account relies on the Late Antique idea that the virtues of the first inhabitants of a city constituted the guaranty of the character of its future citizens. John Chrysostom' tirade on the secular dignity of the Antiochenes is clearly the counterpart of Libanius' speeches on Antioch's glorious past. In his *Antiochikos*, the rhetor asserted that the city's character and virtues had been passed on to the dwellers of his city through its past heroes, mythical or historical: 'Such was the city when dangers threatened it; and in its character it kept alive the brave deeds of our forefathers. Let us see now whether it preserved the other virtues of the Athenians, whom it received as fellow settlers.'⁵² (transl. Downey)

Elsewhere, John Chrysostom had explicitly criticized Seleucus Nicator, historical founder of Antioch, and praises instead Emperor Theodosius for his virtues as founder: 'for it will not be so much indebted to the kindness of him who first founded it, as it will be to your sentence. And this is exceedingly reasonable; for he but gave it its beginning, and departed; but you, when it had grown up and become great'⁵³ (transl. Scaff). Again, this negative presentation

⁵¹ JOH. CHRYS., *De stat.* 17 PG 49, col. 176: Βούλει μαθεῖν σου τῆς πόλεως τὸ ἀξίωμα; βούλει τὰ πάτρια αὐτῆς εἰδέναι; Ἐγὼ ταῦτα μετὰ ἀκριβείας ἐρῶ, οὐχ ἵνα μάθῃς μόνον, ἀλλ'ἵνα καὶ ζηλώσης. Τί ποτ' οὖν ἐστι τῆς παρ' ἡμῖν πόλεως τὸ ἀξίωμα; Ἐγένετο πρῶτον ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ τοὺς μαθητὰς χρηματῖσαι Χριστιανούς. Τοῦτο δὲ οὐδεμία τῶν κατὰ τὴν οἰκουμένην ἔχει πόλεων, οὐδ' αὐτὴ ἡ Ῥωμύλου πόλις.

⁵² LIB., *Ant.* § 163: Τοιαύτη μὲν ἐν τοῖς ἐπείγουσι τῶν κινδύνων ἢ πόλις σώζουσα τὰ τολμήματα τῶν προγόνων ἐν τῇ φύσει. σκοπῶμεν τοίνυν, εἰ καὶ τὰς ἄλλας ἀρετὰς Ἀθηναίων ἐφύλαξεν, οὐς ἐδέξατο συνοίκους.

⁵³ JOH. CHRYS., *De stat.* 21 PG 49, col. 217: οὐδὲ γὰρ τοσαύτην εἴσεται χάριν τῷ παρὰ τὴν ἀρχὴν αὐτὴν οἰκίσαντι, ὅσῃν τῇ ψήφῳ τῇ σῆ· καὶ μάλα εἰκότως. Ἐκεῖνος μὲν

of Seleucus should be understood as a reaction to the long passages devoted to the first Seleucid king by Libanius.⁵⁴

It is worth noting that John Chrysostom also stresses the antiquity of Antioch as a Christian city in contrast to Rome, which he called ‘city of Romulus’ (ἡ Ρωμύλου πόλις)⁵⁵ in order to highlight its pagan origins. These were used to assert the precedence of Antioch over Rome and the other great cities, such as Constantinople and Alexandria. This competition between the four major cities of the Empire is also attested in the *Antiochikos* of Libanius (§ 270) and the *Ordo Urbium Nobilium* of Ausonius.⁵⁶

Similarly, some minor cities were able to base their civic pride through various allusions to early Christian History. For example, in the late fifth century, we learn from the author of the *Miracles of Thecla* that Christian Tarsus was ‘a city priding itself on ... what is most important and glorious of all, the fact of being the native city of the most great and holy apostle Paul’.⁵⁷ Paul’s native city based its reputation on the reference of its own Christian hero instead of referring to the pagan foundation myths of the re-foundation of the city by Perseus,⁵⁸ which were still in use at Nonnus’ time.⁵⁹

However, Christian mythology was far more rigid than Graeco-Roman myths. The historical geography of the Old and New Testaments could not help numerous Greek cities at reshaping their civic identity for it was unquestionable that the founder of Christianity had lived and died in Palestine and nowhere else. By the same token, most cities could not boast of Paul’s visit, as the apostle’s peregrinations had once and for all been established.⁶⁰

Other strategies were then set up for the creation of a Christian civic identity, notably thanks to the resort to more recent History. The establishment of the lives and stories of local martyrs contributed to create a common heirloom of a

γὰρ ἀρχὴν αὐτῆ δούς ἀπῆλθε, σὺ δὲ αὐξηθεῖσαν καὶ γενομένην μεγάλην, καὶ μετὰ τὴν πολλὴν ταύτην εὐημερίαν κατενεχθεῖσαν ἀναστήσεις.

⁵⁴ LIB., *Or.* 11, 77-104. See FRANCESIO (2004), 42-46; PRIMO (2009), 262-270.

⁵⁵ JOH. CHRYS., *De stat.* 17 PG 49, col. 176.

⁵⁶ See also *Expositio totius mundi* 23; AMM. 14.8.8.

⁵⁷ THECLA MIR. 29: πόλεως ἐπὶ ... ἐπιγαυρουμένης τὸ δὴ μείστον καὶ περιφανέστερον τῷ πόλιν εἶναι μάλιστα τοῦ μείστου καὶ θεσπεσίου ἀποστόλου Παύλου.

⁵⁸ DION CHRYS., *Or.* 33.45; AMM. 14.8: *Tarsus nobilitat, urbs perspicabilis; hanc condidisse Perseus memoratur*. Perseus is similarly represented on the civic coinage of Imperial Tarsus, see ROBERT (1977).

⁵⁹ NONN., *Dionys.* 18.293-294: the city would have been named after the fast foot (*tarsos*) of Perseus.

⁶⁰ See THONEMANN (2012) for similar remarks.

city and could provide an attractive alternative focus for civic identity. For instance, Basil of Caesarea is proud to count among his fellow citizens the second century martyr Gordius: 'for he was a native of this very city, whence we love him all the more, since he is our own private ornament'.⁶¹ Similarly, in numerous Greek cities, local holy figures, having lived one or two centuries before, took the role formerly played by local gods, heroes or historical founders. A case in point is Antioch, where various martyrs like Juventius, Maximinus, Julianus and Babylas, contributed to provide an alternative to the traditional pagan myths still recalled by Libanius and found on numerous mosaics and sculptures throughout the city.⁶²

In some cities, it was also possible to create Christian local histories by reinterpreting pre-Christian material evidence still visible in the Late antique urban landscape. In this respect, the *Vita* of Abercius of Hierapolis offers interesting insights about the manner in which the Phrygian city could build in the middle of the fourth century a Christian civic identity. It is well-known that the author integrated the funerary inscription of the second century local bishop,⁶³ and we can presume that the whole story of the holy man mainly relied on the biographic elements contained in the obituary. In addition, P. Thonemann has recently demonstrated that the *Vita* was also constructed from other epigraphical monuments, such as an imperial letter from Emperor Marcus Aurelius and the dedication of baths by Empress Faustina.⁶⁴

In the same perspective, I have shown that some accounts of temple destruction can be considered as Christian aetiological myths aiming at explaining the presence of the ruins of an existing building.⁶⁵ As such, the *interpretatio christiana* of stones was a way to manage the pagan urban legacy and, at the same time, to rewrite the history of the city.

5. Conclusion

Christians' will to maintain and sometimes to conquer the cities' traditional past originates the fact that the classical world lived in and for the past. Like Pagans, Christians tried to legitimize their faith and religion by constantly referring to

⁶¹ On *Gordius* 5 PG 31 col. 493: Οὗτος ἔφθ μὲν ἀπὸ τῆς πόλεως ταύτης, ὅθεν καὶ μᾶλλον αὐτὸν ἀγαπῶμεν, διότι οἰκείος ἡμῖν ὁ κόσμος ἐστίν.

⁶² SOLER (2006), 189-214, SANDWELL (2007), 133-134, LIEBESCHUETZ (2011), 208.

⁶³ *Vita Abercii* § 79-80. See THONEMANN (2012) with previous bibliography. The stone of the inscription has been found on the site of Hierapolis, see WISCHMEYER (1980) = SEG 30 (1980), 1479 = *Steinepigramme aus dem Griechischen Osten* III 16/07/01.

⁶⁴ THONEMANN (2012).

⁶⁵ See BUSINE (2013).

what happened long before. This attitude towards the past may be explained by the fact that one of the most severe charges repeatedly levelled at the Christians was that they were a new nation with a new religion. Christianity could therefore not spread into the Greco-Roman civilisation without claiming deep-seated roots in the history of both Hebrews and Greeks. In order to guarantee a foothold in the civic past, Christians developed different strategies to make theirs the cities' local histories.

On the one hand, numerous Greek cities kept appropriating and circulating the classical pagan past at least until the sixth century. Managing the classical heirloom was possible as the myths were considered as part of the common culture shared by both Pagan and Christian Greeks. Similarly, the *interpretatio christiana* of classical accounts allowed to make a room for Christians in the rooted history of some Greek *poleis*.

On the other hand, the rejection of the pagan past of the cities led the Christians to create new local histories able to compete with ancestral mythologies. Biblical episodes, the Apostles' and first Christians' doings, martyrs' lives and even more recent actions of local illustrious characters as prominent bishops could provide material for the elaboration of a Christian civic identity.

The re-appropriation of poliad myths by Christians showed that Christian *poleis* kept identifying themselves through the urban and civic ideal, which was inherent to the classical world.⁶⁶ As in the past, praising his motherland contributed to build the civic identity for every dweller of the Roman Empire. This integration of Christians into the traditional civic culture was possible thanks to the secularisation and/or Christianisation of pagan mythology. In this respect, fourth and fifth centuries cities were in line with the classical civic way of life.

This use of secular culture seems to have gradually been left from the reign of Justinian onwards. Local variations of classical foundation myths were henceforth replaced by the Biblical stories. In this regards, it is significant that Byzantine praises of cities kept following the classical topics of the *enkômion poleôs*, such as the *thesis* or the natural resources, with the exception of the evocation of the city's past which disappears from the literary genre.⁶⁷ From the sixth and seventh century onwards, parochialism was mainly kept through the promotion of Saints. These holy figures became the sole local heroes allowing the unification of members of new communities, defined by their religious allegiance only. The promotion of this new community culture constitutes the

⁶⁶ MANGO (1994).

⁶⁷ On praises of cities from the 10th to the 15th centuries, see ROBERT (1961), 151-166.

ultimate outcome of the Christianisation of the city and, at the end of the day, marks the end of the classical polis.

As regards references to pagan mythologies, they were from then on confined to nostalgic works written in order to entertain their erudite readership. In the West, Latin authors such as Corippus in the sixth century also kept referring to classical mythology in their poetic works.⁶⁸ It must be acknowledged, however, that antiquarian references to classical mythology were not anymore put into the service of civic communities in search of identities.

Ultimately, the loss of the pagan history of the cities led to the replacement of their traditional, and often theophoric, names by christianised names. When Alexandria, Aphrodisias and Antioch respectively became 'Philochristos polis', Stauropolis and Theoupolis during the sixth and the seventh century,⁶⁹ the ancestral origins of civic communities were once and for all erased.

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⁶⁸ LEPALLEY (2010), 477-492.

⁶⁹ IRMSCHER (1970), SCOTT (1985), 108, ROUECHÉ (2007), HAHN (2008).

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