

The Use of the Figure and the Myth of Asclepius in the Greek Anti-pagan Controversy*

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1. Introduction

In the *Exhortation to the Greeks* (or *Protrepticus*), Clement of Alexandria, polemicizing with the cult of pagan divinities,¹ hurls himself with particular vehemence against the statues representing the gods. In lamenting the madness of worshipping the artifacts built by men themselves, the Alexandrian theologian uses a rather ironic image:

“The swallows and the majority of the birds, flying over these statues, excrete right there, regardless of Zeus Olympius, Asclepius of Epidaurus (Ἐπιδαυρίου Ἀσκληπιοῦ), Athena Polias herself or the Egyptian Serapis. But not even these animals can make you understand the insensitivity of the statues!”²

The message is clear: even animals, beings without intellect, seem to understand the nonsense of the cult of statues and they defecate on them, regardless of honors attributed by men.³ In this passage Clement cites examples of well-known sculptures of divinities, including the two famous statues of Zeus Olympius and Athena Polias, that of the Egyptian Serapis, and that of

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¹ I use the term ‘pagan’ for a matter of pure convenience, well aware of the problematic nature of the use of this term.

² Clem. *Prot.* 4.52.4. The reference edition of the *Exhortation* is that of C. Mondésert (2004). Unless otherwise stated, translations are always by the author of this article.

³ On the critique of the statues of the gods, an aspect very present in the anti-pagan controversy of ancient Christianity see Kristensen 2013, 89-106.

Asclepius in his sanctuary in Epidaurus. The reference to this god in such a context is not accidental. On the one hand, in fact, Clement precisely desecrates the god by mocking his statue in Epidaurus, one of the most important and well-known sanctuary consecrated to the god.⁴ On the other hand, the author's aim could be another: he would be demonstrating that there is nothing divine or sacred in Asclepius or in his worship (as the birds' conduct demonstrates) and that, therefore, the alleged god would have nothing to share with the "true doctor", Jesus Christ.⁵

The scope of Clement's controversy is that of distancing the figure of Asclepius from Christ, which, as we shall see, is present on several occasions in the *Exhortation* and it is indeed a very widespread argument of ancient Christian apologetics; an argument that, more generally, is also applied to other gods, demigods and heroes, such as Heracles, the Dioscuri and Dionysus (among the gods most attacked by apologists),⁶ who, for one reason or another, presented similar characteristics to Jesus: son of a deity, often born men but divinised after death, healers of any illness, capable of raising the dead – risen from the dead themselves. This problem appears even clearer if contextualised in that period of great religious ferment in the Empire which was the 2nd-3rd century.⁷ While Christianity spread in the various imperial regions, with a growth of followers and a more definite attempt at institutionalization, the figure of Christ, through his "path in the Empire", according to the definition of P. Siniscalco (2007), met other cultures and religious realities. In these different and heterogeneous contexts one can observe a sort of "re-reading" of the figure of the Messiah, also in a critical key, according to the models of (semi) divine man.⁸ It is precisely this reading of Christ that leads the opponents of Christianity to complain against what Christians claim to be the uniqueness of the figure of the Savior. The case of Asclepius, son of Apollo and saving and

⁴ On Epidaurus see Torelli 2009.

⁵ The relationship and opposition between the two figures, that of Christ and that of Asclepius, represent a very common theme in ancient Christian literary production. For an overall study of the theme, I refer to the important work of E. Dinkler (1980) and to the contributions of J. Den Boeft (1997) and E. dal Covolo (2008), certainly shorter but giving a good overview of the issue. There are also several specific studies on particular cases of possible comparison between the two figures: among the most recent, I cite that of L. M. Jefferson (2014), focused on artistic representations, and those of F. Flannery (2017) and R. Thompson (2017).

⁶ On the reception of the figure of Dionysus in ancient Christianity see Massa 2014a, esp. 81-120.

⁷ The matter of religious novelties in the Roman Empire between the 1st and 3rd centuries was largely examined by J. Rüpke (2016, 270-370). I also refer to the study of G. Rinaldi (2015), focused on the spread of Christianity and its encounter with Greek-Roman culture.

⁸ I will only remember here the famous example of the emperor Alexander Severus, as witnessed in the *Historia Augusta* (*Alex. Sev.* 29,2), who worshipped Apollonius of Tiana, Christ, Abraham and Orpheus in his lararium; see Dal Covolo 2008, 103-105. On this theme see also Cotter 2006.

healing divinity, becomes exemplary. As the pagan philosopher Celsus asks,⁹ when both Asclepius and Christ performed miraculous healings, what should be the difference between the two? Did not Asclepius die of a violent death like Jesus? Did not he become a god? And, if they share basically the same nature, why do Christians insist on believing only in Christ and despising Asclepius?

In this article we will investigate the figure of Asclepius and his mythology as used by the early Christian Greek polemicists: Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Clement Alexandrian and, finally, Origen. These four authors, who were connoisseurs of Greek literature, philosophy and religion (each, of course, with a different depth and perspective), use precisely the cultural models of the opponents for their polemical purposes, in order to effectively attack the pagan culture while defending Christianity.

Our analysis will investigate not only the aspects of the controversy in a typically Christian perspective – i.e. the presentation of Asclepius as a demon or a (wicked) man – but also the use of “pagan” mythological and literary sources about the god by these Christian polemicists. Our aim is to shed a light on how the authors use the “adversary sources” to prove that Asclepius was not a true deity, and to discredit the god and his cult, thus differentiating him from the figure and actions of Jesus.

2. Asclepius and the “sons of Zeus” in Justin’s *First Apology*

The discernment between the false gods and the true Christ is one of the first concerns of the apologist Justin, martyred between 163-167, according to Christian tradition, in Rome, where he had his own school. At the beginning of his *First Apology*, addressed to Antoninus Pius, he states:

“But the truth will be proclaimed! Since in ancient time evil demons, in apparitions, violated women, corrupted children and showed fearful visions to men, so that those ones were frightened [...], they [*scil.* men] called them gods and each with the name that each demon assigned to himself. [...] We, indeed, obeying to Him [*scil.* to Christ], say not only that demons, who

⁹ On Celsus and his controversy against Christians in the *Alethes Logos* see *infra*.

acted in this way, are not good, but that they are evil and ungodly, because they do not even perform actions similar to men who love virtue”.¹⁰

Here is one of the most widespread explanations of the activity of the gods adored by the pagans. This explanation, which is based on the biblical teaching of the Psalms,¹¹ says the gods are actually demons, worshipped out of fear and not for their real virtues.¹²

Justin, however, recognizes that especially some of these divine figures, those he calls “the children of Zeus”, seem to have qualities in common with Christ. He states:

“When we say that the Logos, who is God’s firstborn son, Jesus Christ our Master, was begotten without union, and that he was crucified and died and, risen again, ascended to heaven, we bring no novelty to those who are called son of Zeus among you (τοὺς παρ’ ὑμῶν λεγομένους υἱοὺς τῷ Διὶ). [...] Hermes the interpretative Logos and master of everything; Asclepius, who was a healer (θεραπευτὴν γενόμενον) and, struck by thunderbolt, ascended to heaven; Dionysus, who was torn to pieces; Heracles, who threw himself into the fire to escape the sufferings”.¹³

Justin draws here from the myth about the life of various divine figures to highlight the points of contact with the figure of Christ; points of contact that, in the case of Asclepius, also concern his benevolent activity towards the sick:

“When we affirm that He has healed the lame and paralytic and afflicted since birth (χολοὺς καὶ παραλυτικούς καὶ ἐκ γενετῆς πηροὺς ὑγιεῖς πεποικέναι), and that He has raised the dead (νεκροὺς ἀνεγεῖραι), even in these statements we will appear to agree with the actions that tradition attributes to Asclepius”.¹⁴

The intention of the apologist is clear here: through this comparison he wants to demonstrate that Jesus is not inferior to other deities for his own experience and actions. Indeed, the

¹⁰ *IApol.* 5.2 (reference edition, Munier 2006). On the theory of demons in Justin, see Massa 2013, 125-127.

¹¹ The reference is that of Psalm 95/96 (v. 5), which states that “all the gods of nations <are> demons” (πάντες οἱ θεοὶ τῶν ἐθνῶν δαιμόνια).

¹² See Angelini 2018.

¹³ *IApol.* 21,1-2. This use of myth and mythological figures by Justin, especially in the *First Apology*, was the theme of an interesting study by N. W. Pretila (2014).

¹⁴ *IApol.* 22,6.

similarities between Christ and Asclepius, in our case, appear obvious to the apologist, even though “he who is superior is shown by his works” (*IApol.* 22.4). Further on Justin explains the origin of these similarities, intersecting Greek mythology, biblical prophecies and demonology:

“Those who teach the mythical inventions of poets (οἱ δὲ παραδιδόντες τὰ μυθοποιηθέντα ὑπὸ τῶν ποιητῶν) do not offer any demonstration to young disciples; on the contrary, we show that they [*scil.* the gods] were created by evil demons to deceive and mislead mankind. In fact, having heard the prophets announcing the coming of Christ and the punishment of the ungodly in the fire, the demons offered to send back the fables of many who called themselves the sons of Zeus”.¹⁵

It is always possible, says the apologist, to find similarities between the action of the demons and those of the Saviour, because it was precisely the demons, in trying to deceive men, who sent false gods that presented the characteristics foretold by the prophets.¹⁶ So, when they heard of the virgin’s son, they created Perseus; when they heard Moses' prophecy about the master of the vineyard, they created Dionysus; when “they heard that it had been foretold that He would heal all diseases and raise the dead, they introduced Asclepius” (54,10). If it is true, therefore, that the figure of Christ presents traits in common with some deities, this is not due to a real similarity, concludes the apologist, but to an attempt by the demons to imitate the Savior who would arrive later.¹⁷

This perspective of the imitation of Scriptural prophecies by the pagans is a recurrent theme in the *First Apology*, and not only for the figure of Christ: “[w]hen not arguing that custom may be regarded as suspect, Justin may adopt the contrary position, claiming that Christian thought is not in fact new, being based on Hebrew prophecies, preceding Greek philosophy (*IAp.* 23.1). So too pagan practices are a perverted imitation of Christian acts of worship and, like

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 54.1-2.

¹⁶ Previously (*IApol.* 31-36) the apologist had spoken of the prophecies about Christ, explaining the meaning of the words and expressions of the prophets, some of which (“son of the virgin”, “blood of the vineyard”) will be taken up again later when the apologist speaks of the attempt to emulate Christ by the demons; see *infra*.

¹⁷ Justin (*IApol.* 26) had stated that even after Christ's ascent into heaven the demons had continued to arouse men who proclaimed themselves gods: this is the case of Simon of Samaria, his companion Helen, as well as Marcion of Pontus, “heretics” against whom Justin claims to have written a treatise, now lost. It is interesting to note that in Justin the reasons for accusations against “heretics” are similar, at times identical, to those against pagans and their divinities; an aspect very present in ancient Christian heresiology – think of the accusation of Dionysism against some “heretical” groups (see Massa 2014b, 276-290).

tales of the gods and their generation and deeds, are demon-inspired attempts to prevent people from perceiving the truth” (Sheather 2018, 126).

However, for Justin, the demonstration of who was the true Christ lies in a crucial evidence: the passion on the cross. Although those divine figures were also remembered in their myths for their violent death – Dionysus killed by the Titans, Heracles burned alive, and, in our case, Asclepius struck with the thunderbolt by Zeus himself –only Jesus died through the punishment which, for Justin, had been prophesied “in the form of a symbol”. It is precisely the crucifixion, therefore, that becomes the clearest discerning element, demonstrating how myths about deities (included Asclepius) were only a vain attempt to emulate the Scriptural promises –the crucifixion that, for pagan opponents, is also a reason for mockery towards Christians.¹⁸

3. Athenagoras and the *Legatio*

As we have seen, Justin's explanation of the similarities between Christ and Asclepius takes after the interpretation of pagan gods as demons who try to imitate the prophecies of the Scriptures. However, in the anti-pagan controversy the demonological explanation, which starts from the Scriptures, is not the only theory applied by apologists. The rejection of the pagan deity can be justified, according to the Christian polemicists, by the explanation that deities were originally men divinized after death because of their merits¹⁹. This interpretation is commonly defined as "euhemerism", a term that derives from Euhemerus of Messina (4th-3rd century B.C.), who according to the tradition was among the first to propose it.²⁰

¹⁸ For example, Celsus (*ap. Orig. Contra Celsum* 2.47) provocatively asks Christians why, if they believed in Christ who died on the cross, they did not also believe in many other men condemned to death “not in a less despicable way”.

¹⁹ After all, even emperors, as Justin recalls, were divinised after death: “What is the need to talk about Ariadne, and how many, like her, are said to have been transformed into stars? Or of your emperors, who, when they are dead, you always consider worthy of immortality, and even say that someone vows to have seen the cremated Caesar rising from the pyre to heaven!” (*IApol.* 21.3); “In this form you erect the images of your emperors, when they die, and in the inscriptions that you put on them you call them gods” (*ibid.* 55.7).

²⁰ On euhemerism see Borgeaud 2017, Roubekas 2017.

Euhemerism was already recurrent in pagan thought on divinities and therefore, in this case, Christians seem to “adopt” a perspective that was proper of the “opposing culture”.²¹

The euhemeristic interpretation of pagan divinities can be clearly seen in the polemic of Athenagoras of Athens, author of a *Legatio* (“Embassy”) addressed to Marcus Aurelius and Commodus.²² In this work, like Justin’s, while the author defends Christians from slanders and unfair accusations against them, such as that of atheism, he is also committed to unmask pagan divinities through the demonstration that, in reality, they were nothing more than deified men. Also Asclepius is not spared this sort of critique: for his merits as a doctor and a healer, he appeared to be, the apologist argues, particularly suited to *post mortem* divinization. Having recalled the wicked actions of demons and their reprehensible performances, which conduct people away from God’s truth²³, Athenagoras argues that several of the deities of the Gentiles were actually men. To do this, the author makes use of authoritative Greek sources, such as Herodotus:

“Herodotus, therefore, and Alexander the son of Philip in his letter to his mother [...] say that they learned from them that the gods were men (φασὶ παρ’ ἐκείνων ἀνθρώπους αὐτοῦς γενέσθαι μαθεῖν). Herodotus writes: “Thus they showed that all whose statues stood there had been good men, but wholly unlike gods. Before these men, they said, the rulers of Egypt were gods, but none had been contemporary with the human priests” [...]. So they had as their first kings these who were of heavenly origin (οὓς οὐρανίους γεγονότας πρώτους βασιλέας ἔσχον), but perhaps out of ignorance of true devotion to the gods, perhaps because of their power, they considered them and their wives as their first kings”.²⁴

The passage quoted comes from the second book of the Herodotean *Stories*, dedicated to Egypt, where the historian had the opportunity to discuss with the Egyptian priests. Here Athenagoras places particular emphasis on the information given by these characters to

²¹ The two theories, of course, are not mutually exclusive, and can also be assimilated, as we shall see for some apologists. In any case, even the philosopher Celsus (*infra*) had used an euhemeristic perspective, as Origen points out several times.

²² For a study of the *Legatio* and, more generally, of Athenagoras see the essays of L. W. Barnard (1972) and B. Pouderon (1989) and the contribution of M. Sheather (2018), who made a comparison with Justin.

²³ See, for example, Athen. *Leg.* 25,1-4.

²⁴ *Leg.* 28.1-4 (Hdt. 2.144). The reference edition of the *Legatio* is that of B. Pouderon (1992). The translation of Herodotus is taken from the edition of A.D. Godley (1960).

Herodotus, recalling how they proclaimed to be the knowledge-bearers about divinities: if they themselves declared that the simulacra they worship were originally humans, it is unlikely that they were lying.²⁵ But for the apologist there is also another detail revealed by Herodotus which would demonstrate the all-human reality of pagan gods, ‘c’est-à-dire’ their mysteries:

“Herodotus calls mysteries (μυστήρια) their sufferings (παθήματα): ‘I have already told how they keep the feast of Isis and Busiris. There, after the sacrifice, all the men and women lament, in countless number [...]’. If they are gods, they are also immortal; but if they mourn and if suffering are their mysteries, they are men (εἰ δὲ τύπτονται καὶ τὰ πάθη ἐστὶν αὐτῶν μυστήρια, ἄνθρωποι)”.²⁶

Having demonstrated how the Greek sources already presented the human reality of the gods, Athenagoras remembers several (semi-)divine figures: here too, it is Greek sources that support his polemic. Asclepius is also featured among the gods criticized and to demonstrate his human origin, the apologist quotes Hesiod:

“And Hesiod <sang> of Asclepius:
‘the father of men and gods
became enraged, and hurling from Olympus his
smoking thunderbolt (ψολόεντι κεραυνῷ)
he killed Leto’s grandson, stirring up Phoebus’ spirit’.”²⁷

Athenagoras recalls here, through the testimony of the poet of Ascra, the detail of Asclepius’ death, caused by Zeus who, in anger with the demigod for his healing activity towards men, strikes a thunderbolt at him, thus provoking the subsequent irate reaction of Apollo. The choice of quoting Hesiod in this passage could have a precise meaning. The poet, in fact, was considered a “theological authority”, especially for one of his most famous works, the *Theogony*. The apologist, even if he does not quote this last work, thus wants to demonstrate that Hesiod himself presented Asclepius as a mortal who was punished by Zeus and who died struck by the thunderbolt. Athenagoras, however, omits to recall here the real reason for Zeus’

²⁵ Cf. *Leg.* 28.5: “And who in such stories could deserve more faith than those who, because of the natural succession of father and son, also received the knowledge of these stories from his office of priest? It is not in fact plausible that ministers who venerate simulacra lie in saying that they were men”.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 28.8 (Hdt. 2.61).

²⁷ *Ibid.* 29.2 (Hes. fr. 55 Most; transl. by G. W. Most [2007]).

fury;²⁸ on the contrary, he shifts the discourse to Asclepius' alleged love for money, quoting another eminent Greek source, Pindar:

“Also Pindar <said>:

‘But even wisdom is enthralled to gain
gold appearing in his hands (χρυσὸς ἐν χερσὶ φανείζ)
with its lordly wage
prompted even him
<...>.

But then, with a cast from his hands,
Kronos's son took the breath from both men's breasts
in an instant; the flash of lightning hurled down doom’.”²⁹

This quotation from the third *Pythian* – mentioned by Clement of Alexandria too in *Exhortation* (see *infra*) – led Athenagoras to a double accusation against the god: first, Asclepius cannot be an immortal god, because the gods as such “must not die”; second, his passion for money reveals his human nature, since a god should not be subject to greed and love for gold, which are all-human passions. Athenagoras quotes a Euripidean fragment:

“O gold, you give mortal men (βροτοῖς) the finest welcome!
No mother holds such pleasure for mankind,
Nor their children...”³⁰

For Athenagoras, therefore, it is the same “pagan” Greek sources that reveal the human origin of Asclepius – a man who was considered a healer, and who was revered “for his art” (τέχνη), but who was also culpable of gluttony and who was punished for this reason.³¹ Certainly, Athenagoras' way of using his sources is polemical, and in the *Legatio* there is no lack of attacks on the poets and their fanciful and scandalous fables. These sources, indeed, are instrumental to Athenagoras' line of reasoning, since they have a strong efficacy in condemning religious reality and myth from the very opposing culture, highlighting its

²⁸ As we will see more specifically later on, the passage of Pindar quoted by the apologist (see below) is actually incomplete, because Athenagoras omits to quote the part in which Asclepius performs the resurrection of Hippolytus.

²⁹ Ibid. (Pind. *Pyth.* 2.54-55, 57-58; transl. from W. H. Race's edition [1997]).

³⁰ Ibid. 29.3 (Eur. fr. 324 Collard-Cropp, 1-3; English translation from the edition of C. Collard and M. Cropp [2008]). Athenagoras, indeed, does not specify who is the author of the passage he reports: is it possible to deduce that he was consulting a florilegium? On the use of Euripides in apologetics, *infra*.

³¹ Clement, in the *Protrepticus*, insists precisely on the greed of the god and his love for money; see *infra*.

ambiguities, illogicalities, paradoxes and, not at last, immoral features. Concluding that those who are claimed to be gods by the pagans have no divine nature, thus Athenagoras can reject the accusation of atheism towards Christians:

“That, therefore, we are not atheists, recognizing God, who created this universe, and His Logos, has been proved, according to my capability, if not according to the relevance of the subject”.³²

4. ἰατρὸς φιλάργυρος: Asclepius in the *Exhortation* of Clement

The various ways to discredit the figure of Asclepius as a savior and a healing deity in the anti-pagan controversy of Justin and Athenagoras can also be found in the work of Clement of Alexandria, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, the *Exhortation*. As the title of the work itself suggests, Clement’s aim is to exhort the Greeks (to whom the book is addressed) to move from the error of their doctrines to truth of Christ: “dans la grande et multiculturelle cité d’Alexandrie, Clément compose son *Protreptique aux Hellènes*, un texte entièrement pensé comme une exhortation à la conversion, adressée aux païens de son temps; il est conçu non seulement comme un lieu où recueillir les accusations contre les pratiques rituelles des Grecs, mais aussi comme l’occasion de faire montre des capacités et des qualités littéraires des chrétiens” (Massa 2013, 130).³³

Clement associates to the pure controversy against the pagan divinities, a more “proactive” part, in which he shows what the truth is and how the various aspects of pagan religiosity (also the ones that seems positives) should be interpreted. Moreover, the Alexandrian adopts for his work a high and literary style, aiming to reach the level of the writings of his “adversaries”.³⁴

In the second book of the *Exhortation*, Clement addresses the issue of those errors or bad interpretations that can lead to the creation and worship of presumed gods. Having recalled “the spectacle of heaven”, “the fruits of the earth”, “the punishments and misfortunes”, the

³² Leg. 30.6. Justin (*IApol.* 6.1-2) had also rejected the accusation of atheism – an accusation that is widespread in the polemic of pagans against Christians. On the subject see Walsh 1991.

³³ For the dating of the work see Dainese 2010.

³⁴ For a general presentation of the *Protrepticus* and his motifs, I refer to the introduction of F. Migliore (2004, 23-39).

forms of passions (“Fear, Love, Joy and Hope”), and the events of life – all aspects that led men to the invention of divinities – as well as the gods sung by Homer and Hesiod, Clement states:

“There remains one last way (there are in fact seven in all), that which derives from the benefits that the gods bring to mankind. They, in fact, invented certain Dioscuri, saviors, Heracles, who keeps the evils away, Asclepius the doctor (Ἀσκληπιὸν ἰατρόν), because they did not know that God was benefiting them (τὸν γὰρ εὐεργετοῦντα μὴ συνιέντες θεὸν)”.³⁵

The benefits coming from God, according to Clement, were not understood by men, even though they clearly perceived the positivity of what was happening and also the divine intervention. However, since they did not know God, they created false idols in order to honour and glorify them for the benefits received. Thus, Asclepius is considered a doctor (ἰατρός) because of his beneficial powers; also for Heracles (ἀλεξίκακος, “who keeps the evils away”)³⁶ and the Dioscuri (σωτήρες, “saviors”), Clement uses epithets to convene the idea of salvation and victory against evil.³⁷

After having demonstrated the origins of the deceptions that lead to the creation of the false gods, Clement focuses on them in an attempt to reveal their evil and, sometimes, ridiculous nature. The aim, once again, is not simply polemical, since Clement wishes to make the Greeks understand which are the errors that lead to ruin and which, on the contrary, is the way to the Truth. It is precisely from the criticism of traditional divinities that it is necessary to begin:

“So that you can finally put an end to your error and promptly flight back to heaven, now I want to show thoroughly your gods (ἐν χρῶ τοὺς θεοὺς αὐτοὺς ἐπιδειῖξαι), what species they are and whether they exist (ὅποιοί τινες καὶ εἴ τινες)”.³⁸

³⁵ *Prot.* 2.26,7.

³⁶ On the values of this term, see *LSJ* 62-63 s.v. ἀλεξιάρη, and Montanari 2015, 84.

³⁷ The appellative “savior” (σωτήρ) was, after all, also recognized for Asclepius. On Asclepius as a savior divinity see Sfameni Gasparro 2007.

³⁸ *Prot.* 2.27,1. Shortly before Clement spoke of the risk of falling “into the abyss” (εἰς βάραθρον) because of these errors.

From this point, the theologian begins to attack the various deities of the Greek pantheon, starting with Zeus, passing through Hermes, Ares and Hephaestus. Asclepius does not escape this desecratory review:

“Among the gods you have not only a blacksmith [*scil.* Hephaestus, whom Clement faced in the previous chapter] but also a doctor; but this doctor was a money-lover (ιατρὸς φιλάργυρος) and his name was Asclepius”.³⁹

If, previously, recalling the benefits coming from God but not understood by ignorant men, Clement had indeed spoken of “doctor”, here the theologian specifies from the beginning what the true nature of this doctor was: he was a “money-lover”, affected by greed. Like Athenagoras, also Clement then quotes the same verses of Pindar's third *Pythian* (“your Boeotian poet”), in which he tells of Asclepius receiving the money to resurrect Hippolytus and the subsequent punishment of Zeus. It is necessary, however, at this point to remark one further detail. The passage quoted by both Athenagoras and Clement is not complete; or rather, it lacks the verse in which the poet tells of the business for which Asclepius was paid, that is, the resurrection of a dead man. This was precisely the cause of Zeus’ reaction, who, urged on by Hades, angry because the dead were no longer arriving in the underworld, decided to punish Asclepius for his deeds.⁴⁰ This omission could be, in my opinion, intentional: Clement – and before him Athenagoras – in this way insists on a precise vice, greed, and avoids a detail of the myth of Asclepius, the resurrection of a dead man, which could represent a dangerous comparison with Christ and the resurrection of Lazarus.⁴¹

Clement continues to insist on the condemnation of Asclepius even afterwards, this time quoting Apollo's words in Euripides’ *Alcestis*:

³⁹ Ibid. 2.30.1.

⁴⁰ Pindar’s omitted verses (*Pyth.* 3.56-57) say: “to bring back from death a man / already carried off” (ἄνδρ’ ἐκ θανάτου κομίσαι / ἤδη ἀλωκότα). Anyway, it should be remembered, Pindar said that Zeus had struck “both men” (*supra*). It is not easy to understand if Clement, quoting the Boeotian poet, was considering the version of Athenagoras: Pindar is not, unlike Euripides, an author very quoted by Christians, and therefore it could be possible to think of a florilegium or a collection of his poems consulted by authors drew. If, however, Clement did not know the *Legatio* and, at the same time, his knowledge of Pindar was “direct” and not anthological, it is remarkable that both apologists introduced the same changes to the original text.

⁴¹ Dal Covolo (2008, 106) thinks that Clement is also pointing out Asclepius’ guilt of hybris: “Per questo, adducendo le testimonianze stesse dei pagani, Clemente sottolinea due tratti negativi di Asclepio, quali l’avidità di danaro e la tracotanza, che gli fa violare i confini naturali della vita e della morte”. Also for Dionysus, in the *Exhortation* Clement does not remember his resurrection.

“and Euripides <said>: ‘Zeus was the cause: he killed my son / Asclepius, striking him in the chest with the lightning bolt’. This man, then, after being struck by the thunder (κεραυνωθείς) lies on the edge of the Cynosuris”.⁴²

The term “struck by thunder” (κεραυνωθείς) is often associated with Zeus: the verb κεραυνώω, in addition to its literal meaning, can have a nuance of condemnation, therefore of guilt.⁴³ Clement could perhaps have precisely used this expression to reinforce the idea of condemning the alleged god, punished for his immoral behaviour. The image of Asclepius struck by the thunder and lying on the borders of the Cynosuris concludes the desecratory and polemical description of the god by the theologian.⁴⁴

5. Miracles, apparitions and healings: Asclepius in the *Contra Celsum*

Until this moment our focus has been on the analysis of the polemical voices of the Christian authors examined regarding pagan deities and, more specifically, Asclepius. We have highlighted how these authors used the same Greek literature to “unmask” the real nature of the gods, now all-human, now demonic, and, in the case of the god of medicine, to reaffirm the distance of the “false gods” from Christ. However, in all the works analyzed, the direct voice of the pagan polemicists, that is, of those authors who in the controversy against the Christians included Jesus within the category of (semi) divine human, has never emerged. The pagan positions, in short, can be reconstructed from the account given by Christian apologists, but they are not clearly identifiable.

It is precisely for this reason that, for our analysis— but, more in general, for the history of the apologetic genre – the *Contra Celsum* of Origen has a considerable importance. In this work, composed around 248/249 upon invitation of his friend and patron Ambrose, the theologian replies to the accusations made by the pagan philosopher Celsus, a figure whose life, work and philosophical affiliation (Platonic or Epicurean) is still subject of discussion⁴⁵. Celsus

⁴² *Prot.* 2.30.2 (Eur. *Alc.* 3-4). Translation of the *Alcestis* by D. Kovacs (1994). On the use of Euripides in Christian apologetics see Morlet 2020; in particular for Clement see Massa 2020.

⁴³ On the verb κεραυνώω see *LSJ* 942; Montanari 2015, 1116.

⁴⁴ On the Cynosuris cf. Mondésert (2004, 85): “On peut croire qu’il s’agit de la Kynouria, région du Sud-Ouest de l’Arcadie”. Mondésert, moreover, recalls that the same indication was given by Cicero in *De natura deorum* (3.22).

⁴⁵ On the various proposals concerning the identification of Celsus and the dating of his work see Ressa 2000, 11-22.

would be the author of a polemical treatise against Christians, the *Alethes Logos (True Discourse)*, in which the philosopher attacked Christianity on several fronts. In dealing with this polemical work, Origen constantly mentions his opponent, reporting long fragments of the treatise. In this way, for the various arguments dealt with by Origen we can also read the direct position of the philosopher – even if, it is necessary to point it out, the use that Origen makes of it may appear at times distorted or “modified” by the theologian, in order to demonstrate the fallacy of the opponent's propositions.⁴⁶

The figure of Asclepius, his mythology and his cult in the religious panorama of the time play an important role in the controversy between Celsus and Origen. The discussion about the healing god is part of a broader discussion on the similarities between divine and semidivine figures of paganism and Jesus, an aspect that we have seen to be very present in the other polemical works analysed above. In the specific case of Asclepius, it is possible to highlight, in my opinion, two important aspects on the discussion on his similarities with Jesus: 1) the violent death of the divinity (and the subsequent divinization); 2) his function as healer associated with his apparitions. Both these points can be found in the third book of the *Contra Celsum*, which is in fact dedicated to attacking pagan deities.

As observed several times in this paper, the figure of Asclepius in the anti-pagan controversy is very often accompanied by other (semi)divine figures, such as Heracles, the Dioscuri and Dionysus⁴⁷. This is the case also in Celsus' work:

“That charlatan of Celsus recalls in his speech against us “the Dioscuri, Heracles, Asclepius and Dionysus (Διοσκούρους καὶ Ἡρακλέα καὶ Ἀσκληπιὸν καὶ Διόνυσον)”, that the Greeks believe have become gods from men; and he states that we “cannot bear to consider them, because they were men before gods (ἄνθρωποι ἦσαν καὶ πρῶτον), although they have shown

⁴⁶ For a study on the origenian rhetoric in the controversy against Celsus see the recent work of M. Duncan (2013).

⁴⁷ It is interesting, in fact, that Celsus precisely mentions those (semi)deities that were also remembered by Justin, Athenagoras and Clement. This aspect, on the one hand, suggests that they were indeed mentioned by the anti-Christian authors in their polemics against Christ and Christians, and, on the other, could provide some information on the diffusion of these figures, especially in a salvific dimension, as the examples of Celsus himself would suggest; see *infra*.

many and many feats for men, and yet we affirm that Jesus was seen by his followers after his death”.⁴⁸

The philosopher here tries to bring out what appears in his eyes a contradiction in which the Christians incur: “Celsus wishes to point up a logical contradiction: how can Christians dismiss the Dioscuri, Heracles and others as mere men, and simultaneously claim that Jesus is divine? Clearly, Celsus here construes Jesus as belonging to the type of the deified mortal, and naturally enough, since Jesus was admittedly a man and since by the conventions of popular belief a post mortem appearance constituted *prima facie* evidence of divinity” (Gamble 1979, 17). Even later on in the work, in the seventh book, Origen returns to the subject, quoting Celsus who recalled other men who were considered “divine spirits” and suffered torments or violent deaths: in addition to Asclepius, the philosopher adds Orpheus, but also philosophers such as Anassarchus and Epictetus.⁴⁹ The answer of Origen, philosopher and theologian, starts precisely from the instruments of his adversary. Although he previously evoked the demonic nature of the pagan gods, with the support of the above-mentioned Psalm,⁵⁰ Origen uses the myth about the figures named by his adversary and the philosophical doctrines to dismantle Celsus’ reasoning. Having recalled the main doctrines (Epicurean, Stoic and Platonic) about the soul and having focused on its immortality, the theologian declares that this latter must be demonstrated “not only on the basis of the Greeks who spoke in a righteous manner, but also according to what is in conformity with divine teachings” (*Cels.* 3.22). Starting from these propositions, Origen concludes, it is unlikely that figures like the unbridled Heracles or Asclepius, punished precisely “by their Zeus”, could have found themselves “in a region or in a better condition” after death. With no mentions of Scriptures, but always remaining in the field of the opponent, therefore, Origen demonstrates that Asclepius could not, according to philosophical thought, be elevated to divinity. Moreover,

⁴⁸ Orig. *Cels.* 3.22. For the parts attributed to Celsus, here marked by double high commas, I follow the edition of M. Marcovich (2001).

⁴⁹ Cf. Orig. *Cels.* 7.53: “[Celsus says] If you did not appreciate Heracles, Asclepius and those who were celebrated in ancient times, you had Orpheus, a man unanimously recognized as a divine inspired man and who died with violence (ἄνδρα ὁμολογουμένως ὁσίῳ χρησάμενον πνεύματι καὶ αὐτὸν βιαίως ἀποθανόντα). Perhaps, however, others had already taken him. But then you had Anassarchus, who, thrown into a mortar, while he was being violently weighed, did not care completely for the punishment, and said: ‘Pound, pound the juice of Anassarchus, but he does not pound him! [...] And Epictetus? While the master was twisting his leg, he said calmly, with a smile: ‘You are breaking it’; once he broke it, he said: ‘I told you you were breaking it!’”

⁵⁰ Origen (*Cels.* 3.2) is referring in this case to the Jews, who, instructed by the psalm in question, had learned to despise the gods of nations.

although it is true that both Asclepius and Jesus died a violent death, the difference is, for the theologian, remarkable:

“His death came as a result of a conspiracy of men and bore no resemblance to the lightning bolt hurled at Asclepius (οὐδὲν ὅμοιον ἔσχε τῷ πρὸς τὸν Ἀσκληπιὸν κεραυνῷ)”.⁵¹

This insistence on the death of Asclepius is similar to the one already seen in Clement: although Origen does not mention the accusation of greed, his assertion that it was Zeus himself who caused the death of the god is enough to show an evident guilt. The comparison with Christ is therefore, for the Alexandrian theologian, unacceptable.

For Celsus, however, there is one aspect common to Christ and Asclepius in which the latter surpassed the former: his apparitions after the divinization, associated with his healing powers. Origen declares:

“Again Celsus wants that we believe him, when it is said ‘of Asclepius’ that ‘a great crowd of men (ἄπλετον ἀνθρώπων πλῆθος), Greeks and barbarians, declares that they have seen him and still see him and not as an apparition, but while he is healing, benefiting and predicting future events (θεραπεύοντα καὶ εὐεργετοῦντα καὶ τὰ μέλλοντα προλέγοντα)’.”⁵²

In a religious and historical perspective, this information is very intriguing, since it gives us an idea not only of the spread of the cult, but also of this dimension of apparitions linked to healing and divination activity. The philosopher is here perhaps referring to the cities dedicated to the god or where there was a sanctuary of his: Celsus himself previously recalled that Asclepius “provides benefits and predicts future events to all the cities dedicated to him, for example Tricca, Epidaurus, Cos and Pergamum”⁵³; but perhaps the references could be broader.⁵⁴ In any case, Celsus reproaches Christians for believing in a man who, after death,

⁵¹ *Cels.* 3.23.

⁵² *Ibid.* 3.24.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 3.3.

⁵⁴ Around the middle-second century, a cult linked to a snake, Glycon, a manifestation of Asclepius, developed in the city of Abonoteichus by the prophet Alexander, who was also able to predict the future. Most of the information on the cult of Glycon-Asclepius comes from the work of Lucian of Samosata *Alexander, or the false prophet*, in which the rhetorician makes irony on Alexander, unmasking his charlatan tricks and mocking the credulity of people. See Steger 2005; Mastrocinque 2009.

appeared only once, moreover to a small group of disciples, while Asclepius continually manifests himself to a large number of people, the “Greeks and barbarians”.⁵⁵

Origen’s polemical response follows a thigh reasoning. First of all, the theologian places the Scriptures and the apostolic testimony before the words of Celsus: while the apostles were few but are worthy of being believed for their honesty, on the contrary, Celsus “cannot prove, as he says, that there are a great number of men, Greeks and barbarians, who believe in Asclepius”. Origen then overturns Celsus’ attack: it is Christians themselves who can prove that the great crowd of Greeks and barbarians believe in Jesus; and they can do so precisely through the miracles they received, when, sick, they were healed thanks to the name of God and Jesus:

“Among these men, in fact, we have seen many freed from terrible illnesses, from delirium, from madness, from countless other ailments, which neither men nor demons were able to heal (ἄπερ οὐτ’ ἄνθρωποι οὔτε δαίμονες ἐθεράπευσαν)”.⁵⁶

Thus, to carry out miraculous healings to Christians does not need the apparition of God or Jesus, but a firm and upright faith in their power is sufficient. Even in the case of healings, therefore, for Origen, Christ is confirmed as more powerful than Asclepius.

Celsus’ mention of the divinatory power of Asclepius allows Origen to continue his proposition, calling into question the father of the god, Apollo:

“Even if I recognized that a medical demon (ιατρόν τινα δαίμονα) called Asclepius heals bodies, I could say those who look with admiration at these powers, as well as at the divinatory power of Apollo: if the medicine of bodies (τῶν σωμάτων ἰατρικὴ) is something normal and a practical skill that can belongs not only to honest men, but also to the wicked, and the ability to

⁵⁵ Cf. Gramble 1979, 18: “This testimony to Asclepius is clearly put forth with implied prejudice to Jesus at every point: if Jesus appeared after death, it was only to his own small following, not to a large and cosmopolitan body of witnesses; if Jesus was seen for only a brief period and not again later, Asclepius appears frequently and continually; if Jesus was perceived only phantasmically, Asclepius himself truly appears and attests his divinity through concrete activity”.

⁵⁶ *Cels.* 3.24.

foresee future events is also normal, [...] let them show us how those who heal or predict the future are not evil at all”.⁵⁷

What is commonly thought to be divine and supernatural, i.e. divination and miraculous healings, are, in Origen’s words, “banalized”; or rather, the theologian relativizes these two faculties, saying that they do not necessarily involve the righteousness of those who practice them. Precisely for this reason it may seem that even a “medical demon” like Asclepius can heal the sick or that Apollo predicts the future. As a proof of this, Origen cites a few examples. The one about medicine is quite generic and consists in the observation that often doctors heal evil men who did not deserve healing. The example on divination, on the other hand, considers two cases of the Pythian oracle, that recognized greater divine honors to the boxer Cleomedes and to the licentious poet Archilochus, “servant of the Muses”, than to Pythagoras and Socrates, thus demonstrating its own irrationality.⁵⁸ Origen’s reasoning then insists not so much on actions that may seem marvelous but which in reality turn out to be normal things, but on the morality and behavior of the figures brought up by Celsus. Further on, still in the third book, Origen will reaffirm this concept. In the discussion on the transformation of the body of Christ, the Alexandrian confutes Celsus:

“Since [...] he says, on the transformation of His body: ‘But when He has laid down this flesh, will He really be God? Then why not Asclepius, Dionysus and Heracles?’, we answer him: what great deed have Asclepius, Dionysus or Heracles done (τί τηλικούτον Ἀσκληπιὸς ἢ Διόνυσος ἢ Ἡρακλῆς εἰργάσαντο)? And which men, improved in their customs and become more honest through their doctrine and the example of their lives, could they show in order to become gods (ἵνα γένωνται θεοί)?”⁵⁹

Origen’s answer seems obvious: not only did these supposedly demigods not improve anyone, but their own lives, their vices, their deaths because of their own immorality represent a negative example. The problem, therefore, concerns the morality and the model of life that these characters can provide, a true indicator, for the Alexandrian, of their nature: “[I]ikewise, Origen allows that remarkable powers are associated with traditional subjects of deification (though he typically regards these powers as exercised by demons), but argues that for the

⁵⁷ Ibid. 3.25.

⁵⁸ Cf. Orig. *Cels.* 3.25.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 3.42.

question of divinity the possession of unusual powers is “indifferent” (3,25) and in itself indicates nothing. [...] Thus for Origen the proper basis for deification is the conferral of benefaction, which he finds to consist pre-eminently in the assistance of the race toward religious truth and moral virtue” (Gramble 1979, 24-25).⁶⁰

6. Conclusions

In this contribution we have examined how the figure of Asclepius, his mythical events and his healing faculties are criticized by the early Christian apologetic in Greek language between the 2nd and 3rd centuries, specifically the *First Apology* of Justin, the *Legatio* of Athenagoras, the *Exhortation* of Clement of Alexandria and the *Contra Celsum* of Origen. At the end of this analysis, we can try to highlight some common points and some differences in the four works.

All the authors agree in indicating Asclepius as the (presumed, for them) god of medicine of the Greeks, a god who would share with Christ the appearance of a healer. But if for some Asclepius is openly a demon, who seeks through his actions to emulate Jesus, for others he was in fact originally a man –two perspectives that are not mutually exclusive, as we have seen. Where the euhemeristic perspective emerges more clearly, as in Athenagoras and Clement, Asclepius is presented as an evil and dishonest man, punished by Zeus for his greed. Although his sanctuaries are widespread and many people admit that they have seen him and even benefited from his presence, his negative model in life, as Origen says, has not really improved the quality of the people – one of the most important differences with Jesus. Moreover, we have shown how in the polemic against Asclepius and the other gods these authors make use of Greek mythology and literature, adopting them naturally for their own argumentative purposes: historians like Herodotus, poets like Hesiod and Pindar. The use of these authoritative authors allows apologists, in the rhetorical perspective, to “play on the same level” as their opponents, demonstrating – in a more or less convincing way – the ambiguities, contradictions and paradoxes that characterize the figure of Asclepius.

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, we decided to focus on these four authors, not only for reasons of conciseness, but also for their particular relationship with Greek culture.

⁶⁰ On this aspect of Origen’s polemic see also Litwa 2014, 87-110.

However, many other Christian authors dealt with the figure of Asclepius and his myth, even in the Latin West. Tertullian, in the *Apologeticum* (14.5), attacks Aesculapius harshly, calling him a bad example and a dishonest and dangerous doctor. Later on, Lactantius (*Div. Inst.* 1.10.1-2) says that Aesculapius had not particular merits, while Arnobius (*Adv. Nat.* 7.44-47), more irreverent, mocks the cult of the god in the Capital. In short, these examples show how the “conflict” between Christ and Asclepius remained actual. Still in the 5th century, Theodore, the future bishop of Cirrus, answering to the complaints of the philosopher Porphyry, will continue to refer to Asclepius, to announce, at last, the definitive triumph of Christ over him:

“Thus spoke Porphyry, our worst enemy: he openly admitted that faith in Jesus made the gods disappear (ὁ Ἰησοῦς φρούδους ἀπέφηνε τοὺς θεοὺς) and that, after the saving cross and passion, neither Asclepius nor any other of the supposed gods could mistreat men (οὐκέτι φενακίζει τοὺς ἀνθρώπους Ἀσκληπιός, οὐδὲ ἄλλος τις τῶν καλουμένων θεῶν)”.⁶¹

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⁶¹ Theod. *Cur.* 12.96-97. Cf. Filoramo 2008.

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