Conference Agenda

Session

S053: Classical Mythologies in Christian, Jewish and Islamic Sources

Time: Wednesday, 26/June/2019: 9:15am - 11:15am
Session Chair: Daniel Barbu
Session Chair: Francesco Massa

Location: Philosophicum (Jakobi 2) - 110

Session Abstract

This panel proposes to explore the different modes of interaction with the mythological traditions of the classical world in the Jewish, Christian, or Islamic literatures of the late antique and medieval periods. The aim of this panel is to engage in a reflexions on the status, place, function and role of the “pagan” past in the elaboration of a discourse articulating religious identities to a historical rupture, while at the same time becoming an important channel of transmission and reception of classical mythology. In this process, “pagan” myths, understood not only as a deceitful form of speech but also as a source of historical knowledge, came to contribute to the various ways in which Jews, Christians and Muslims thought about history, and especially, the history of religions.

This panel, encouraging a comparative perspective, grounded in rigorous historical and/or philological methodologies, welcomes contributions on case studies shedding light on the ambiguities of this relation between myth and history in specific historical contexts. Are also welcome contributions addressing the question from a historiographical vantage point, for instance by considering the place of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic discourses about the “pagan” past in the historiography of the comparative study of religion.

Presentations

Achilles and Polyxene as Adam and Eve: Trojan mythology as a new Genesis story in the Jewish-Christian Pseudo-Clementine novel (4th c.)
Benjamin Marguerite De Vos
Ghent University, Belgium

My contribution focuses on the reception of Greek mythology in the only late antique Jewish-Christian novel from 3rd-4th century Syria: the Pseudo-Clementines. In this story the main characters Peter and Clement hold discussions with several opponents such as Simon Magus – who features in e.g. the Acts of Peter – and the Egyptian grammarian Apion. Those characters claim truth and true culture/education and reveal the role that philosophy, revelation and mythology were thought to play in the Jewish-Christian and pagan identities. Classical mythology features at the very centre of this Jewish-Christian novel as an object of debate.

Besides rationalising techniques as Euhemerism, which also occurs in Christian apologetical texts from the 2nd-3rd centuries, we discover a wealth of unique (re)constructions of Greek myths. This paper will especially focus on the connection the novel draws between the mythological world of the Trojan War and the Genesis story, more precisely: the former as rewriting of the latter. The Pseudo-Clementines tell how Achilles is the first man, how Polyxena is related to wrong knowledge, how a snake plays a bad role, ... Moreover, this Christian retake on the Trojan mythology is linked to the Gnostic background of the figure of Simon Magus. In the Pseudo-Clementines, just as in apologetical literature, Simon is linked to Gnosticism and the figure of Helen of Troy. My aim is (a) to understand the meaning of this retake of this particular mythology in a novel that is highly critical about Greek mythology, and (b) to try to recover the possible implications in its context. What does this learn us about how the group of Jewish-Christians by whom the novel was written dealt with Greek myths (e.g. in relation to sin)? What do the details of the connection, and the differences, between the Trojan War and the Genesis story reveal?

Mythology versus History: Phaeton and Judaism in Orosius's Historiae adversus paganos 1,10,19
Elisa Manzo
Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II, Italy

Writing a historiographical work is a daunting task for Orosius, especially due to the universalistic approach he chooses. From the very beginning, he endeavours to distinguish what is historically relevant from what he considers just a “myth”. In particular, how he deals with the myth of Phaeton (Hist. 1, 10, 19) well represents, in my opinion, his efforts. Indeed, when Orosius refers to the traditional story of Phaeton, he attempts to blame and to disclaim such narration by considering its content as a “myth”. According to him, his predecessors created it to explain an event that, actually, had already been accounted for in the Holy Scriptures. In light of this consideration, it is inevitable that the historical perspective and the theological criticism to polytheism, seen as a “factory of falsehood”, weave together in Orosius’s Historiae. Starting from such premises, my paper aims to present a detailed analysis of Orosius’s approach to the myth of Phaeton. As a consequence, it also aims to demonstrate how, in the Historiae, the “biblical history” serves as a truthful and real opposition to a “mythological” narration that, in the author’s viewpoint, has a polytheistic basis.

The Curetes between Greek and Christian traditions
Mélanie Lozat
University of Geneva / University Sapienza of Roma

Earth-born divinities, inventors of the arts of metalworking, bounding warriors, entranced dancers, the Curetes are mainly known, in the Greek mythological tradition, for having guarded the infant Zeus. In order to spare him from the fate of his sisters and brothers, swallowed up as soon as they came into the world, Rhea, his mother, hid Zeus in a cave on the slopes of Mount Ida. She entrusted him to the Curetes who drowned out the cries of the newborn god clashing their spears and shields in a frenzied dance.

In the Christian tradition, the Curetes also have many facets. If to many authors they are young warriors, Clement of Alexandria (like Eusebius of Caesarea almost a century later) places them at the heart of a Dionysiac tetete: while the Curetes surrounded the young Dionysos in an armed dance, the Titans crept up on him and lured him to themselves. They dismembered the body of the god, then cooked and devoured him. Because of the intervention of Athena, who saved the heart of the young god, Zeus was able to reconstitute the body of Dionysos and bring it back to life.

In this presentation, I will emphasize the typology of the Curetes, its elaboration and diffusion from the Greek to Christian discourses (from...
1st century BC to 3rd century AD). I will especially discuss the image conveyed by Clement of Alexandria, examining its source as well as the function of the Curetes. Finally, I will focus on the purpose of the appropriation of this category in the construction of a Christian theory on the history of religions.

Adversus Nationes: the Controversy against Polytheism
Chiara Di Serio
University of Rome La Sapienza, Italy

The work of Arnobius Adversus Nationes represents a key text to understand the terms with whereby Christian thought demolished the plurality of the gods in the religions of the classical world from an ideological, philosophical and theological point of view. The arguments used against the previous religious order include, among others:

a) pagan gods have a birth and therefore are not eternal, in God the past and the present coincide;
b) their anthropomorphic representation is not suitable to express divinity are not suitable to the representation of divinity: 1) the gods cannot have a sex; 2) they cannot have children; 3) they cannot become angry; 4) they cannot behave obscenely; 5) they cannot carry out tasks equal to those of men.

Therefore, through the analysis and comparison of some passages of this work with other texts written by apologists of the first four centuries, we will try to reflect about the Christian "judging" perspective against the classical mythology and the polytheistic religious system.