

CRYPTO-PAGANISM IN THE LATER ROMAN EMPIRE.

PART I: CONCEALED IDENTITY AND FALSE CONVERSION

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ABSTRACT. This article explores crypto-paganism in the later Roman Empire as a phenomenon of concealed religious identity shaped by coercion, conformity, and false conversion to Christianity. It argues that successful dissimulation normally leaves no documentary trace, while accusations of paganism are frequently preserved only in polemical or judicial contexts, often arising after political disgrace or conflict with ecclesiastical authorities. As a result, modern attempts to identify "cryptopagans" risk reproducing the ambiguities already present in Late Antique evidence. By combining narrative, legal, and rhetorical sources, this article shows that covert adherence to traditional cults nevertheless persisted from the fourth to at least the early seventh century, particularly among members of the political and cultural elite. At the same time, from the mid-sixth century onward, accusations of paganism increasingly lost precise confessional meaning and functioned as a flexible instrument of social mobilization and denunciation, especially in periods of crisis. Crypto-paganism thus appears not as a marginal survival strategy, but as a structural by-product of Christianization under conditions of legal and social pressure.

KEYWORDS: crypto-paganism; Late Antiquity; Later Roman empire; Early Byzantium; religious identity; conversion; apostasy; paganism and Christianity.

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1. Approaching the Problem: The Limits of Evidence

At the end of 354, a young Christian aristocrat, born into a family famed for its exceptional generosity to the Church, was ordered to present himself at the court of Emperor Constantius II, then resident in Mediolanum. Making his way through the Hellespont, he detoured onto the Troad to see the places he knew from Homer. He did not, however, expect much pleasure from visiting the ancient monuments of

Ilios. Rumors circulating in the East claimed that the local temples had been destroyed by adherents of the new faith under the leadership of Pegasus, bishop of the Troad. Yet on arrival he found the heroon of Hector, the tomb of Achilles, and even the sanctuary of Athena Ilios all perfectly maintained. Statues revered by devotees of the ancestral gods had been anointed with oil, and fires still burned on the altars. “What does this mean? Do the people of Ilios offer sacrifices?” the young man asked. Pegasus, acting as his guide and reputedly a fierce opponent of any “idolatry,” replied: “Is it not natural that they should worship a brave man who was their own citizen, just as we worship the martyrs?”

The reasons for such a turn of mind, strange from the standpoint of a scrupulous Christian, soon emerged. One of Pegasus’ enemies informed the young man that the bishop secretly prayed to Helios. The informer presumably hoped that an aristocrat with court connections and a reputation for piety would pass the information to the proper authorities. The attempt failed. The young man kept his guide’s secret. Three years before visiting Troy, the aristocrat had privately embraced the ancestral cults. Fearing the wrath of his powerful relatives, he nonetheless maintained the public image of an ardent Christian. The young man was none other than Flavius Claudius Julian, later known as Julian “the Apostate.” After becoming Augustus and openly declaring his commitment to paganism, he recalled his acquaintance, the bishop. Pegasus openly renounced Christianity and became a priest in the new “pagan Church” the emperor sought to establish¹.

Julian’s account of this encounter with Pegasus, preserved in his correspondence, is among the few explicit and unambiguous testimonies to the existence of crypto-paganism within the Christian Roman Empire. Until recently, the phenomenon had rarely been the object of sustained study. In 1998, G. Fowden described it as “a little researched subject,”² and the situation has changed only marginally over the past quarter century. Only a handful of works have addressed the topic in any depth³. The principal reason for this neglect lies in the nature of the evidence.

¹ For the account of Julian’s meeting with Pegasus, see *Jul. Ep.* BC79/W19/F34 – the numbering of the emperor’s letters is given according to the editions of Bidez and Cumont (BC), Wright (W), and Furman (F); here and below: translation by W.C. Wright. On Pegasus’ apostasy, see *ibid.*; *Pass. Bas.* 9; 10; Pietri and Destephen 1999: 783–785; Schöllgen 2004; Vedeshkin 2023: 688–689.

² Fowden 2008: 557, n. 72.

³ Cancik 1995 – a very brief article, which merely registers the phenomenon; Kahlos 2007: 46–48 – crypto-paganism is mentioned only in passing; Caseau 2011 – a useful study, though based on limited sources; Frankfurter 2022 – not so much a study of Late Antique crypto-paganism as an attempt to identify general patterns in the functioning of concealed

Secret religious practices, and still more concealed religious self-identification, by definition evade documentation. If a crypto-pagan succeeded in hiding his convictions, neither contemporaries nor later generations would have had reason to question the sincerity of his Christian persona.

Consider the most obvious counterfactual. Had Julian, the most famous crypto-pagan of all, died during his Gallic caesarship, neither most of his contemporaries nor posterity would have known that he had privately embraced paganism as early as 351. At best, the sources would have preserved reports of a young member of the house of Constantius Chlorus with a pronounced interest in classical culture and a suspicious closeness to pagan philosophers and mystics⁴. More than a century after Julian's death, similar rumors circulated about Emperor Anthemius⁵, the general Illus, and the usurper Leontius⁶. They are suggestive enough to cast doubt on the

religious practices in different epochs and regions; Vedeshkin 2024a – an analysis of only one aspect of the cultic activity of secret pagans in the fourth–sixth centuries.

⁴ These rumors found reflection in Philost. III.27; *Galli Caesaris ad Iulianum fratrem epistula* / *Jul. Ep.* W82. However, the authenticity of Gallus' letter continues to raise doubts. See Den Boer 1962: 179–186; Malosse 2004: 190, n. 47; Neil 2023: 233.

⁵ In Photius' excerpts from Damascius the Scholarch, Anthemius is called a Hellene who allegedly intended to restore the ancient cults (Dam. *V. Isid.* 77A Athanassiadi). However, none of his contemporary western authors reported anything about the emperor's adherence to the ancient cults (see MacGeorge 2002: 53), while Greek chroniclers of later centuries considered him, on the contrary, a pious Christian and generous benefactor of the Church (Theoph. *Chron.* 5957; 5964; *Chron. Pasch.* 468). Nevertheless, it cannot be ruled out that the story about Anthemius' paganism reflects something more than mere rumors circulating among Alexandrian adherents of the ancient cults. Anthemius clearly preferred pagans in appointments to the highest offices: Messius Phoebus Severus received the titles of *patricius* and consul and held the post of *praefectus urbanus*, while the ruler of Dalmatia Marcellinus became *comes* and *patricius* (Dam. *V. Isid.* 69; Marc. Com. *Chron.* 468; Hydat. *Chron.* 466). See Haehling 1980: 59–60; O'Flynn 1991: 127; Athanassiadi 1993: 17; Roberto 2018: 484–487. One may agree with P. Chuvín's suggestion that, if Anthemius was a pagan, he kept this secret from his subjects (Chuvín 1990: 121).

⁶ The Eastern Roman *magister* Illus and the usurper Leontius whom he promoted were suspected of apostasy because of their ties with the pagan mystic and adventurer Pamprepus (Dam. *V. Isid.* 77B; 113C Athanassiadi; Zach. *V. Sever.* 40 Ambjörn/54 Brock, Fitzgerald; *V. Isaiae.* 7 Brooks; Athanassiadi 1993: 19; Kosinski 2010: 155–165; Livrea 2014). At the same time, Illus cultivated the image of a zealous adherent of the doctrine of Chalcedon and managed to win over Bishop Calandion of Antioch (Evagr. III.16) and Bishop John Talaia of Alexandria, who opposed Zeno's conciliatory policy toward the Monophysites (Liber. *Brev.* XVII; ps.-Zach. *Chron.* V.6f). On the influence of pagan intellectuals on the religious choices of their students and admirers, see in more detail Vedeshkin 2019.

intensity of their Christian commitment, yet insufficient to identify them with confidence as secret pagans.

The same logic applies to Pegasius. Had Julian been defeated in the civil war against Constantius II, Pegasius would scarcely have ventured to reveal his true convictions. In that scenario, few modern scholars would have any reason to doubt the sincerity of the Christian bishop's faith. In other words, our knowledge that Julian and Pegasius were crypto-pagans at certain stages of their lives depends on a concatenation of circumstances. This invisibility in the sources necessarily shapes the way modern scholars approach the evidence. Where actual practices and convictions remain concealed, any recorded accusation of secret paganism must be handled with extreme caution.

The problem is compounded by the fact that Christian authors could deploy accusations of secret paganism as a polemical instrument. Paulus Orosius, apparently seeking to justify the extrajudicial execution of Stilicho and the murder of his family, alleged that Stilicho's son Eucherius was a secret idolater who intended to seize the throne and persecute Christians (Oros. VII.38)⁷. Quodvultdeus of Carthage branded Eutropius, the notorious eunuch courtier of Arcadius' reign, a pagan on the grounds that he was believed to have been responsible for a decree restricting the right of ecclesiastical asylum (Quodv. *Lib. de Prom.* III.XXXVIII.41, CCSL XL, p. 183)⁸. In a sermon, the same bishop asserted that the usurper Joannes, who curtailed ecclesiastical privileges and pursued a tolerant policy toward religious dissenters, was an apostate (Quodv. *TB. II.4.2*, CCSL XL, p. 475)⁹. Zacharias of Mytilene called the *praefectus Augustalis* Entrechius a covert "Hellene," citing the presence of an open adherent of traditional cults in his entourage and suspicions that the prefect looked the other way while certain Alexandrian teachers and students performed pagan rites (Zach. *V. Sev.* 25–27 Ambjörn / 29–32 Brock, Fitzgerald)¹⁰.

In almost all these cases (Entrechius being the exception), the charge of secret paganism appears *post factum*, after political disgrace, conflict with the Church, or

⁷ See Burns 1995: 220; Fletcher 2004: 41; Kahlos 2007: 43.

⁸ *CTh.* IX.40.16; 45.2; 3; cf. John. Chrys. *In Eutrop.* PG LII, col. 391–398; Soc. VI.5; Soz. VIII.7; Joh. Ant. Fr. 189 Müller/283 Roberto/214 Mariev; Phot. *Bibl. Cod.* 96. For more detail, see Baur 1960: 44; Hallebeek 2005: 168–169.

⁹ For arguments in favor of identifying the anonymous *iuvenis fortis* from *TB II.4.2* – previously thought to be either the barbarian warlord Radagaisus (Mai and Cozza-Luzi 1852: 276, n. 1) or the usurper Priscus Attalus (Morin 1917: 214; Franes 1920: 66–68; Kalkman 1963: 236–237; Gassman 2024: 116, n. 89) – with Joannes the Primicerius, see Vedeshkin 2026.

¹⁰ P. Athanassiadi unequivocally recognizes Entrechius as a crypto-pagan. See Athanassiadi 1993: 20. For a more balanced position, see Watts 2010: 235–236.

unpopular administrative measures, and functions to explain or legitimize subsequent repression. Such accusations may have been mere slander, shaped by polemical and political aims. Yet it is also possible that the authors were transmitting information now lost to us, whether accurate or not. In none of the cited instances do we possess external, independent evidence that would allow us to choose decisively between these alternatives. In most cases, in short, we can neither refute nor confirm the accusation.

The analysis is further complicated by the likelihood that some prominent individuals accused of adherence to the ancestral cults were in fact Christians. Two fifth-century officials, for instance, the prefect Cyrus and the *patricius* Pelagius, who were removed from office on charges of ‘Hellenism,’ appear to have been sincere adherents of the new faith¹¹. Once pagans were legally excluded from military, civil, and court service¹², allegations of covert idolatry became an instrument of intra-elite competition¹³. This makes it difficult, often impossible, to distinguish genuine crypto-paganism from defamatory invective and thus complicates any attempt to reconstruct the religious practices of the late Roman elite.

If in the fourth and fifth centuries accusations of secret paganism functioned primarily within polemical discourse and the dynamics of court politics, then from the second quarter of the sixth century, under Justinian¹⁴, they assumed a different significance. Once persecutions of pagans and alleged crypto-pagans reached an unprecedented scale, the line between actual practice and politically motivated denunciation became even harder to draw. Procopius of Caesarea reports that Justinian used charges of “idolatry” as a pretext for confiscating the property of his subjects (Procop. *HA*. XIX.11; cf. *ibid.* XI.31; *CJ*. I.11.10; Malal. XVIII.42.449; Theoph. *Chron.* 6022). Under such conditions, it is frequently impossible to determine who among the condemned were indeed secret pagans and who were victims of denunciation or deliberate slander. It is at least plausible that the expanding machinery

¹¹ On the Christianity of Cyrus, see Constantelos 1972: 460–463; Gregory 1975; Holum 1982: 193, n. 79; Cameron 1982; Van Der Horst 2012. On the Christianity of Pelagius, see Vedeshkin 2026: 77–80.

¹² Edicts of 408 (*CTh*. XVI.5.42), 416 (*ibid.* XVI.10.21), 425 (*Sirm.* 6), 468 (*CJ*. I.4.5), and 529 (Malal. XVIII.42.449; Theoph. *Chron.* 6022).

¹³ See Rohmann 2016: 93–95; Ведешкин 2026.

¹⁴ On Justinian I’s anti-pagan policy, see Stein 1949: 369–373; Constantelos 1964; Irmischer 1981; Chuvín 1990: 132–144; Maas 1992: 58–61; Evans 2000: 249–251; Meier 2003: 198–209; Vedeshkin 2018: 295–299.

of repression served not only the purposes of religious policy but also those of political consolidation and fiscal extraction, eliminating opposition while replenishing a treasury strained by wars and large-scale monumental construction¹⁵.

2. From Constantius II to Maurice: Case Studies of Crypto-paganism

From all of the above, it does not follow that everyone accused of paganism was necessarily the victim of false denunciation, or that no “genuine” crypto-pagans existed among them. On the contrary, several cases show that from the fourth to sixth centuries there were indeed individuals who consciously hid their adherence to the traditional cults while outwardly professing loyalty to the new faith.

Julian the Apostate himself concealed his conversion to the cults of the ancient gods for more than a decade (351 to 361) (Amm. XXI.2.3–4, XXII.5.1; Theod. *HE*. III.3)¹⁶. According to fifth-century church historians, Julian deliberately adopted a “monastic way of life” and was even enrolled in the clergy of the church of Nicomedia as a lector (Soc. III.1; Soz. V.2). After being appointed Caesar, he continued to present himself as a zealous Christian and a loyal executor of the ecclesiastical policies of Constantius II. The youngest member of the imperial college even managed to convince the Nicenes, whom he would later persecute¹⁷, of his fervent faith. Hilary of Poitiers, for example, referred to Julian as “*dominus meus religiosus*” (Hil. *Lib. ad Const.* II). At least until January 361, he dutifully attended church and took part in Christian rites (Amm. XXI.2.5), without arousing any suspicion among his subjects.

The *patricius* Phocas, son of Krateros, who came under suspicion during the first wave of Justinian’s persecutions around 529¹⁸, apparently succeeded in persuading

¹⁵ See Maas 1992: 65–66; Wildberg 2005: 334; Sarris 2011: 167; Bell 2013: 242–244.

¹⁶ Ammianus Marcellinus reported that Julian from his youth displayed an inclination toward paganism (Amm. XXII.5.1). Meanwhile, in the letter to the Alexandrians written in autumn 362, the emperor himself claimed that a little more than eleven years had passed since his conversion (Jul. *Ep.* BC111/W47/F55).

¹⁷ Thus, for example, Julian, though without any zeal, took part in the exile of one of the leaders of the western Nicenes, Hilary of Poitiers (see Borchardt 1966: 28–31; Smulders 2015: 131).

¹⁸ In the surviving recension of John Malalas’ chronicle, it is reported that Phocas died during the first anti-pagan purge of 529 (Malal. XVIII.42.449). This error is corrected in Theophanes the Confessor, who had access to a better edition of Malalas’ text. See Martin-dale 1980: 882; Mango, Scott, and Greatrex 1997: 275; Kaldellis 2013: 350, n. 14. Al. Cameron’s concept, according to which the chroniclers confused Phocas son of Kraterus with the *magister* Phocas (Cameron 2015: 263–264), is entirely unsubstantiated.

investigators that he was a pious Christian (Theoph. *Chron.* 6022)¹⁹. Yet in 545/546 he was again accused of secret idolatry and committed suicide by taking poison. When Justinian learned that Phocas had “escaped justice,” he ordered that the former prefect be buried like dead livestock (Ps.-Dion. *Chron.* III, p. 71 Witakowsky; Mich. Syr. *Chron.* IX.24 Moosa II, p. 330). The circumstances of his case, and above all his death²⁰, make it plausible that Phocas was not the victim of slander, but rather a genuine crypto-pagan who successfully concealed his convictions for at least sixteen years²¹.

Another revealing case concerns the trial of secret pagans under Emperor Tiberius II Constantine. In 579, a denunciation reached the court alleging that the Christians of Heliopolis–Baalbek were being mistreated by the local pagan elite²². A military commander, Theophilus, was sent to the city; he arrested, interrogated, and executed a substantial number of pagans. Under questioning, the accused named fellow adherents across various eastern cities, especially in Antioch, where the “chief priest” was said to be one Rufinus (Joh. Eph. *HE.* III.27, pp. 209–210 Smith). It was soon established that Rufinus had left Antioch for Edessa to meet Anatolius, *praeses* of Osroene and *comes Orientis*. He was tracked down and caught in Edessa while offering sacrifice to Zeus on the governor’s estate. Most of the participants escaped, but Rufinus, realizing the inevitability of exposure, committed

¹⁹ This is indicated by the fact that in 532 Phocas held the office of *praefectus praetorio Orientis* for several months. See Martindale 1980: 881–882 (Phocas 5).

²⁰ On suicide as a predominantly pagan practice in Late Antiquity, see Harl 1990: 24–25; Karpouzilos 2007: 85–86.

²¹ K. Harl believes that Phocas formally accepted Christianity in 529 (Harl 1990: 24). This hypothesis finds no confirmation in the sources. Most likely, Phocas was formally baptized earlier. According to John Lydus, Phocas donated to the Church (Joh. Lyd. *De mag.* III.74). One may suppose that the dignitary thereby tried to create for himself a reputation as an ardent Christian. But see the objections in Scott 2013: 209–210.

²² Heliopolis long remained one of the last bastions of paganism in the Syro-Phoenician region. Theodoret of Cyrrhus (probably somewhat exaggerating) reported that by the end of the fourth century, there were no Christians there at all (Theod. *HE.* IV.22). Even though the city’s main temple was destroyed under Emperor Theodosius I (Malal. XIII.37.344), Heliopolis managed to preserve most of its famed sanctuaries. At the beginning of the fifth century, local pagans mutilated the monk Rabbula, who attempted to destroy idols installed in one of Baalbek’s openly functioning temples (*V. Rabb.* 407–408 Bedjan). According to the chronicle of ps.-Zachariah, the city’s main temple functioned until the reign of Justin I, under whom the sanctuary burned after being struck by lightning (ps. Zach. *Chron.* VIII.4c; however, ps.-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre dates this event to 554–555; see ps.-Dion. *Chron.* III, p. 116–117 Witakowsky). On the survival of paganism in late antique Baalbek, see Aliquot 2009: 103–106.

suicide. Two elderly persons who failed to flee were apprehended beside his body, under pressure (though without torture), revealed the names of the others, including Anatolius. The governor and members of his staff were arrested soon after. His attempt to fabricate an alibi failed: pagan images disguised as Christian icons were found in his house. Anatolius was transferred to Constantinople, where he was tried, convicted of Hellenism, and brutally executed (Joh. Eph. *HE*. III.27–33, pp. 210–224 Smith; cf. Evagr. V.18)²³. Rufinus' crypto-paganism is beyond doubt: he was caught performing sacrifice and immediately took his own life. Anatolius' crypto-paganism, though less certain, nevertheless appears highly probable. Eyewitness testimony, the performance of forbidden rites on his estate, the presence of disguised cult images, and his deliberate cultivation of a Christian public persona (friendships with bishops, an ostentatiously Christian household) (Joh. Eph. *HE*. III.28–29, pp. 211–214 Smith) together suggest that he was not falsely accused but a concealed adherent of the traditional cults.

According to Michael the Syrian and the Anonymous Chronicle of 1234, persecutions of pagans also occurred in Carrhae–Harran under Maurice. Acting on the emperor's orders, Bishop Stephanus initiated a crackdown on the followers of the ancestral cults. Some were converted, others executed. Akindynus, the city's governor, nominally a Christian, was accused of secretly making sacrifices after being denounced by his own notary. Once the charges were confirmed, the governor was crucified and the informer took his place (Mich. Syr. *Chron*. X.24 Moosa; *Chron*. Syr. 1234. 79, pp. 214–215 Chabot)²⁴. The notary may well have slandered his superior in order to secure the office. Yet the accusations might also have had substance. Carrhae was the last stronghold of the ancient cults in the Levant. Throughout Late Antiquity, most inhabitants of this city practiced traditional religion more or less openly²⁵. Local officials could hardly have been unaware of the religious situation, which forced them to seek workable arrangements with the local elite and to tol-

²³ On this episode, see Rochow 1977; Allen 1981: 229–232; Liebeschuetz 2001: 263–264; Roggo 2024.

²⁴ For more detail, see Brock 1992: 209.

²⁵ Egeria the Pilgrim, who visited Carrhae at the end of the fourth century, wrote: “In the city itself, apart from a few clerics and holy monks living in the city, I found absolutely no Christian, but all are pagans” (In ipsa autem ciuitatem extra paucos clericos et sanctos monachos, si qui tamen in ciuitate commorantur, penitus nullum Christianum inueni, sed totum gentes sunt – Eger. *Itin*. 21; trans. by M.V.). In the mid-fifth century, Theodoret called Carrhae a city overgrown with “Hellenic thorns” (Theod. *HE*. IV.18). According to Procopius of Caesarea, in the mid-sixth century the majority of the city's inhabitants were still loyal to the ancient faith (Procop. *BP*. II.13.7).

erate local practices for the sake of civic stability. Akindynus may have ignored pagan practices out of self-interest²⁶, yet he may also have sympathized with the local population or even shared their views in secret.

The cases of Julian, Pegasius, Rufinus, and probably Phocas and Anatolius, as well as possibly Akindynus, show that among the subjects of the Roman emperors there were individuals who outwardly presented themselves as adherents of the new faith, attending church and participating in Christian rites, yet in secret continued to venerate their ancestral gods. These individuals included members of the aristocracy, high-ranking officials, and even clerics.

3. External Evidence: Rhetoric, Preaching, and Legislation

The existence of crypto-paganism was well known both to defenders of the old cults and to preachers of the new faith. In his speech *Pro templis*, composed around 387²⁷, the pagan rhetor Libanius noted that some of his contemporaries “go to their [Christian] ceremonies, join their crowds, go everywhere where these do, but when they adopt an attitude of prayer, they either invoke no god at all or else they invoke the gods. It is no proper invocation from such a place, but it is an invocation for all that. In plays, the actor who takes the part of a tyrant is not a tyrant, but just the same as he was before putting on the mask: so here, everyone keeps himself unchanged, but he lets them think he has been changed”²⁸ (Lib. *Or.* XXX.28, trans. by A.F. Norman). According to Shenoute of Atripe, abbot of the White Monastery, many pagans came to church posing as Christians. They stood through the service, recited Christian prayers, and raised their hands during the liturgy. At the same time, they remained as indifferent to the meaning of the rite and the words of the sermon as the geese and peacocks wandering in the monastery courtyard (Shenout. *Ad Philos. Gent.* 44–45 Leipoldt). Eugippius reports that in the second half of the fifth century, Severinus of Noricum discovered that some inhabitants of

²⁶ For example, at the II Council of Ephesus (“Robber Council”) of 449, Bishop Daniel of Carrhae was accused of taking bribes from local pagans who were buying for themselves the right to offer sacrifices (*C. Chalc.* X.73.17). On corruption in the state apparatus and clergy of the Roman Empire as one of the factors in the long survival of paganism, see Vedeshkin 2018.

²⁷ On the date, see Watson 2013: 13–16.

²⁸ ἔρχονται μὲν γὰρ ἐπὶ τὰ φαινόμενα καὶ τὸν τούτων ὄχλον καὶ διὰ τῶν ἄλλων ὧν οὗτοι πορεύονται, καταστάντες δὲ εἰς σχῆμα τὸ τῶν εὐχομένων ἢ οὐδένα καλοῦσιν ἢ τοὺς θεούς, οὐ καλῶς μὲν ἐκ τοῦ τοιοῦτου χωρίου, καλοῦσι δ’ οὖν. ὥσπερ οὖν ἐν ταῖς τραγωδίαις ὁ τὸν τύραννον εἰσιῶν οὐκ ἔστι τύραννος, ἀλλ’ ὅπερ ἦν πρὸ τοῦ προσωπείου, οὕτω καὶ ἐκείνων ἕκαστος τηρεῖ μὲν αὐτὸν ἀκίνητον, δοκεῖ δὲ τούτοις κεκινήσθαι.

the town of Cucullis, regarded as Christians and participating in public prayers, gathered in a hidden place to offer sacrifices to the ancient gods (Eugip. *V. Sever.* XI.2–5).

Secret pagan practices are attested not only in rhetorical works and homiletic literature but also in legislation. The codices of late Roman civil law preserve several edicts directed against apostasy, understood as participation in pagan rites, above all sacrifices, by persons who had already received baptism (*CTh.* XI.39.11; XVI.7.1–7; *CJ.* I.11.10)²⁹. For most of the fourth century, citizens of the empire could still declare their break with Christianity and return to the ancient cults openly or at least without much concealment³⁰. After 391–392 in the East and 394 in the West, such acts could be carried out only in secret, since apostasy and especially participation in forbidden rites were punishable by loss of civil status, exile, and eventually by capital punishment³¹.

Even so, in 426 the government of Valentinian III still found it necessary to issue an edict against “those persons, who have made sacrifices or who have commanded them to be made, after they assumed the name of Christianity” (*qui nomen christianitatis induti sacrificia vel fecerint vel facienda mandaverint* – *CTh.* XVI.7.7, trans. by C. Pharr)³². The problem remained acute in the following century. Shortly after his accession, Justinian I issued an edict declaring that those who “having abandoned the adoration of the true and only God, have, in their insane error, offered sacrifices to statues and performed worship replete with iniquity, and that even those who had been already found worthy of sacred baptism, have

²⁹ On late Roman legislation against apostates, see the mostly descriptive works of Giandomenici 1979; Baccari 1981; Vincenti 1995; Impallomeni 1987; Saggioro 2007; Cococcia 2008; Di Pinto 2018; Manni 2020; Riedlberger 2020: 685–765.

³⁰ A few fourth-century apostates who demonstratively renounced the new faith and returned to the ancestral worship of the gods are known by name. Among them are companions of Julian the Apostate: the *comes* Julianus, Seleucus, Felix, Helpidius, Domitius Modestus; the Christian bishops Pegasius of Troas and Heron of the Thebaid; the Antiochene presbyter Theotecnius (Vedeshkin 2023: 674–680; 688–689); members of the senatorial aristocracy of the Eternal City, Marcian and Leucadius (Vedeshkin 2024b: 280–282); and an anonymous Roman aristocrat, most likely identical with the consul of 382 Flavius Syagrius (Vedeshkin 2025).

³¹ See *CTh.* XVI.7.5; XVI.10.10–25. On anti-pagan legislation and edicts against apostates of the late fourth–fifth centuries, see Impallomeni 1987; Salzman 1993: 367–373; Saggioro 2007: 167–168; Vedeshkin 2016: 771–783; Riedlberger 2020: 735–750.

³² The content of this constitution has been analyzed repeatedly; see Saggioro 2017: 171–176; Di Pinto 2018; Hornung 2016: 278–282; Manni 2020: 226; Riedlberger 2020: 751–762.

committed these sins, we subjected them, in a spirit of kindness, to the punishment adequate to the crime of which they shall be convicted. And by the present law we give notice to all that, if in the future it shall appear that those who have become Christians and have at any time been considered worthy of the holy and saving baptism, still adhere to pagan error, they shall be punished by death" (*CJ.* I.11.10, trans. by F. H. Blume)³³. Yet more than fifty years after Justinian had seemingly eradicated the traditional cults, Emperor Maurice issued a decree instructing that those who, while calling themselves Christians, continued to worship idols were to be identified and brought to trial (*Joh. Eph. HE.* V.16, p. 225 Smith). The issue of apostasy appeared for the last time in imperial legislation in the *Ecloga*, whose final redaction dates to the third decade of the eighth century (*Eclog.* App. 4.20.66–67).

Taken together, these testimonies show that adherents of the traditional cults, followers of the new faith, and officials of the imperial administration clearly understood that formal membership in the Christian community did not always imply a true abandonment of ancient beliefs.

4. False Conversion: Conformism, Coercion and Adaptation

The motives that led subjects of the late Roman emperors who did not believe the Gospel to accept baptism were diverse. One of the most obvious was social conformism and the wish to obtain a worldly advantage. Once Constantine openly declared sympathy for the new faith, many of his subjects began to convert in the hope of attracting the emperor's attention. Eusebius of Caesarea already noted that "there was also an unspeakable deceit on the part of those who slipped into the Church and adopted the false facade of the Christian name" in order to win the favor of the Augustus (*Euseb. V. Const.* IV.54, trans. by Av. Cameron, S.G. Hall)³⁴.

³³ eos deserta veri et solius dei adoratione simulacris insano errore sacrificia obtulisse et sollemnitates omni impietate refertos celebrasse, eos quidem, qui iam, postquam sancto baptismo digni habiti sunt, haec commiserint, congruae delictis quorum convicti sunt animadversioni, et hoc quidem benignius subiecimus: in futurum autem per praesentem legem omnibus edicimus eos, qui Christiani facti et sancto salutarique baptismo quoquo tempore digni habiti sunt, si adhuc in paganorum errore eos remansisse apparuerit, ultimo supplicio subiectum iri. F. Trombley connected the promulgation of *CJ.* I.11.9–10 with the revolt of Illus and Leontius and dated it to the reign of Emperor Zeno (*Trombley 2001*: vol. I, 82–94). However, relying on *P. Oxy.* 1814, S. Corcoran proved that *CJ.* I.11.10 was issued at the beginning of Justinian's reign (*Corcoran 2009*).

³⁴ εἰρωνεῖαν τ' ἄλεκτον τῶν τὴν ἐκκλησίαν ὑποδυομένων καὶ τὸ Χριστιανῶν ἐπιπλάστως σχηματιζομένων ὄνομα... *Cf.* *Soz.* II.5. It is noteworthy that a considerable part of those who

Toward the end of the fourth century, the Roman senator Quintus Aurelius Symmachus complained that “now to desert the altars is, for Romans, a kind of careerism” (nunc aris deesse Romanos genus est ambiendi – Symm. *Ep.* I.51, trans. by M.R. Salzman, M. Roberts). His younger contemporary Augustine of Hippo stated quite directly that some entered the Church “to win the favor of an influential friend, to get himself a desirable wife, or escape some difficulty and distress of this world” (...ut maiorem amicum conciliet, ... ut ad concupitam uxorem perveniat, ... ut aliquam pressuram huius saeculi evadat...– Aug. *Serm.* 47.18, trans. by E. Hill; cf. *Catech. rud.* 5.9 / 6.2). In practice, many citizens of the empire received baptism in order to strengthen their social position, secure office, or enter the clergy and thus free themselves from the burden of municipal and state liturgies (Athan. *Hist. Ar.* 73; 78; *Apol. ad Const.* 28). A typical example is again Pegasius of the Troad, who, as Julian believed, accepted ecclesiastical office “because he was ambitious for power” (δυναστείας ὀρεγόμενος – Jul. *Ep.* B79/W19/F34).

Joining the state religion became even more attractive as legal discrimination against adherents of the traditional cults intensified. Fifth-century edicts that barred pagans from civil, military, and court service³⁵ may have played a decisive role in the “conversion” of the political class. Although these prohibitions were often violated³⁶, it was undoubtedly easier for officials who had at least formally accepted the new faith to build a career.

A fairly widespread (and no less paradoxical for that) reason for fictitious baptism was the desire to save one’s idols from desecration. For example, Pegasius, who later became a priest of a pagan cult, assured Julian that he had once taken ecclesiastical office solely to protect the sanctuaries of the gods from overzealous parishioners (Jul. *Ep.* B79 / W19 / F34). Augustine observed that some pagans ac-

converted for career reasons left the Church as soon as the pagan Julian ascended the throne. See Vedeshkin 2023.

³⁵ See above.

³⁶ See Martindale 1980: 121 (Apollonius 3); 299 (Claudianus 3 [cf. Theod. *Ep.* 99]); 371 (Domitius 1); 491 (Florus 1); 500–501 (Generidus); 558 (Hierius 3); 684–685 (Litorius); 691–692 (Lucius 1–2); 708–710 (Marcellinus 6); 770–771 (Namatianus); 798 (Olympiodorus 1); 825–827 (Pamphrepius); 881–882 (Phocas 5); 1005–1006 (Severus 19); 1055 (Taurianus); 1101 (Theodosius 9) = 1102–1103 (Theodosius 20); 1186 (Uranius 2); 1184–1185 (Volusianus 6); 1188 (Ulpianus 2; see Theod. *Ep.* 22); 1199–1200 (Zenon 6); 1206 (Zosimus 5). On adherents of the traditional cults in the administrative system after Theodosius I, see Haehling 1978: 581–608. Paraphrasing a twentieth-century political figure, Christian late Roman emperors of the fifth–early sixth centuries themselves decided which of their servants was a pagan and which was not.

cepted Christian identity only outwardly to safeguard “their idols,” that is, the images of the gods, from desecration (Aug. *Serm.* 360A.8 / 24.8 Dolbeau). In the late fifth century, Besa, the successor of Shenoute, described how villagers near his monastery fiercely defended a “piece of wood,” that is, a local deity’s statue, and that those involved were officially regarded as Christians (Bes. fr. 41, Kuhn I, p. 129 / Kuhn II, p. 124)³⁷. Thus, outward acceptance of the new faith served not only as a tool of social adaptation but also as a conscious strategy aimed at preserving sacred space and the material objects associated with traditional worship. Formal membership in the Church protected household shrines and images from destruction at a time of growing pressure.

Many converted to Christianity under compulsion. Some feared anti-pagan legislation (Aug. *Ep.* 97.4; *Serm.* 360A.8 / 24.8 Dolbeau); others hoped to avoid punishment for unrelated offences, since timely baptism could improve the legal position of a pagan facing prosecution. A telling example is the situation in Rome after the defeat of Emperor Eugenius in 394³⁸. Prudentius reports that after the fall of the usurper, many senators embraced Christianity (Prud. *C. Symm.* I.566–569). Despite poetic exaggeration, this likely reflects a real wave of conversions under pressure from Theodosius I. According to Symmachus, senators who supported Eugenius faced fines and confiscations (*Symm. Ep.* III.33; IV.19; 51; V.47; VI.12). Augustine adds that amnesty was granted only to those pagan senators who accepted Christianity (Aug. *De Civ.* V.26). The choice facing these aristocrats was stark: loyalty to ancestral cults or preservation of property and status³⁹. It is improbable that such baptisms were accompanied by doctrinal conviction; they were mere instruments of political survival.

Another illustration is the case of the quaestor Isocasius. In 467, he was accused of “Hellenism” (Malal. XIV.38.396–397; *Chron. Pasch.* 467) as well as of other, unspecified crimes (Zonar. *Chron.* XIV.1). He was removed from office, arrested, and exiled. Influential friends secured a senatorial review of his case in Constantinople.

³⁷ Frankfurter 2000: 79; Frankfurter 2022: 296. For an alternative interpretation of this passage, see Kuhn 1954: 179.

³⁸ The so-called “pagan revival” of 393–394 has generated an enormous bibliography. We will allow ourselves to list only the major works of the last decades: Matthews 1990: 238–248; Hedrick 2000: 37–88; Cameron 2011: 74–131; Ratti 2012: 111–120; Vedeshkin 2018: 137–148.

³⁹ Some scholars believe that among the aristocrats who received pardon thanks to timely acceptance of Christianity was also the son of the leader of the Roman pagans, Nicomachus Flavianus – Flavianus Nicomachus Junior. See Sogno 2006: 80. On the baptism of Roman pagan senators, see in more detail Cameron 1969: 256–257; Hedrick 2000: 56; 71–74; Vedeshkin 2018: 145–148.

During the hearings, Isocasius won the sympathy of the urban plebs, who freed him from his guards and escorted him to Hagia Sophia, where he was hastily baptized. Emperor Leo I eventually allowed him to withdraw to his homeland⁴⁰. As P. Brown noted, Isocasius' paganism became a "trump card." Once discarded, it allowed a safe resolution⁴¹. Nothing suggests that his baptism reflected an inner change; it was a means of escaping prosecution.

Another indicative case is that of Leontius, the celebrated teacher of the Berytus law school in the late fifth century (Zach. *V. Sev.* 48 Ambjörn / 62 Brock, Fitzgerald). According to Zacharias of Mytilene, he not only taught law but also introduced future officials to idolatry, magic, and astrology (ibid. 66–67). His activity was uncovered only after the arrest of students who attempted to offer sacrifice to "demons;" Leontius himself was saved from lynching thanks to the intercession of Christian alumni of his school (ibid. 69–70 Ambjörn / 89–99 Brock, Fitzgerald). He was forced to flee the city for a time but soon returned and received baptism (ibid. 74 Ambjörn / 100 Brock, Fitzgerald; Dam. *V. Isid.* 40 Athanassiadi), apparently in order to avoid further persecution and to retain his position and teaching chair⁴². As with Isocasius, nothing in the account suggests genuine conversion.

The strategy of fictitious baptism became especially widespread under Justinian I, whose reign marked a decisive turning point in the position of pagans. From the first years of his rule, it was declared criminal not only to perform the rituals of pagan cult (as before) but even to remain outside the Christian community as such. Pagans were deprived of all civil rights: they were forbidden to make wills, to inherit property, to serve in civil and military posts (Malal. XVIII.42.449; Theoph. *Chron.* 6022), to teach (*CJ.* I.5.18; I.11.10), and to own Christian slaves (*CJ.* I.10.2). Moreover, an edict issued around 529 prescribed: "Those who have not yet been deemed worthy of the holy baptism must make themselves known whether they live in this imperial city or in the province, and go to the holy churches with their wives and children and their whole household, to be taught the true faith of the Christians, and when so taught, to entirely abandon the former error, receive the saving baptism, or realize that if they consider these things of little worth, they will be without any civil rights and will not be permitted to become owners of property movable or immovable, but stripped of all things, will be left in penury, and in addition will be subject to the proper punishment"⁴³ (*CJ.* I.11.10, trans. by F. H. Blume).

⁴⁰ On the case of Isocasius, see in more detail: Βασιλείου 2008; Vedeshkin 2020; Mecella 2023.

⁴¹ Brown 1992: 133.

⁴² On these events, see Hall 2004: 106–108.

⁴³ ... illi vero, qui primam aetatem iam excesserunt, sacrosanctas ecclesias frequentent et in sacris scripturis instituantur et sic sincerae paenitentiae se dedant et pristino errore

From this moment, all subjects of the Augustus, except Jews, were forced to be baptised⁴⁴.

It is difficult to believe that mass conversions carried out under direct state pressure and under threat of severe sanctions were accompanied by metanoia. In particular, the Eastern Roman clergy, who were charged with catechizing the pagans who flooded into churches after the imperial decree, understood that many of the “new converts” became Christians not out of true faith but solely “out of fear of the royal command” (Bars. et Iohn. *QR*. 821/830).

Justinian’s policy favored the spread of fictitious baptism and the survival of concealed adherence to traditional cults. The authorities themselves recognized this danger, which is why the edict insisted on the baptism not only of the *pater familias* but of all household members.

These fears proved well-founded. Procopius of Caesarea reports that after the edicts mandating compulsory baptism, many of whom “decided to accept Christianity did so in name only, as a ward against the difficulties that they now found themselves in, and most of them were caught soon afterward performing their libations and sacrifices and other unholy rites” (ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτῶν ὅσοι τοῦ Χριστιανῶν ὀνόματος δῆθεν μεταλαχεῖν ἔγνωσαν τῷ λόγῳ τὰ παρόντα σφίσιν ἐκκρούοντες, οὗτοι δὲ οὐ πολλῷ ὕστερον ἐπὶ ταῖς σπονδαῖς καὶ θυσίαις καὶ ἄλλοις οὐχ ὁσίοις ἔργοις ἐκ τοῦ ἐπὶ πλεῖστον ἡλίσκοντο. – Procop. *HA*.XI.32, trans. by A. Kaldellis).

At least some inhabitants of Carrhae–Harran who were forcibly baptized under Maurice later returned to pagan worship, presumably after the Persian capture of the city in 609⁴⁵, *i.e.*, around twenty years after the persecution initiated by Bishop Stephanus. A sizable portion of the local population continued to profess paganism until the Seljuk conquest in the eleventh century, sheltering under the legally protected designation of ‘Sabians’⁴⁶.

Augustine had already observed that although some of the false Christians who had joined the Church (*de falsis intra ecclesiam Christianis*) only in words later

reieto venerabile baptismum accipiant: hoc enim modo firmiter veram orthodoxorum fidem suscipiant neque rursus in pristinum errorem recident. Qui vero ideo militiae dignitatis bonorumve retinendorum gratia ipsi quidem simulate ad salubre baptismum accesserunt vel accesserint, uxores autem vel liberos vel reliquos, qui in eorum domo sunt, in paganorum errore reliquerint, eos bonis exui et nostrae rei publicae plane expertes esse iubemus neque non quibus digni sunt poenis subici...

⁴⁴ On Justinian’s religious policy toward pagans, see above.

⁴⁵ Howard-Johnston 2021: 31.

⁴⁶ On the “pseudo-Sabians” of Harran and their religious practices, see Green 1992: 94–217; Pingree 2002; Hämeen-Anttila 2006: 46–52.

“corrected” themselves, many remained faithful to their former convictions. According to the bishop, some of these internal enemies concealed their views, while others openly criticized the tenets of the new faith (Aug. *De Civ.* I.35; cf. Aug. *Serm.* 47.18)⁴⁷. Among them may be counted the scholasticus Nicotychus, to whom one of the letters of Nilus of Ancyra was addressed. In his letter, the ascetic accused Nicotychus of having accepted the new faith only outwardly while continuing to mock the Church’s teaching, call Christian clerics ignorant, and praise pagan philosophers incessantly. All this, in Nilus’ view, unequivocally exposed him: “You have not escaped notice, sorcerer! You have not escaped us, Nicotychus, even if you thought to escape by hypocrisy and by misuse of the holy and most precious name of Christ. You have not escaped us, for you are a fully formed Hellene, and you are uncontrollably defiled by the vain teachings of the Hellenes” (Οὐκ ἔλαθες, φαρμακέ. Οὐκ ἔλαθες γὰρ ἡμᾶς, Νικοτίχε, καὶ λανθάνειν ἔδοξες διὰ τῆς ὑποκρίσεως καὶ τῆς καταχρήσεως τοῦ ἁγίου καὶ πολυτιμῆτου ὀνόματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ. Οὐκ ἔλαθες ἡμᾶς ἀπηρτισμένος Ἕλληνα ὑπάρχων, καὶ ἀκρατῶς καὶ τοῖς Ἑλλήνων μεμολυσμένος ματαίοις διδάγμασιν – Nil. *Ep.* III.8, PG 79, col. 369–372; trans. by M.V.).

Another example is the famous iatrosophist Gessius of Petra, who in old age accepted Christianity out of fear of yet another anti-pagan edict⁴⁸. According to

⁴⁷ Kahlos 2007: 46.

⁴⁸ P. Athanassiadi believed that Gessius’ baptism occurred during the persecution of pagan intellectuals under Emperor Zeno (Athanassiadi 1993: 20). At the same time, E. J. Watts expressed doubts about the reliability of the *Miracula*’s testimony on the physician’s baptism. He based his arguments on two early sixth-century texts (Zachariah of Mytilene’s dialogue *Ammonius* and Damascius’ *Vita Isidori*), in which the iatrosophist appears as a convinced adherent of the traditional cults (Watts 2009: 126–127). In other words, at least at the beginning of the sixth century, Gessius was still regarded as a pagan, and therefore his formal conversion to Christianity can in no way be dated to Zeno’s reign. However, this event could have taken place after the works of Zachariah and Damascius were written. Relying on the testimony of Stephanus of Athens (late sixth–early seventh c.), who either personally knew Gessius or was a student of one of the pupils of his school, L. Westerink suggested that the iatrosophist could have lived into the reign of Justinian I (Westerink 1985: 20). This hypothesis is supported by external evidence. A papyrus from the recently discovered in Petra dated 10 May 538 mentioned that the brother of one of the local aristocrats was a certain “of learned memory Ge[...]” (λογίας μνήμης Γε[...] – *P. Petr.* 1.2.150). According to the hypothesis of R. Caldwell and T. Gagos, the above-mentioned “Γε...” is identical with the famous Petran iatrosophist Gessius (Gagos and Caldwell 2007: 432). If so, in 538, the memory of Gessius could still have been very fresh among his compatriots, and therefore the physician died shortly before the time the document was composed, i.e. in the early to mid 530s. In other words, it seems likely that Gessius lived into the first wave of Justinian’s persecutions of pagans (ca. 529), which forced him to accept baptism.

Sophronius of Jerusalem, as he emerged from the baptismal font, he allegedly paraphrased the *Odyssey* to the effect that it was not Ajax but the baptistery that was a sea abyss. Subsequently he continued for a time to live “in a pagan manner” and openly mocked the doctrines of the new faith (Soph. Hier. *Mir. Cyr. et Joh.* 30). In other words, formal baptism did not in the least affect the physician’s *modus cogitandi*⁴⁹.

The author of the *Life of Symeon Stylite the Younger* related that sometime in the mid-sixth century, a certain notable man of Antioch came to a monastery to receive communion. Symeon, who was present, exposed the visitor’s secret impiety, accusing him of constant blasphemy and threatening that he would be possessed by demons if he did not confess his sins. The aristocrat was allegedly seized by fear, after which he “began to recount his lawless deeds, his blasphemies against God, the many sacrifices that he secretly performed for demons, and certain other abominations which we have considered it better to pass over in silence, sparing the hearing of simpler people” (Καὶ ἀρξάμενος ἀφηγεῖτο τὰς ἀνόμους αὐτοῦ πράξεις καὶ τὰς εἰς Θεὸν βλασφημίας καὶ πολλὰς θυσίας ἃς κρυπτῶς ἐπετέλει τοῖς δαίμοσιν, καὶ ἕτερα ἅτινα μυσαρὰ, ἅπερ σιωπῇ παραδραμεῖν καλὸν εἶναι νενομίκαμεν, φειδόμενοι τῆς τῶν ἀπλουστέρων ἀκοῆς – *V. Sym. Iun.* 221; trans. by M.V.).

Thus, formal conversion was by no means always followed, even gradually, by a transformation of religious consciousness. On the contrary, in many cases the newly baptized preserved their former beliefs and religious practices, which were either carefully concealed or manifested themselves in irony, criticism, and overt nonconformity with official confessional identity. Under conditions of increasing pressure from the state and the Church, fictitious conversion became a stable strategy of adaptation, allowing one simultaneously to avoid sanctions, preserve one’s social position, and continue covert adherence to ancestral religion.

5. From Religious Policy to Social Hysteria

A side effect of Justinian’s policy, and of that pursued by his immediate successors, was a sharp rise in religious tension. During the fourth and fifth centuries, and in the first decades of the sixth, adherents of the traditional cults could still, in one way or another, declare loyalty to the ancestral faith in public. After 529, any open manifestation of attachment to the old religion became virtually impossible⁵⁰. As

⁴⁹ For an analysis of this episode, see Caseau 2011: 256–258.

⁵⁰ Rare exceptions appear to have been made for a few public intellectuals. According to the account of Agathias of Myrina, one of the conditions of the “Eternal Peace” concluded in 532 between Persia and Rome was the granting of the right to practice paganism

Al. Cameron aptly observed, in early Byzantium accusations of paganism began to resemble accusations of communism in the United States in the 1950s. Such an accusation lacked a clear definition. It was extraordinarily grave and deeply stigmatizing. Unlike an accusation of heresy, it was in practice almost impossible to refute. The underlying assumption, which was often true, was that a pagan, unlike a heretic, concealed his identity behind a carefully crafted façade of virtuous Christianity⁵¹. Paganism thus gradually lost its external markers. It became hidden, hard to verify, and therefore potentially universal. In the eyes of society and the authorities, almost anyone could now turn out to be a crypto-pagan.

This uncertainty, so characteristic of sixth-century sources and of later centuries as well, is largely reproduced in modern historiography. Scholars continue to dispute which intellectuals of Justinian's age were, or were not, "crypto-pagans." At one pole stands A. Kaldellis, who tends to suspect crypto-paganism among many members of the classically educated elite of the Eastern Roman Empire. At the other stands Al. Cameron, for whom paganism as a living religious identity had, in effect, ceased to exist by the sixth century⁵². Both positions, however, risk oversimplifying a more complex reality.

freely to seven Neoplatonic philosophers who had been teaching at the Athenian Academy, which had been closed shortly before (Agath. *Hist.* II.31). For the journey of the scholar Damascius and his companions to Persia and for their subsequent fate, see Tardieu 1986; Athanassiadi 1993: 24–27; Wildberg 2005: 330–333; Watts 2004; Watts 2005; Hadot 2007; Abdullaev 2013: 250–254. The Alexandrian pagan philosopher Olympiodorus the Younger also somehow managed to preserve his school. See Wildberg 2005: 333–334; Watts 2006: 234–237.

⁵¹ Cameron 1982: 269.

⁵² Kaldellis regarded as secret idolaters the historians Procopius of Caesarea (Kaldellis 2010a: 155–221), Agathias of Myrina (Kaldellis 1999), Hesychius of Miletus (Kaldellis 2005), the architects Anthemius of Tralles and Isidorus of Miletus (Kaldellis 2013), the jurist Tribonianus (Kaldellis 2010b: 63, n. 114; 92, n. 19), and the antiquarian John Lydus (Kaldellis 2003). It should be noted that the hypothesis of possible crypto-paganism of John Lydus is not new. See e.g., Whitby 1991: 122. For discussion of Lydus' religious views, see Hâncu 2016: 523–527; Tóth 2017; Hooker 2017: xii–xix; Sinitsa 2018. Similar positions are taken by scholars who believe that the creation of the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus was a crypto-pagan project intended to preserve the Neoplatonic tradition in a Christian milieu. See Mazzucchi 2006; Lankila 2011. For criticism (sometimes excessive) of the views of Kaldellis and other proponents of the idea of the prevalence of paganism in the sixth century, see Scott 2013; Cameron 2015: 255–286; Gador-Whyte 2017: 111–112; Cameron 2017: 16–17. Cf. Allen 1981: 232: "...it is impossible to believe that paganism was widespread in the Christian Byzantine empire of the sixth century...".

In most cases, the religious affiliation of a sixth-century intellectual cannot be determined securely. Modern scholars usually lack sufficient grounds to classify any given figure with confidence as pagan or Christian. Appeals to the classical tradition, which remained integral to elite culture in Late Antiquity, cannot by themselves prove pagan sympathies. Conversely, isolated references to Christian Scripture, or references that are merely formal, are not reliable evidence of Christian identity. They could function as a mere rhetorical cover – a form of self-protection intended to deflect unwanted attention from secular or ecclesiastical authorities. Overall, the most reasonable position seems to be that of P. N. Bell, who rightly observed that “no one suggests that homosexuals, ‘heretics,’ even Manichaeans, other targets of purges, were non-existent. There is no reason to suppose that Pagans were either⁵³.”

Once the idea took hold that a hidden pagan could be almost anyone, the result was what can be described as a mass anti-pagan hysteria. It expressed itself in rumors, denunciations, street violence, and attempts at vigilante justice. Suspicion could be triggered by attachment to classical culture, which was easily branded as “pagan.”⁵⁴ It could be provoked by attendance at secular festivals, races, or the theater, all of which rigorists among the new faith treated as self-evidently impious⁵⁵. It could also arise from something as vague as insufficient deference toward self-appointed Christian authorities⁵⁶.

Such moods intensified during moments of political strain and natural catastrophes. In these circumstances society sought an outlet. It also sought a scapegoat. The second wave of persecutions in Justinian’s reign, beginning in 546⁵⁷, appears to have been related to the renewed Romano–Persian war that ended, overall, unfavorably for the Romans. During operations on Roman territory, the shahanshah Khosrow I showed a marked favor toward pagan populations in Persian-occupied provinces. He ordered sacrifices to the nymphs in captured Antioch (Procop. *BP.* II.11.6) and refused the tribute offered by the inhabitants of Harran–Carrhae, stating that “most of them are not Christians but are of the old faith” (οἱ πλείστοι, οὐ Χριστιανοί, ἀλλὰ βοηθεῖν τῇ παλαιᾷ τυγχάνουσι ὁδῷ – *ibid.* II.13.7, trans. by H. B. Dewing). As A. A. Chekalova has plausibly suggested, such gestures aimed to inflame

⁵³ Bell 2013: 246.

⁵⁴ Дьяконов 1908: 75–76; Whitby 1991: 120; Ginkel 1995: 132; Caseau 2011: 562.

⁵⁵ See e.g., Jos. Styl. *Chron.* 27; 30; 33; 46; Sev. Ant. *Hom.* 95.537–538; Jac. Ser. *Hom.* 2–5; Moss 1935; Alpi 2004; Parker 2022: 134–142.

⁵⁶ See e.g., V. Sym. *Iun.* 158; 160; 172; Parker 2022: 212–214.

⁵⁷ See Ps.-Dion. *Chron.* III. P. 71 Witakowsky.

internal opposition within the Roman state and thereby complicate imperial stability⁵⁸. After the five-year truce of 545, pagans within the empire could easily be accused of collaboration⁵⁹. This dynamic could, in turn, feed a new round of repression. A further catalyst was the outbreak of plague. Several scholars have argued that a government unable to control the pandemic attempted to shift responsibility onto a defenseless religious minority⁶⁰. It is significant, in this light, that the victims included physicians accused of paganism.

After the disasters of the 550s, including earthquakes, an epidemic, and livestock mortality⁶¹, Antioch witnessed a campaign to identify secret pagans, together with other religious dissidents. The driving force of this “witch hunt” was apparently Symeon Stylite the Younger. The commander Amantius acted as the principal executor. According to the author of the *Life of Symeon*, Amantius discovered that “most of the leading men of the city and many of its inhabitants were possessed by Hellenism, Manichaeism, astrology, automatism⁶², and other foul heresies” (ὄρε τοὺς πλείους τῶν πρώτων τῆς πόλεως καὶ πολλοὺς τῶν κατοικούντων αὐτὴν ἐλληνισμῷ καὶ μανιχαϊσμῷ καὶ ἀστρολογίαις καὶ αὐτοματισμῷ καὶ ἄλλαις δυσωνύμοις αἰρέσεσι κατεχομένους – *V. Sym. Iun.* 161, trans. by M.V.). Those suspected included aristocrats, ordinary citizens, and even clerics (*ibid.* 164). Many of the accused probably regarded themselves as good Christians and did not imagine themselves to be pagans at all. The hagiographer’s own report suggests that some were pursued merely for their interest in astrology⁶³, which was widespread across all social strata and did not map neatly onto confessional identity. Others appear to have been targeted for involvement in the exact sciences⁶⁴. The pattern of punishments supports this caution. Clerics were confined to monasteries for correction. Some were assigned to service in urban hospitals. Others were exiled. Only a few were executed (*ibid.* 164)⁶⁵. Even so, it remains possible that some of the accused were

⁵⁸ Чекалова 1993: 461–492.

⁵⁹ Cf. Börm 2007: 195.

⁶⁰ See e.g. Maas 1992: 64–65; Little 2007: 113; Bell 2013: 246. Cf. Ведешкин 2018: 296–297.

⁶¹ Downey 1961: 558; Liebeschuetz 2015: 364–365.

⁶² In this context, “automatism” refers to the Epicurean doctrine that the world functions according to natural laws without divine intervention. See Rohmann 2016: 104–106, nn. 205–206.

⁶³ See e.g. Magdalino 2017.

⁶⁴ On the association of mathematics and mechanics with paganism, see Kaldellis 2013: 355–356; Rohmann 2016: 79–85.

⁶⁵ See Cremonesi 2008: 262; Parker 2022: 98–100; 162–164; Roggo 2024: 229–230.

genuine crypto-pagans⁶⁶. Michael the Syrian, transmitting John of Ephesus⁶⁷, reports that in 562, Constantinople saw another trial of pagans. Many idols and “Hellenic” books were produced as evidence. Five priests of the old cult were presented: one from Athens, two from Heliopolis–Baalbek, and two from Antioch (Mich. Syr. *Chron.* IX.33 Moosa II, p. 367; cf. Malal. XVIII.136.491). The Antiochenes may well have been arrested during Amantius’ investigation.

A further wave of hysteria swept the capital of Syria during the investigation of the *comes* Anatolius, which began soon after an earthquake in 577⁶⁸ destroyed Daphne, the suburb of Antioch (Evagr. V.17). Among the many accused was the notary Theodore. Under torture he claimed that secret pagans included Gregory, patriarch of Antioch, and Eulogius, the future patriarch of Alexandria. He even alleged that they had participated in the sacrifice of a child to the gods in Daphne. This apparently absurd charge nevertheless provoked unrest in Antioch. Many residents interpreted the earthquake as divine punishment for the patriarch’s supposed involvement in pagan rites. Gregory, fearing lynching, remained in hiding for several days (Joh. Eph. *HE.* III.29, pp. 213–214 Smith; cf. Evagr. V.18). In other words, part of the city seriously entertained the possibility that its bishop was a secret idolater.

Similar events unfolded in Constantinople, which had also been affected by the earthquake and where the proceedings in Anatolius’ trial were transferred. The hearings were held behind closed doors in the Palace of Placidia. Rumors spread that the judges had been bribed and intended to let the pagans escape with their lives (Joh. Eph. *HE.* III.30, p. 215 Smith). Disorder followed. Crowds began to search for idolaters and their supposed protectors. Once the plebs learned that Gregory of Antioch was implicated, suspicion fell on a hierarch of comparable stature in the capital, namely Eutychius, patriarch of Constantinople. The patriarchal palace was surrounded. It was nearly set on fire. Eutychius was saved only because the crowd hesitated to ignite buildings near a church, fearing the fire would spread. The crowd then moved against the Palace of Placidia and threatened retribution against venal judges. The building was stormed and ransacked. Two prisoners found in the palace jail were taken for pagans and burned alive. The rioters then targeted the residence of the urban prefect Sebastian, whom someone denounced as a crypto-pagan. He avoided lynching only by publicly declaring support for the “pious cause” of the Christ-loving inhabitants of Constantinople (Joh. Eph. *HE.*

⁶⁶ Liebeschuetz 2011: 335.

⁶⁷ Hilkins 2018: 170.

⁶⁸ On the date, see Downey 1961: 562–563, n. 11.

III.31, pp. 216–220 Smith). The riot subsided only after Tiberius II deployed troops in the capital (Joh. Eph. HE. III.32, pp. 220–222 Smith; *cf.* Evagr. V.18)⁶⁹.

A further scandal, involving the exposure of real or alleged crypto-pagans, erupted in Constantinople at the beginning of Maurice's reign. It is reported, with minor variations, by Theophylact Simocatta and John of Nikiu. An anonymous bishop of Heraclea came to the capital and bought a silver vessel designed to collect the myron said to exude from the relics held in his city's church. Once the vessel was placed beside the relic, the myron ceased to flow and did not resume, despite fasting and prayers. The bishop then saw in a dream that the vessel had previously been used by a pagan for sacrifice. He returned to Constantinople, seized the merchant who had sold it, and brought him before Patriarch John the Faster. The merchant stated that he had acquired the vessel from an educated and influential aristocrat named Paulinus. John demanded that Maurice execute Paulinus for apostasy. The emperor and several senators attempted to defend Paulinus. They argued that ecclesiastical penance would suffice. John refused and threatened to close all churches in Constantinople and halt the liturgy. Such a step would almost certainly have produced renewed unrest. Eventually Maurice yielded. Paulinus and his son were burned alive (Theoph. Sim. I.11.1–21; Joh. Nik. XCVIII.13). The fact that the emperor and the elite tried to restrain the patriarch suggests that solid evidence was lacking. The decisive "proof" seems to have been only the bishop's dream, which was hardly a sound basis for a capital sentence.

These episodes show that under Justinian and his immediate successors, accusations of secret paganism could function as a mechanism of social mobilization and as a form of collective release in moments of crisis. They also became instruments of intra-Christian and intra-elite conflict. Miaphysites could accuse their Chalcedonian opponents of paganism to discredit the official Church, as in the case of Gregory of Antioch and Eulogius of Alexandria⁷⁰. Orthodox hierarchs, for their part, could use such charges to strengthen their position in negotiations with secular power.

From the mid-sixth century onward, accusations of paganism increasingly lost their specific confessional content. They became a general term of abuse and an evaluative label. The term "Hellene" was used less as a marker of concrete religious practice and more as a rhetorical tag for someone politically suspect, socially dangerous, or morally reprehensible. For example, Procopius of Caesarea hinted that John the Cappadocian, one of the most odious bureaucrats of the reign of Justinian

⁶⁹ On this episode, see Liebeschuetz 2011: 263–264; Roggo 2024: 237–241.

⁷⁰ Rochow 1977: 129; Whitby 1991: 124; Liebeschuetz 2001: 265–266; Bell 2013: 242; Roggo 2024.

I, was a pagan (Procop. *BP.* I.25.10). Given Procopius' hostility toward John, the insinuation could well serve to further blacken the official's reputation⁷¹. John of Ephesus called the quaestor Anastasius both "pagan" and "Samaritan" (Joh. Eph. *HE.* I.19, p. 30 Smith). The pairing is logically incompatible, which shows how flexible the invective had become. Elsewhere John describes a Miaphysite nun who, under pressure from Patriarch Eutychius, denounced the "orthodox" as "pagans, persecutors, and murderers of Christians" (Joh. Eph. *HE.* II.39, pp. 153–154 Smith)⁷². John of Nikiu even leveled accusations of paganism against Maurice himself because he supposedly lacked zeal in searching for hidden idolaters (Joh. Nik. XCVIII.13). For some Miaphysites, Chalcedonian opponents were "pagans" because they persecuted the "true Christians," meaning opponents of Chalcedon, while failing to persecute "hidden pagans," i.e., anyone who could be made suspect⁷³.

None of this, however, eliminates the likelihood that a considerable number of citizens of the Roman Empire continued to perform ancient rites. Public worship had become rarer and covert practice more common. Such survivals were possible in hard-to-reach regions and peripheral towns, where ancestral cults endured for local reasons. The Mani peninsula⁷⁴, Sardinia⁷⁵, and Carrhae–Harran⁷⁶ are obvious examples. Yet even major administrative centers could harbor clandestine gatherings. In such settings people could meet in hidden sanctuaries, maintain fragments of older cult practice, and offer sacrifices to their gods in secret⁷⁷.

To be continued.

⁷¹ On the portrait of John in Procopius, see Pazdernik 2020. Discussion of this passage: Vedeshkin 2024a.

⁷² Other examples: Rochow 1991.

⁷³ Cf. Дьяконов 1908: 125; Rochow 1977: 129; Rochow 1991; Krausmüller 2005.

⁷⁴ Constantine Porphyrogenitus mentioned that in the reign of his grandfather, Emperor Basil I (867–886), the Maniots still worshiped the Olympian gods (Const. Porph. *De adm. Imp.* L.71).

⁷⁵ Greg. Dial. *Ep.* IV.23–27; 29; V.38; IX.205; XI.12; Jones and Pennick 1997: 78; Maymó i Capdevila 2010: 329–330; Zurutuza 2015; Hobart and Turdas 2017: 181–182.

⁷⁶ See above.

⁷⁷ In 2024, during the excavations of Aphrodisias – the capital of the late Roman province of Caria – within one of the urban estates a secret sanctuary of Cybele was discovered, functioning until the sack of the city by the Persians in 617. See 'Unearthing the secrets of the Byzantine world' n.d.: <https://www.development.ox.ac.uk/impact-stories/unearthing-the-secrets-of-the-byzantine-world>; Astell 2025: <https://medievalartresearch.com/2025/11/27/online-lecture-worshipping-the-mother-goddess-an-underground-cult-complex-in-late-antique-aphrodisias-with-ine-jacobs-2-december-2025/>.

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