SPECIAL INSERT

Paganism in Athens from the Fourth Century to the Sixth Century

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Abstract: Paganism in Athens was greatly challenged and suppressed by Christianity so that it came to its end after three centuries of struggle from the fourth to sixth centuries. Since the fourth century, authorities showed preference for Christianity and most areas of the Mediterranean world had been Christianized by the middle of the fifth century. Athens was one of a few cities where the Paganism lasted into the sixth century. Athenian Paganism doubtless had tenacious vitality, but Athens inevitably became a Christian city as late as the sixth century. This paper discusses Paganism in Athens from the third to the six centuries by analyzing the practiced pagan sacrifice, the feast of the Panathenaea and the philosophical schools.

Key words: Athens, Byzantine, Hellenic cult, Paganism, Christianity

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After Christianity gained support from authorities in the fourth century, the traditional Hellenic cult was considered as Paganism in Christian contexts. As early as the first century, when St. Paul made his famous sermon to the members of the Council of the Areopagus (Acts 17:15-34), the Hellenic cult was no longer the only religious cult in Athens. Christianity left no visible traces for the first three centuries, although a few Christian congregations were recorded in Greece from the time of St. Paul. The Hellenic cult in Athens was increasingly challenged from the fourth century on and survived until the sixth century. The Christianization of Athens is well covered. But it’s still not clear how Athens, a center of classical culture, turned into a Christian city or why the Hellenic cult survived in Athens in Late Antiquity. In order to get how the Hellenic cult and Christianity faced each other, this paper discusses Paganism in Athens from the third to the six centuries by analyzing the practiced pagan sacrifice, the feast of the Panathenaea and the philosophical schools.

The Sacrifice

Sacrifice was a most important element of Pagan religious practice and was not easily given up by the faithful who kept the practice alive even when the emperors threw their weight on the side of Christianity.

The Theodosian Code, edited and published in 438, assembled seventeen laws against sacrifices in its Book 16. It started with the law of Constantine the Great (reign: 324-337), the first Christian emperor. His first law against sacrifices issued in 321 stated: “If it should appear that any part of Our palace or any other public work has been struck by lightning, the observance of the ancient custom shall be retained, and inquiry shall be made of the soothsayers as to the portent thereof. Written records thereof shall be very carefully collected and referred to Our Wisdom. Permission shall be granted to all other persons also to appropriate this custom to themselves, provided only that they abstain from domestic sacrifices, which are specifically prohibited.” (Codex Theodosianus 16.10.1)

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3 Clyde Pharr, trans., The Theodosian Code and Novels, and the Sirmondian constitutions: a translation with commentary, glossary, and bibliography (Princeton: Princeton University Press,
The emperors after Constantine the Great continued to issue laws against sacrifices in various circumstances. Until 392, Theodosius the Great (reign: 379-395) issued a law to oppose all sacrifice. It stated, “No person at all, of any class or order whatsoever…shall sacrifice an innocent victim to senseless images in any place at all or in any city. He shall not, by more secret wickedness, venerate his lar with fire, his genius with wine, his penates with fragrant odors; he shall not burn lights to them, place incense before them, or suspend wreaths for them.” (Codex Theodosianus 16.10.12) The last law against sacrifice in the Code was issued by Theodosius II (reign: 408-450) in 435, which ruled that “We interdict all persons of criminal pagan mind from the accursed immolation of victims, from damnable sacrifices, and from all other such practices that are prohibited by the authority of the more ancient sanctions.” (Codex Theodosianus 16.10.25)

The laws in the Theodosian Code show the legal steps taken by emperors to oppose sacrifices. They also reveal changing attitudes toward conversion to Christianity over the course of the fourth and early fifth centuries.6

The emperors of the Byzantine Empire firmly suppressed the practice of sacrifice, but some scholars at the time argued in favour of allowing it. Libanius (born in 361) was one of the most influential figures in the fourth century. He presented the Pro Templi in 386. Basing his argument on the concept of the “peace of the gods” (pax deorum) and stated that the maintenance of Roman imperial power depended on the traditional sacrifices.7 He also argued that the traditional public ceremony taking meat from the altar was not an illegal sacrifice because “the oxen were slaughtered elsewhere, no altar received the blood offering, no part of the victim was burned, no offering of meal began the ceremony, nor did libations follow it.”8 This rationale represented the popular opinion about sacrifice among the defensive pagans and even those who had recently converted to Christianity but were still accustomed to

8 Ibid., 117f.
public dinners or banquets in the fourth and fifth centuries. Moreover, private sacrifice continued. It “seems to have accompanied incubation for the cure of maladies until the 480’s” at the Asklepieion in Athens.

The *Theodosian Code* reflected the reality of ongoing sacrifices until the middle of the fifth century, although the Christian emperors had consistently forbidden sacrifice since the fourth century. Because of the authority of the government, the public sacrifice gradually disappeared by the end of the fifth century, but private sacrifice very likely continued.

The Panathenaea

The Panathenaea was one of the most important public events related to Athenian civic identity. All Athenians participated in the event’s parades and games. The Panathenaea was not prohibited by law because there was no obvious hint of public sacrifice in it.

Staging the Panathenaea was a lavish affair, and included vehicles, instruments, food, wine, flowers and coins thrown to the public during the parade. It therefore required generous financial support from wealthy Athenians. Some sponsors were recorded in inscriptions, which showed that the Panathenaea was held until the beginning of the fifth century.

An inscription dated in A. D. 267 or 270 showed that the Panathenaea was held on time after Athens was seriously damaged by the Heruli in 267. A dedication to Publius Herennius Dexippus stated, “Upon the approval granted by the Council of Areopagus and by the Council of the 750 members and by the people of Athens, the children (erected the statue for their father) Publius Herennius Dexippus… because of his merits in having held the office of basileus among the thesmothetai and having held the office of the eponymous archon and having served as the president of the panegyris-festival and having been the agonothetes of the Great Panathenaic Games at his own expense.” (IG

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10 For the details of the Panathenaea in the fourth century, see Himerius, *Declamationes et Orationes*, ed. by Aristides Colonna, Roma 1951.

Dexippus was known for his bravery against the Heruli and for his successful defense of the city against their incursion. Epigraphic evidence associated to Dexippus therefore demonstrates the vitality of the Panathenaea in the third century.

An oration, presented by Himerius (ca. 315-386, a sophist and rhetorician,) in the middle of the fourth century and titled “To Basileios on the Occasion of the Panathenaia at the Beginning of Spring,” stated, “I wish to relate to you a detailed account about the custom of the city and panegyris to which you are coming. It is pleasant and admirable not only to see the Panathenaia for oneself, but even to say something about the Hellenes when the Athenians send the Sacred Trireme to the goddess in this panegyris…Priests and priestesses, all of them Eupatrids, crowned with garlands, some of gold, others of flowers, are the complement of the ship.”

According to this inscription, the Panathenaea was a very big event in Athens in the last decade of the fourth century when Christianity was establishing strong roots in the Roman Empire as the polity’s official religion.

A late fourth-century inscription to Plutarch recorded the traditional procession in Athens. “The people of Erechtheus dedicated [this statue of] Plutarch, the king of words, the mainstay of firm prudence, who rowed the sacred ship three times in all near to the temple of Athena, spending all his wealth.”(IG II/III, no. 3818) It has not been proven that the Plutarch mentioned in this inscription was the one who founded the Neoplatonic School. If it is the same person, the three processions would have been held between 390 and 410, very likely after Theodosius I’s ban of Paganism in 392. So the Panathenaea was still held after 392 when Christianity was declared the only religion allowed a public ritual presence in the Roman Empire.

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15 For the discuss on the identity of the Plutarchus in the description, see E. Sironen, “Life and Administration of Late Roman Attica in the Light of Public Inscriptions,” in *Post-Herulian Athens*, 47.
Traditional processions such as the Panathenaea were not forbidden by the emperors because there was no hint of sacrifice but ships, flowers and gold during public processions. Athenian Pagans considered it a public religious event, while it seems probable that ordinary pious Christians could and did participate in the festivities as onlookers to an important civic ritual.16

The Schools

Athens was known as a “university town” in Late Antiquity. The schools in Athens emphasized classical education and so they were bastions of Pagan opposition to Christianity. Philosophers, rhetoricians and sophists usually participated in pagan practices. They greatly influenced the traditional religious life and some of them involved themselves in civic politics. As scholars participated in or advised city government, Paganism was tacitly tolerated by local authorities.

The intellectual life of Athens was disrupted by the Herulic invasion of 267. But the schools were active again by the beginning of the fourth century. In 396, Alaric invaded Athens and intellectual life was disturbed again. Around that time, Synesius of Cyrene visited Athens and called it a desert of philosophy. In the fourth century, most of the teachers and students known to us did not come from Athens. Plutarch was the only native Athenian who gained an academic reputation. In the latter part of the fourth century, he founded the Neoplatonic School, which played the most important role in supporting Athenian Paganism.17

Life of Proclus by Marinus of Neapolis (born ca. 440) and Life of Isidore by Damascius (ca. 458-after 538), the last head of the Neoplatonic School, are two sources about fifth-century Athenian Paganism and Neoplatonism in Athens. Both writers were the leaders of the Neoplatonic School.18 Both books describe how intellectuals practiced Athenian Paganism but do not focus on ordinary Athenians. These two works suggest that public pagan practices disappeared after 450, but private practices continued.

18 The sequence of the Diadochs of the Neoplatonic School was accepted as Plutarch, Syrianus, Domninus, Proclus, Marinus, Isidore, Hegias, and Damascius.
According to the two lives, the Neoplatonic scholars practiced the cult of the physician god Asklepios, the philosophy god Athena, the Mother of the Gods Cybele. For instance, Proclus, the most influential leader of the Neoplatonic School, practiced the cult of Athena in the room of his teacher Syrianus upon his arrival in Athens in 431-432. He also healed Asklepiegenei, a daughter of his friend Archiadas, by praying to the god Asklepios. Marinus wrote, “For the savior [Asklepios] heals easily, as befits a god.” Practicing the cult of the traditional Hellenic gods was one way that the Neoplatonic scholars supported Paganism.

Moreover, Proclus had a good relationship with the local aristocracy and participated in civil politics. Proclus’ friend Archiadas, archon eponymous from 438-450, contributed much to the Panathenaea. After the death of Archiadas, Proclus “himself sometimes took up political counsels, being present at the public discussions on behalf of the city and introducing opinion sensibly…” So, the Neoplatonic scholars used their intellectual reputation to influence civic politics and supported Paganism.

The Neoplatonic School came to its end in 529 when Justinian I (reign 527-565), according to John Malalas (ca. 491-578), sent an edict to Athens “ordering that no-one should teach philosophy nor interpret laws…” The existence of such a decree has been doubted given Malalas’ general lack of credibility. In his Historiarum libri quinque, however, Agathias of Myrina (ca. 530-580) wrote that “Not long before…to use a poetic turn of phrase, the quintessential flower of the philosophers of our age, left immediately and set off for a strange land” partly because “they were forbidden by law to take part in public life with impunity owing to the fact that they did not conform to the established religion.” Agathias did not identify “the law” with the one

mentioned by Malalas, but it is likely that he was in fact referring to the law of 529 mentioned in the latter’s work. If this law did exist, it was a clear turning point for Athenian Paganism, which lost its most powerful support with the closure of the Neoplatonic School.

Conclusion

Athenian Paganism survived for three hundred years partly because Athens was a flourishing classical center and Athenian Paganism was deeply rooted there, and partly because the intellectuals and their learned activities contributed to slowing down the Christianization of the city. Most philosophers, rhetoricians, and sophists lived in a Pagan universe. They not only actively participated in the theological debates and traditional religious practices, but also generously contributed to the pagan cultic activities, such as the Panathenaea. Although intellectual activity was seriously disturbed over the centuries by invasions, it always appeared to bounce back, at least until the sixth century, when Justinian issued a law to compulsorily close the Neoplatonic School, from which point on learned activities in Athens never recovered.