

## **Dionysus and Rome**

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## **Volume 93**

# Dionysus and Rome

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Edited by  
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Francesco Massa

# The shadow of Bacchus: Liber and Dionysus in Christian Latin literature (2nd–4th centuries)

**Abstract:** This chapter proposes to analyse the role of Dionysus and Liber in the Christian Latin literature, from the end of the second century up until the second half of the fourth century. It aims not only to clarify how Christian authors wrote about Dionysus and Liber, but also to bring to light the differences that exist between the Greek Dionysus and the Roman Liber and between the originally Greek Dionysian *koine* attested in texts and images, and a distinctly Roman trait stemming from their ritual practices. The chapter will focus on some Christian works, in particular the *Apologeticum* by Tertullian, the *Adversus nationes* by Arnobius, the *Institutiones divinae* by Lactantius and the *De errore profanarum religionum* by Firmicus Maternus.

## The Greek Dionysus and the Roman Liber: Christian views

In the complex process of the construction of ancient Christian identities, Christian authors are constantly confronted with the polytheistic world. The divinities of the Empire's traditional religions were often protagonists in (and targets of) apologetic treatises and Christian polemics; these intellectuals' pages drew out the conflict between the Christians' unique god and the disorderly multitude of the Greek and Roman gods. The Roman Empire's multi-religious world forced Christians, on the one hand to take a stand against previous religious traditions, and on the other, to find their place within the Roman political and cultural systems.<sup>1</sup>

In this context, the Roman Liber and the Greek Dionysus have an ongoing presence in Christian writings in the first centuries of our era. Of course, Dionysus

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1 For the construction of religious identities, see e.g. Frakes, DePalma Digeser 2006 and Belayche, Mimouni 2009. For Christianity as a religion of the Roman Empire, see Rüpke 2009.

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is not the only divinity who is in competition with Christianity in the Roman Empire. Several divine figures (for example, Mithras, Orpheus and Heracles) were compared to Christ, as Justin shows in his *Apology* and as Celsus underlines in his *On the true doctrine*.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the literary, epigraphic and iconographic evidence of the Imperial period confirms the great importance of Dionysus in most of the territories of the Roman Empire, partly as a traditional deity of Greek and Roman religion, and partly assimilated to local deities.<sup>3</sup> That is why, as it began to spread, Christianity confronted Dionysian myths and ritual practices described in a number of literary texts as well as on monuments, coinage, mosaics, frescos and sarcophagi. The Christian authors could simply not avoid engaging with this world with its Dionysian traditions.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter analyses the role of Dionysus and Liber in the Christian literature of the Latin language, from the end of the second century up until the second half of the fourth century. What interests us is not only to clarify how Christian authors spoke about Dionysus and Liber, but also to bring to light the differences that exist between the Greek Dionysus and the Roman Liber and between the originally Greek Dionysian *koine* attested in texts and images, and distinctly Roman characteristics stemming from Roman ritual practices. Christian Latin literature is a body of sources that is often neglected by scholars of ancient religions.

In a previous article, I have highlighted that studies of the Latin Liber often argue that, starting with the Republican era, the overlap between Greek Dionysus and Roman Liber excluded all differences between the two deities.<sup>5</sup> More recently some scholars have attempted to emphasize the discrepancies between the two deities by focusing almost exclusively on Archaic and Republican Rome.<sup>6</sup> Notably, they have highlighted two areas where there is no overlap between Liber's and Dionysus' respective spheres of influence: the wine festivals and dramatic

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2 For example, Justin, *Apol.* 1.65.3 and Cels. 7.3. The relationship between Jesus and the various divine figures of the pagan world have been studied in numerous essays: on Heracles, see Simon 1955; on Mithras, see Simon 1978, Martin 1989 and Mastrocinque 2009, 111–14; on the Mother of the gods, see Fear 1996 and Borgeaud 1996, 135–42; on Asclepius, see Magri 2007 and dal Covolo 2008. More generally see Alvar 2008, 383–421 and Massa 2014, 20–26.

3 On Dionysus in the Imperial Age, see Nilsson 1957; Turcan 1989, 290 and Jaccottet 2003, II, 14.

4 For an overview on the role of Dionysus in Christian evidence, see Massa 2014.

5 Massa 2016; cf. Bruhl 1953, 13: 'il n'est pas surprenant que nous soyons peu renseignés sur ses attributions et son culte [*scil.* Liber Pater], car son assimilation au fils de Zeus et Sémélé s'était faite dans des temps relativement reculés et d'une manière si complète que les écrivains de l'époque classique disaient indifféremment Liber ou Bacchus quand ils voulaient parler de Dionysos'. See also Jeanmaire 1951, 453 and Le Bonniec 1958, 297. Scholars have rendered a similar judgment even more recently: see e.g. Pailler 1995, 14.

6 Cf. Montanari 1988, 103–10. See also Mastrocinque 1988, 245–66.

competitions. In Rome, the public holidays connected with wine, the *Vinalia* on April 23 and August 19, are dedicated to Jupiter and Venus, not to Liber Pater, as Robert Schilling and subsequently Olivier de Cazanove have clearly demonstrated.<sup>7</sup> As for the theatre, in Rome Liber was not the only patron god of the festivals: theatrical performances were also part of the *ludi* in honour of the Magna Mater and/or Apollo, and the actors' guilds were not under Liber's tutelage.<sup>8</sup>

In order to clarify and interpret the identities of Dionysus and Liber, it is necessary to distinguish between two different planes. First, it is necessary to acknowledge that poetry and images since the Archaic era had portrayed Liber with substantially the same features as the Greek Dionysus, though often with local inflections.<sup>9</sup> The expansion of the Dionysian cult and its imagery in the Mediterranean world allowed Liber to assume a Greek identity in iconographic and literary representation. Nonetheless, certain differences do appear to persist between the Roman and the Greek divinity, especially within the ritual domain. With this in mind, the equivalence between Liber and Dionysus is not in fact comparable to that between Dionysus and Osiris, say, or Dionysus and Sabazios.<sup>10</sup> Rather, it is played out within the construction of the Roman Liber's identity, a hybrid identity comprising various cultural traditions and clearly encompassing the Greek Dionysus among other figures. The Roman Liber, as our rare Archaic sources present him, appears from the outset to be the result of contact between various cultures. Unlike the relationship between Dionysus and Osiris, for example, we cannot isolate among our sources a Liber that is entirely independent of the Greek Dionysus.<sup>11</sup>

Christian Latin literature fits perfectly within this context since, in drawing on themes that are derived from the Dionysian literary and iconographic *koine*, authors also reference more specifically Roman ritual practices. In the following

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7 See in particular Schilling 1955, 146–47 and Cazanove 1988, 245: 'Jupiter patronne l'obtention du vin sacrificiel (*uinum inferium*), Liber celle du vin profane, impropre à la libation parce qu'impur (*uinum spurcum*). Liber intervient au moment du pressurage parce que le moût, dont il reçoit les prémices, est un liquide temporairement impur et qui, pour partie, par les opérations de frelatage, va le devenir, irrévocablement'. See also Cazanove 1991.

8 Cf. Mastrocinque 1988, 248.

9 Cf. Gasparri 1986. On the Roman archaic poetry, see Rousselle 1987 and Wiseman 2000. On Virgil, see Mac Góráin 2013; see further the Introduction to this volume.

10 Dionysus was identified with Osiris in Egypt, with Dusares in Arabia, with Atargatis in Hierapolis/Bambyke, etc. On this subject, see Turcan 1989, 290.

11 For an important analysis of the analogies and differences between Greek and Roman divinities, see Bonnet, Pirenne-Delforge, Pironti 2016.

pages, I will analyse, without aiming at exhaustiveness, some examples of the utilization of the figure of Dionysus and Liber in Christian Latin literature.

## Liber and Dionysus *versus* Jesus

Faced with this Dionysian presence, the Christian authors developed two different cultural responses in order to respond to the possible analogies between Dionysus and Christ. First of all, a process of selection of those elements that could be reinterpreted and adapted to the realities of Christianity. This involved adopting and transforming certain Dionysian scenarios from a Christian point of view, a valuable example of which is given in the works of Clement of Alexandria; in *Stromata* for example, Clement uses the words of the Euripidean Dionysus of the second episode of Euripides' *Bacchae* to explain the transmission of Christian doctrines.<sup>12</sup> A second response involved the construction of a negative representation of Dionysus based in part on the common anti-Dionysian polemic: this representation was ranged against the diffusion and popularity of the god during the first centuries of our era.<sup>13</sup>

For the representation of the 'clash' between the Greek and Roman divinities and the new Christian god, Latin apologists relied on the traditional repertoire of Greek mythology. A first important example is that of Tertullian, the first Christian author to use Latin as a literary language. In his *Apologeticum*, most likely written in 197, the author affirms his desire to address the judges of the city of Carthage, following legal trials in which Christians had been condemned.<sup>14</sup> Having dedicated an important section of the work to the *refutatio* of accusations against the followers of Christ, and having discussed the nature of the relationship between Jews and Christians, Tertullian presents the figure of Christ as a god (*necesse est igitur pauca de Christo ut Deo*). Christ is then the *filius Dei*. However, what is implied in Tertullian's discourse is that Christ cannot be assimilated to or superimposed onto the numerous sons of Zeus/Jupiter, evoked in the Greek and

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<sup>12</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 4.162.2–4. On the intellectual constructions of Clement of Alexandria, see Herrero 2010; Jourdan 2010, 195–220 and Massa 2014, 157–99. For Clement's use of Euripides' *Bacchae*, see Mac Góráin and Perris in this volume, with further references at pp. 63–66.

<sup>13</sup> For anti-Dionysian polemic, see Mac Góráin in this volume.

<sup>14</sup> According to Price 1999, 109 Tertullian refers 'specifically to Roman governors, and not, as has been suggested, also to local, civic magistrates.' More generally, see Fredouille 2005.



Roman mythical tales. Here we are some distance from the rhetorical and narrative strategies employed by Christian authors writing in Greek, such as, for example, Justin, who developed the theory of *imitatio diabolica* in order to explain pagan myths and their analogies with Christian accounts.<sup>15</sup> Tertullian pursues his discourse in specifying that the birth of Christ is not the result of a shameful action:

Not as the result of incestuous intercourse or the violation of another's wife has he a god for his Father – a god covered with scales, or horned, or feathered (*squamatum aut cornutum aut plumatum*), or a lover, for his vile ends transmuting himself into the gold of Danaus. They are your divinities upon whom these base deeds of Jupiter were done (*Iovis ista sunt humana vestra*). But the Son of God has no mother in any sense that involves the violation of her purity; in fact, she who is regarded as his mother had not married. First, however, let me discuss his nature; then the manner of his birth will be understood.<sup>16</sup>

The reference to the mythical tales of the sexual unions of Jupiter, which were well known in a cosmopolitan city such as Carthage, where Tertullian lived, is very clear in this passage of the *Apologeticum*.<sup>17</sup> The father of gods turns into a serpent (*squamatus*) to unite with Persephone/Proserpina and engender Dionysus/Liber; into a bull (*cornutus*) for Europa; into a swan (*plumatus*) for Leda; into a shower of golden rain (*in auro*) for Danaë. In what is an apologetic construct, Tertullian opposes the respectability of the human birth of Christ to the criminal and animal birth of the sons of Zeus. Among these unions that are against nature, Tertullian includes also Liber. Christian authors were familiar with various mythological tales concerning the birth of Dionysus. If the Theban tale in which Dionysus is the son of Zeus and Semele is well attested in Christian literature, the version of Zeus' union with his daughter Persephone is equally present.<sup>18</sup> The latter allowed Christian polemicists to highlight the incestuous and monstrous aspects of the birth of Dionysus: Athenagoras of Athens, for instance, in his *Embassy for the Christians*, speaks of the double union of Zeus, in the form of a serpent, first with his mother Rhea (or Demeter) and subsequently with his daughter Persephone, which led to the conception of Dionysus. It was perhaps

**15** On Justin and the god Dionysus, see Massa 2014, 86–99. More generally on Justin, see Munich 2012.

**16** Tertullian, *Apol.* 21.8–9: transl. R.D. Sider, modified.

**17** On Carthage during the second and third centuries see Barnes 1971, esp. 67–71, and Rebillard 2012, 9–33.

**18** See for example Athenagoras, *Suppl.* 20.3 and Clement of Alexandria, *Protr.* 2.16.1. Diodorus, 3.64.1 and 4.4.1 evoke the birth of Dionysus from Zeus and Persephone without going into detail. On this version of the Dionysian myth, see Massa 2010.

the potentially negative aspects of this version which led Tertullian to cite it in his list of sexual unions with Zeus.<sup>19</sup>

In Tertullian's text, we encounter one of the most important problems in Christian apologetic literature from the first centuries of our era, namely the distinction between 'real' and 'false' discourses. During the history of the Empire, Christians authors developed their own reflections on myths, ritual practices and images through which Greek and Roman religions expressed themselves, in order to lay bare the deceit and lies which lay at their heart. The distinction and comparison between true and false, between the original Christian truth and its diabolical copy, the tension between the reality claimed for Christian beliefs and its supposed deformation at the hands of Pagans – all of these elements were essential for the formation of Christian identity.

Moreover, this is why the *Apologeticum* opens with a reflection on the primacy of the Christian truth and presenting the earth as a place of falsehood, as opposed to the heavens, the only residence of the truth.<sup>20</sup> The lexicon and rhetoric of truth contained in the work of Tertullian clearly show that the analogies between the biography of Christ and of the divinities of the Greek and Roman worlds had already entered the religious debates of the time.<sup>21</sup> To take a single example, according to Celsus' *On the True Doctrine*, the biographies of mythical figures presented several analogies with sacred Christian tales: Heracles, Asclepius, Dionysus, Orpheus, Mithras, Apollonius of Tyana, all of these figures, whether heroic or divine, were interpreted as rivals of Jesus, notably because of their birth from a woman, or their death and return to life.<sup>22</sup>

Tertullian's procedure is representative of a tendency that does not seem to change much throughout the centuries: although we advance from the end of the second century up until the fourth century, in a period in which Christianity, although – locally – limited by imperial power, had gained a certain diffusion throughout the Empire, the rhetorical strategies of Christian writers remain the same. A valuable testimony to this tendency is the *Adversus nationes* of Arnobius, a rhetorician in Sicca, Numidia, who presents an opposition between Pagan and

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<sup>19</sup> There are several references to Liber in the *Apologeticum*, but these are somewhat conventional: *Apol.* 11.6 and 8 where Tertullian says, adopting a Euhemeristic perspective, that Liber cannot be considered a god simply because he gave wine to men; 12.4 where he alludes to the link between Liber and beasts; 42.5 where he refers to Dionysian rituals in the streets.

<sup>20</sup> See Tertullian, *Apol.* 1.2.

<sup>21</sup> On religious competition in the Roman Empire see Rosenblum, Young, DesRosiers 2014, Engels, Van Nuffelen 2014, DesRosiers, Vuong 2016, and Naerebout 2016.

<sup>22</sup> See Origen, *C. Cel.* 3.41–42 and 7.53.

Christian beliefs and practices.<sup>23</sup> The first book is divided into two main sections that appear to be the most apologetic parts of the entire work: the first aims to respond to the accusation levelled against Christians that they were the reason for the gods' anger and the punishments that were imposed upon men; the second, by contrast, concentrates on the problem of the human nature of Christ, which had been used as a basis to accuse Christians of venerating a mortal man. In this section, Arnobius recalls that Christians were accused of considering as a god an individual who was killed on the cross, 'something infamous for miserable people' (*quod personis infame est uilibus*). The author responds by proposing some of the others divine figures that had shared the same type of mortal birth: he evokes, amongst others, Liber Pater, 'thrust out of his mother's womb by a bolt of lightning' (*ex genitalibus matris... fulmine praecipitatus*).<sup>24</sup> Arnobius' ultimate goal is explicitly declared in this paragraph:

But if, while you know that they were born in the womb, and that they lived on the produce of the earth, you nevertheless upbraid us with the worship of one born like ourselves, you act with great injustice, in regarding that as worthy of condemnation in us which you yourselves habitually do; or what you allow to be lawful for you, you are unwilling to be in like manner lawful for others.<sup>25</sup>

This part of the first book pursues the same arguments: some other parallelisms between Christ and the Pagan divinities are outlined. As the gods are venerated for their blessings towards men, Christians therefore considered Christ a divinity for what he had done for men. Arnobius cites also, amongst other things, Liber as the god who discovered wine and who taught men how to produce it, a clear statement of position in relation to Euhemerism.<sup>26</sup> Finally, we can cite a final analogy between Christ and Liber, concerning the matter of violent death. Arnobius complains that his Pagan addressees scoff at Christians because of Christ's crucifixion:

And yet, O ye who laugh because we worship one who died an ignominious death, do not ye too, by consecrating shrines to him, honour Father Liber, who was torn limb from limb

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<sup>23</sup> For an overview of Arnobius' work, see Le Bonniec 1982.

<sup>24</sup> Arnobius, *Adv. nat.* 1.36.1 and 3.

<sup>25</sup> Arnobius, *Adv. nat.* 1.37.4: transl. H. Bryce and H. Campbell.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Arnobius, *Adv. nat.* 1.38.2: *Liberum, quod usum reppererit uini*. On wine as a subject of dispute between Pagans and Christians, see Massa 2014, 203–49. For Christian interpretations of Liber according to Euhemerism, see also Tertullian, *Apol.* 11.6 and 8 and Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 21.2. For Euhemerism in Christian texts, see Roubekas 2017, 115–38 and Borgeaud 2017.

by the Titans? (*nonne Liberum et uos patrem membratim ab Titanis dissipatum fanorum consecratione mactatis?*).<sup>27</sup>

Before launching an attack on Pagan cults and beliefs towards the middle of book 5, Arnobius establishes a series of parallels between the biography of Christ and those of the Greek and Roman divinities. The goal is to show that the Christian religion is not absurd in comparison to traditional cults and that it could therefore be included in the religious repertory of the Empire.

## From myth to rite?

Arnobius' *Adversus nationes* also offers a basis for analysing how Christian authors thought about the relationship between mythical tales and ritual practices.<sup>28</sup> But first it is necessary to highlight that *Adversus nationes* offers a reflection on the existence of many gods with the same name and that Arnobius pokes fun at the plurality of divine figures in the Greco-Roman world:

And lest it appear long-winded and fastidious to go through them [*scil.* the pagan gods] one by one (*minutatim velle capita ire per singula*), the theologians (*theologi*) themselves say that there are four Vulcans and three Dianas, as many Asclepiuses and five Dionysuses, two times three Herculese and four Venuses, three categories of Castors and as many of the Muses, a triplet of winged Cupids and four Apollonian denominations, for whom they list both fathers and mothers, as well as their places of birth, and they explain the origin of each with their lineages [...]. We cannot be hard to influence if only something worthy of the conception of so great a name be shown us. Show us Mercury, but only one; give us Liber, but only one; a single Venus and likewise a single Diana.<sup>29</sup>

The Greco-Roman world of the gods is, Arnobius suggests, but a chaotic collective where the gods lose their identities. This presentation of the pagan gods by a Christian writer is of course a caricature, and seeks to emphasize the ridiculous aspect of the traditional cults scattered throughout the Empire. But it also reflects a particular phenomenon of the imperial era, namely the intensification of a process of equivalence between the names of the gods, which led to the formation of

<sup>27</sup> Arnobius, *Adv. nat.* 1.41.1.

<sup>28</sup> For an analysis of Arnobius' text in the context of religious competition see Simmons 1995.

<sup>29</sup> Arnobius, *Adv. nat.* 4.15.1 and 17.35: my translation.

a plurality of divine powers: the practice of *interpretatio*.<sup>30</sup> Dionysus is at the centre of this intellectual tendency. Cicero had already, in his *De natura deorum*, evoked the existence of several Dionysuses. One of the characters in this dialogue, Caius Cotta, *pontifex* and supporter of the principles of Aristotelian philosophy, proposed an example of equivalence and of an overlapping between divinities in order to critique Stoic theories in this regard. He also affirms that *Dionysos multos habemus* ('we have many Dionysuses'), by giving the list of five Dionysuses along with their genealogies.<sup>31</sup> From a similar perspective but in the fourth century, an epigram by the Latin poet Ausonius enumerates the multiple names of the god Dionysus according to the customs of several ancient peoples.

Ogygiadae me Bacchum vocant,  
Osirin Aegypti putant,  
Mysi Phanacen nominant,  
Dionyson Indi existimant,  
Romana sacra Liberum,  
Arabica gens Adoneum,  
Lucaniacus Pantheum.

The sons of Ogyges call me Bacchus, Egyptians think me Osiris, Mysians name me Phana-  
ces, Indians regard me as Dionysos, Roman rites make me Liber, the Arab race thinks me  
Adoneus, Lucaniacus the Universal God.<sup>32</sup>

This text gives a good indication of the intellectual tendency that read into the names of honoured divinities, found in different places, a single divine power ultimately acknowledged to be the 'Pantheon' or universal divinity. The practice of translating divine names allows Greek and Roman intellectuals not only to reflect on the unity of the divine world, but also to view the entire world in a single uniform manner, even on the cultic and cultural planes. The translation of divine names is very much an integral part of the theological interpretations of this epoch.

From a Christian perspective, it was not acceptable to venerate multiple divinities who carried the same name, as Christianity held that the divinities' denominations could not be interchangeable depending on people's language. The *Contra Celsum* by Origen, a demolition of the work by Celsus written in the middle

<sup>30</sup> For Christian attitudes to Greek and Roman *interpretatio*, cf. Arnobius, *Adv. nat.* 3.32; Origen, *C. Cels.* 1.24 and 5.46. On *interpretatio* see Hartog 1980; Borgeaud 2004, 71–72; Ando 2008, 43–58; Albert, Belayche, Bonnet, Borgeaud 2012; Bettini 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Cicero, *De nat. deor.* 3.23.58.

<sup>32</sup> Ausonius, *Epigr.* 32; transl. H.G.E. White.

of the third century, demonstrates this principle in argument. Origen deplores the Greeks' attitudes towards the translation of divine names and refutes the idea of the Pagan Celsus, according to whom it barely matters if the supreme God is called Zeus Most High, Zen, Adonai, Sabaoth, Amon, etc. Two main considerations are advanced in Origen's discourse: on the one hand, the divine names Adonai and Sabaoth are given after a 'divine science that is attributed to the Creator of the universe',<sup>33</sup> and, so, they cannot simply be the result of a translation; on the other hand, the translation between Pagan divinities and the supreme God is possible because Zeus, Amon, and the other gods, are, in the Christian conception, demons who do not have divine status and who are enemies of the true God.<sup>34</sup> The only means of translating the name of God permitted by the Christian religion is, obviously, through the generic term that indicates 'god'.

The Christian Latin authors rehearse the main topics of the relevant Greek god's mythology: thus, in Dionysus' case, the invention of wine, the love affair with Ariadne, and the death of the god at the hands of the Titans. Christian authors make a point of integrating these traditional stories into Roman forms and categories. In the *Adversus nationes*, Arnobius relates the myth of the dissection of Dionysus and defines it as a *bacchanal*, but at the same time, however, he affirms that the Greek term for *bacchanal* is *omophagia*:

We shall pass by the wild bacchanalia also, which are named in Greek *Omophagia*, in which with seeming frenzy and the loss of your senses you twine snakes about you; and, to show yourselves full of the divinity and majesty of the god, tear in pieces with gory mouths the flesh of loudly-bleating goats [...].

But those other bacchanalia also we refuse to proclaim, in which there is revealed and taught to the initiated a secret not to be spoken; how Liber, when taken up with boyish sports, was torn asunder by the Titans; how he was cut up limb by limb by them also, and thrown into pots that he might be cooked; how Jupiter, allured by the sweet savour, rushed unbidden to the meal, and discovering what had been done, overwhelmed the revellers with his terrible thunder, and hurled them to the lowest part of Tartarus. As evidence and proof of which, the Thracian bard handed down in his poems the dice, mirror, tops, hoops, and smooth balls, and golden apples taken from the virgin Hesperides.<sup>35</sup>

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33 Origen, *C. Cels.* 1.24.

34 Origen, *C. Cels.* 5.46.

35 Arnobius, *Adv. nat.* 5.19; transl. H. Bryce and H. Campbell.

Arnobius plays with the Dionysian literary tradition. His view of ritual Bacchic omophagy no doubt derives from a long literary tradition at least as old as Euripides' *Bacchae*.<sup>36</sup> But it is possible that the *Protrepticus to the Greeks*, by Clement of Alexandria, a late second-century CE exhortation to convert to Christianity, also played a role in Arnobius' construction of Dionysian imagery.<sup>37</sup> The second part of the *Adversus nationes* refers to mythical and poetic traditions according to which Thracian Orpheus was the initiator of the Dionysian mysteries, and Clement had indeed devoted important passages of his work to condemning the myth of Dionysus and the Titans.<sup>38</sup> In Arnobius, the application of the Roman label *bacchanalia* attests to the attempt at Romanizing Greek rituals. Anyway we must not forget that the Roman literary tradition was influenced by the events of 186 BCE. Through Livy's account,<sup>39</sup> the memory of the Roman *bacchanalia* is imposed in Latin literature as a noble paradigm of the conduct of the *res publica* of Rome to the extent that the *senatus consultum* on the *bacchanalia* already addressed most of the legal and organizational aspects that an association should possess in order to be recognized by the Roman state. From this perspective, then, Jean-Marie Pailler has approached the utilization of the *bacchanalia* by Christian authors, from Tertullian to Arnobius, in order to show how the paradigm of the *bacchanalia* represented an enduring point of reference and source of inspiration for the following epochs.<sup>40</sup>

## Between gods and emperors

The persistence of Roman traits in the construction of Dionysus/Liber is also evident in another context. Numerous studies have shown how, in the context of military campaigns in the east, imperial power appropriated the motif of Dionysus as leader of an army of maenads and satyrs and as conqueror of the Indians.

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<sup>36</sup> See Bocciolini Palagi 2007.

<sup>37</sup> On Christian texts concerning omophagy and its relations with the Eucharist, see Herrero 2006.

<sup>38</sup> Many scholars have considered Arnobius' passage on the mysteries a paraphrase, if not a translation, of Clement's *Protr.* 2.17.2–18.2: see Röhrich 1893 and Rapisarda 1939. More recently, the same interpretation was proposed by Le Bonniec 1982, 58–59 and Herrero 2010, 154–155. Whether or not it is in fact a translation, comparison of the two texts shows that Arnobius was familiar with the *Protrepticus*.

<sup>39</sup> Livy 39.8–22; see Steinhauer in this volume on the organizational aspects of the cult.

<sup>40</sup> Pailler 1988, 759–75. For Tertullian's reference to the *senatus consultum de bacchanalibus* see *Apol.* 6.7; for Arnobius, see *Adv. nat.* 5.19, even if the reference is not explicit.

Liber Pater received some attention from Roman emperors eager to be assimilated to the god, and the various guises of Dionysus, as of the myths involving him, were the object of important reinterpretations by figures of imperial authority. Roman propaganda since Mark Antony had many related motifs at its disposal: the account of the Dionysian conquest, the assimilation of Alexander to Dionysus, Dionysus' triumphal procession upon his return from India. This latter motif also found support within the Roman literary tradition, which placed the origins of the triumph in a Dionysian context: according to Ovid, Pliny the Elder, and Tertullian, it was Liber Pater who had invented the triumph.<sup>41</sup>

This Roman tradition is also attested in epigraphic texts. Inscriptions from the imperial era form a connection between Roman religion and the Bacchic thiasus, which was often portrayed in mythic accounts as an army, and often indeed appeared as such in the plastic arts as well (notably on sarcophagi and in mosaics).<sup>42</sup> Sarcophagi from the time of Severus, for example, clearly feature the 'Indian triumph' motif, conceived as a Roman adaptation of Hellenistic iconography and contributing to the construction of an imperial ideology.<sup>43</sup> The image of a victorious Dionysus who has returned from India could be interpreted as a parallel for the generals of the Roman army, and, consequently, for the *imperator* as well.

The diffusion of this Roman image of Dionysus/Liber is also confirmed by its presence in a Christian source from the beginning of the fourth century, a passage from Lactantius' *Institutiones divinae*. This testimony of a military representation of Liber is interesting in that it reveals the supposed otherness of the god *vis-à-vis* Greek myth. Before the anti-Christian persecutions of Galerius end in 312, Lactantius, master of rhetoric, writes the *Institutiones divinae* with the purpose of creating a corpus of Christian knowledge that might replace the traditional cult beliefs of the empire. The systematization and classification of 'Paganism' in the first three books of this work are remarkable.<sup>44</sup> The author presents the Greek and Roman myths and rites, not only in order to mock them, but also in order to understand and explain religious history.<sup>45</sup>

In the first book, while listing the pagan divinities and their human, non-divine origins, Lactantius offers the following portrait of Liber:

<sup>41</sup> See Ovid, *Fast.* 3.729–32; Pliny, *HN* 7.191 and 14.144. See also Varro, *De ling. lat.* 6.68.

<sup>42</sup> *CIL* III, 6150; *ILS* 4060. See Jaccottet 2003, II, 138–40 (n° 68).

<sup>43</sup> On this subject, see Turcan 1966, 459–65. On the triumph, see Versnel 1970, Buccino 2013 and Rutherford 2013.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Lactantius, *Div. inst.* 1.8–20, on the Christian refutation of the Pagan pantheon, or 1.21 on sacrifices. For an analysis of Lactantius' attitudes toward religions see Schott 2008, 79–109 and Colot 2016.

<sup>45</sup> See Fredouille 1978, 237–52 and Massa 2019.



Of supreme authority in the senate of the gods, with right to speak first in debate, must be father Bacchus, the only one of them all, Jupiter apart, to win a triumph, after leading his army to victory in India. Yet our invincible general (*invictus ille imperator*), *Indicus* the greatest (*Indicus maximus*), became the shameful victim of passion and lust.<sup>46</sup>

The Christian Latin writers very often evoke Liber through the most famous episodes of Greek myth. They mention his birth from a mortal woman, his invention of wine, and so forth. In the above passage, however, Liber is a very Roman god: he is authorized to speak first in the senate of the gods (*in senatu deorum*) by virtue of his military successes. Liber is the only one, apart from Jupiter, to have benefited from triumphal honours, due to his victory against the Indians. Lactantius plays with the imperial titles: the epithets *invictus imperator* and *Indicus maximus* recall the traditional honorific titles of imperial ideology.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, the end of the passage also questions Liber's 'Romanness': the god that had never experienced a military defeat is conquered by *amor* and *libido*. Our Christian author also mentions Liber's arrival on Crete, where he finds a 'debauched woman' (*impudica mulier*): 'he gave her the name Libera and ascended to heaven in her company' (*Liberam fecit, et cum ea pariter ascendit in coelum*).<sup>48</sup>

The Christian setting obviously has a polemical purpose: it aims to emphasize Liber's human character by mentioning his deeds as *imperator* and his weakness for women. But the goal is also to criticize those Roman emperors who associated their personal image with a deity so lacking in dignity.<sup>49</sup> In the *Institutiones divinae* Lactantius is aware of two facets of Liber, the one related to Roman imperial tradition and the other derived from traditional Greek myth. The close association of these two facets with each other allows Lactantius to present what is a complex und multifaceted divine world as a unified whole. He wishes to offer a unitary view of 'Paganism', one where Greek and Roman beliefs mingle.

## Liber and the Devil

In the decade after 340, another author concentrates his attention on Liber/Dionysus. In his treatise against pagan cults (especially mystery cults of oriental provenance) addressed to the sons of Constantine, Firmicus Maternus devotes

<sup>46</sup> Lactantius, *Div. inst.* 1.10.8: trans. by A. Bowen and P. Garnsey.

<sup>47</sup> Also Tertullian refers to Liber 'as the God of triumphs' (*ut deo triumphorum*): see *De cor.* 12.1.

<sup>48</sup> Lactantius, *Div. inst.* 1.10.9: my translation.

<sup>49</sup> Lactantius also proceeds to scoff at Jupiter's title of *Optimus Maximus*: see *Div. inst.* 1.10.10.

one chapter to the Bacchic mysteries.<sup>50</sup> He rehearses from a euhemerist perspective – as had many other Christian writers before him – the myth of how Dionysus was killed by the Titans. But by way of introducing this myth, he evokes Liber and Libera:

Thus, Most Holy Emperors, have the elements been deified by the children of perdition. But there are still other superstitions (*adhuc supersunt aliae superstitiones*) whose secrets must be revealed (*secreta pandenda sunt*): those of Liber and Libera, whose whole story in detail must be made known to your sacred intelligence, to make you aware that in these pagan religions again (*et in istis profanis religionibus*) it is the deaths of human beings that have been hallowed by worship. Well then, Liber was the son of Jupiter...<sup>51</sup>

The reference to Liber and Libera together is not repeated in the following paragraphs, which focus on the myth of Liber. Nor is there any mention of Persephone, who might have been associated with Liber/Dionysus in the context of the mystery cults. Libera does not appear in Firmicus Maternus' account of Greek myth, but she is mentioned elsewhere due to her traditional presence in Roman ritual practice. Her presence next to Liber in the mystery cults is also mentioned in the Servian *Commentary* on Virgil's *Georgics*, a text from the fourth century.<sup>52</sup>

The *De errore profanarum religionum* of Firmicus Maternus is also important because he witnesses the development of a new phenomenon. Gradually over the course of the work, a change becomes evidence in the representations of the gods Liber and Dionysus: their image starts to evolve away from traditional mythical references and towards a progressive assimilation with demonic powers. Of course, since the beginning of Christian literature, Dionysus had been the target of ferocious attacks by the Christians. Based on a negative Dionysian stereotype that was already present in Greek literature from Euripides' *Bacchae* and in Roman literature at least since Livy, Christian authors often highlighted both the god's aggressive madness and his sexuality.<sup>53</sup> To Christian eyes, the sexual fury and excitation that inhabits Dionysus also permeates the ceremonies; the sacred

<sup>50</sup> On the condemnation of Dionysian cults in Firmicus Maternus, see Massa 2010, 250–56; On Firmicus' specific attention to the cults of the East, see Praet 2011 and Massa 2013, 493–99.

<sup>51</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *Err. prof. rel.* 6.1: transl. by C.A. Forbes.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Servius, *Comm. Verg. Georg.* 1.166: *Nonnulli Liberum patrem apud Graecos Λικμητήν dici adserunt: uallus autem apud eos λιχμὸς nuncupatur... Alii 'mysticam' sic accipiunt, ut uannun uas uimineum latum dicant, in quod ipsam propter capacitatem congerere rustici primitias frugum soleant et Libero et Liberae sacrum facere: inde 'mystica'.* On the relationships between Liber and Libera, see Massa 2016, 124–27.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Protr.* 2.12.2.

Bacchic (ὄργια) rituals derive then from the perverse nature of the god that presides over them.

Nevertheless, throughout the fourth century, a change came about in Christian authors' representations of the god Dionysus. At this time, it was as if the Bacchic imaginary had started to also nourish the representations of the devil and of his accomplices. Firmicus Maternus, in his *De errore profanarum religionum*, describes the Dionysian procession as evil, a *scelerum pompa*. Having recounted the origins and development of the cults of Liber, the author depicts a scene in which a group of Dionysus' followers appears:

There, amidst the drunken young women and old men (*inter ebrias puellas et uinolentos senes*), he was always preceded by a wicked procession (*scelerum pompa*): one whose black fur gave him a repulsive aspect; another, grasping a serpent in a horrid display (*alter nigro amictu taeter, alter ostenso angue terribilis*); yet another, gore running from his mouth which he used to rend asunder the limbs of a living beast (*alter cruentus ore dum uiua pecodis [sic] membra discerpit*).<sup>54</sup>

Young women and drunken old men clad in black (or perhaps simply hirsute), serpents in hand, bloody from the raw flesh of the living animals they have dismembered: this is how a Dionysian procession appeared in the eyes of a Christian author in the fourth century CE. Even the term *pompa* (κῶμος in Greek), often describing the followers of Dionysus, was used widely in ancient Christianity to indicate diabolical encounters. The expression *pompa diaboli* is already found in Tertullian, in which it indicates 'les cultes des idoles qui accompagnent les différentes manifestations de la vie de la cité païenne'.<sup>55</sup> Firmicus Maternus' testimony seems to develop the stereotype that was already present in Livy, especially if we bear in mind that Firmicus was familiar with Livy's account of the *Bacchanalia*, and that he considers it an *exemplum* to be followed in the repression and elimination of Pagan cults.<sup>56</sup>

On the other hand, in *De errore profanarum religionum*, Firmicus entertains an explicit assimilation between Dionysus and the Devil: in connection with a formula used in the mysterious initiations in honour of Dionysus, Firmicus declares:

He is the basilisk and the scorpion (*Ipse est basiliscus et scorpio*), who is stepped on by the sure footstep of the believers; this evil reptile (*ipse malitiosus anguis*), whose head mortals

<sup>54</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *Err. prof. rel.* 6.8; transl. by C.A. Forbes. For a commentary on this text, see Turcan 2002 *ad loc.*

<sup>55</sup> Daniélou 1978, 329. See also Tertullian, *De spect.* 4.12 and 24.12; *De idol.* 18.8.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Firmicus Maternus, *Err. prof. rel.* 6.9.

seek to stroke; that sinuous dragon (*ipse tortuosus draco*), who is led along by a fish hook, who is captured and imprisoned.<sup>57</sup>

The figure of Dionysus is superimposed onto the image of the Christian demons.<sup>58</sup> Firmicus Maternus' strategy is a response to the new political context. The historical situation after the death of Constantine in 337 and the laws enacted by his sons, Constans and Constantine II, prompt this rather servile author to ask the new emperors to eradicate the Pagan cults and to destroy their temples.<sup>59</sup> The sons of Constantine not only maintained and indeed intensified the distribution of benefits to Christian churches; they also imposed curbs on the empire's traditional cults: in 341, they condemn *superstitio* and *insania sacrificiorum*, and in 346 order the closing down of temples as well as the abolition of sacrifices.<sup>60</sup> To be sure, these legislative resolutions, included in the *Codex Theodosianus*, do not amount to a complete prohibition on Pagan practices, but they do bear witness to the intensification of a phenomenon that will lead to the recognition of a form of Christianity as a state religion in 380, and to the official prohibition of Paganism in 391–392.<sup>61</sup> In an explicit fashion, then, Firmicus derives the origins of the parallelisms between Pagan rituals and Christian beliefs from the Devil, laying the basis for 'demonizing' the 'Paganism' that justifies the Christian desire to permanently eradicate Pagan cult practices.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusions

The Christian writers discussed here avail themselves of literary traditions when writing polemically about Dionysian myth and ritual. Even when writing about ritual contexts they use the generic representational norms of older literature without referring to the actual ritual practices throughout the Empire. It thus becomes difficult to find any signs of regional or geographical cultic features in the texts. From a literary and iconographic point of view, the Dionysian *koine* also includes Liber. It is only occasionally that Liber's specific traits emerge from the

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Firmicus Maternus, *Err. prof. rel.* 21.2: my translation.

<sup>58</sup> See Monaci Castagno 1996.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Firmicus Maternus, *Err. prof. rel.* 28.6 and 29.1–4. On the relationship between Firmicus Maternus and Roman legislation, see Drake 1998. On the violence against Pagans in Firmicus' *De errore profanarum religionum*, see Barnard 1990 and Kahlos 2009.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. *CTheod.* 16.10.2 and 16.10.4. See Bonamente 2010.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. *CTheod.* 16.1.2 and 16.10.10.

<sup>62</sup> On the construction of 'Paganism' in Firmicus Maternus, see Massa 2013.

sources. And the polemical goals of Christian Latin writers help us identify this phenomenon.

Images of Liber and Dionysos are used by Christian Latin authors for different purposes: to deny the comparison between the Pagan god and Christ, to explain that Pagan rituals are simply the imitations of Pagan myths, to assimilate Liber to the Devil, or to criticize Pagan emperors.

The testimony of Christian Latin authors is not only useful in order to study the narrative strategies used to represent the divine Pagan world and to fight against the Empire's traditional religions. The Christian outlook also provides us with an original point of view on myths and on Greek and Roman cults. We are thus able to identify the differences that still existed in the imperial epoch between the Greek Dionysus and the Roman Liber, which shows the importance of Christian sources from our era's first centuries in the study of ancient religions.

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