

Defining Pagan Mystery Cults in Christian Latin Authors of Third and Fourth Centuries

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From the second century CE, Christian writers commonly used the vocabulary of mystery cults to discuss their religion. Such terms as *mysterium*, *mysticus*, *initia*, etc. became part and parcel of the new religious language that Christians were defining.¹ In the works of Christian Greek literature, the meaning of the word μυστήρια was not unique, since it could refer either to Christian doctrine or a Christian ritual practice. Christian texts followed the classical use of the term. In Latin, this ambiguity persisted, as shown by the translations of the Bible. In the second and third centuries, the oldest versions of the Bible – including the *Itala* and the *Afra* – translated (in the Gospels and Paul's Epistles) μυστήριον by *sacramentum*, which brought out the ritual dimension of the term, whereas Jerome's *Vulgate* at the end of the fourth century used almost exclusively the Latin *mysterium* for the Greek μυστήριον.² This semantic transformation also reflected a change in the status of Christians in the Empire: Christian authors had gradually appropriated the language and images of pagan mysteries to write about Christianity as they had increased their influence and power in the administration of the Empire.³

This paper aims to explore two issues about the shared vocabulary of mysteries by pagans and Christians. The first concerns the perspective of Christian writers: how did they name and classify Greek and Roman mystery cults? I believe Christian writers had a dual perspective on contemporary religious practices, both close and distant: it was close, because they belonged to the same cultural world and shared the same *paideia*;⁴ and distant, because they built their identity in opposition to the Empire's traditional religions and constantly emphasized the

¹ On this issue: NOCK (1952); HAMILTON (1977); RIEDWEG (1987); STROUMSA (2017), MASSA (2016) and (forthcoming). I will not discuss here my own view on mystery cults: see BELAYCHE & MASSA (2016). For a recent analysis of initiation in mystery cults: BREMMER (2014); more generally, on mystery cults in Latin texts, see MASSA & NELIS (2022).

² Regarding this point: SORDI (2003), p. 67-68; NERI (2011), p. 289; RAMELLI (2014). For an example of both uses: AMBR. *De Myst.* 1.2.

³ This use of the vocabulary of mystery cults is already attested in Tertullian's works: e.g., LANG (2015), p. 221-248.

⁴ On the shared *paideia* among the Empire's elites: POUDERON & DORÉ (1998); ESHLEMAN (2012); VAN HOOF & VAN NUFFELEN (2015).

distance that existed between themselves and others.⁵ The second issue concerns the use of the vocabulary of mysteries by Latin Christian writers: what terms did they use to describe the experience of mysteries? Therefore, this article aims to grasp what Christian authors thought about the ritual practices that we designate as “mystery cults” between the third and the fourth century. In so doing, I wish to shed light on how Christian authors saw mystery cults at the beginning of Late Antiquity.

To answer these questions, I chose to focus on three authors, Arnobius, Lactantius, and Firmicus Maternus. Several reasons underpin and justify the comparison of these three authors on the issue of mystery cults.

First, although their historical contexts did not overlap, they were almost contemporaries. Arnobius’ *Aduersus nationes* dates from the end of the third-early fourth century, Lactantius’ *Diuinae institutiones* from the beginning of the fourth century, and Firmicus Maternus’ *De errore profanarum religionum* from the 340s.

Second, these authors, among other Christian writers, provide the most detailed presentations of pagan mystery cults in that time. It is true that Minucius, before, and Augustin, later, addressed the topic in their works. Still, neither of them did so with the same degree of depth and precision.

Third, notwithstanding that they shared the same rhetorical training, the three selected authors differ in their choice of vocabulary to describe mystery cults. While Arnobius uses profusely the vocabulary of mystery cults, Firmicus Maternus does so sparingly. Lactantius, for his part, is more interested in proposing a classification of these cults. The following pages do not offer an exhaustive analysis of the passages on mystery cults in the three texts. The article predominantly takes into account the passages explaining the definition of pagan mysteries given by the analysed Christian authors.

1. *Arnobius, A Treatise on the Mysteria*

We have little information on Arnobius’ life. The only ancient author to refer to it was Jerome according to whom Arnobius wrote the *Aduersus nationes* to prove to the bishop of Sicca in Numidia that his conversion was sincere.⁶ The work, in seven books probably written during the reign of Diocletian,⁷ included apologetic and polemical issues, like most Christian authors of that time for whom defending Christianity meant unmaking paganism. Greek authors are more often quoted than Latin authors, but Arnobius’ rhetorical and scholarly model was certainly Varro.⁸ Book 5 of the *Aduersus nationes* is a rich source of information on the Greek and Roman mystery cults.

⁵ See MASSA (2017).

⁶ Jerome mentions two contradictory pieces of information concerning Arnobius’ life. In *De uir. ill.* 79, he writes that Arnobius taught rhetoric in Sicca, in Numidia, at the time of Emperor Diocletian (i.e., before 305), but in *Chronicon* (2340) he situates the peak of Arnobius’ life in 327. On these issues: LE BONNIEC (1982), p. 7-16; SIMMONS (1995), p. 47-130.

⁷ SIMMONS (1995), p. 47-93, argued that the work was written after the beginning of the great persecution of Diocletian’s reign. On Simmons’ hypothesis: NORTH (2007), p. 27.

⁸ On this aspect: HAGENDAHL (1988), p. 66. The Bible is quoted only twice throughout the book: *ARN. nat.* 1.6.2; 2.6. On Varro as Arnobius’ model: GASTI (2013), p. 41, who notes that at the end of the sixteenth century, the humanist Justus Lipsius defined Arnobius as *Varro Christianus*.

Arnobius was not the first Christian Latin author to devote part of his work to mystery cults. A century earlier, Minucius Felix had addressed these rituals defined by the lexical pair *sacra* and *mysteria* (*Oct.* 23.1-2):

Considera denique sacra ipsa et ipsa mysteria: inuenies exitus tristes, fata et funera et luctus atque planctus miserorum deorum.

And lastly, consider the sacred rites and the mysteries: you will find tragic deaths, dooms, funerals, mourning and lamentations of woebegone gods.⁹

Minucius Felix is the first of the Christian Latin authors to address these rituals as a specific cultural typology.¹⁰ In *Octavius* (22.1-4), several rituals fall into this category: Isis-Osiris, Cybele, the Corybantes, the Eleusinian rites.¹¹ In Minucius Felix, the *sacra* and the *mysteria* form an epistemological pair that define several rituals whose liturgy is based on the tale of the misfortunes of the pagan gods:¹² the interpretation rests partially on Euhemerism, a vision shared by several Christian authors who tried to explain the origins of the Empire's traditional rituals.¹³ This is the only passage of the *Octavius* featuring the term *mysteria*. Minucius Felix uses the generic Latin term to define the rituals: *sacra*. From this point of view, Minucius Felix's approach bears some resemblance to Firmicus Maternus', as we will see in the second part of this paper.

The issue of the pagan *mysteria* becomes central with Arnobius. He was indeed the first Latin author to devote an entire book to mystery cults. In the *Aduersus Nationes*, Arnobius delves into and seeks to understand the pagan mysteries, while at the same time using the language of this tradition to define Christianity. Book 5 of *Aduersus nationes* is far more detailed in its presentation of mystery cults than Tertullian's and Minucius Felix's passages. As we shall see, even the *Diuinae institutiones* of Lactantius will not be as sharp in focus as Arnobius on the question of *mysteria*. The only comparable text in terms of breadth and precision is chapter 2 in Clement of Alexandria's *Protrepticus*, dating from the last years of the second century.¹⁴ This is why, since the end of the nineteenth century, scholars have tended to interpret Arnobius' text as a paraphrase or a loose translation of Clement's text.¹⁵ I will not delve in the complexities of this philological quarrel which would divert us from the topic at hand: Arnobius undoubtedly knew Clement's text on the mysteries which had become a standard reference among Christian authors.¹⁶ Nevertheless, even if Arnobius followed

⁹ Translation GLOVER & RENDALL (1931), slightly modified. Latin text: BEAUJEAU (1964).

¹⁰ Seven occurrences of the term are attested in the works of Tertullian: *Apol.* 6.7 (Liber Pater); 7.6 (Eleusis and Samothrace); 39.15 (Attic mysteries); *Ad nat.* 1.7.13; 14; 25 (Christian mysteries); *De praescr. haer.* 40.1 (the mysteries of the idols). However, these passages do not show the presence of a comprehensive category of "pagan mysteries" in the works of Tertullian.

¹¹ I analysed the way in which Minucius Felix described Egyptian mysteries in MASSA (2018), p. 709-712.

¹² The link between divine πάθη and μυστήρια is also found in ATHENAG. *Suppl.* 32.1. See also CLEM. AL. *Protr.* 2.13.2.

¹³ On Euhemerism: BORGEAUD (2017); ROUBEKAS (2017).

¹⁴ See CLEM. AL. *Protr.* 12.12-23.

¹⁵ See RÖHRICHT (1893); RAPISARDA (1939); LE BONNIEC (1982), p. 58-59; HERRERO (2007), p. 46. *Contra* MORA (1994) who believes that Arnobius wrote independently from Clement's text. A few studies also argued that chapter 2 in Clement's *Protrepticus* was based itself on a pagan treatise on mysteries: see RIEDWEG (1987), p. 117-123. GAGNÉ & HERRERO (2009) think that Clement's chapter was influenced by orphic poems.

¹⁶ I have tried to highlight Clement's importance in Christian representations of mysteries in MASSA (2016), p. 121-126.

Clement's arguments in some passages from book 5 in *Aduersus nationes*, he reworked the contents of Clement's *Protrepticus* by adding cults and adapting the text to his Latin public.

Since Arnobius discussed all issues pertaining to the mysteries in book 5, there are almost no other occurrences of the language of mysteries in the other books that form *Aduersus nationes*. This vocabulary only concerns pagan mysteries, except for a very interesting passage in book 1 on Christian mysteries. The first time that Arnobius uses the term *mysteria* is therefore to refer to Christian mysteries. Book 1 is conceived as a series of responses to pagan criticisms: one of these criticisms concerns the death of Christ, killed as a man. Arnobius' answer is that this problem is one of the mysteries that cannot be explained.¹⁷

Then Arnobius asks a second question: *quae sunt ista, inquis, clausa atque obscura mysteria*. And he pursues his line of reasoning (*Adu. nat.* 1.63.1):

Quae nulli nec homines scire nec ipsi, qui appellantur dii mundi, parte queunt aliqua suspicionis atque opinionationis attingere, nisi quos ipse dignatus est cognitionis tantae impertire muneribus et in abditos recessus thesauri interioris inducere.

[Mysteries] which neither men nor even those who are called gods of the world can at all fathom by imagination or thought, except those upon whom He had thought it fitting to bestow the blessing of such great understanding and to lead into the hidden recesses of the inner treasury.
(transl. McCracken)

Not only were Christian mysteries inaccessible to men but also to the gods. Arnobius was suggesting that in a Christian context, the *mysteria* were secret teachings and doctrines. The meaning of *mysteria*, then, is the same as in the Septuagint, the epistles of Paul or the Gospels. But it is also the one that the philosophers had begun to give to the term since Plato.¹⁸ The adjectives *clausa* and *obscura* evoke a conception of ancient Christianity as *disciplina arcani*. The expression, coined in the sixteenth century during the Wars of Religion, referred to the prohibition for Christians to reveal the content and practices of their rituals to those who had not yet received baptism.¹⁹ Recent studies have highlighted the theological and polemical issues between Catholics and Protestants behind the construction and use of this expression.²⁰ Beyond that, the discourses of Christian authors raise the existence of a threshold not to be crossed between initiates and non-initiates.²¹ In *Aduersus nationes*, the use of *mysteria* to refer to Christian doctrines reserved for those who had a particular *cognitio* shows that, according to Arnobius, the phenomenon of the *mysteria* existed both in pagan religions and in the Christian doctrines. Even from a lexical point of view, the two adjectives which defined the Christian

¹⁷ *Adu. nat.* 1.62.5: *nec ipsam perpeti succubisset uis tanta, si non agenda res esset et inexplicabilis ratio fati clausis patefacienda mysteriis* (Latin text: MARCHESI [1953²¹]), "this a power so great would not have stooped to suffer if so great a thing did not have to take place and the inscrutable plan of fate did not have to be revealed in hidden mysteries." (transl. MCCRAKEN [1949]). On the issue of Jesus' suffering on the cross in ancient Christian texts: STROUMSA (2004).

¹⁸ On the use of the vocabulary of the mystery cults by ancient philosophers, see *infra*, ###.

¹⁹ On the *disciplina arcani*: STROUMSA (1996); PERRIN (2008); SCHWARTZ (2011), p. 132-136.

²⁰ For instance, see POST (2017).

²¹ ORIG. *Hom. in Leu.* 9.10. The theme of secrecy appears especially in the liturgical treatises of the fourth century.

mysteria, clausa and *obscura*, are close to the those used by Arnobius for pagan *mysteria* in his book 5 (*arcana, intima, obscuritas... mysterii*, etc).²²

This treatment of pagan and Christian *mysteria* confirms the phenomenological approach to mysteries among Christian writers: mysteries were a typical component of religions and therefore were attested in all religious practices.²³ What differentiated mysteries was their degree of truthfulness or falsehood: the Christian mysteries were expressions of the true religion, while pagan mysteries were false and the proof of the demonic presence in the world.

In order to clarify the author's main view on pagan *mysteria* in *Aduersus nationes*, one must read the beginning of the presentation in book 5 where Arnobius distinguishes between the stories of the poets and ritual practices. The author claims that the rituals preserved the memory of the stories we knew from literature.²⁴ He gives the example of King Numa's *fabula* and how he deceived Jupiter.²⁵ The *mysteria* were part of a discourse which associated "myth" and "ritual", as evidenced by the following passage (*Adu. nat.* 5.18.1-2):²⁶

Postulat quidem magnitudo materiae atque ipsius defensionis officium, ut similiter ceteras turpitudinum species persequamur, uel quas produnt antiquitatis historiae uel mysteria illa continent sancta quibus initiis nomen est et quae non omnibus uulgo sed paucorum taciturnitatibus traditis. Sed sacrorum innumeri ritus atque adfixa deformitas singulis corporaliter prohibet uniuersa nos exsequi: quinimmo, ut uerius exprimamus, a quibus<dam> nos ipsi consilio et ratione deflectimus, ne dum explicare contendimus cuncta, expositionis ipsius contaminationibus polluamur.

The importance of the subject as well as the task of the defense itself really demand that we should likewise pursue other types of infamy, those which the ancient stories supply or those venerable mysteries called "initiations" contain, which you do not divulge to all but hand down to the secrecy of a few. But the countless rituals of these ceremonies and the loathsomeness attaching to each of them prevents us from going through them all one by one.²⁷

Let us start from the terminology. Arnobius built an analogy between the terms *mysteria* and *initia*. According to him, *initia* was the Latin term for the Greek μυστήρια. Furthermore, *mysteria* are defined as *sancta*, an adjective that we find nowhere else to define pagan mystery cults. In Roman religion, *sanctus* is something or someone protected by a penalty for violation (Festus, *Gloss. Lat.*, p. 420, ed. Lindsay). Therefore, when ancient sources use the term *sanctus*, they are referring to that which is inviolable and pure.²⁸ In the Christian context, the syntagma *sancta mysteria* will feature in some authors of the fourth and fifth centuries.²⁹ Prior to

²² The adjective *obscurus* to define the *mysteria* or the *initia* is also found in classical Latin. See CATULL. 62.259: the expression *obscura orgia* refers to rituals in honour of Liber.

²³ On this phenomenological conception, see for example EUS. *P.E.* 15.1.2, who used to argue that the μυστήρια existed "in all the cities and towns", and my commentary on this passage in MASSA (2016), p. 119-120.

²⁴ *Adu. nat.* 5.1.1: *Quid? illa, quae historiae continent graues seriae curiosae quaeque in arcanis misteriis traditis, poetarum sunt excogitata lasciuiia?* The term *arcana* is rarely used in the *Aduersus nationes* to talk about mysteries. See also *Adu. nat.* 5.27.

²⁵ On the meaning of the Latin term *fabula*: BETTINI (2006). On Numa and Jupiter in Arnobius: CHAMPEAUX (2018), p. 137.

²⁶ On the association between "myth" and "mysteries" among Christian authors: VAN NUFFELEN (2011), p. 27-47; MASSA (2016), p. 122-123; (2018).

²⁷ Translation by MCCRAKEN (1949), slightly modified.

²⁸ On the meaning of *sanctus*: SCHEID (2004).

²⁹ For instance, LACTANT. *Diu. inst.* 4.12.11; AMBR. *De ob. Valent.* 56; AUGUST. *De bapt.* 5.27.38; *Epist.* 55.14.

Arnobius, the only occurrence is in the *De Singularitate Clericorum*, a treatise originally attributed to Cyprian, and now believed to be by an anonymous African author of the third century. In this work, the *sancta mysteria* refer to the rituals of the mass (Ps.-Cypr. *De sing. cler.* 14). Shortly after the *Aduersus nationes*, Lactantius (*Diu. inst.* 4.12.11) uses the expression when he proclaims that Christ was sent to the earth to reveal “the venerable mystery of the one and only God” (*singularis et ueri Dei sanctum mysterium*). Arnobius’ choice to designate pagan mystery cults as rituals subject to violation is particularly interesting. The author probably recognizes the importance of the vow (requirement or prescription) of silence as an essential component of these practices.³⁰ This interpretation is consistent with Arnobius’ insistence on the fact that these rituals were not transmitted to all, as shown by the opposition between the *omnes* and the *pauci*.

I propose to interpret this passage as a brief definition of pagan *mysteria*: they were reserved rituals, transmitted only to a small group of individuals. On this basis, the author then added that there were numerous rituals; it was too difficult to review them all in detail and consequently he considered it was not necessary to consider them all. We are faced with a rhetorical strategy that emphasizes the large number of rituals and names them but does not explain them. All the same, the passage demonstrates Arnobius had precise knowledge of the matter.

A little further Arnobius continues his reflection on the mysteries, adding other important features that also clarify the vocabulary used (*Adu. nat.* 5.39.1-2):

“Vnde igitur probamus historias has omnes rerum esse gestarum conscriptiones?” Ex sollemnibus scilicet sacris atque initiorum mysteriis, uel quae statis fiunt temporibus ac diebus uel quae in abdito tradunt gentes moris proprii perpetuitate seruata. Neque enim credendum est sine suis originibus haec esse, frustra atque inaniter fieri nec habere coniunctas primis institutionibus causas.

How, then, do we prove that all these stories are records of actual events? From the solemn rites, of course, and the mysteries of initiation, either those which take place at stated times and days or those which the clans hand down in secret, preserving the perpetuity of their customs. For it must not be believed that these are without their origins, take place without reason or cause, having nothing to link them with first beginnings. (transl. McCracken)

The passage insists on two points: the first concerns the fact that the *mysteria* happen *statis ... temporibus ac diebus*. This is an idea found elsewhere in imperial literature: the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, for example, in a passage from his *Discourses* emphasized that it was forbidden to celebrate the mysteries of Eleusis anytime and anywhere.³¹ The second is a reminder that these cults were transmitted secretly, and that this transmission guaranteed the tradition was respected. The verb *tradere* is specific to the Latin context of mysteries, as shown for example by the vocabulary used in Eleusinian mysteries or Mithraic inscriptions.³² The transmission of ritual knowledge was also central to ancient mystery cult practices. Moreover,

³⁰ Later, Arnobius again uses the expression associated with a second adjective: *sancta illa atque arcana mysteria* (*Adu. nat.* 5.27.1).

³¹ See EPICT. *Diss.* 4.21.13-15. On the use of mysteries in imperial stoicism: PIÀ-COMELLA (2021). On the possibility of celebrating the Eleusinian mysteries elsewhere: MASSA (2020).

³² On Eleusis mysteries: e.g., CIC. *Tusc.* 1.29; APUL. *Met.* 11.21.7.

the term *conscriptio* could refer to the *commentarii* and show that Arnobius interpreted ritual memory like a college of Roman priests. The link with historical events can be explained by the more general interpretation of pagan divinities – and consequently of paganism – who were merely human beings deified after their death: nothing new here, Arnobius was building his argument on Euhemeristic theory, as noted above concerning Minucius Felix and as we will also see in relation to Firmicus Maternus.

Another lexical specificity in this excerpt deserves to be highlighted: the expression *initiorum mysteria*. In the previous passage Arnobius claimed that the *mysteria* were called *initia*, as if the terms described the same ceremony. Yet, it seems that the author is distinguishing here two forms, suggesting that the *mysteria* represent a specific part of the *initia*, or that the *mysteria* define a kind of knowledge, a doctrine of rituals called *initia*.³³ *Initiorum mysteria* seems to correspond to the Greek τελετῶν μυστήρια, a Greek expression found in Eusebius of Caesarea (*P.E.* 1.9.17), where the bishop mentions the ἀπορρήτων τελετῶν μυστήρια, the ‘mysteries of unspeakable practices,’ even if the ambiguity and flexibility of the language of mystery cults throughout antiquity mean that we cannot impose any semantic restriction on the terms in question.

To summarize, according to Arnobius the *mysteria* were contained in ancient stories, were reserved for a small audience and were linked to historical events. The third passage worth mentioning is where the author refuted the idea that the will of the gods was hidden behind the *mysteria* (*Adu. nat.* 5.42.1-2):

Nisi forte dicetis – hoc enim solum restat, quod a uobis posse uideatur opponi – deos sua mysteria nolle ab hominibus sciri et idcirco historias ambagibus esse allegoricis scriptas. Et unde uobis est liquidum, quod hominibus superi nolint sua mysteria publicari? Vnde illa uos scitis aut cur ea dissoluere in allegostrarum explanatione curatis?

But perhaps you will say – for this is the only thing remaining which, so it seems, you can bring forward – that the gods do not wish their mysteries to be known by man and therefore the stories were written in allegorical circumlocutions. And how do you know for sure that the gods above do not wish their mysteries to be made known to man? Whence are you acquainted with them? Why are you anxious to dilute them by explaining them as allegories? (transl. McCracken)

It is the philosophical use of mysteries that is at stake in this passage. We know since classical Greece that the works of philosophers, and Plato especially, assimilated and re-elaborated the terminology of mysteries, in order to pave the way to philosophical knowledge and the path of knowledge.³⁴ The Christian use of the vocabulary of mystery cults was also a consequence of the philosophical usage that was part of that common *paideia* of the Empire’s literate elite already mentioned above. In the quoted passage, Arnobius argues against the use of the allegorical method to explain the content of the mysteries, as did philosophers at the time. This polemic was also attested among the pagans: in a fragment of Porphyry, quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea (*H.E.* 6.19.7-8), the Platonist philosopher accuses Origen of having learned the

³³ This *iunctura* is also attested in the historian IUST. 5.1.1: *insimulatur mysteria Cereris initiorum sacra, nullo magis quam silentio sollemnia, enuntiauisse.*

³⁴ On the relationship between mystery cults and philosophy: RIEDWEG (1987); VAN NUFFELEN (2011), p. 27-47; MARTÍN-VELASCO & GARCÍA BLANCO (2016); BREMMER (2017); MASSA & BELAYCHE (2021).

allegorical interpretation of the Greek mysteries and having applied it to the Hebrew scriptures.³⁵

Based on this general conception of the mysteries, we can now analyse how Arnobius refers to the *sacra* and *mysteria* mentioned in his book 5. I take as an example chapter 19 which reviews several rituals. Arnobius always uses negative rhetoric, stating that he will not talk about this or that, which allows him to name several ritual practices (*Adu. nat.* 5.19.1-4):

Bacchanalia etiam praetermittimus inmania quibus nomen Omophagiis Graecum est, in quibus furore mentito et sequestrata pectoris sanitate circumplicatis uos anguibus, atque ut uos plenos dei numine ac maiestate doceatis, caprorum reclamantium uiscera cruentatis oribus dissipatis. Nec non et Cypriae Veneris abstrusa illa initia praeterimus, quorum conditor indicatur Cinyras rex fuisse, in quibus sumentes ea certas stipes inferunt ut meretrici et referunt phallos propitii numinis signa donatos. Obluioni etiam Corybantia sacra donentur, in quibus sanctum illud mysterium traditur [...]. Sed et illa desistimus Bacchanalia altera praedicare, in quibus arcana et tacenda res proditur insinuaturque sacratis [...].

We shall also pass by the wild Bacchanalia bearing in Greek the name of *omophagia* in which with pretended frenzy and with sanity of mind set aside, you bind around you snakes, and to show yourselves full of the divinity and majesty of the god, tear asunder with gory jaws the flesh of loudly-bleating goats. And those hidden mysteries of the Cyprian Venus we pass by also, of whom the founder is said to have been King Cinyras, in which those who take them bring stipulated fees as to a harlot and carry away obscene tokens, given them as a sign of the propitious divinity. Consign to oblivion also the rites of the Corybantes in which this venerable mystery was transmitted [...]. And we also refrain from speaking of those other Bacchanalia in which a sacred secret which must not even be uttered is revealed and communicated to initiated [...]. (transl. McCracken)

This is a central passage for our purposes. The author shows the variety of the Latin when describing mystery cults in Latin. First, Arnobius mentions Liber's *bacchanalia*, which are not openly called *mysteria*, but *omophagia* – a Greek term that refers to the so-called banquet of raw flesh celebrated by the worshippers of Dionysus. Clement's text may have played a role in this superposition between *bacchanalia* and *omophagia*, since the *Protrepticus* insists on this violent dimension of Dionysian practices (*Protr.* 2.12.2). Then we have Venus' *initia*,³⁶ the Corybantes' *sacra*, during which the sacred *mysterium* was transmitted and finally other bacchanalia the content of which was revealed to the *sacrati*, a technical term used in the description of mysteries and particularly of Dionysian mysteries.³⁷ Moreover, in this second type of *bacchanalia*, the revelation concerns something secret and unspeakable. *Arcana* and *tacenda* refer to the definition of *mysteria* proposed by Arnobius in his book 5.

Importantly, the term *mysteria* does not define any specific ritual in this passage. With regard to the *sacra* of the Corybantes, Arnobius states that the *sanctum mysterium* is transmitted in their ceremonies. The use of the singular here is significant. We know that in polytheistic practice, *tradere mysteria* indicates a transmission of ritual knowledge that does not necessarily

³⁵ The literature on allegory is abundant: e.g., PÉPIN (1987); BLÖNNIGEN (1992); DAWSON (2002). On the relationship between Origen and Neoplatonism: RAMELLI (2009); (2011).

³⁶ On the mysteries of Venus/Aphrodite in Christian literature: RUANI (2018), p. 337-345.

³⁷ See JACCOTTET (2006), p. 31.

correspond to a transmission of doctrine. According to the sources at our disposal, the highest vision of the Eleusinian mysteries (*epopteia*) showed to the initiates gathered in the Telesterion some images.³⁸ Even the initiatory formula pronounced at Eleusis and recounted by Clement of Alexandria refers to something resembling a manipulation of objects.³⁹

How shall we then interpret the various terms used by Arnobius in the passage above quoted? To answer we must consider two different processes. On the one hand, Arnobius wanted to show that all these practices fell within a single and coherent category, the *mysteria*, which, as we have seen, he defined in book 5. In this category, Arnobius includes several different rites: two cults in honour of Dionysus, the initiations celebrated for Venus, and the rituals of the Corybantes. On the other hand, his identification of the *bacchanalia*, the *initia*, and the *sacra* was an attempt to standardize these practices in order to oppose them more easily to the true Christian mysteries.

2. Lactantius, *Classifying Pagan Mystery Cults*

To fully grasp the specificity of the *Aduersus nationes* book 5, it is necessary to analyze the function of pagan mystery cults in another work of the early fourth century: the *Diuinae institutiones* of Lactantius. According to Jerome (*De uir. ill.* 80), Lactantius trained at Arnobius' school of rhetoric in Sicca. His most significant work dates to before the end of the persecutions against the Christians in 311, but Lactantius published other versions of his text, including dedications to the Emperor Constantine.⁴⁰

In the *Diuinae institutiones*, the term *mysterium* in the singular is part of the Christian language and refers to “the mystery of his [*scil.* God's] truth and religion”, *mysterium ueritatis ac religionis suae* (5.18.11).⁴¹ The mystery is a form of knowledge and wisdom associated with the notion of *arcanum*, “secret”, as we have also seen in Arnobius. In the *Diuinae institutiones*, Lactantius also uses this vocabulary to refer to the practices of the traditional religions of the Empire. Book 1, which offers an exposition of pagan error, dedicates some chapters to cults called the “religions of the Romans” (*religiones Romanorum*). The aim is to show the specificities of the Roman religions in relation to other peoples, especially the Greeks. First of all, he lists and briefly describes the minor deities of the Romans: Lupa, Leaina, Faula, Flora. The list, as much as passages on Hercules or Liber, has a mocking tone to it (*Diu. inst.* 1.20).

Next, Lactantius offers a reflection “on the rites and the mysteries” (*de sacris et mysteriis*) of the Roman world. The relevant section is organized by geographical areas on the rites in

³⁸ The author of the *Elenchos* is one of the very few to describe the Eleusinian *epopteia*. See PS.-HIPPOCRATES. *Haer.* 5.8.39: “The Athenians, while initiating people into the Eleusinian rites (μοῦνοντες Ἐλευσίνια), likewise display to those who are being admitted to the highest grade at these mysteries (ἐπιδεικνύοντες τοῖς ἐποπτεύουσι), the mighty, and marvelous, and most perfect secret suitable for one initiated into the highest stage (τὸ μέγα καὶ θαυμαστόν καὶ τελεώτατον ἐποπτικὸν ἐκεῖ μυστήριον): an ear of grain in silence reaped (ἐν σιωπῇ, τεθερισμένον στάχυν)”. According to Varro, quoted by Augustine, the *Telesterion* contained a revelation of grains (*De ciu. D.* 7.20): “Then he [*scil.* Varro] says that many things are transmitted in her [Ceres'] mysteries (*multa in mysteriis eius tradi*) which only refer to the discovery of fruits (*quae nisi ad frugum inuentionem non pertineant*)”. On these texts: BELAYCHE & MASSA (2021), p. 41.

³⁹ CLEM. AL. *Protr.* 2.21.2: see *infra*. On the role of objects at Eleusis: PATERA (2010). More generally on objects in mystery cults: JACCOTTET (2021).

⁴⁰ On the *Diuinae institutiones*: DEPALMA DIGESER (2000); WALTER (2006); COLOT (2016).

⁴¹ Concerning the “mystery of truth”, see also LACTANTIUS. *De ir. D.* 1.6. On the whole passage: MONAT (1973), tome II, p. 148-149.

honor of Isis, Osiris-Sarapis, Ceres, Priapus and Hercules (*Diu. inst.* 1.21.1-43). The expression *sacra et mysteria* return at the end, delimiting this section as a unity (1.43: *ex ipsis itaque mysteriis et caerimoniis*). Lactantius thus uses the same appellation as Minucius in his *Octavius*, even if the cults called *sacra et mysteria* are not exactly the same. The association between *sacra* and *mysteria* must have given the idea of a juxtaposition between some properly Roman practices and foreign ones (Greek or barbarian). Lactantius lists three types of cults in this section. First the human sacrifices: in Cyprus for Jupiter; among the Tauri for Diana; among the Gauls for Esus, Teutates, Jupiter Latiaris, and Saturn; and in Carthage for Jupiter (*Diu. inst.* 1.21.1-6). The second set of listed rituals are the *publica sacra* in honor of the Mother of the Gods and Virtus/Bellona, which are also violent and bloody (*sacra*), but entail the shedding of the priests' blood rather than the death of its participants (*Diu. inst.* 1.21.16).⁴² Finally, other cults "which do not involve crimes": the *sacra* of Isis, the *sacra* of the Eleusinian Ceres, the *mysterium* of Priapus at Lampsacus, the *sacra* of Hercules, and the *sacra* and *mysterium* of Cretan Jupiter.

Lactantius organizes his analysis by peoples, emphasizing the ethnic dimension of the religions of the Roman Empire. The aim thereby is to frame his presentation in a historical perspective. For instance, with regard to the human sacrifice practiced by the Cypriots in honor of Jupiter, Lactantius says that it was abolished "during the reign of Hadrian" (*Diu. inst.* 1.21.2); and for the Latin cult of Jupiter Latiaris, he reports that he is honored "with human blood, even today" (*Diu. inst.* 1.21.3).

Unlike Arnobius, Lactantius does not simply propose to group several rituals into one category, that of the *mysteria*. He also tries to construct a taxonomy, to differentiate them according to the relationship these cults have with violence. This process is part of a broader effort and objective to systematize pagan knowledge. The mysteries enter into the modeling of pagan practices and beliefs in the *Diuinae institutiones*.⁴³ Lactantius uses the violence of mystery cults as the argument for opposing paganism to Christianity. In book 5 of *Diuinae institutiones*, which is entirely devoted to the question of justice and morality, the author notes that, as Virgil sang in the *Aeneid* (3.112), the rule of silence in mystery cults serves to hide their true origin (5.19.19):

Nam fere uulgus, cui simplex incorruptumque iudicium est, si mysteria illa cognoscat in memoriam mortuorum constituta, damnabit aliudque uerius quod colat quaeret. "Hinc fida silentia sacris" instituta sunt ab hominibus callidis, ne sciat populus quid colat.

If ordinary people, whose judgment is simple and straightforward, came to know that those mysteries of theirs were established in memory of the dead, they will vote against, I guess, and look for something else more sound to worship. Hence the institution by shrewd operators of "the hush of the faithful at sacrifice", in case people should know what they are worshipping.⁴⁴

According to Lactantius, human beings are attracted by the truth, hence the need to conceal the true reason for the existence of mysteries through the artifice of secrecy. The importance of the

⁴² The Mother of Gods perfectly embodies the double Roman and foreign dimension of the *sacra* and *mysteria*. On this: BORGEAUD (1996); ROLLER (1999); VAN HAEPEREN (2019).

⁴³ On this systematization of pagan knowledge in Lactantius: SCHOTT (2008), p. 79-109.

⁴⁴ Transl. BOWDEN & GARNSEY (2003); Latin text: MONAT (1973).

pagan mysteries in the systematization of paganism is confirmed by the *Epitome Diuinarum Institutionum*. In this summary, pagan mysteries have an important place. In the section *ritibus sacrorum culturisque*, the author returns to several cults criticized in the first book of the *Diuinae institutiones* (*Epit.* 18-19).⁴⁵ After reviewing the Cyprian, Latial and Cretan Jupiter, the Saturn of the Carthaginians, Ceres and Proserpine, the Mother of the Gods and Bellona, he concludes: *haec sunt mysteria deorum* (*Epit.* 19.1). The category of pagan mysteries, therefore, appears as a tool for classifying and organizing the traditional religions of the Empire.

The interest of the *Epitome* does not stop there. After having refuted the *falsa religio* and the *falsa sapientia* – respectively, paganism and Greek philosophy – the author proposes to explain the *uera religio* and the *uera sapientia*, i.e. Christianity (*Epit.* 36.1). He affirms the existence of a supreme and creative God, who created man in his own image. Man, in turn, worships this divinity. By his obedience, he deserves immortality: *hoc est uerum diuinumque mysterium* (*Epit.* 36.3). The expressions – *haec sunt* against *hoc est* – shows that in the *Epitome* two typologies of mysteries confront each other. On the one hand are the pagan *mysteria*, which are multiple and violent. On the other hand, stands the single and true Christian *mysterium*.⁴⁶ The paralleling and, consequently, the confrontation are more explicit here than in the *Diuinae institutiones*.

There has been some debate over the authorship of the *Epitome*, even though most researchers are in favor of attributing it to Lactantius.⁴⁷ A consensus has instead emerged as to the dating of the work, in the 320s, around the Council of Nicea (324). With the *Epitome*, unlike the *Diuinae Institutiones*, we are in the middle of Constantine's reign. The sense of Lactantius' attempt at classification is strictly linked to the figure of the emperor.⁴⁸ The changed political situation also influences the way of speaking about pagan mystery cults.

3. Firmicus Maternus, between Oriental Cults and Mystery Cults

For the third, and last, stage of our investigation we move beyond the age of Emperor Constantine. The imperial policy at the time had gradually extended the privileges of the churches and Christians. It is against this backdrop that Firmicus wrote a violent treaty against paganism.⁴⁹ Having authored first a work of astrology, *Mathesis*, and then a controversial work against paganism, *De errore profanarum religionum*, Firmicus Maternus is often considered to be the model of the pagan erudite Christian convert; a member of the Roman elite who followed opportunistically the religious transformations of the Empire in the fourth century, under the reign of Constantine's sons.⁵⁰

Firmicus devoted the second part of his work to the sacred formulas (the *symbola*) of mystery cults, with almost no references to the other traditional cults. The focus is on Mithra, Cybele and Attis, Isis and Osiris, and Dionysus. The purpose of *De errore* was to show that the symbols used in pagan initiations were the product of demons and the devil. The formulas were often

⁴⁵ Latin text: PERRIN (1987).

⁴⁶ A similar expression will be used in *Epit.* 44.2: *Haec est sapientia et hoc mysterium summi dei*.

⁴⁷ See INGLEBERT (2010), p. 492.

⁴⁸ INGLEBERT (2010), p. 509-513.

⁴⁹ See GASSMANN (2020), p. 48-75.

⁵⁰ See CHAPOT (2001), p. 63-65; CASEAU (2007). On the historical context: BARNARD (1993), p. 87-88; LEPPIN (1999); KAHLOS (2009a), p. 65-66; McLYNN (2009).

quoted without explicit religious reference and therefore associating them to a specific cult is sometimes a difficult task.

As part of a research on mystery cults, one must not forget that *De errore* played a significant role in the historiography of the twentieth century. Turcan was the first to raise an interesting analogy between the pagan cults condemned by Firmicus and the cults analysed in Franz Cumont's book, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, first published in 1906 in Paris.⁵¹ Turcan defined the Christian author as 'the initiator of a theme of research and publications which has flourished for a century,' on the so-called 'Oriental religions'.⁵² This historiographical reminder is all the more important because, according to Cumont, all devotions from the Levant took the form of mysteries, which means that mysteries and oriental religions were superimposed in the Belgian scholar's view.⁵³ The cults contained in the second part of *De errore* were associated by Firmicus with the Orient and are part of the rituals that modern scholarship places in the category of mystery cults.⁵⁴

In this context, one would expect to find several terms belonging to the vocabulary of mysteries in Firmicus' work or at least the same terms used by Minucius Felix, Arnobius, or Lactantius. Firmicus, however, rarely uses this language. The same is true for the other work of the author, the *Mathesis*. Firmicus do not use a specific vocabulary to speak of mystery cults. The analysis of *De errore profanarum religionum* shows that when he refers to what we call mysteries, but also to what other Christian authors called (in Greek and in Latin) the *mysteria*, this author chooses most often the generic Latin term *sacra*. A good example is found in chapter 27 where Firmicus describes the Phrygian cults of the Mother of the gods, the cults of Isis and Proserpina simply as *sacra*.⁵⁵

The term *mysterium* is only used twice in *De errore*. The first occurrence is at the beginning of the treatise, where the author explains that the Egyptians worshipped water. According to Firmicus, Egyptian *sacra* are called *mysteria* and are based on the mythical stories of Isis and Osiris (*Err. prof. rel.* 2.1):

Sed in sacris suis quae mysteria uocant addunt tragica funera et funestae calamitatis <metuenda certamina>: incestum cum sorore adulterium que commissum, et hoc facinus seueris mariti animaduersionibus uindicatum. Isis soror est, Osyris frater, Tyfon maritus.

But in their cults which they call 'mysteries' they add tragical funerals and <fear-inspiring struggles> which have a gruesome denouement: incest and adultery with a sister, and the crime by which the husband exacted vengeance for this crime. Isis is the sister, Osiris the brother, Typhon the husband.⁵⁶

This is a typical rhetorical strategy of Firmicus used to trivialize and ridicule pagan myths. The adventures of Isis and Osiris are presented as a sordid family affair. Divine misfortunes are at

⁵¹ See CUMONT (2006). On the history of these editions (and the translations in multiple languages), see the historiographic introduction by C. Bonnet and F. van Haepere in CUMONT (2006), p. xi-lxxiv.

⁵² TURCAN (1989), p. 15. The issue was also studied by BUSINE (2009); PRAET (2011).

⁵³ CUMONT (2006), p. 305. On "oriental religions", see at least BONNET (2006). On the link between mysteries and oriental religions: BONNET, RÜPKE & SCARPI (2006).

⁵⁴ See BURKERT (1987); BOWDEN (2010); BREMMER (2014).

⁵⁵ *Err. prof. rel.* 27.1-2: *in sacris Phrygiis quae matris deum dicunt... in Isiaci sacris... in Proserpinae sacris.*

⁵⁶ Translation FORBES (1970), slightly modified. On this passage see the critical edition of TURCAN (2002), p. 170-174; SCARPI (2002), p. 503-504; SANZI (2006), p. 71-74. I use the Latin text edited by TURCAN (2002).

the centre of *De errore*'s arguments, as they were in Minucius Felix's works. The crucial term in this passage, however, is the verb *addere*. In Firmicus' perspective, *mysteria* are ritual practices to which pagans added mythical stories.⁵⁷ It is clear that from the point of view of the vocabulary, according to Firmicus, the correct Latin term to define the Egyptian rituals surrounding Isis and Osiris was *sacra*. *Mysteria* was just a word used by others, probably the Greek-speaking subjects of the Empire.

The second occurrence of *mysterium* is attested in one of the sections in *De errore* devoted to Mithraic rituals. In chapter 19.1, Firmicus quotes the Greek Mithraic formula <i>δὲ νόμφε, χαῖρε νόμφε, χαῖρε νέον φῶς (“behold bride, greetings bride, greetings new light”), commentating:

Quid sic miserum hominem per abrupta praecipitas, calamitosa persuasio? Quid illi falsae spei polliceris insignia?

O disastrous delusion, why do you thus plunge unhappy man over the precipice? Why do you promise him the trapping of a false hope? (transl. Forbes)

The verb <i>δέ is a conjecture for the lacuna in the text.⁵⁸ For a long time, scholars discussed this formula trying to identify the cult that is referred to, since Firmicus does not associate it with a specific deity. The term *nymphos* probably refers to a rank in Mithraic initiations, as shown for example by an inscription in Santa Prisca's mithraeum where the person represented is wearing a bridal veil.⁵⁹ The light could refer to a kind of revelation shown to the initiate, expressed by the reference to the *insignia*, which contrasts Mithraic initiation and Christian baptism. Firmicus' commentary associates Mithraic initiation with a form of hope, which is typical of Christian beliefs. Once again, what distinguishes pagan practices from Christian practices is their measure of truth and therefore the Mithraic *spes* can only be a *falsa*, a false hope.

Firmicus explains the Mithraic formula using the Christian scriptures, claiming that *sponsum esse Christum, sponsam ecclesiam*. He then continues (*Err. prof. rel.* 19.5-6):

Secretiora pandantur arcana: in Apocalypsi id est in reuelatione, qui sit sponsus inuenimus. Ita enim scriptum est: “Veni, ostendam tibi nouam nuptam uxorem agni [...]”. Huius rei mysterium ostensum est, huius sponsi aduentum sapientium uirginum chorus exspectat [...].

Let arcana of a more secret kind be revealed: in the Apocalypse, that is, in Revelation, we find who find who the bridegroom is. For so it is written: “Come and I will shew thee the new bride, the wife of the Lamb” [...]. This mystery is revealed, this is the bridegroom whose coming the band of the wise virgins [...]. (transl. Forbes)

⁵⁷ TURCAN (2002), p. 173: “Firmicus Maternus revient plusieurs fois sur cette idée que le paganisme est fait d’incrustations adventices, d’additions qui couvrent une marchandise suspecte.”

⁵⁸ On this issue: TURCAN (2002), p. 296: “<i>δέ me paraît s’imposer en fonction du contexte : vision chrétienne opposée à la vision païenne.”

⁵⁹ On Santa Prisca' mithraeum: VERMASEREN & VAN ESSEN (1965); ALVAR (2008), p. 366-368; BREMMER (2014), p. 133-134. More generally, on the grades in mysteries of Mithra: ADRYCH (2021).

The term *mysterium* was used to define a restricted form of knowledge in Christian teaching. This is the only occurrence in *De errore* in the singular form because the Egyptian *sacra* are defined by the plural *mysteria*. The meaning of *mysterium* is close to the one given by the Latin authors of the fourth century: e.g., for Ambrose, the term referred to a deep knowledge of the meaning of the scriptures, accessible only to those who were initiated and therefore baptized (*De myst.* 1.2).

In another section devoted to Mithraic formulas, we find another lexical specificity (*Err. prof. rel.* 20.1):

Alterius profani sacramenti signum est Θεὸς ἐκ πέτρας. Cur hoc sanctum uenerandumque secretum ad profanos actus adulterata professione transfertis?

Another pagan sacrament has the key word “god from a rock”. Why do you adulterate the faith and transfer this holy and worshipful mystery to pagan doings? (transl. Forbes)⁶⁰

Two other elements should be added to Firmicus’ reflections on these cults. First, the adjective *secretus* which in the *De errore* is a specific quality of these practices, as shown by its use to describe many cults: Liber and Libera, Venus, Attis, pagan cults in general; but *secretus* also refers to baptism and Christian cults (*Err. prof. rel.* 33.3). Then, the expression *sacramentum profanum*. The adjective *profanus* is attributable to *De errore*’s general logic: for Firmicus *religio profana* is used to define the traditional religions and *profana*, as a homogeneous system, is opposed to the only true doctrine and teaching, that of Christ (*Err. prof. rel.* 21.1).⁶¹ The lexical choice of *sacramentum* is even more fascinating. In classical Latin, the word refers to an oath, often in a military context, a loaded term both religiously and politically. How it developed into a Christian meaning is not entirely clear and scholars have suggested several interpretations.⁶² In the Christian context and particularly in the first Christian texts in Latin, *sacramentum* was used to translate the Greek word *mysterion*: one only needs to refer to *Acta martyrum Scillitanorum*, Tertullian or the first Latin versions of the Bible.⁶³

Applying this category of *sacramentum* to the cult of Mithra is not new. Tertullian mentions the *sacramenta* of Mithra in the first book of the *Aduersus Marcionem* dating from 207-208 (1.13.5): *sicut aridae and ardentis naturae sacramenta leones Mithrae philosophantur* “likewise, the lions of Mithra are interpreted from a philosophical point of view as the signs of an arid and burning nature”.⁶⁴ Tertullian does not offer an interpretation of Mithraic rituals because in this passage he is interested in the philosophical interpretation of the mysteries of Mithras. But, for Firmicus, I believe that the term is the Latin translation of the Greek μυστήρια and that the author wants to put forward the ritual component of the expression. Although it is attested only once in *De errore*, Firmicus used *sacramentum* twice in *Mathesis* (5.22 and 26). In one of the two passages, Firmicus explains how one determines the future of an individual from his birth zodiacal sign.

⁶⁰ On this Mithraic formula: GORDON (2012), p. 983-984.

⁶¹ On this new category of *religio profana* for Firmicus: MASSA (2013), p. 496-499.

⁶² See for example HINARD (1993); SORDI (2003); NERI (2011).

⁶³ Cf. MOHRMANN (1954). On Tertullian: MICHAELIDES (1970).

⁶⁴ My translation. This is an exception, because Tertullian generally refuses to use the noun *sacramentum* for pagan mysteries: RAMELLI (2015), p. 353-355.

Si horoscopus in Scorpione fuerit inuentus, in prima aetate faciet acutos iracundos agiles, sed hi per multa infortuniorum genera ducentur. Verum postea felici licentia subleuantur, et erunt magnis laetitiiis dediti, si ipsum Iuppiter aliqua radiatione respexerit; erunt gloriosi et a diis praesidia sperabunt semper, et sacrorum aut caelestium religionum sacramenta percipient.

Those who have the ascendant in Scorpio are clever, bad-tempered, and active in early youth, but encounter many kinds of misfortune in life. But afterwards, if Jupiter is in aspect in any way, they will attain fortune, power, and happiness; they will be famous and protected by the gods and will partake of the rites of sacred or heavenly religion. (transl. Rhys Bram)

How does one translate *sacramentum* in this excerpt from *Mathesis*? I think it should be understood as ‘mysteries’, just like in Christian Latin. To stay within the context of initiatory formulas, my last example is a passage about rituals performed in Attis’ honour (Firm. Mat. *Err. prof. rel.* 18.1):

Libet nunc explanare quibus se signis uel quibus symbolis in ipsis superstitionibus miseranda hominum turba cognoscat. Habent enim propria signa, propria responsa, quae illis in istorum sacrilegiorum coetibus diaboli tradidit disciplina. In quodam templo, ut in interioribus partibus homo moriturus possit admitti, dicit: “De tympano manducaui, de cymbalo bibi et religionis secreta perdidici”, quod Graeco sermone dicitur: ἐκ τυμπάνου βέβρωκα, ἐκ κυμβάλου πέπωκα, γέγονα μύστης Ἄττεως.

Now I should like to explain what signs or symbols the wretched human throng uses for purposes of recognition in the superstitious cults themselves. For they have special signs, special responses, which the teaching of the devil has transmitted to them in the meetings sponsored by those impious cults of theirs. In a certain temple a person (doomed to perdition) says when seeking admittance to the inner chambers: “I have eaten from the tambourine, I have drunk from the cymbal, and I have mastered the secrets of religion” – the Greek words being ἐκ τυμπάνου βέβρωκα, ἐκ κυμβάλου πέπωκα, γέγονα μύστης Ἄττεως. (transl. Forbes)⁶⁵

The use of the past tense in this kind of formula was common in Greek and Latin: one only needs to think of the Eleusinian formula quoted by Clement of Alexandria in his *Protrepticus* (2.21.2): “I fasted; I drank the draught; I took from the chest; having done my task, I placed in the basket, and from the basket into the chest” (ἐνήστευσα, ἔπιον τὸν κυκεῶνα, ἔλαβον ἐκ κίστης, ἐργασάμενος ἀπεθέμην εἰς κάλαθον καὶ ἐκ καλάθου εἰς κίστην; transl. Butterworth); or the Isiac formulas evoked in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* (11.23.7): “I approached death’s door, I crossed the threshold of Proserpina” (*accessi confinium mortis et calcato Proserpinae limine*). Once more, Firmicus does not use the term *mysteria* or the term *initia*. The formula itself does not contain a specific lexicon. What is interesting is the comparison between Greek and Latin in the formulation of the initiation. The Greek version of the formula contains the connoted term μύστης (“I became a mystes of Attis”). But, as soon as one moves from Greek to Latin, the vocabulary related to mystery cults becomes less explicit and the reference to the initiate

⁶⁵ On this text: TURCAN (2002); SANZI (2006), *ad loc.*

disappears. In the Latin version of the formula, the term *secreta* refers to the restricted dimension of the Phrygian formula and rituals.⁶⁶

4. Conclusion

In Late Antiquity, under the influence of Christian authors arose a new rhetoric, striving to distinguish true/unique religion from superstition, heresy, or false belief; in other words, from the ‘religions of the Others’. In order to do this, Christians incessantly compare, classify, assign spatial and temporal coordinates, and hierarchize. Mystery cults enter this classification process. And in so doing, the mysteries become a tool to rethink the traditional religions of the Roman Empire, a weapon between competing pagans and Christians of that time.

With Arnobius, Lactantius and Firmicus Maternus we are confronted with different ways of using mystery cults in Christian polemical literature. There is an abundant use of the vocabulary of the mysteries in Arnobius’ work. In book 5 of *Adversus Nationes* many rituals of the various religions of Rome or the Roman world are labelled as such. The influence of Greek models (and especially Clement of Alexandria’s *Protrepticus*) probably played a role in Arnobius’ rhetorical strategy, which alternated the Greek μυστήρια with the Latin term *initia*. In the age of Constantine, Lactantius inserts mystery cults into his project of systematization of traditional religious knowledge. He does not, however, propose a detailed reflection on these practices because his objective is to classify the various pagan religious rites. When it comes to Firmicus Maternus’ use of the vocabulary, its absence is conspicuous, both the Greek μυστήρια as the Latin *initia*. With one exception, mystery cults are simply referred to by the term *sacra*, the most generic term in Latin to refer to religious practices. This reluctance to use the vocabulary of the mysteries is confirmed when Firmicus translates a Greek initiatory formula that contained the term μύστης.

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