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Three Types of Coexistence of Pagan and Christian Elements in the Late Roman Intellectuals' Mentality

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Abstract

The paper considers three types of coexistence of pagan and Christian elements in the consciousness of Late antique intellectuals who were Latin writers in the period from of the 4th to 6th centuries, representatives of the upper stratum, Christians such as Ausonius, Paulinus of Nola, Sidonius Apollinaris, and others. The authors come to the conclusion that the attitude to the pagan heritage combined in the minds of Late Latin intellectuals with Christian ideas in three versions: passive-eclectic, contrast-nihilistic and respectful-condescending, which was conditioned both by life circumstances and chronologically.

Keywords: Late Antiquity, Nobleman intellectuals, Paganism, Christianity, Mentality.

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INTRODUCTION

After the official permission of Christianity (after 313 AD) till 6th AD paganism was still alive as a cultural guideline in the consciousness of Roman elite. This time is characterized by the using of some ancient myths and mythological personages by orthodox Christians not during the ideological debate, but as a necessary cultural heritage.

Generally the attitude of Christian Church to the ancient cultural tradition was defined in the fourth century AD by the education of its leaders and their personal attitude to the pagan past. As long as the pagan education was kept and while the church leaders were people educated within the framework of the ancient cultural traditions, the tolerant attitude to these traditions remained in whole.

SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

Present study deals with some personalities from the fourth to sixth centuries AD representing the stratum of aristocrats-intellectuals. They were Christians, nevertheless they were bearers of classical traditions (Ausonius, Paulinus of Nola, Sidonius Apollinaris, Prudentius, Paulinus of Pella, Fulgentius the Mythographer). Indeed, such authors like Symmachus, Claudian and Rutilius Namatianus are out of the frame of our work. Chronologically they belonged to the period of Late Antiquity, but they were pagan. More attractive for us the persons who were Christians with pagan background. So, the main criteria for such selection are: the belonging to stratum of aristocrats-intellectuals, the belonging to Christianity, the rhetorical education, the literary activity, the usage of Latin, the dwelling in the Western part of Empire for focusing our attention on defined territory.

It makes quite reasonable in our case to use the achievements of the historians working within the frame of "microhistory" (Levi, 1991; Ginzburg, 1993), history of everyday life considering sensations and habits, religion impact, patriotic sentiment and human behaviour.

Such historians focus on some concrete aspects of the past which are easier to observe. They try to reveal behavioural alternatives of an individual, to elicit his personal choice, its motives and implications. It is the plenitude of such "microdata" that lets track down an individual's changes and their relations with the social environment.

It is possible to use the hermeneutical method within the frame of "microhistorical" approach. It means "getting accustomed to the epoch" for reconstruction of its unified image, comprehending that epoch from within. It is possible to understand the most real picture of any period of time by way of reconstructing mentality, disclosing everyday life of different social and age groups, exposing features of an individual's spiritual life through the study of individual behaviour motives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As well as according to other studies (P. Brown (1993, 1998), Av. Cameron (1993), G. Bowersock (1990), V. Ukolova (1989, 2010), P. Shkarenkov (2004) at al.) the peculiarity of the postclassical world is in the cultural continuity of the Europe from the Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages. Meanwhile, as for any transition stage, two main qualitative characteristics are tradition and transitivity of historical process and elements of culture under complex interaction of different factors (the dynamic model "continuity-discontinuity"). Why? After the second century AD, during the third-fourth-fifth centuries Roman state became less and less powerful. The Roman provinces fell away one by one. We may see the changes in ideology as well. The old civic values were replaced of state (imperial) values. People were disappointed with pagan gods because of destabilization of all social spheres.

The Christianity as a new religion suggested the equality of all people in Christ: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" ((Gal. 3:28) and above all the paradise in heaven.

Hereby the Christian Church became the state Church instead the pagan *collegia*. In the fourth - fifth centuries the Church took over many functions of the decomposing state, and above all the organization of municipal self-government and self-defense against the barbarians (as an examples we may consider the activity of Severinus in Noricum, Augustine in Africa, Synesius in Cyrene, Sidonius in Gaul, etc.)

So, the Christianity met Paganism. On the one hand we have the new popular religion, on the other hand we have rich Antique heritage.

The interaction of two religions in the period after the official permission of Christianity till sixth century AD is characterized by the using of some ancient myths and mythological personages by orthodox Christians not during the ideological debate, but as a necessary cultural heritage.

So, here we can see elements of pagan and Christian traditions. What are they?

One of well-known Russian historian Mihail Kazakov (1996: 111-114) thinks that the preservation of ancient traditions in everyday consciousness of Roman Christians is reflected in the combination of pagan ideas with Christian symbols in the art (for example, on the gravestones), literature (the use of images of ancient mythology, even by the fathers of the Church), philosophy (Neoplatonism). The usage of some pagan ideas in daily life and even in religion itself, first of all it means the revival of the ancient polytheism in the cult of Christian saints. Moreover, we can see the compliance with ancient traditions in ecclesiastical policy, for example, the compliance with ancient models: Emperor as the head of religious cult (caesaropapism); in the origin of Arian teaching and debates we can see an attempt of rational interpretation of the idea of Christian trinity. At last, the tendency to adapt the Church structure to administrative and territorial structure of the Roman Empire.

Kazakov says about our problem on a large scale, within the scope of state, and names some elements. But we study our question within the frame of "microhistory", we should have a look at the writings of our late Latin authors. So, according to it we reveal some pagans and Christian elements. The first ones are mythological stories and names, "Imperial Idea", conception of "Aeternitas Romae", service for the benefit of state, old traditions of everyday life (hunting, games, feasts, etc.), rhetorical techniques such as complex sentence structure, metaphors, allegories, etc. The second are observance of the Ten Commandments, observance of church rituals (to pray, to attend service), ministrations, usage of neologisms connecting with Christian terminology, new traditions of everyday life (to deny worldly pleasures, to keep the fast, to pray, reading of Christian literature, aid-giving behavior etc.).

Antique tradition implied the presence of particular forms of translating its backbone elements:

- Rhetorical education promoting the formation of single (the same for all) Code of Conduct for all members of the intellectual elite and providing a means for transmitting an ancient heritage for future generations;
- Poetic tradition, lexis, trends of the Low (postclassical) Latin enriched the cultural constituent of medieval civilization.

This model was the basis of the mentality of late Roman high society in the Latin West, especially for the educated part of the so-called intellectuals. The Roman aristocracy was the main force that kept the classical tradition and transmitted it to their successors.

With the expansion of Christianity in the Latin language appears a whole layer of neologisms to describe Christian concepts: *salvator, carnalis, spiritualis, vivificare, glorificare, sanctificare*, etc.

As we can see the situation in the social sphere of *Pax Romana* during the period from the end of fourth to the beginning of sixth centuries was largely determined by the attitude of citizens to religion. Even ethnic differences had no such significance like religion. So, Late Roman saw all things in the light of religious opposition (the Pagans / the Christians or the Orthodox Christians / the Arians).

The representatives of the intellectual elite were not the exception. Who were they?

By the beginning of the fourth century AD the imperial aristocracy, coming from the provinces, dominated Rome, and by means of that the City lost part of its historical superiority. The provincial elite, replacing the old Roman aristocracy, sought to preserve eternal ideal, which for them could not be separated from Rome. In the Late Antiquity the representatives of the intellectual elite played the role of successors in preserving of the Roman identity, like Pliny and Tacitus.

These people were united not only (and not so much) due to belonging to the Roman nobility, but rather due to the system of rhetorical education («*Paideia*» in Greek, "*Urbanitas*" in Latin), cultivated both as a cognitive component of consciousness and the whole system of social and cultural values, typical for Classical Antiquity.

The elements of the opposing religions (paganism and Christianity) rarely occurred in the texts of the same author in pure form, as a rule, they existed in a complex combination completely individualized for each writer.

So, the aim of present research is to represent the three types (models) of coexistence of pagan and Christian elements in the mentality of Late Antiquity's elite.

The first group named *passive-eclectic* because of the peaceful combination of contrary elements and their using as "building material" for self-expression.

In Ausonius' and Sidonius' works the opposite elements combined in chaotic order. Ausonius (c. 310 – c. 395) was born in Bordeaux, he belonged to one of the land-owning Gallo-Roman families of southwestern Gaul. Ausonius received an excellent education at Bordeaux and at Toulouse, where his uncle was a professor.

Let's have a look on Ausonius poem *Cupido Cruciatu*s (Cupid Crucified). We can see where this mixing straight in the title. On the pages of his works were close to each other *cento nuptialis* (nuptial poems), panegyrics for emperors, epitaphs on the heroes who took part in the Trojan War, epigrams and *Oratio*. His close friends were Symmachus and Paulinus of Nola, the first was ardent defender of pagan past and religion and the latter was true Christian and priest. Ausonius carried on correspondence with Paulinus and tried to return him to the place where the Boeotian muses predominate.

His poetry is full of mythological stories and names – gods and goddesses surround him like a living creatures (*Mosella*, 170-174; see also 180-190). Gods live in his poems both in plural (*Carm.*, VIII, 19-20) and singular (*Orat.* 1-5). His poem «Riddle of the Number Three» is grammatical verse finished with next words:

"Thrice drink! <...> Three hypostases in one God! <...>

Thrice thirty compose nine tens" (Griph. Tern. Num. 90).

These lines express quite light-minded attitude to the Trinity and eclectic mixing of motifs.

As concerns Sidonius Apollinaris he was a poet bishop (c. 430 – after 489) born in Lugdunum (Lyon). We have nine books of Sidonius' letters and twenty four poems. These are the panegyrics, epithalamiums, poems "in case" (impromptu) and only one of them is Christian (*Carm.* XVII) "Thanksgiving to bishop Faustus". Though, at the beginning of it Sidonius asks the pagan Gods about the poetic inspiration.

Further, poet enumerates events of the Books of the Old and the New Covenant. In general, this poem shows us that Sidonius Apollinaris assimilated Christian superficially. Becoming the bishop Sidonius decided to leave his studies in poetry but he didn't keep the promise so long as occasionally put verses in his letters to friends and acquaintances.

Then, the tale about Emperor's exploits, thanksgiving to newly married or description of the estate are put into magnificent mythological frame: Rome complaints to Jupiter about privations and the king of the gods prophesies about the Emperor who save Rome; Pallas listens the news about the philosopher Polemius wedding and blesses the newly wed and so on.

Though, the Christian terminology is inherent in Sidonius letters, especially in Episcopal letters (books 6, 7, 8). Concerning the everyday life we can say according to the letters that it almost didn't change as compared it with pagan past. As a bishop he ruled the province like temporal governor because of the weakness of central power (Sid. Ep. II. 2; IV. 4; V. 17)

Sidonius' Latin was very refined as opposed to Saint Augustine, which preferred to use in his sermons vulgar Latin. According Sidonius, speech can be adequate on conditions that it possesses a refinement and harmony of rhetorical manners, modes of eloquence, grammar figures, poetic fiction, brilliant wordplay (I. 9, 1; II, 9, 4). So, for Ausonius and Sidonius we can state the passive-eclectic mixing here, certainly.

Another modification, interesting for us is the **contrast-nihilistic** then the authors who experienced "the crisis of identity or *"Psychomachia"* according to Prudentius (passionate assertion of old principles firstly, then assertion of new (Christian) ideas under the clean break with old (antique) principles). The striking example is majority of hagiography but we consider the representatives of nobility, so they are Prudentius, Paulinus of Nola, Paulinus of Pella.

Prudentius recognizes and regrets that up to fifty seven years he was a negligent Christian, in passage below we feel the motif of "Augustinian" repentance (Praefatio, 7-11).

The constant internal struggle is inherent for works of these authors, this struggle expressed in opposition between Christianity and paganism, spiritual and secular.

Prudentius sincerely believes in God, compares the paganism with carrion or dead body and "vile evil" (Per., IV, 100-101), however, he continues to appreciate the outstanding talented men of the pagan world. He condemns the commitment of Julian the Apostate to idolatry, but recognizes his achievements as a ruler and commander (Apoth. 449), leading to controversy with Symmachus, he fairly assesses his eloquence (Contr. Symm. I, 622). He insists on the prohibition of idolatry, but doesn't mind the statues of gods as works of art (Contr. Symm., I, 499).

The next figure is Paulinus of Nola (ca. 354 – 431) who survived a similar crisis of identity like Prudentius. He was a Roman senator who converted to a severe monasticism in 394 and was recognized as a saint.

His renunciation of wealth and a senatorial career in favour of a Christian ascetic and philanthropic life was held up as an example by many of his contemporaries, including Augustine, Jerome, and Ambrose. After his conversion he wrote to his friend and teacher, the poet Ausonius, affirming his friendship but insisting on the priorities of his new life: "...Hearts, which devoted to Christ forever, Are shut for Phoebus <...> Because the man without Christ is a shadow and ashes..." (Epist. ad Auson. 30-40).

But he recalls with a light sadness all that relates to the pagan past of Rome: senatorial togas, curial insignia. He believes that all signs of the past in spite of the fact that they were pagan will "continue to shine as untarnishable gold forever" (Epist. ad Auson. 250).

Paulinus of Pella was a nobleman and Christian poet of the fifth century. Probably he was the grandson of the poet Ausonius. He underwent some kind of religious conversion when he was 45 (ca. 421) and was

baptized. In his old age he was a firm Christian and at the age of eighty-three Paulinus composed his autobiographical *Eucharisticos*. His poem is a thanksgiving, although illness, loss of property (he lost all his Gallic estates), and dangers from barbarian invasion occupy more space in it than do days of happiness. Perhaps, hard life circumstances forced him to adopt Christianity as last resort for hopeless.

Valery Bryusov, the famous Russian philologist, translating *Eucharisticos*, called her "Confessions of a loser of the fourth century". *Eucharisticos* is thanks to God for Paulinus' life this way not worse.

In poem we can see the same motifs like in Paulinus of Nola verse and Prudentius. On one hand, he adopted the Christianity with all his heart, at the beginning of his poem he turns to God with ask to help with his writing (*Euchar.*, 4-7). On another hand, he can't forget the brilliant past of Rome (38-39, 70-71).

Thus, the poem of Paulinus Pellaeus is the story of world-view transformation under the impact of numerous failures and misfortunes.

The third type is **respectful-condescending** intended the use of various antique themes by strong Christians (including hierarchs) not in ideological polemics, but as nonhazardous cultural heritage (e.g. St. Isidore of Seville).

Here we mean firstly works of Fabius Planciades Fulgentius (5-th - 6-th centuries), well-known as Fulgentius the Mythographer who considered antique mythology and tradition as a subject for study by Christians.

Very little is known about the life of Fulgentius other than the few references he makes to himself in his own works. His style of Latin, knowledge of Greek, and his view on classical authors suggests that he was likely educated in North Africa.

The mythographers of Late Antiquity recast ancient heroes for their own purposes. Their urgent mission was to discredit the core meaning of stories that had long defined their own civilization and the place of human beings in the cosmos. Through various allegorical methods, they aimed to demolish the old understanding of these pagan texts and replace them with radically different Christian interpretations.

Generally known as his chief work, the "*Mythologies*" is a series of legends told in three books, all three of which are introduced by their own prologue. There are a total of 50 chapters, each briefly explaining a classical myth and imposing on it an allegorical interpretation. In his opening prologue, Fulgentius claims that the purpose in writing the "*Mythologies*" was to strip the classic Greek stories of all their fictitious and meaningless details in order to reveal the obscured truths they contain.

According to Fulgentius, the only excuse for mythology, although it is rubbish, is there is no such rubbish, which would not be a useful test for the Christian, and every fiction has its own truth. The whole mythology is, therefore, another existence of morality and nature and it deserves the solution and interpretation.

The content of each myth Fulgentius correlates with the list of virtues and vices, resulting his moralistic arguments to the logical conclusion, often quite artificial. In the fable "About nine Muses" (I, 15) Fulgentius argues that "the nine Muses are the images of learning and knowledge", then lists all the nine Muses, giving each of them absolutely fantastic meaning.

In the worldview of firm Christians like Fulgentius Antiquity is a "dead body", which he zealous prepares for experimental purposes. The author uses ancient stories, searching, and sometimes inventing, didactic moments which is of great value for Christian morality.

SUMMARY

We considered the three types of coexistence of pagan and Christian elements in the Late Roman intellectuals' mentality. The first one was the *passive-eclectic* is that the peaceful combination of contrary elements and their using as "building material" for self-expression. This model demonstrated by Ausonius, Sidonius, Dracontius. The second is *contrast-nihilistic* implied the passionate assertion of old principles firstly, then assertion of new Christian ideas under the clean break with old Classical principles. Such type of thinking is appropriate to Prudentius, Paulinus of Nola, Paulinus of Pella. And the last type is *respectful-condescending* intended the use of various antique subjects by strong Christians not in ideological polemics, but as nonhazardous cultural heritage like in Fulgentius the Mythographer works.

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