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Late Polytheism in Turin and Trent: Some Methodological Remarks¹

by FRANCESCO MASSA

Christianisation, Polytheism, and the Alps

At least until the beginning of the fifth century, the Roman Empire was both multi-cultural and multi-religious. As the crucible of multiple processes of cohabitation and interaction, it represented a globalised and interconnected space in which local realities communicated with a broader Graeco-Roman *koine*.² How different Christian groups spread throughout the Roman world must be analysed in their historical and religious context. Christianity was a component of imperial religions that grew in importance from the third century onwards.³ The study of “Christianisation”, a truly ubiquitous notion in Late Antiquity studies,⁴ should include these historical processes. Generally speaking, Christianisation is interpreted as the Christian transformation of all the domains of the Roman world, from literary and iconographic genres to the organisation of society, from legislative procedures to religious traditions. However, Christianisation is a fluid concept. Some studies insist on the beginning of the process: the first attestations of Christian groups in a territory, or “evangelisation”. Others consider Christianisation as the end of a process of the Christian transformation of a given reality.⁵

It would be difficult to deny the existence of a transformation of Roman society activated by the dissemination of Christian beliefs and by the presence of Christians in the imperial court from the fourth century onwards. Yet, since Christianity at that time was not a single entity consisting in a coherent set of doctrines, we cannot postulate that a Christian wave overwhelmed traditional Roman society. Like every ancient and present identity, ancient Christian identity was in continuous construction, through a comparison (or competition) with the Graeco-Roman and Jewish traditions.⁶ The notion of Christianisation is problematic because it suggests a one-way phenomenon in which Christianity modifies the “pagan” world. In reality, even if we postulate the existence of this phenomenon, it would have been slow and open-ended.⁷ If the Empire was gradually Christianised in a legal sense, this institutional transformation into a Christian Empire does not imply that traditional cults had definitively disappeared since they survived for a long time in various territories of the Empire. Thus, one cannot isolate the process of Christianisation from the role of traditional cults.

Already in ancient times, Christian tradition recognised that the new religion had penetrated the Alpine region at a slower pace than elsewhere. At the very beginning of the fifth century, Sulpicius Severus wrote that “the cult of God had been accepted somewhat late beyond the Alps” (*serius trans Alpes Dei religione suscepta*).⁸ Christian authors deemed that the first martyrdom had taken place in this area under Marcus Aurelius. As we shall see, such an image goes hand in hand with the presence of a more tenacious polytheism in these regions of the Empire, which resisted the process of Christianisation until at least the fifth century.

“Last Pagans” and “Late Paganism”

Before focusing on the area of the Alps, one ought to review the definition of “late paganism” and the “last pagans”. These expressions have been somewhat canonised by two publications: Pierre Chuvin’s *Chronique des derniers païens* and Alan Cameron’s *The Last Pagans of Rome*, respectively published in 1990 and 2011.⁹ I will focus on three aspects of the rich historiographical debate generated by these works:¹⁰ the chronology, the vocabulary in use today to describe late polytheism and the available sources.

First, chronology. Did “late paganism” begin from the reign of Constantine (312–337) or from that of Theodosius I (379–395)? The perspective changes radically depending on the chosen starting point. One approach, still prevalent, considers that the ‘death’ or the ‘twilight’ of paganism started under Constantine and finished under Theodosius I, with the laws promulgated in 391–392.¹¹ These studies often quote the famous constitution of November 8, 392, promulgated by Theodosius and his sons Arcadius and Honorius and addressed to Flavius Rufinus, *magister officiorum* and the praetorian prefect of the East since September 392.¹² The constitution banned anyone from practicing bloody sacrifices, but also discreet gestures of fidelity to paganism, like to “venerate his lar with fire, his genius with wine, his Penates with fragrant odors [...], burn lights to them, place incense before them, or suspend wreaths for them.”¹³ As Rita Lizzi Testa already noted, this legislative text was likely a means to settle accounts between Flavius Rufinus and the pagan Tatian,

the previous praetorian prefect. Also, it is unlikely that the constitution was widespread in the West, not only because the addressee was the prefect of the East, but also because in August 392 the Frankish general Arbogast had already appointed Eugene as emperor.¹⁴

As important as it was, this text could not be used to establish a sort of ‘ban’ on traditional religions, and even less bring about the ‘death’ of paganism in the Alpine region, and more generally in the Western Roman Empire in the last years of the fourth century.¹⁵ In fact, legislation against pagans continued well into the fifth and sixth centuries. On April 9, 423 Theodosius II promulgated a law against the *paganos qui supersunt* who were considered by now few in number.¹⁶ Whereas a cursory read of the situation might suggest this was the *coup de grace* for an already dying religion, a more thorough investigation leads to a very different conclusion. The law’s addressee was the praetorian prefect and consul of 423, Asclepiodotus, the uncle of Theodosius’ wife Eudocia and thus a member of the imperial family.¹⁷ One should not forget that one century later, in 527, Emperor Justinian I still felt compelled to enact a law against “pagans” (“Ελληνες”) “who attempt to introduce polytheism” (τοῖς τὴν πολυθίαν πειρωμένοις εἰσάγειν).¹⁸ While polytheistic cults certainly declined prominently in the last decades of the fourth century, this process was far slower than many studies on Late Antiquity have claimed. The picture relayed by the *Theodosian Code* is influenced by the fact that public sacrifices occupied the most important place.¹⁹ Moreover, one cannot explain the whole phenomenon as an effect of the Christianisation of the Empire. As William Van Andringa pointed out for Gaul, many sanctuaries had stopped functioning by the second half of the third century for reasons that were unrelated to Christian religion.²⁰ The same can be said for Spain, where evidence on public religion stops, with some exceptions, at the third century.²¹

The second aspect is the use of the expression “last pagans.” It has often been pointed out that the term “pagans” is problematic as a Christian creation, a label used to express religious otherness, never used by the *cultores deorum* to self-define themselves or to claim their religious affiliation.²² Much has already been written on this topic so I will not discuss the “pagans” category here.²³ Instead, I will focus on a less-studied aspect, the epithet “last.” On one level, the adjective “last” suggests the idea that these pagans were destined to disappear. Chronology is fundamental here: there is substantial difference between applying the term “last pagans” to those who were still practising traditional cults when the institutional transformation of the Christian Empire was almost complete in the early fifth century as opposed to those who practiced traditional cults in the middle of the fourth century. In the latter case, the pagans are viewed as destined to be overwhelmed by the “triumph of Christianity” from the time of Constantine’s successors, if not that of Constantine himself. The expression “last pagans” also hints at a sort

of weariness or exhaustion of polytheism that was allegedly no longer able to respond to the challenges of a changing world or that had somehow recognised the impossibility of confronting the victorious new Christian religion on equal terms. Paradoxically, it would be preferable to speak of ‘first pagans’ since this terminology did not exist before Christian authors first used the term *paganus* to indicate polytheists in the second half of the fourth century.²⁴

Finally, one must consider the available sources. When working on late antique polytheism, one has the feeling that around the middle of the fourth century there was a sudden blackout in the evidence and that the documentation reappeared only a few decades later, around 380–390, when the Empire had become Christian. The decrease in epigraphic evidence is the main reason for this scarceness of sources, but it preceded Constantine’s era.²⁵ Could the religions of the Empire really have been eradicated within a decade or two? This is what the Christian sources between the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth centuries assert when they describe a victorious Christianity sitting on top of a pagan world in ruins. Theories explaining this disappearance emerged in the Theodosian age, such as the theory of the “collapse of paganism” found in the *Ecclesiastical History* by Rufinus of Aquileia at the beginning of the fifth century:

Idolorum cultus, qui Constantini institutione et deinceps neglegi et destrui coepitus fuerat, eodem imperante conlapsus est.

The cult of idols, which by Constantine’s decision had begun to be neglected and demolished, collapsed during his [scil. Theodosius’] reign.²⁶

This Christian perspective prefigures the still-prevalent historiographic interpretation that places the beginning of the decline at the time of Constantine and the *coup de grace* under Theodosius. But there is something more in Rufinus’ conception of the “end of paganism”: his use of the expression *conlapsus est* implies that ancient polytheism collapsed on its own, suddenly and without leaving any traces. Rufinus’ narrative comes closest to the ‘myths’ about the end of polytheism in the works of Christian Greek authors, for instance, the myth of the death of Great Pan, narrated by Plutarch and interpreted by Eusebius of Caesarea as foretelling the “end of paganism”²⁷ or announcements of the end of paganism claimed by Christian sources to have been pronounced by pagan oracles, like the famous announcement that the Arian historian Philostorgius attributes to the oracle of Delphi at the time of the emperor Julian.²⁸

It is worth noting that when documentary sources are available, the presence and vitality of traditional cults are attested, even after the Theodosian laws.²⁹ This is clear in late fourth century inscriptions in Rome or Ostia,³⁰ or African cities at the beginning of the fifth century,³¹ or

again in the ritual practices celebrated by Neoplatonic philosophers in mid-fifth-century Athens.³² Fifth century Christian texts – especially homilies and letters – are also important evidence, in that they present pagans not as a theological presence, but as inhabitants of the religious landscape in the East and the West.³³

Beyond the attestations of pagan practices, the real problem is how to interpret these documents about the traditional rituals in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Ancient polytheism was not a religion as we understand it today. References to the religions of the Roman Empire ordinarily use a schema composed of three terms, Christianity, Judaism and paganism. This way of thinking, describing and analysing up the religions of the imperial period is neither neutral nor purely descriptive but rather derives from Christian attempts to organise and classify the religious diversity of the time and to show the existence of three groups with well-established boundaries. This taxonomy is opposed to an everyday reality where religious identities were more fluid.³⁴

The practices that we call polytheistic were mainly

related to the cultural and social identities of individuals. Certainly, during the fourth century, some authors opposed the Christians through religious practices. However, often individuals who practiced certain rituals did not question the kind of religious identity that was attached to these practices, since rites could be the expression of the civic identity of individuals, and could define their status within society, which also explains why many Christians continue to celebrate traditional rituals.³⁵ We will see this in the examples analysed below.

Oriental Cults and Sacred Mountains in the Alps?

There is little information about the polytheistic cults celebrated in the late antique Alpine region. Speaking of the representations of the divine in Late Antiquity as part of the history of the sacred in Cisalpine Gaul, Silvia Giorcelli Bersani aptly stressed that archaeological traces are too few to draw a map of the sacred areas.³⁶ Some studies have collected available sources and organised them on a



Fig. 1 Excavation of the mithraeum at Martigny (VS).

regional basis.³⁷ Where sources do exist, the presence of traditional cults in Late Antiquity is also clearly attested in the Alpine region. A few cases in point: the mithraeum of *Forum Claudi Vallensium*, today's Martigny, in Valais, the activity of which is archaeologically attested until at least the beginning of the fifth century;³⁸ the sanctuary of Isis, at *Industria*, on the right bank of the Po, less than 40 km northeast of Turin, active at least until the beginning of the fifth century;³⁹ even some places of worship in honour of Mithras in Trentino or Aquileia (Fig. 1);⁴⁰ and other places, such as the cave in Zillis-Reischen in the Grisons (Fig. 2).⁴¹

These examples are often cited to highlight the vitality of the so-called “Oriental cults” in the area of the Roman Alps even in Late Antiquity.⁴² However, these cults were not more prevalent than others. Indeed, the sanctuary of Minerva in Breno, near Brescia, was active at least until the beginning of the fifth century,⁴³ and similarly, the temple of Jupiter on the Grand Saint Bernard Pass, the road that connects *Augusta Praetoria* (Aosta) with *Forum*

Claudii Vallensium.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, some scholars still interpret the presence of the “Oriental gods” in this area as a sign of a rivalry between these divinities and Christianity, as if these cults were better able than others to resist the spread of the new religion.⁴⁵ I will not go into the much discussed fact that these cults were fully integrated into Roman religion and, with the exception of Mithras, were part of Roman public cults.⁴⁶ Instead, I would like to focus on how ancient Christian authors distorted certain facts. They insisted at length on the role of the so-called oriental deities in the fourth century: for instance, Firmicus Maternus’ *De errore profanarum religionum* in the 340s and at the end of the fourth century, Ambrose of Milan, Jerome, and Augustine of Hippo, who presented Isis and Osiris, Mithras, Cybele, Attis and partly Dionysus as the most vital and important deities of late antique polytheism.⁴⁷ Far from providing a neutral description of traditional religion, the emphasis placed on these deities reflected their apologetic agenda. By insisting on oriental cults, Christian authors underscored the barbaric (i.e.,

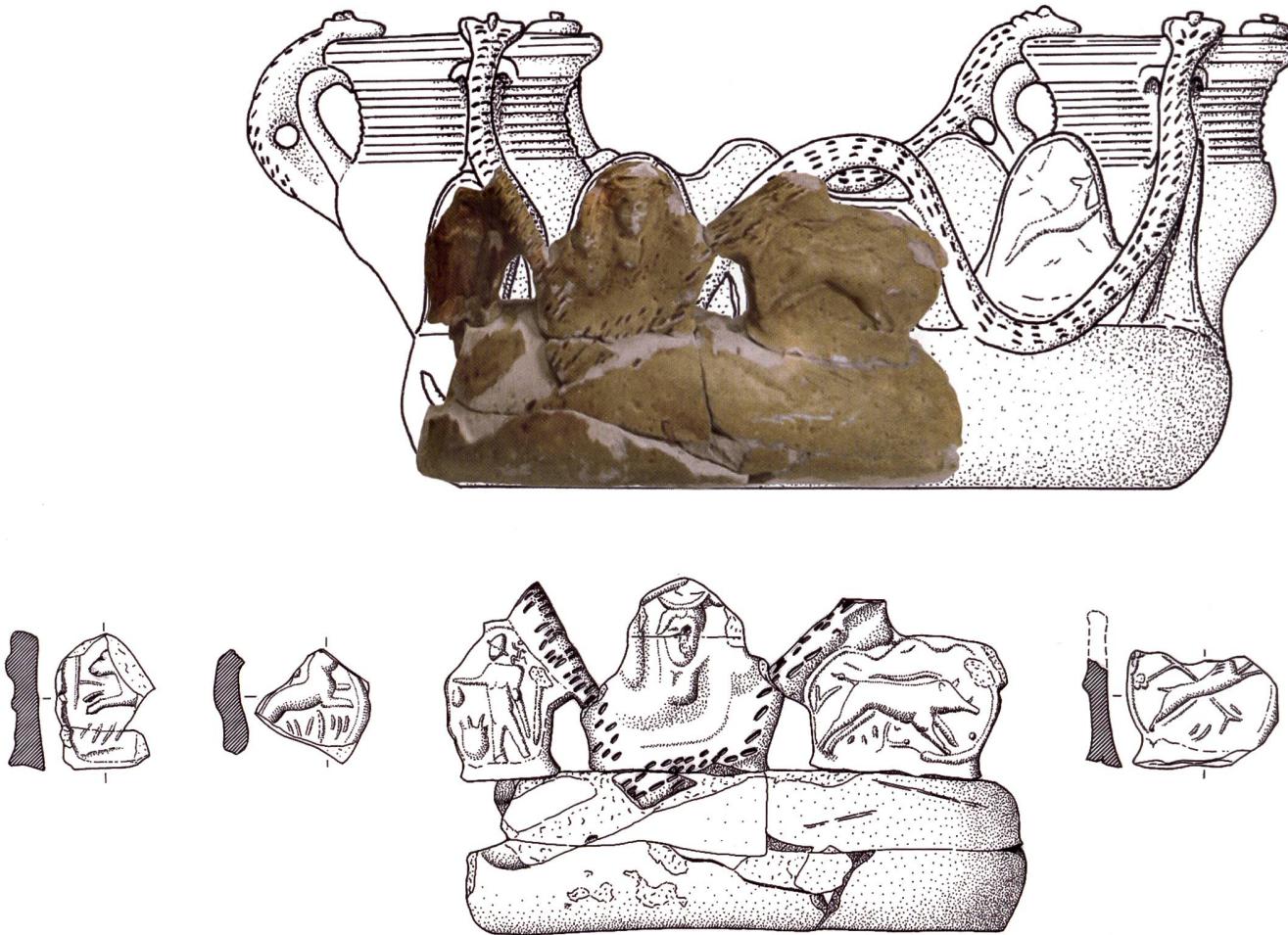


Fig. 2 Three-cup vessel with snake figures drinking out of the cups, presumably used in polytheistic rituals in the Zillis cave. Terracotta, middle/late fourth century, Zillis (GR).

foreign) element of polytheism in order to stress that Roman religion was already moribund since pagans went out looking for cults elsewhere.

This distorted account has influenced the approach to religious transformations in modern historiography. Following Franz Cumont and his *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, imperial and late antique polytheism have long been and still are described as a tired religion incapable of responding to the needs of the Empire's inhabitants.⁴⁸ For this reason, the introduction of oriental divinities, interpreted as saviour gods, would have contributed to triggering a process of 'spiritualising' paganism, even to the point of so-called pagan monotheism.⁴⁹ It is as if it was necessary to upgrade the doctrinal content of late antique polytheism.⁵⁰ This dynamic would have determined a pagan rebirth or reaction in the second half of the fourth century, especially around the figure of emperor Julian. To quote Robert Turcan, these Oriental cults would have allowed "à un paganisme obsolète de redresser la tête."⁵¹ As mystery cults, they would have embodied the experience of a personal religion that allowed devotees to get closer to the deities, unlike the anonymous and cold rituals of civic religion.⁵²

One last methodological aspect should be pointed out when studying the polytheistic forms attested in the Alpine region: the relationship between the so-called sacredness of the mountain and the ritual practices celebrated in this geographical environment. A phenomenological approach to the study of religion has often seen mountain areas as privileged spaces for the expression of human religiosity regardless of historical or cultural context. From this perspective, mountains as a geographical element would be sacred in two respects: first, as a meeting point between heaven and earth, their height and verticality symbolically associated with the transcendent and the superhuman, and secondly, as the favourite seat of most divinities⁵³ as well as a privileged space for theophanies. Without doubt, mountains could be the place par excellence for otherness and even exoticism.⁵⁴ However, they shared this feature with other invulnerable and inaccessible places (caves, forests, etc.), in association with the idea of natural frontiers and unknown places.⁵⁵

Studies of Alpine religions often portray mountain valleys as places of epiphany and consequently a context that exalts devotional practices.⁵⁶ Yet, according to the sources of the Roman period that illustrate the presence of cults in the Alpine region, these spaces present a perfect continuity with the religious practices of the Empire, even when it comes to places like the temple of Jupiter *Poeninus*, probably "the highest sanctuary in the Roman world."⁵⁷ The temple was conceived as proof of the civilizing power of Rome and not as the expression of a mountain sacrality different from other Roman ritual expressions. Likewise, "Oriental cults" were perfectly integrated into the Alpine

region as Roman ritual practices, without any cult modifications due to the geographical context.⁵⁸

This is not to say that ancient sources did not at times attribute to mountains, and the Alps in particular, a special 'sacred' status, or that the religiosity of mountains was not a topic of propaganda.⁵⁹ Even in Antiquity, the wild and unexplored Alps were associated with the expeditions of Heracles, the civilizing hero.⁶⁰ However, I do not believe that this sacredness was connected to the mountain either in a specific or a universal way. In ancient polytheisms, 'nature' was not the most important category, since only territory mattered, as observed by Marcel Detienne.⁶¹ This is not to say that the natural component did not influence religious practices, but only that cults adapted to contexts in which they were practiced and that mountains did not have a more sacred value than other places. Vigilius of Trent, which we will analyse presently, aptly illustrates this issue.

The Distorted Christian Mirror: Vigilius of Trent and Maximus of Turin

The second part of this article analyses passages from two Christian authors that provide information on traditional cults celebrated in two dioceses of the *Italia Annonaria*. These are two letters of Vigilius bishop of Trent, and sermons of Maximus, bishop of Turin. Despite their polemical and misleading nature, Christian sources are often the only surviving ones to transmit some elements of traditional religious practice in these regions.⁶²

Fumosa gentilitas in the Val di Non

In letters to Simplicianus, bishop of Milan, and to John Chrysostom, the archbishop of Constantinople,⁶³ Vigilius, bishop of Trent, reports on the martyrdom of three clerics, Alexander, Sisinius, and Martyrius, who were involved in the evangelization of *Anaunia* in the Val di Non, a land about thirty kilometers from Trent. Scholars usually date the episode to 397. Other contemporary Christian authors also recount the event, proving that the episode had a certain resonance in the cities of Northern Italy.⁶⁴

Much has been written about the significance of Christianisation in this area and about creating a tradition with these three martyrs as the founders of Christianity in those lands.⁶⁵ Some recent studies have also investigated the Latin text's many philological problems.⁶⁶ I want to understand the role of the Alpine context and the representation of the cults celebrated in the very last years of the fourth century and at the beginning of the fifth century by the *natio barbara*, barbarian people, as Vigilius calls them, who inhabited the Val di Non.⁶⁷

In the letter Vigilius sent to John Chrysostom, the natural context of the Val di Non is described in detail: it is a *locus arduus*, "closed by very narrow gorges and with

virtually only one point of access" (*angustis faucibus interclusus, uno paene aditu relaxatus*). This place "offers with its natural setting a kind of spectacle" (*spectaculi genus exhibet scena naturae*).⁶⁸ The natural wonder offered by the site's layout transforms *Anaunia* into a perfect scene for the setting of a martyrdom. The bishop uses mountain context to create a particular naturalistic and geographical atmosphere, but the ritual practices have nothing 'mountainous' about them. In the letters of the Christian author, the mountain does not seem to be endowed with any particular sacredness, or to be in closer proximity with the divine, as assumed by a phenomenological approach to the study of religion. The ritual practices staged in the letters are Roman, with no natural context affecting the ritual. On the contrary, Vigilius insists on the way in which the site resembles an amphitheater, making it ideal for a theatrical celebration of martyrdom.⁶⁹

In the *Letter to Simplicianus*, the valley is in the grip of *fumosa gentilitas*, an impressive and unique expression that indicates a paganism blackened by the smoke of the sacrifices that continue to be celebrated.⁷⁰ As we know, sacrifice in its various forms was the core ritual of Roman religion, shaping and organising not only the relationship between humans and the divine but also the hierarchies within the human and divine communities.⁷¹ This is why the first step in the anti-pagan policy of the Christian emperors was to condemn public sacrifices.⁷²

The reason for putting one of the three Christian priests to death in *Anaunia* was not his Christian faith per se, but the fact that one of them, Alexander, prevented the local Christians from participating in a traditional ritual. He was thought to have forbidden offerings from being given to the devil from a Christian's house (*cum dari hostias diabolo de christiani domo fideli ministerio prohiberet*); he had also banned the funeral lustration custom (*lustri feralis auxilia proferri*).⁷³ We are faced with what we might call a misunderstanding between the fluid religious identity that was the norm in Antiquity and the rigidly established and defined identity that the three Christian evangelisers (and the Christian authorities) wanted to impose. Alexander wanted to interfere with a public ritual that involved the entire community. The occasion is the ceremony of the *lustrum*, and commentators have often identified this ceremony with the lustral ritual of *Ambarvalia*, whose name meant "procession around agricultural land."⁷⁴ However, as John Scheid pointed out, the term does not necessarily mean purification, but "un rite de circumambulation suivi d'un sacrifice qui constitue et protège l'entité ou le groupe concerné."⁷⁵ The main issue is not the fertility of the fields but the good health of the community.

In Vigilius' letters, the issue is not even the 'conversion' to Christianity. The bishop of Trent wants to show us that one cannot be Christian and continue to celebrate pagan rites. He wants to rule out the possibility that pagan and Christian cults can coexist. The three Christian priests opposed the *contaminatio* between pagans and Christians

which must have been a common situation at the end of the fourth century. In fact, many of those who called themselves Christians did not understand why they could not celebrate a pagan cult.⁷⁶

This Christian participation in traditional civic rituals should not come as a surprise. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how anyone could be part of the town community without effectively participating in traditional religious festivals.⁷⁷ The question, moreover, was at the center of Christian reflection at the beginning of the fifth century, as shown by a passage in the *Consultationes Zachei christiani et Apollonii philosophi*. In this dialogue between a Christian and a pagan philosopher, the author polemically asks Christians why they worship pagan images "even in public worship" (*etiam publica adoratione*). The text is also critical of Christian authorities who do not prevent these practices: *cur hoc uestri non prohibent sacerdotes?*⁷⁸ When Christian authors speak of image veneration and public ceremonies, it is extremely likely that these were ceremonies in which sacrifices played an important role.⁷⁹ As we shall see, *contaminatio* is also condemned by Maximus in Turin in the same period.

After killing two of the three priests and leaving Alexander for dead, the people of *Anaunia* turned their fury against the "religious buildings" (*religiosa fastigia*), another unique expression. After destroying the church that had been built in the village, a pyre was built to burn the bodies of the clerics. The fire of martyrdom was built "in the presence of the idol of old Saturn" (*in conspectus idoli veteris Saturni*).⁸⁰ As Rita Lizzi Testa notes, the local population that Vigilius represents as an expression of *rusticitas* is actually perfectly integrated into the Roman world. In 46 AD, Emperor Claudius had granted the inhabitants of *Anaunia* Roman citizenship;⁸¹ they were also integrated into the *municipium* of Trent.⁸² The insistence on the savage aspects of their behaviour, and especially their religious practices, is a rhetorical strategy that presents paganism as violent and savage, driven entirely by archaic agrarian traditions. The reference to Saturn also fits into this narrative.

This is not to deny that the cult of Saturn still played a role in the Val di Non in the late fourth century. In today's villages of Cles and Romeno, the excavated material led to postulate the existence of a place of worship in honour of that god.⁸³ In the epiclesis attested by epigraphy (*dominus, augustus, sanctus*), there may also be that of *patrius* in a third-century inscription.⁸⁴ Such a denomination could emphasize the 'national' character of the god and his importance within the community.⁸⁵ If this is true, the burning of the bodies of Christian clerics before the idol of Saturn, as recounted by Vigilius, could be read as punishment of those who sought to endanger the civic identity of the community. Despite Vigilius' polemical strategy, his letters offer us a small trace of the cults that were still practiced in the Alpine valleys of the Rhaetian province.

Maximus and the Pagan Rituals in Turin

Moving from Val di Non to Turin and reading the sermons pronounced by bishop Maximus between 395 and 415, we may gain some valuable insights into the religious landscape of this subalpine reality.⁸⁶ Turin had acquired strategic importance in Late Antiquity. The city served as a place of passage between northern Italy and the transalpine territories.⁸⁷ Maximus' episcopate coincided with a period of political instability due to groups of barbarian soldiers that threatened northern Italian cities. The fear of the enemy's invasions was rife – as Maximus says, the sounds of war are heard in the city.⁸⁸

In his sermons, which focus on the city and its surroundings, he also mentions the traditional ritual practices of the Roman world on several occasions. These rites are not merely a homiletic topic. Maximus' sermons testify that traditional rituals were still celebrated, and that Christians also took part in them. In a recent analysis of the terms *gentiles* and *pagani* in Maximus' work, Esteban L. Noce pointed out that, contrary to what historiography takes for granted, the two terms cannot be considered synonyms. *Gentilitas* referred to the condition of those who did not yet know the Christian faith and were therefore the target of the bishop's evangelization; the term *pagani*, which appears only twice in the entire corpus, is applied to those who had rejected the teachings of the Christian religion.⁸⁹

One part of the pagan practice to which Maximus of Turin refers was connected to the fields. A particularly explicit example from *Sermon 107* is entirely devoted to the problem of the presence of pagan idols in the Turin estates and the fact that the owners tolerate their celebrations:

Tu igitur, frater, cum tuum sacrificare rusticus cernis nec prohibes immolare, peccas si non data copia at tamen permissa licentia.

Therefore, brother, when you see your farmhand sacrificing and do not forbid him from making his offering, you sin – if not by having provided the wherewithal, then by having permitted the liberty.⁹⁰

Once more, the problem for Christian authorities was the celebration of animal sacrifices. According to Maximus, they were still very common outside the city. Later in the same sermon, Maximus describes one of these rituals in greater detail:

Et si ad agrum processeris, cernis aras ligneas et simulacra lapidea congruens mysterium, ubi diis insensibilibus aris putrescentibus ministratur. Cum maturius vigilaveris et videris saucium vino rusticum, scire debes quoniam, sicut dicunt, aut dianaticus aut aruspex est. Insanum enim numen amentem solet habere pontificem. Talis enim sacerdos parat se vino ad plagas deae

suae, ut dum est ebrius, poenam suam miser ipse non sentiat. Hoc autem non solum de intemperantia[m] sed et de arte faciunt, ut minus vulnera sua doleant, dum vini ebrietate iactantur. Vanus plane vatis est, qui putat crudelitate astrarere pietatem.

And if you go out to the fields you notice wooden altars and stone images – appropriate for a mystery in which unfeeling gods are ministered to on rotten altars. When you rise early and see your farmhand suffering from a hangover, you should know that, as they say, he is either a devotee of Diana or a haruspex, for an insane spirit is accustomed to having a mad priest. Such a priest prepares himself with wine for his goddess' wounds, and since he is drunk the wretch does not feel his own pain. But they do this not only from intemperance but also according to plan, so that they may be less troubled by their wounds on succumbing to the drunkenness of wine. Vain indeed is the soothsayer who thinks to add to piety with cruelty. And how merciful is such a god to others when he is so bloodthirsty to his own priests?⁹¹

The landscape of the countryside around Turin undoubtedly bears the signs of a traditional ritual presence (Fig. 3). First, there are *arae* and *simulacra* to which sacrificial victims were offered. The verb "to immolate" indicates the act of putting an animal to death – Maximus treats the blood of the victims as an element that contaminates the land. Second, there are still pagan ritual agents. Maximus proposes two possible interpretations of the drunken farmer/priest. He could be a haruspex, a function that would link him to the sacrificial rites attributed to him, or a *dianaticus*. The latter term is a *hapax* that occurs only in this text by Maximus. Although the link with the theonym Diana is evident, it is not easy to identify exactly what the term refers to. Translators and commentators have often spoken of a "possessed priest of the goddess Diana" and have linked the cult "to the propitiatory rites of rural activity."⁹² From the point of view of the Christian imagery, this figure could also refer to the procession of the goddess Cybele and the practices of her followers.

This passage, as well as others,⁹³ is often used to assert the presence of polytheistic cults in the early fifth century. However, their presence would then have been 'confined' to the countryside because polytheism had become the religion of the peasants in contrast to a citizen Christianity practiced by the elite.⁹⁴ In the countryside, a sort of pagan resistance would have existed around an "ancestral religiosity."⁹⁵ This image of traditional religion reduced to the worship of *pagani*, as inhabitants of the *pagus*, is problematic.⁹⁶ Both in the West and the East, pagan personalities, who often held important public positions, still resided in the cities of the Empire. The polytheism of this time was not only a consequence of the conservatism in the less central areas, as revealed in the homilies that John Chrysostom addressed to the inhabitants of the rich and



Fig. 3 Relief of the Roman forest god Silvanus located in the vicinity of Turin, on the Val di Susa that connected the city with the Alps. Second century CE.

refined metropolis of Antioch. At least according to the account given by Libanius in his oration *Pro templis*, it would seem that the countryside was more subject to forced Christianisation perhaps because it was less subject to the control of the city authorities.⁹⁷

I believe that Maximus' depiction of rural paganism is actually linked to a broader social problem. The bishop was addressing first and foremost the wealthy public in the city who had landed estates in the countryside.⁹⁸ Through his emphasis on the practices of the peasants, the bishop speaks with the same ambiguous attitude of the more affluent inhabitants of the city. It is no accident that, again in *Sermon 63*, the presence of the *gentiles* is by no means limited to the countryside, but is in fact pervasive:

Non solum autem gentilium, sed et Iudeorum consortia vitare debemus, quorum etiam confabulatio est magna pollutio. Hii etenim arte quadam insinuant se hominibus domos penetrant ingrediuntur praetoria aures iudicum et publicas inquietant, et ideo magis praevalent, quo magis sunt inpidentes.

We ought to avoid, though, the companionship not only of the gentiles but also of the Jews, with whom

even a conversation is a great contamination. For with their artfulness they ingratiate themselves with people, get into homes, enter into the palaces of governors, and disturb the ears of judges and of the common folk, and the more shameless they are the more influential they are.⁹⁹

The passage is a fine example of the threefold division of the religious world into Gentiles, Jews and Christians.¹⁰⁰ Maximus presents Christianity's typical depiction of a world in which religious identities are rigidly defined. Pagans are not only drunken peasants. They are present in the houses of the city, in the courts; Maximus truly believes that they still have a strong agency if they are able to influence judges.¹⁰¹ The passage is also interesting because it shows Maximus' rhetorical strategy in his fight against paganism and, more broadly, religious otherness. Part of the reflection on pagans, as well as Jews and heretics, concerns the *pollutio*, the "contamination" to which Christians expose themselves even if merely speaking to them.¹⁰² The categories of pure and impure are common in the late antique religious debate: as Pierluigi Lanfranchi has highlighted, the analysis of Christian texts shows "a real, concrete, physical fear of pollution."¹⁰³

Conclusion

The limited traces of late polytheism in the territories of the Alps confirm the continuity of some rituals between the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth centuries. Regardless of the fact that the Christian sources were tainted with the polemical intent of ecclesiastical authorities, they insisted on the exclusive dimension of Christian identity, while the ritual reality was in fact certainly more varied.¹⁰⁴ Unfortunately, amongst the available sources dealing with the Alpine region none are by pagan authors, in contrast to other regions. For instance, in his *Life of Proclus*, Marinus describes the sacrificial practices performed by the Neoplatonic philosopher in the fifth century within the space of the city. However, the few available sources show that orthopraxy is at the heart of late antique polytheism and that the *cultores deorum* show great allegiance to these practices.

We do not know how the polytheisms of Late Antiquity would have developed if they had not been the focus of prohibitions by political and ecclesiastical authorities. However, we do know that, in the course of the institutional Christianisation of the empire, pagan religious practices were neither 'moribund', 'Christianised' or even organised as 'armed resistance' against the advances of Christianity.¹⁰⁵ Instead, the cults had to adapt to changes in society, as had always been the case. They also reconfigured some practices based on current legislative restrictions.

NOTES

- ¹ JÖRG RÜPKE, *Early Christianity out of, and in, Context*, in: *Journal of Roman Studies*, 99, 2009, pp. 182–193; FRANCESCO MASSA, *Tra la vigna e la croce. Dioniso nei discorsi letterari e figurativi cristiani (II–IV secolo)*, Stuttgart, 2014; JÖRG RÜPKE, *Pantheon: Geschichte der antiken Religionen*, Munich, 2016.
- ² On globalization, see RICHARD HINGLEY, *Globalizing Roman Culture. Unity, Diversity and Empire*, London 2005; FREDERICK G. NAEREBOUT, *Global Romans: Is Globalisation a Concept that is Going to Help Us Understand the Roman Empire?*, in: *Talanta*, 38/39, 2006/2007, pp. 149–170.
- ³ JÖRG RÜPKE, *Early Christianity out of, and in, Context*, in: *Journal of Roman Studies*, 99, 2009, pp. 182–193; FRANCESCO MASSA, *Tra la vigna e la croce. Dioniso nei discorsi letterari e figurativi cristiani (II–IV secolo)*, Stuttgart, 2014; JÖRG RÜPKE, *Pantheon: Geschichte der antiken Religionen*, Munich, 2016.
- ⁴ See, for instance, RAMSAY MACMULLEN, *Christianizing the Roman Empire. AD 100–400*, New Haven-London, 1984; ROBERT A. MARKUS, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, Cambridge-New York, 1990. More recently, see HARTMUT LEPPIN, *Christianisierungen im Römischen Reich: Überlegungen zum Begriff und zur Phasenbildung*, in: *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum*, 16, 2012, pp. 247–278; HERVÉ INGLEBERT / SYLVAIN DESTEPHEN / BRUNO DUMÉZIL (eds.), *Leproblème de la christianisation du monde antique*, Paris, 2010; EDWARD WATTS, *Christianization*, in: *Late Ancient Knowing*, eds. CATHERINE M. CHIN / MOULIE VIDAS, Berkeley, 2015, pp. 197–217.
- ⁵ See HERVÉ INGLEBERT, *Conclusions: De la cité rituelle à la communauté sacramentelle*, in: *Religious Practices and Christianization of the Late Antique City (4th–7th cent.)*, ed. AUDREY BUSINE, Leiden-Boston, 2015, pp. 221–237, esp. 221–222.
- ⁶ I do not join the historiographical debate on the definition of religious identities: for an overview, see STEEVE BÉLANGER, *L'étude des identités dans l'Antiquité est-elle utopique? Quelques réflexions épistémologiques et méthodologiques sur l'approche des phénomènes identitaires dans l'Antiquité*, in: *Cahiers d'histoire*, 31/2, 2012, pp. 87–111.
- ⁷ PETER BROWN, *Authority and the Sacred. Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World*, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 4–10.
- ⁸ Sulpicius Severus, *Chronicle* 2.32.1. On this passage, see MARK HUMPHRIES, *Communities of the Blessed. Social Environment and Religious Change in Northern Italy, AD 200–400*, Oxford, 1999, p. 176. More generally, on the Christianisation of the Northern Italy, see RITA LIZZI, *Ambrose's Contemporaries and the Christianization of Northern Italy*, in: *Journal of Roman Studies*, 80, 1990, pp. 156–173.
- ⁹ PIERRE CHUVIN, *Chronique des derniers païens. La disparition du paganisme dans l'Empire romain, du règne de Constantin à celui de Justinien*, Paris, 1990 (2011²); ALAN CAMERON, *The Last Pagans of Rome*, Oxford, 2011.
- ¹⁰ On Cameron's book, see the articles published in RITA LIZZI TESTA (ed.), *The Strange Death of Pagan Rome. Reflections on Historiographical Controversy*, Turnhout, 2013.
- ¹¹ The term 'twilight' would suggest the 'in-between, the both-and'. See CHRIS L. DE WET, *Twilights of Greek and Roman Religions. An Introduction*, in: *Journal of Early Christian History*, 10/2, 2020, pp. 1–7.
- ¹² Rufinus had been *magister officiorum* (388–392), *consul* (392) and the *praetorian prefect* (392–395). See *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, Cambridge, 1971, vol. I, s.v. *Rufinus* 18.
- ¹³ *Theodosian Code* 16.10.12 (trans. CLYDE PHARR). On this law, see LUCIO DE GIOVANNI, *Chiesa e Stato nel Codice Teodosiano. Alle origini della codificazione in tema di rapporti Chiesa-Stato*, Naples, 2000⁵, pp. 128–130; ROLAND DELMAIRE, *Les lois religieuses des empereurs romains de Constantin à Théodose II (312–438)*. Vol. I: *Code Théodosien Livre XVI*, Paris, 2005, pp. 442–446; RITA LIZZI TESTA, *Insula ipsa Libanus almae Veneris nuncupatur. Culti, celebrazioni*,

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¹⁴ sacerdoti pagani a Roma, tra IV e VI secolo, in: Istituzioni, carismi ed esercizio spirituale del potere (IV–VI secolo d.C.), ed. GIORGIO BONAMENTE, Bari, 2010, pp. 273–304, esp. 287–290; NEIL B. McLYNN, *Pagans in a Christian Empire*, in: A Companion to Late Antiquity, ed. PHILIPPE ROUSSEAU, Malden, 2009, pp. 572–587, esp. 576–577.

¹⁵ See RITA LIZZI TESTA, *Legislazione imperiale e reazione pagana. I limiti del conflitto*, in: Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire: The Breaking of a Dialogue (IVth–VIth Century A.D.). Proceedings of the International Conference at the Monastery of Bose (October 2008), eds. PETER BROWN / RITA LIZZI TESTA, Zurich, 2011, pp. 467–491, esp. 483. See also CHRISTOPHE J. GODDARD, *Le paganisme des cérémonies publiques depuis le règne de Théodose, une simple question de point de vue?*, in: L'automne de l'Afrique romaine. Hommages à Claude Lepelley, eds. XAVIER DUPUIS et al., Paris, 2021, pp. 349–377.

¹⁶ NEIL B. McLYNN / RITA LIZZI TESTA, *Le relazioni tra pagani e cristiani: nuove prospettive su un antico tema*, in: Cristianesimo nella storia, 31, 2009, p. 255–276; RITA LIZZI TESTA (see note 13).

¹⁷ SILVIA ACERBI, *Pagani qui supersunt...* (CTh 16, 10, 2): *The "End of Paganism" and Apologetic Christian Triumphalism (IV–Vth C.)*, in: Dinamiche politico-ecclesiastiche nel Mediterraneo cristiano tardoantico. Studi per Ramón Teja, eds. SILVIA ACERBI / GIORGIO VESPIGNANI, Rome, 2017, pp. 1–14.

¹⁸ *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, vol. II, Cambridge, 1983, s.v. *Asclepiodotus 1*; ROLAND DELMAIRE, *Les responsables des finances impériales au Bas-Empire romain (IVth–Vth s.). Études prosopographiques*, Brussels, 1989, pp. 200–201; ROLAND DELMAIRE (see note 13), p. 324.

¹⁹ *Code of Justinian* 1.5.12 (ed. BRUCE W. FRIER, *The Codex of Justinian*, Cambridge, 2016).

²⁰ On this subject, see NICOLE BELAYCHE, *Realia versus leges? Les sacrifices de la religion d'État au IVth siècle*, in: La cuisine et l'autel. Les sacrifices en question dans les sociétés de la Méditerranée antique, eds. STELLA GEORGODI / RENÉE KOCH PIETTRE / FRANCIS SCHMIDT, Turnhout, 2005, pp. 343–370.

²¹ WILLIAM VAN ANDRINGA, *Les dieux changent en Occident (IIIrd–IVth s. apr. J.-C.)*, in: *Gallia*, 71/1, 2014, pp. 3–10.

²² JOSÉ CARLOS LÓPEZ-GÓMEZ, *El ocaso de los dioses en Hispania: transformaciones religiosas en el siglo III*, Madrid, 2021.

²³ For this reason, in this article I will use the terms 'paganism' and 'pagans' when expressing the views of Christian authors, and the term 'polytheism' to define the traditional religion of the empire. Of course, this distinction is not without its problems.

²⁴ On the problems related to the category of "pagan", see PIERRE CHUVIN (see note 9), pp. 15–20; JOHN NORTH, *Pagans, Polytheists and the Pendulum*, in: The Spread of Christianity in the First Four Centuries. Essays in Explanation, ed. WILLIAM V. HARRIS, Leiden-Boston, 2005, pp. 125–143; NEIL B. McLYNN (see note 13), pp. 573–574; ALAN CAMERON (see note 9), pp. 14–32; JÖRG RÜPKE, *What Comes to an End When a "Religion" Comes to an "End"? Reflections on a Historiographical Trope and Ancient Mediterranean History of Religion*, in: *Numen*, 68, 2021, pp. 204–229. See also the useful presentation by MAIJASTINA KAHLOS, *Religious Dissent in Late Antiquity*, 350–450, Oxford, 2020, pp. 92–104.

²⁵ On this topic, see RITA LIZZI TESTA, *When the Romans Became Pagani*, in: The Strange Death of Pagan Rome: Reflections on a Historiographical Controversy, ed. ead., Turnhout, 2013, pp. 31–51. See also PHILIPPE BORGEAUD, *L'histoire des religions*, Lausanne, 2013, p. 43.

²⁶ See KATHARINA BOLLE / CARLOS MACHADO / CHRISTIAN WITSCHEL, *Introduction: Defining the Field – The Epigraphic Cultures of Late Antiquity*, in: The Epigraphic Cultures of Late Antiquity, eds. ead., Stuttgart, 2017, pp. 15–29; SIMON PRICE, *Rituals and Power. The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*, Cambridge, 1984, pp. 59–60. Price refers to a "black hole" for almost all type of evidence between 260 and 290.

²⁷ RUFINUS OF AQUILEIA, *Ecclesiastical History* 11.19 (my translation, ed. E. SCHWARTZ ET AL., *Eusebius Werke: die Kirchengeschichte*, Berlin, 1999).

²⁸ See PLUTARCH, *On the Failure of Oracles* 17.419B–E; EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA, *Preparation for the Gospel* 5.18.13. On this myth, see PHILIPPE BORGEAUD, *La mort du Grand Pan. Problème d'interprétation*, in: *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 200/1, 1983, pp. 3–39.

²⁹ PHILOSTORGIIUS, *Church History* 7.F1c. See LAURENCE FOSCHIA, *Les mythes de la fin du paganisme dans le monde grec*, in: *Mythes et sociétés en Méditerranée orientale entre le sacré et le profane*, eds. ARTHUR MULLER / DOMINIQUE MULLIEZ, Lille, 2005, pp. 89–104. See also FRANCESCO MASSA, *La construction de l'imaginaire delphique chez les auteurs chrétiens (fin IIth–début Vth siècles)*, in: *Delphes dans la littérature d'Homère aux nos jours*, ed. JEAN-MARC LUCE, Paris, 2018, pp. 135–156, esp. 153.

³⁰ F. R. TROMBLEY had already pointed out that private sacrifices, that is, sacrifices not financed by the city, did not disappear at all at the end of the fourth century and not even at the beginning of the fifth. His analysis shows that these practices are attested at least until the ninth century: FRANK R. TROMBLEY, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization c. 370–529*, vol. 1, Leiden–New York–Cologne, 1993, pp. 5–10.

³¹ ALAN CAMERON (see note 9), pp. 142–153; FRANÇOISE VAN HAEP-EREN, *Fin des temples et fin des cultes à Ostie: une histoire complexe*, in: *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 235/2, 2018, pp. 233–253.

³² For Roman Africa, see CLAUDE LEPELLEY, *De la réaction païenne à la sécularisation: le témoignage d'inscriptions municipales romano-africaines tardives*, in: PETER BROWN / RITA LIZZI TESTA (see note 14), pp. 273–289; ANNA LEONE, *The End of the Pagan City. Religion, Economy, and Urbanism in Late Antique North Africa*, Oxford, 2013 ; CHRISTOPHE J. GODDARD, *De l'été indien à l'automne des cités africaines (IVth–VIth siècles apr. J.-C.)*, in: L'automne de l'Afrique romaine. Hommage à Claude Lepelley, eds. XAVIER DUPUIS ET AL., Paris, 2021, pp. 483–497.

³³ NICOLE BELAYCHE, *Adite aras publicas adque delubra* (CTh 9.16.2). *Les cultes civiques dans l'empire hellénophone tardif*, in: Des dieux civiques aux saints locaux dans le monde romain tardο-antique (IVth–VIIth siècle), eds. J.-P. CAILLET ET AL., Paris, 2015, pp. 25–38; DOMINIQUE JAILLARD, "Le philosophe ne doit pas être le prêtre d'une seule cité (...) il doit être universellement le hiérophante du monde entier" (*Marinos, Proclus ou sur le bonheur*, 19), in: *Les philosophes et les mystères dans l'empire romain*, eds. FRANCESCO MASSA / NICOLE BELAYCHE, Liège, 2021, pp. 171–191.

³⁴ For instance, AUGUSTINE, *Letters* 233–235 (to Longinianus) (ed. J.-P. MIGNE, coll. 1030–1033).

³⁵ I have analysed this issue in FRANCESCO MASSA, *Nommer et classer les religions aux IIth–IVth siècles: la taxinomie 'paganisme, judaïsme, christianisme'*, in: *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 234/4, 2017, pp. 689–715.

³⁶ ROBERT A. MARKUS, *The Secular in Late Antiquity*, in: Les frontières du profane dans l'Antiquité tardive, eds. ÉRIC REBILLARD / CLAIRE SOTINEL, Rome, 2010, pp. 353–361. Markus applied the category of "secular" to an "area of shared culture, shared values, practices and traditions" (p. 357). See also ROBERT A. MARKUS (see note 4), pp. 1–17 (on "secularity"), p. 107–123 (on "secular festivals"). On the notion of "secular" by R. A. MARKUS see more recently, ROBIN WHELAN, *After Augustine, After Markus: The Problem of the Secular at the End of Antiquity*, in: Early Medieval Europe, 29/1, 2021, pp. 12–35.

³⁷ SILVIA GIORCELLI BERSANI, *Rappresentazioni del divino nella tarda antichità: quali indizi per una storia del sacro in Cisalpina?*, in: *Sacrum facere. Atti del II Seminario di Archeologia del Sacro. Contaminazioni: forme di contatto, traduzione e mediazione nei sacra del mondo greco e romano*, eds. FEDERICA FONTANA / EMANUELA MURGIA, Trieste, 2014, pp. 162–185, esp. 169; SILVIA GIORCELLI BERSANI, *L'impero in quota. I Romani e le Alpi*, Turin, 2019, pp. 186–190.

³⁷ For the Western Roman Empire, see GIANFRANCO BINAZZI, *Il radicamento dei culti tradizionali in Italia fra Tarda Antichità e Alto Medioevo. Fonti letterarie e testimonianze archeologiche*, Rome, 2012. See also CLAIRE SOTINEL, *La disparition des lieux de culte païens en Occident. Enjeux et méthode*, in: Hellénisme et Christianisme, eds. MICHEL NARCY / ÉRIC REBILLARD, Paris, 2004, pp. 35–54 ; WILLIAM VAN ANDRINGA (ed.), *La fin des dieux. Les lieux de culte du polythéisme dans la pratique religieuse du III^e au V^e s. apr. J.-C. (Gauls et provinces occidentales)*, in: *Gallia*, 71/1, 2014 ; SILVIA ACERBI / CHRISTOPHE J. GODDARD, *The Evolution of Pagan Sanctuaries in Late Antique Italy (fourth-sixth centuries A.D.): A New Administrative and Legal Framework. A Paradox*, in: *Les cités de l'Italie tardo-antique (IV^e–VI^e siècle): institutions, économie, société, culture et religion*, eds. MASSIMILIANO GHILARDI / PIERFRANCESCO PORENA / CHRISTOPHE J. GODDARD, Rome, 2006, pp. 281–307.

³⁸ See FRANÇOIS WIBLÉ, *Le mithraeum de Forum Claudi Vallensium/Martigny (Valais)*, in: *Archäologie der Schweiz*, 18/1, 1995, pp. 2–15 ; id., *Quelques particularités du mithraeum de Forum Claudi Vallensium (Martigny, Suisse)*, in: *The Archaeology of Mithraism. New Finds & Approaches to Mithras-Worship*, eds. MATTHEW McCARTY / MARIANA EGRI, Leuven, 2020, pp. 65–76.

³⁹ See SILVIA GIORCELLI BERSANI 2014 (see note 36), pp. 174–176, ead., 2019 (see note 36), pp. 180–183 ; RITA LIZZI TESTA, *Vescovi e strutture ecclesiastiche nella città tardoantica (l'Italia Annonaria nel IV-V secolo d.C.)*, Como, 1989, p. 175. According to Testa, the end of Industria is a result of the “devastazioni compiute dalle truppe visigote prima di uscire definitivamente dall’Italia intorno al 412.”

⁴⁰ ALFREDO BUONOPANE, *Società, economia, religione*, in: *Storia del Trentino*. Vol. II: L’età romana, ed. EZIO BUCHI, Bologna, 2000, pp. 133–239, esp. 184–187 ; FRANCA MASSELLI SCOTTI, *Riflessioni sul culto di Mitra ad Aquileia*, in: *Orizzonti del sacro. Culti e santuari antichi in Altino e nel Veneto orientale*, eds. GIOVANELLA CRESCI MARRONE / MARGHERITA TIRELLI, Rome, 2001, pp. 277–288 ; ead., *I culti orientali ad Aquileia*, in: *Roma sul Danubio. Da Aquileia a Carnuntum lungo la via dell’ambra*, eds. MAURIZIO BUORA / WERNER JOBST, Rome, 2002, pp. 139–143.

⁴¹ See CHRISTA EBÖTHER / ANNA FLÜCKIGER / MARKUS PETER, *Zillen. Von der spätantiken Kulthöhle zum frühmittelalterlichen Bestattungsplatz*, Chur, 2021.

⁴² An overview of the “Oriental cults” in the Alps can be found in COLETTE JOURDAIN-ANNEQUIN, *Quand les Grecs et les Romains découvraient les Alpes: “les Alpes voisines du ciel”*, Paris, 2011, pp. 251–268 (chap. 10: Le succès des cultes orientaux).

⁴³ *Milano capitale dell’Impero romano (286–402 d.C.)*, Milan, 1990, pp. 79–80 ; FILIPPO ROSSI (ed.), *Il santuario di Minerva. Un luogo di culto a Breno tra protostoria ed età romana*, Milan, 2010, p. 149.

⁴⁴ See PATRICK HUNT, *Summus Poeninus on the Grand St Bernard Pass*, in: *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 11, 1998, pp. 265–274.

⁴⁵ See for instance SILVIA GIORCELLI BERSANI 2014 (see note 36), p. 172: “nel Trentino esso si radicò così profondamente da rappresentare la più genuina espressione di resistenza al cristianesimo.” More generally, see ARNALDO MARCONE, *Tarda Antichità. Profilo storico e prospettive storiografiche*, Rome, 2020, p. 13.

⁴⁶ See JOHN SCHEID, *Les dieux, l’État et l’individu. Réflexions sur la religion civique à Rome*, Paris, 2013, pp. 201–207.

⁴⁷ On this topic, see FRANCESCO MASSA, *Lo sguardo cristiano sui culti orientali*, in: *Roma città degli dèi. La capitale dell’impero come laboratorio religioso*, eds. CORINNE BONNET / ENNIO SANZI, Rome, 2018, pp. 343–354.

⁴⁸ CORINNE BONNET, *Les Religions Orientales au Laboratoire de l’Hellénisme. 2. Franz Cumont*, in: *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*, 8, 2006, pp. 181–205 ; CORINNE BONNET / VINCIANE PIRENNE-DELFORGE / DANNY PRAET (eds.), *Les religions orientales dans le monde grec et romain: cent ans après Cumont, 1906–2006: bilan historique et historiographique* (Introduction), Brussels–Rome, 2009, pp. 5–14 ; CORINNE BONNET / JÖRG RÜPKE / PAOLO SCARPI (eds.), *Religions orientales – culti misterici. Neue Perspektiven – nouvelles perspectives – prospettive nuove*, Stuttgart, 2006.

⁴⁹ See, for instance, PAUL VEYNE, *La société romaine*, Paris, 1991, pp. 281–310, contra NICOLE BELAYCHE, *Quel regard sur les paganismes d’époque impériale?*, in: *Anabases*, 3, 2006, pp. 11–26.

⁵⁰ See, for instance, CARLO TRUZZI, *Zeno, Gaudenzio e Cromazio. Testi e contenuti della predicazione cristiana per le chiese di Verona, Brescia e Aquileia (360–410 ca)*, Brescia, 1985, p. 150.

⁵¹ Robert TURCAN, *Les pères ont-ils menti sur les mystères de païens?*, in: *Les pères de l’Église au XX^e siècle. Histoire – Littérature – Théologie. L’aventure des Sources chrétiennes*, Paris, 1994, pp. 35–56, esp. 36. See also, recently, YVES LEHMANN, *La théologie des mystères de Samothrace: mythe, rites et philosophie*, in: *Les Mystères: nouvelles perspectives*, eds. MARC PHILONENKO / YVES LEHMANN / LAURENT PERNOT, Turnhout, 2017, pp. 125–147 ; BAUDOUIN DECHARNEUX / IRINI-FOTINI VILTANIOTI, *Les cultes à mystères ou l’expérience de la transformation*, in: *Le Livre des Égyptes*, ed. FLORENCE QUENTIN, Paris, 2015, pp. 191–208.

⁵² An example of this interpretation can be found in DEVON H. WIENS, *Mystery Concepts in Primitive Christianity and in Its Environment*, in: *ANRW II*, 23/2, 1980, pp. 1248–1284.

⁵³ To quote only one example, see DIANA L. ECK, *Mountains*, in: *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Vol. 10, ed. MIRCEA ELIADE, New York–London, 1987, pp. 130–134.

⁵⁴ On the imagery of the Alps in the modern age, see NOÉMIE ÉTIENNE ET AL. (eds.), *Une Suisse exotique? Regarder l’ailleurs en Suisse au siècle des Lumières*, Zurich–Berlin, 2020.

⁵⁵ For Graeco-Roman Antiquity, see SILVIA GIORCELLI BERSANI 2019 (see note 36).

⁵⁶ See, for instance, COLETTE JOURDAIN-ANNEQUIN (see note 42), p. 274: “la proximité des sommets, de la montagne divinisée avec le sentiment du sacré qui naturellement s’y exprime” ; VALERIO NERI, *La montagna e il sacro nella cristianità tardoantica*, in: *Gli antichi e la montagna: ecologia, religione, economia e politica del territorio*, ed. SILVIA GIORCELLI BERSANI, Turin, 2001, pp. 65–80.

⁵⁷ PATRICK HUNT (see note 44), p. 265.

⁵⁸ On the “Oriental Cults” in the Alps, see COLETTE JOURDAIN-ANNEQUIN (see note 42), pp. 269–285 (Le succès des cultes orientaux).

⁵⁹ As SILVIA GIORCELLI BERSANI, *Le Alpi nella panegiristica tardoantica tra propaganda e sacro*, in: *Preistoria Alpina*, 39, 2003, pp. 299–305, has pointed out: “la strumentalizzazione del divino della montagna piegato agli interessi di propaganda del potere tardoantico, in ambito sia pagano sia cristiano” (p. 300).

⁶⁰ For example, SILVIUS ITALICUS, *Punica* 4.496–499. On Heracles/Hercule in the Alps, see COLETTE JOURDAIN-ANNEQUIN (see note 42), pp. 276–279, and the article by SILVIA GIORCELLI BERSANI in this issue.

⁶¹ See MARCEL DETIENNE, *Comment être autochtone: du pur Athénien au Français raciné*, Paris 2003. Moreover, Philippe Descola’s studies show how problematic the opposition between nature and culture is in anthropological terms: PHILIPPE DESCOLA, *Par-delà de nature et culture*, Paris, 2005 ; id., *La composition des mondes. Entretien avec Pierre Charbonnier*, Paris, 2014.

⁶² RITA LIZZI (see note 8), p. 161: “The most intractable problem lies in reconstructing pagan attitudes through hostile Christian sources, which are often apt to exaggerate.”

⁶³ VIGILIUS OF TRENTO, *Ep. 1 and 2* (LUIGI F. PIZZOLATO, *Studi su Vigilio di Trento*, Milan, 2002).

⁶⁴ MAXIMUS OF TURIN, *Sermons* 105–106. For the Maximus Sermons, I use the edition by ALMUT MUTZENBECHER, *Maximus Taurinensis: Sermones*, Turnhout, 1962 (Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina, 23), and the English translation by BONIFACE RAMSEY, *The Sermons of St. Maximus of Turin*, New York, 1989. See also GAUDENTIUS OF BRESCIA, *Sermon 17* (ed. AMBROSIUS GLÜCK, *Tractatus XXI. Gaudentius Brixiensis*, Vienna, 1936, pp. 120–122).

= Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, vol. 68). RITA LIZZI (see note 8), pp. 171–172 suggests that the “imperial constitution addressed to Theodore” (16. 2. 31) of April 25, 398 may be related to the events in Anaunia.

⁶⁵ On this episode, see GIANFRANCO BINAZZI (see note 37), pp. 46–47; ENRICO M. SIRONI, *Dall’Oriente In Occidente: I Santi Sisino, Martirio e Alessandro Martiri in Anaunia*, Sanzeno, 1989; RITA LIZZI (see note 8), pp. 169–172; MARK HUMPHRIES (see note 8), pp. 182–183; GISELLA CANTINO WATAGHIN, *Christianisation et organisation ecclésiastique des campagnes: l’Italie du Nord aux IV^e–VIII^e siècles*, in: *Towns and their Territories Between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, eds. GIAN PIETRO BROGIOLO / NANCY GAUTHIER / NEIL CHRISTIE, Boston-Leiden, 2000, pp. 209–234; SILVIA GIORCELLI BERSANI 2014 (see note 36), p. 177; ead. 2019 (see note 36), p. 188.

⁶⁶ On the Latin text of Vigilius’ letters, see ENRICO M. SIRONI (see note 65), pp. 51–113; LUIGI F. PIZZOLATO (see note 63), pp. 141–144.

⁶⁷ VIGILIUS OF TRENTO, *Letter to Simplicianus* 17.

⁶⁸ VIGILIUS OF TRENTO, *Letter to John Chrysostom* 25–27.

⁶⁹ VIGILIUS OF TRENTO, *Letter to John Chrysostom* 31–32.

⁷⁰ VIGILIUS OF TRENTO, *Letter to Simplicianus* 47, “the fumigant paganism against the hot breath of faith” (*fumosa gentilitas contra furem fidei zelo*).

⁷¹ See, for instance, JOHN SCHEID, *Quand faire c'est croire. Les rites sacrificiels des Romains*, Paris, 2005; FRANCESCA PRESCENDI, *Sacrificio*, in: *Con i Romani. Un’antropologia del mondo antico*, eds. MAURIZIO BETTINI / WILLIAM SHORT, Bologna, 2014, pp. 107–125. As argued by ROGER S. BAGNALL / JAMES B. RIVES, *A Prefect’s Edict Mentioning Sacrifice*, in: *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*, 2/1, 2000, pp. 77–86: “Sacrifice was not simply a stick with which to beat the Christians, but was instead a key element in a system of exchange that bound together the emperor, the people of the empire, and the gods” (p. 85).

⁷² See NICOLE BELAYCHE (see note 19), p. 343: “une politique chrétienne soucieuse de changer la religion d’État devait nécessairement s’attaquer aux sacrifices.”

⁷³ VIGILIUS OF TRENTO, *Letter to Simplicianus* 51–53. See also VIGILIUS OF TRENTO, *Letter to John Chrysostom* 53–58.

⁷⁴ For this interpretation, see LUIGI F. PIZZOLATO (see note 63), p. 180. On the *Ambarvalia*, see JOHN SCHEID, *Romulus et ses frères. Le collège des frères arvales, modèle du culte public dans la Rome des empereurs*, Rome, 1990, pp. 442–451; FRITZ GRAF, *Ambarvalia*, in: Brill’s New Pauly. Consulted online on 05 May 2021 http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1574-9347_bnp_e117450.

⁷⁵ JOHN SCHEID, *Le lustrum et la lustratio. En finir avec la ‘purification’*, in: *Vestigia. Miscellanea di studi storico-religiosi in onore di Filippo Coarelli nel suo 80^o anniversario*, ed. VALENTINO GASPARINI, Stuttgart, 2016, pp. 203–209, esp. 204. See also HENDRIK VERSNEL, *Sacrificium lustrale: The Death of Mettius Fufetius (Livy I, 28). Studies in Roman Lustration-Ritual*, I, in: *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Instituut de Rome*, 37, 1975, pp. 97–115.

⁷⁶ CHRISTOPHER E. CHAFFIN, *Civic Values in Maximus of Turin and His Contemporaries*, in: *Forma futuri. Studi in onore di M. Pellegrino*, Turin, 1975, pp. 1040–1053. A similar example in the Antiochian context is analysed by

⁷⁷ PIERLUIGI LANFRANCHI, *Les amulettes tardo-antiques: un exemple de bricolage religieux*, in: *Semitica et Classica*, 11, 2018, pp. 143–153

⁷⁸ On the notion of “civic participation” and its relationship with religious affiliations in the Eastern Roman Empire, see NICOLE BELAYCHE / ANNE-VALERIE PONT (eds.), *Participations civiques des juifs et des chrétiens dans l’Orient romain (I^{er}–IV^e siècles)*, Geneva, 2021.

⁷⁹ *Consultationes Zachei christiani et Apollonii philosophi*, 1.28.3–4.

⁸⁰ See NICOLE BELAYCHE (see note 19), p. 347.

⁸¹ VIGILIUS OF TRENTO, *Letter to Simplicianus* 143–144.

⁸² RITA LIZZI (see note 8), p. 170.

⁸³ ALFREDO BUONOPANE, *Civis Anaunus: integrazione e identità etnico-culturale in area alpina. Un caso emblematico*, in: *Identità e autonomie nel mondo occidentale. Iberia-Italia, Italia-Iberia*, eds. ANTONIO SARTORI / ALFREDO VALVO, Faenza, 2011, pp. 141–150, esp. 143–144.

⁸⁴ On the attestations of the cult of Saturn in Raetian province, see CECIL BENNETT PASCAL, *The Cults of Cisalpine Gaul*, Brussels, 1964, pp. 176–179; GIANFRANCO PACI, *Saturno in area atesina*, in: *Sintria*, 3/4, 1995–2007, pp. 393–406; ALFREDO BUONOPANE (see note 40), pp. 169–171.

⁸⁵ I follow the interpretation by GIANFRANCO PACI (see note 83), p. 399.

⁸⁶ The dates of Maximus’ episcopate are only approximate. On the scarce biographical and chronological information on Maximus, see CHIARA DE FILIPPIS CAPPALI, *Massimo Vescovo di Torino e il suo tempo*, Turin, 1995, pp. 3–9.

⁸⁷ On late antique Turin and its role as a link with the Alps, see RITA LIZZI TESTA (see note 39), pp. 176–178; SERGIO RODA, *Le trasformazioni del III e IV secolo: tesaurizzazione e nuovo ruolo politico-Strategico della Cisalpina occidentale*, in: *Storia di Torino. Vol. I: Dalla preistoria al comune medievale*, ed. GIUSEPPE SERGI, Turin, 1997, pp. 233–245.

⁸⁸ See MAXIMUS OF TURIN, *Sermons* 72.2 and 85. On feelings of threat, see RITA LIZZI TESTA (see note 39), p. 178–179; EMANUELE PIAZZA, *La predicazione di Massimo di Torino. Il ruolo del vescovo tra nemici spirituali e barbari*, in: *Annali della facoltà di Scienze della formazione*, 8, 2009, pp. 121–134.

⁸⁹ MAXIMUS OF TURIN, *Sermons* 48.4: “But since it is true that this stone is a millstone, let us see if it is also the millstone of the pagans (*si et paganorum talis est mola*). Without a doubt it is, for the millstone of the pagans is the stony Jupiter and Hercules (*saxea enim mola est paganorum Iuppiter Herculesque lapides*), around whom they revolve with blind eyes and in constant error.” See ESTEBAN L. NOCE, *Cristianismo y gentilicias en los Sermones de Máximo de Turín: consideraciones críticas sobre el estado de la cuestión*, in: *Vetera Christianorum*, 54, 2017, pp. 173–204; id., *Gentilicias y paganismo en los sermones de Máximo de Turín: reconsideración de una sinonimia infundada*, in: *Annali di Storia dell’Esegesi*, 36/1, 2019, pp. 171–199; id., *En torno a la independencia semántica de los términos gentilicias y paganismo en los sermones de Máximo de Turín. Verificación de una hipótesis*, in: *Antiquité Tardive*, 27, 2019, pp. 279–301. These articles are also very useful for their extensive, updated bibliography on Maximus and the Turin context.

⁹⁰ MAXIMUS OF TURIN, *Sermons* 107.1.

⁹¹ MAXIMUS OF TURIN, *Sermons* 107.2 (I slightly modified RAMSEY’s translation).

⁹² GIANFRANCO BINAZZI (see note 37), p. 56. See also RITA LIZZI TESTA (see note 39), pp. 198–199.

⁹³ MAXIMUS OF TURIN, *Sermons* 42.1; 91; 105–107.

⁹⁴ Among the many examples, see SARA PETRI, *Introduzione*, in: *Massimo di Torino. Sermoni*. Traduzione a cura di GABRIELE BANTERLE, introduzione e note a cura di SARA PETRI, Rome, 2003, pp. 16–17; MARIA LUISA ARIANO, *La condanna dell’idolatria nell’omiletica dell’Italia settentrionale di fine IV secolo*, in: *Auctores Nostri*, 14, 2014, pp. 129–163, esp. 135; GIANFRANCO BINAZZI (see note 37), pp. 54–56; RITA LIZZI TESTA (see note 39), p. 195, note 127, speaks of “ruralizzazione del paganesimo”.

⁹⁵ GIANFRANCO BINAZZI (see note 37), p. 54.

⁹⁶ MICHEL ROBLIN, *Paganisme et rusticité*, in: *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 8/2, 1953, op. 173–183, has clearly shown that “le *pagus* ne renferme aucunement la notion de rusticité” (p. 177) and that the Christianisation of the countryside sometimes preceded that of the cities.

⁹⁷ LIBANIUS, *Orations* 30.11–12.

⁹⁸ On the social profile of Maximus' audience in Turin, see ENRICO DAL COVOLO, *Vescovi e città tra il IV e il V secolo. Eusebio di Vercelli, Ambrogio di Milano, Massimo di Torino*, in: *Humana sapit. Études d'antiquité tardive offertes à Lellia Cracco Ruggini*, eds. JEAN-MICHEL CARRIÉ / RITA LIZZI TESTA, Turnhout, 2002, pp. 229–237, esp. 236; FRANCESCO TRISOGLIO, *Massimo di Torino: il pastore dinanzi ai suoi fedeli*, in: *Augustinianum*, 47, 2007, pp. 117–143.

⁹⁹ MAXIMUS OF TURIN, *Sermons* 63.3. See also *Sermons* 30 and 31 in which Maximus admonished the inhabitants of Turin for having celebrated the traditional practices on the occasion of a lunar eclipse. On this episode, see RITA LIZZI TESTA (see note 39), pp. 194–195; GIANFRANCO BINAZZI (see note 37), pp. 53–54.

¹⁰⁰ On the Jews in Northern Italy, see LELLIA CRACCO RUGGINI, *Ebrei e orientali nell'Italia settentrionale fra il IV e il V secolo d.C.*, in: *Studia et Documenta Historiae et Iuris*, 25, 1959, pp. 186–309; ead., *Il vescovo Cromazio e gli ebrei di Aquileia*, in: *Antichità Altoadriatiche*, 12, 1977, pp. 353–381; ead., *Pagani, ebrei e cristiani: odio sociologico o odio teologico nel mondo antico*, in: *XXVI Settimana di Studi del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo*, Spoleto, 1980, pp. 15–117; FRANCO BOLGANI, *Militari e preti, potenti e servi, ariani ed eretici, ebrei e barbari*, in: *Storia di Torino*. Vol. I: Dalla preistoria al comune medievale, ed. GIUSEPPE SERGI, Turin, 1997, pp. 278–287, esp. 280–281.

¹⁰¹ Sometimes the Latin pronoun *hii* is interpreted as referring only to the Jews. It seems to me, however, that the Latin text does not permit us to rule out a reference to the pagans as well.

¹⁰² See also MAXIMUS OF TURIN, *Sermon* 107.2. On the *pollutio* of the sacrifices, see MAIJASTINA KAHLOS (see note 23).

¹⁰³ PIERLUIGI LANFRANCHI, *La religion qui souille: les catégories du pur et de l'impur dans la polémique religieuse pendant l'Antiquité tardive*, in: *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 234/4, 2017, pp. 717–736.

¹⁰⁴ However, see also Chromatius of Aquileia, *Sermons* 16.3 who states that pagans and Jews participated in Christian rites. On this passage, see CARLO TRUZZI, *Zeno, Gaudenzio e Cromazio. Testi e contenuti della predicazione cristiana per le chiese di Verona, Brescia e Aquileia (360–410 ca)*, Brescia, 1985, p. 156.

¹⁰⁵ See, for instance, CARLO TRUZZI (see note 104), p. 150.

IMAGE CREDITS

Fig. 1: © Martigny tourisme

Fig. 2: Christa Ebnöther, Anna Flückiger, Markus Peter, Zillis.
Von der spätantiken Kulthöhle zum frühmittelalterlichen
Bestattungsplatz [Archäologie Graubünden vol. 10] Chur,
2021.

Fig. 3: ACAV-Associazione Culturale Archeologica Valsusina

RIASSUNTO

In un volume centrato sulla molteplicità e varietà dei processi legati alla diffusione del cristianesimo nelle regioni alpine, il presente saggio si concentra su alcune dinamiche connesse alla presenza di culti politeisti tra la fine del IV e l'inizio del V secolo. In primo luogo, vengono messe a confronto alcune categorie e nozioni che si riferivano alla religione romana tradizionale e che erano comunemente utilizzate nella Tarda Antichità e nel contesto alpino. In un secondo momento, invece, si utilizzano alcune opere di Vigilio di Trento e di Massimo di Torino come casi di studio, analizzando, in particolare, il ruolo dei sacrifici per capire quali elementi del politeismo tardoantico rappresentassero ancora un pericolo per le autorità ecclesiastiche.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans le cadre d'un ouvrage consacré principalement à la multiplicité et variété des processus liés à la diffusion du christianisme dans les régions alpines, la présente contribution se concentre sur certaines dynamiques relatives à la présence de cultes polythéistes entre la fin du IV^e et le début du Ve siècle. Tout d'abord, l'article établit une comparaison entre des catégories et notions qui avaient un lien avec la religion romaine traditionnelle et étaient communément utilisées durant l'Antiquité tardive et dans le contexte alpin. Par la suite, il utilise les textes de Vigile de Trente et Maxime de Turin comme étude de cas pour comprendre quels éléments du polythéisme de l'Antiquité tardive représentaient encore un danger pour les autorités ecclésiastiques, en analysant notamment le rôle des sacrifices.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der vorliegende Beitrag konzentriert sich auf bestimmte Dynamiken im Zusammenhang mit der Präsenz polytheistischer Kulte zwischen dem Ende des vierten und dem Beginn des fünften Jahrhunderts, wobei der Schwerpunkt auf den vielfältigen und unterschiedlichen Prozessen im Zusammenhang mit der Ausbreitung christlicher Gruppen im Alpenraum liegt. Zunächst möchte ich einige häufig verwendete Kategorien und Vorstellungen über die traditionelle römische Religion in der Spätantike und im alpinen Kontext vergleichen. Anschliessend werde ich einige Werke von Vigilius von Trient und Maximus von Turin als Fallstudien heranziehen, um zu verstehen, welche Elemente des spätantiken Polytheismus eine Gefahr für die kirchlichen Autoritäten darstellten.

SUMMARY

This paper addresses specific dynamics related to the presence of polytheistic cults between the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth centuries, whereby it is focused on the multiple and varied processes linked to the spread of Christian groups in the Alpine region. First, I intend to compare some commonly used categories and notions about traditional Roman religion in Late Antiquity and in the Alpine context. Next, I will use some works by Vigilius of Trent and Maximus of Turin as case studies to understand which elements of late antique polytheism still represented a danger for ecclesiastical authorities. The role of sacrifices will be more particularly analysed.