

Project research [not sure if this should be 'Research Project' since the original phrase was in English]

Aphrodite's fortunes in the collective imagination of the Late Antiquity

Project objective:

- Carry out a study on the topic of the explorations of myths related to Aphrodite in the Late Antiquity, with particular reference to the literature of the IV and V centuries.

Task description:

- Analyze the presence of Aphrodite and related myths in the work of Late Antiquity epic poets (Quintus Smyrnaeus, Triphiodorus, Coluthus, Nonnus of Panopolis).
- Analyze the presence of Aphrodite and related myths in the prose of IV and V century rhetors and philosophers (specifically Themistius, Julian, Sallust, Libanius).
- Look for the influence of neoplatonic philosophy in the literature devoted to Aphrodite's myth.
- Investigate any possible political meanings of the myth of Aphrodite and of the Aeneads between the IV and V centuries, also in relationship to the foundation of Constantinople.
- Search for relations between the flowering of myths and traditions on Aphrodite and the main places of worship of the goddess (Cyprus, Paphos, Byblos).

Expected results:

- Reconstruct how widespread the cult of Aphrodite was in the eastern Mediterranean between the IV and V centuries.
- Demonstrate the level of inventiveness and originality in how the the Aphrodite-related mythological repertoire changed in Late Antiquity, compared to other traditional forms of the same myth.
- Highlight points of conflict and reconciliation between pagan and Christian cultures in relation to Aphrodite.
- Propose an interpretation of the figure of Aphrodite, in the new functional import attributed to her within the late antiquity cultural context.

Alexandra Eppinger's recent book, *Hercules in der Spätantike. Die Rolle des Heros im Spannungsfeld von Heidentum und Christentum* (Wiesbaden 2015) develops in depth the fortunes and reinterpretations of the mythological figure of Herakles, the hero, the Dorian soul of Greek culture, during the centuries of the Late Antiquity. Since this is a central figure of the ancient Greek and Roman collective imagination, the author assesses its presence in contexts of daily life, from the decorations in private houses, to clothing, to regular school lessons. This documentary aspect of the study, rich in information and details, precedes the subsequent reconnoitering in the literary and philosophical cultural spheres.

Any survey on the fortunes of certain myths in Late Antiquity, in fact, cannot prescind from a preliminary considerations on the significance of the use of myth itself: the poets and writers of the IV and V centuries A.D. that evoked traditional figures from their mythological heritage did not do so with the same innocence of their predecessors from the archaic and classical periods. The philosopher and mathematician Theon of Alexandria was right in soberly and coherently defining myth as *λόγος ψευδής, εικονίζων ἀλήθειαν* (*Progymnasmata* 59, 21 Spengel).

The greatest danger for the Greek myth, in fact, had originated even before by Christianity, from the Greek Enlightenment of the V century B.C., to use an effective definition coined by Wilhelm Nestle. The following centuries had tried in various ways to set up a rationalistic rereading, filtering it through an allegorical interpretation: what had at first appeared as the purest form of Greek Art was now fatally perceived as an unwieldy topic with little credibility. The myth now needed to be subjected to the scrutiny of reason, or if used as a resource, it was in sore need of a new interpretation.

Late Antiquity had a significant role to play in this process: on the one hand, epic poetry continued to sustain itself with myths (Quintus of Smyrna, Nonnus of Panopolis, Triphiodorus, Coluthus), on the other hand philosophy, especially through Neoplatonism, continued searching for obscure interpretations in order to systematize and restore meaning to the mythological repertoire. Theon's outlook was, from this point of view, not unlike that of Julian or Sallust, the author of the Treaty *Περὶ θεῶν καὶ κόσμου*.

After poetry and philosophy, the third variable was represented by Christianity, which found it easy to demonise the pagan cults and ridicule their eccentricities. However, it also knew how to progressively co-opt Greek myths, whenever mythological figures or events were suited for a spiritual or ascetic reading, the interpretation of the figure of Christ-Orpheus is a case in point.

The figure of Aphrodite prompts an inquiry using Eppinger's methods: Evaluating on the one hand the continuity of Aphrodite's cult and myths in literature, understood as a *longue durée* longitudinal study, while also taking into account some violent, punctual events in ancient history.

The Roman Republic, in fact, went hand in hand with the consecration of a goddess, the Greek Aphrodite or *Venus* for the Romans, as the protectress and mythical ancestor of Julius Caesar, the man that, together with his successor Octavian Augustus, was the principal creator of the new political order of the ancient world. The entire mythography on Venus was then revisited and adroitly adapted to meet the needs of legitimization of imperial power: the construction of the temple of Venus Genetrix in the Forum of Caesar was, in this sense, one of the most significant architectural operations.

Late Antiquity was no less creative in the valorization of traditional mythological heritage, going beyond the mere literary sphere. The survival of ancient place names dedicated to divinities and other mythological characters, for example, demonstrates the lasting vitality of classical collective imagination. Renaming an urban center such as the city of Aphrodisias of Caria is one case among many, which require to be analyzed in the sense of a careful diachronic reconstruction, but also paying attention to the cultural persistence of the cult of Aphrodite.

These premises give rise to the following question: What use was made of Venus/Aphrodite in the mythological and political collective imagination of the Late Antiquity?

Considering the vast extension of the material, one must first of all identify the most important texts, where the mention of Aphrodite acquires a deeper meaning than that of the commonplace metaphor for love.

The first important document is the *Oration to Helios*, a sort of "Christmas sermon" composed by the emperor Julian toward the end of 362, during his stay in Antioch. One would surmise that the Emperor, known for his extreme abstinence from self-indulgence, would not grant too much leeway to the goddess of love, even from a mythological or historical point of view. However, in what has been called one of the most important treaties on religion in the Late Antiquity period, Julian mentions the divine ancestry of Aeneas and his lineage (40, οἱ Ῥωμυλίδαι τε καὶ Αἰνεάδαι); the goddess is defined in a theological context rather than a political one, marked by the cult of the Sun, ὑπουργὸς Ἡλίῳ καὶ συγγενής. Shortly before (33), Julian devotes some remarks to the goddess also in astronomical terms: Aphrodite, according to him, represents the fusion of the celestial gods, as well as the love and unity of their harmony (σύγκρασις

τῶν οὐρανίων θεῶν, καὶ τῆς ἁρμονίας αὐτῶν ἔτι φιλία καὶ ἔνωσις). When the planet is located in the proximity of the Sun, a temperate climate reigns on earth stimulating living beings in their desire to reproduce. If Helios is the primary cause, Aphrodite is just as important, "enchanting our souls with her charms and sending her more gentle and pure rays from the ether to the Earth, shining brighter than gold itself" (ἡ θέλγουσα μὲν τὰς ψυχὰς ἡμῶν σὺν εὐφροσύνῃ, καταπέμπουσα δὲ εἰς γῆν ἕξ αἰθέρος ἀγὰς ἡδίστας καὶ ἀκηράτους αὐτοῦ τοῦ χρυσοῦ στυλπνοτέρως).

The other handful of texts, in which Julian cites Aphrodite as a symbol of love even in a metaphorical sense, require further analysis. This should be aimed also at detecting any traces of the philosophical tradition that, starting from Epicurus and Lucretius, had attributed to Venus a particular importance as an organizing principle of reality.

Still in the sphere of prose and rhetoric, Themistius is an interesting author. A rhetorician and an imperial officer in IV century Constantinople, he was considered by Libanius as a traitor to the culture of the *polis* since the moment in which he accepted a public post in the new capital. A recurring motif in his diplomatic prose is the *κεστός Ἀφροδίτης*, Aphrodite's belt, always enriched by its seductive meaning. Among the many texts that I intend to subject to a close reading in search of an *interpretatio themistian*a of the myth of Aphrodite is Oration 13 (176d-177a), addressed to Gratian in 376. Its theme is love winning over strength: the shrewd politician and rhetorician refers to a copy of the Gigantomachy located on the plinth of the senate building of the recently founded city of Constantinople. In that bas-relief, the giant taking on Love is the only one not to bear any traces of fury, out of respect toward a mythical figure and divine power superior to that of weapons.

Epic poetry, on the other hand, requires a different focus. To this end, I intend to dwell on Quintus of Smyrna and, to a greater extent, on Nonnus of Panopolis, the last great epic poet of myths. An episode of the XXIV book of the *Dionysiaca*, the singing of Aphrodite while working at the loom, is particularly interesting, not just because of its aesthetic value, but also because it records a myth that is unknown from other sources. At the request of the Cypriot Lapet, the designated singer tells a curious story about Aphrodite trying her hand at spinning, an activity not suited to the goddess of leisure and love. The episode closes with the predictable failure of this attempt, as well as Athena's anger, who feels deprived of one of her prerogatives, and the escape of Aphrodite to Cyprus, her native island. The story is characterized by a strong impression of *imitatio Homerica* (Hopkinson) and by a successful humorous tone.

Previous studies (Vian, Hopkinson) have brought to light the connection between this story and Homer and Callimachus, as well as some attempts to a meta-textual interpretation of the resulting cloth, suggested by structuralist literary critics. On the basis of the most recent critical interpretation, it would be interesting to relate the section of Aphrodite at the loom with the other parts of the poem where Nonnus devotes his verses to Aphrodite, and with the presence of the goddess in the cult and the collective literary imagination of the Late Antiquity (e.g. in the *Orphic Hymns*). A brilliant hypothesis proposes to have Nonnus's scene originate from a Cypriot myth, which was recently evoked "to explain a few depictions of Aphrodite seen as spinning" (Chuvin, Gigli), which suggests the importance of considering the local aspects of the Aphrodite cult. Gigli's and Chuvin's considerations can, in fact, be profitably complemented by the islanders' pride concerning the birth of Aphrodite on Cyprus. According to a very intriguing hypothesis, also the fifth book of the *Iliad*, which records the sole occurrence of the epithet *Κύπρις* throughout the Homeric poems, may have been the archaic fruit of the labor of a Cypriot *aidos* (Cassius). Along the same lines, the attribution of the epithet *φιληλάκατος* 'distaff lover' to the goddess Aphrodite in *Dionysiaca* (*hapax* in 24.242) is not attested outside Nonnus's opus.

It is interesting that Nonnus thus becomes the spokesperson or creator of an original form of the Aphrodite myth and in so doing he grants space, in all likelihood, to local traditions in Cyprus, possibly the *Patria*. A detailed history of the V century, moreover, raises the question of the continued vitality of pagan cults in peripheral areas of the Mediterranean in the Late Antiquity, even if Nonnus may admittedly be citing here an older mythological or poetic source.

Another episode in Nonnus's writings that revolves around one of the best known myths of Aphrodite is to be found in the XXIX book: Rea sends a dream to deceive Ares, promising a situation contrary to that in *Od.* 8.266-366. Instead of betraying her legitimate husband with Ares, Aphrodite would again fall in love with Hephaestus. The Homeric imitation

is mixed here with a well-known *luciana* (Agosti) and a vocabulary that includes a Hesiod-like term: ἀλυκτοπέδη (v. 354), recovered from the poetry of the Late Antiquity. Finally, the story of Morrheus and Chalcomeda in books XXXIII-XXXV, where Aphrodite herself plays a decisive role, could be said to be at the boundary between myth and the novel.

The comic scene of Aphrodite at the loom of the XXIV book, therefore, is then 'corrected' by the triumph of Aphrodite-Chalcomeda in XXXV: How can we, then, speak of a rebirth of the myth of Aphrodite in Nonnus's epoch? In what terms can we instead discuss this being a challenge to the myth at the time of its final waning?

Beyond the world of epic poetry, moreover, the myth of Aphrodite as the progenitor of the Roman lineage also raises a more fundamental question, at the time in which Constantine founded the new capital on the Bosphorus and brought the imperial banner back whence Aeneas came, and with him, even if much later, also the Great Mother of the gods, to which Julian dedicates a famous hymn. A recognition of this historical-political aspect of the Aphrodite myth, especially in its Roman version, can reveal neglected aspects of its fortunes, also seen in the light of the late antiquity tradition of the *Patria*.

The pagan culture of Late Antiquity had a constant interest toward the theme of love, embodied by Aphrodite, not only in its sexual dimensions: the opposition between Aphrodite Urania vs. Aphrodite Pandemos had already been theorized by Plato in the *Symposium* (180d-181D).

A survey of the literature of the IV and V centuries, starting from the works by Emperor Julian, the philosopher Sallust, rhetoricians such as Themistius and Libanius, and down to Nonnus of Panopolis and Gregory of Nazianzus and beyond, will be an interesting area of research to assess the forms and the repurposing of the mythological heritage gravitating around Aphrodite, both in the literary sphere, and on a popular level.