



Giovanni Alberto Cecconi, *Barbari e pagani: Religione e società in Europa nel tardoantico*, Bari: Editori GLF Laterza, 2022 (Cultura storica), XXII + 268 pp.

Giovanni Alberto Cecconi is a historian of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, working at the University of Florence. One of the topics he frequently addresses is the Christianization of Western Europe in late antiquity, and his latest book, *Barbari e pagani*, follows directly from these research interests and focuses precisely on the process of Christianization, when the tribes ceased to be the eponymous barbarians and pagans.¹ To some extent, the reviewed work marks the closure of Cecconi's *Pagani e Cristiani nell'Occidente tardoantico: Quattro studi*,² written ten years earlier. In that book, he analysed mainly Greco-Roman paganism and its relations with Christianity. Together, the two volumes — although they can be read separately — constitute an important compendium of knowledge about the Christianization of Western Europe in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

It is worth noting here that Cecconi's work is distinguished by the fact that, to a much greater extent than other publications on the transformation of the Roman and barbarian worlds, he does not limit himself to a specific segment of the process. Historiography is dominated by either writing about Christianization itself, or the barbarian identity.³ Cecconi, on the other hand, shows that the best way to understand what happened in those times is to take a view that at once gives much greater consideration to religion. His approach is not about methodological innovations, but rather in the attempt to take a more synthesizing approach. The merit of this work lies, therefore, in the collection and collation of sometimes well-known material, whereby it offers a new insight. Moreover, Cecconi does not position his book as a polemic, but rather as a lecture about his interpretation of the sources. A discussion with other authors is usually conducted in the footnotes.

It must be stated at the outset that this book, although fully scholarly in nature, is also addressed to a wider audience. To some extent, it is reminiscent of the *Origins of Civilizations* series published in Poland, as it is a summary of scholarship given in an engaging way. Cecconi's highly visual language and

¹ Cecconi makes it abundantly clear that the term 'pagans' is a *sui generis* simplification, pp. XV–XVI.

² Giovanni Alberto Cecconi, *Pagani e Cristiani nell'Occidente tardoantico: Quattro studi*, Rome, 2012 (Saggi di storia antica, 35).

³ A good example of this is the *Transformation of the Roman World* published in Brill's series, whose many volumes are essentially bereft of an analysis of religion as a key element of the said transformation.

numerous cultural and literary references make the book a pleasure to read, at once ensuring that it will satisfy the most discerning members of the reading public, who expect a scholarly publication. The first sentence of the volume invokes the Italian sword-and-sandal (*peplum*) film *La furia dei barbarii*, directed by Guido Malatesta in 1960. This is not only a matter of linguistic ornamentation, intended to encourage the amateur reader, but also a look at a rather important problem; namely, the question of the image of pagans and barbarians. The title of the film has been translated into English as 'Fury of the Pagans'. This surprising interchangeability of the two terms is worthy of special linguistic attention, and is developed by Cecconi in his book.

Cecconi's work is divided into six chapters, which in turn are broken down into subchapters. The first chapter deals with the migration of the barbarians and begins with a look at Tacitus' remarks on the religion of the Germans, which is the traditional approach to the subject. Next there follows a discussion of the functioning of the barbarians within the borders of the Roman Empire, and of a problem usually overlooked by historiography: that is the coexistence of barbarian paganism with the concurrently existing Roman paganism. At the time of the first major contact between Christianity and the barbarian Germanic tribes, the process of Christianization of the Roman Empire was relatively fresh. Moreover, Cecconi demonstrates that there were instances where 'barbarian pagans' converted to pagan beliefs, but of the Greco-Roman world, and not in the form of an expansion of the pantheon of gods, or a process of identifying their own gods with those professed in Rome.

The second chapter tells the story of the settlement of barbarians in the territory of the Western Roman Empire between the fourth and sixth centuries. Cecconi's point of departure is the Huns. As a result of their migration, successive waves of barbarians appeared on Roman soil, of whom the Goths — to whom Cecconi devotes a subchapter — were particularly important. Cecconi then writes about the state and functioning (or, rather, the non-functioning) of the imperial administration in the territories where the barbarians settled, and their interactions with the Romans.

The following, third, chapter deals with armed conflict in the context of inter-religious relations in the broadest sense. The author writes about the situation of captives in communities religiously foreign to them — both Christians among barbarians and pagans among Christians. Here, Cecconi rightly points out that armed conflict with the barbarians weakened the structures of the Church in areas affected by the fighting and invasions. What interests him most, however, are the instances of Christian prisoners who abandoned Christianity due to their captivity. At the same time, he uses the example of Saint Patrick to present the opposite situation, as his Christian faith was strengthened by enduring being in pagan captivity. Cecconi also pens a more extensive analysis of the population subjected to barbarian rule. In this regard, he mentions the persecution of Christians by pagan rulers. Living in a pagan environment involved, as Cecconi points out, following specific religious rituals. Thus, the author writes about the issue of eating meat

from offerings made to pagan gods, which may have been a way of making sure that the population was not in fact Christian. Furthermore, the fact that Christians lived in areas ruled by pagans, and were therefore detached from the rituals and elements of Christian worship, meant that many of them must have lost their connection with their religion, and in some cases probably adopted pagan beliefs.

The fourth chapter touches upon the matter of the remnants of traditional perceptions or beliefs, and when a person can be said to be a pagan and when not. Cecconi recalls that the process of Christianization was not tantamount to the simultaneous disappearance of pagan beliefs. Between the extremes there was a large space in which there functioned both nominal Christians and Christians in whose daily life the remnants of pagan teachings played some role. The first subchapter deals with the most extreme phenomenon, namely, human sacrifice, an act that largely distinguished the pagan barbarians. Although the Romans did make human sacrifices, they were the exception — not the norm. At the same time, Cecconi points to the ritual executions of impure vestal virgins, which were held even in the Christian Roman Empire, as an example of how practices of this type functioned. Nonetheless, the special nature of these sacrifices in Rome contrasted with their much more frequent occurrence among barbarians. Cecconi, using the case of, for example, Procopius of Caesarea, reminds us that such practices were present even among theoretically Christianized barbarian peoples. In the next subchapter, the author continues his analysis of this inconstancy of beliefs, and — more specifically — of the co-occurrence of rituals or ritual behaviours derived from pagan beliefs within Christianity. He focuses particularly on how canon and secular law reacted to various suspicious non-Christian practices. The result is a very carefully presented panorama of activities and opinions expressed on the subject in the early Middle Ages. The chapter also considers the phenomenon of the equation — in the early Middle Ages — of the terms ‘barbarian’ and ‘pagan’.

The penultimate chapter, by far the longest of the entire book, is devoted to specific insights into paganism in various regions of Western Europe. Here, Cecconi takes up the topic of, among other things, the conversion of the British Isles. He also discusses the situation in the regions where pagan beliefs had long persisted, namely the Lower Rhine and Frisia. Another focused insight concerns the persistence of pagan beliefs according to the story of Wulfilaich, a sixth-century Lombardian deacon. According to Gregory of Tours, upon seeing that the inhabitants of a certain region continued to worship Diana, he became an eremite and a stylite. In this chapter, the author points to a surprisingly large number of traces of pagan practices throughout Western Europe. Hence, there is no question in the analysed period — which in this chapter goes up to the Merovingian epoch — of a complete Christianization of these lands. In this time frame, of course, the author is discussing local functioning, and not the existence of pagan beliefs as some kind of frequent phenomenon.

The final chapter is devoted to how paganism was viewed in the already Christianised — albeit in the Arian rite — barbarian kingdoms. An important issue in this section concerns the codifications and legislative activity of the Arian

rulers, such as Alaric II. The codification prepared upon his instruction, *Breviarium Alaricianum* (*Lex Romana Visigothorum*), omitted the anti-pagan provisions found in earlier Roman laws. This fact seems to indicate that the Arian leaders attached much less importance (compared to Roman times) to the threat that paganism could pose for social norms. What should be stressed, as Cecconi points out, is that the barbarian legislation of the Catholic Franks seems to point to the frequent occurrence of paganism among them too — a situation that was sometimes tolerated by the Frankish rulers.

Cecconi carefully builds up a picture of how the borders between Christian and pagan Europe were by no means obvious. This shows that the process of Christianization was not uniform, and that the early medieval world, although nominally Christian, was more complex than traditionally viewed. We cannot always speak of paganism as such; more often it seems that a better term, as to certain extent suggested by Cecconi, would be ‘post-pagan superstitions’. For some readers, such a thesis may seem quite obvious, but the book’s additional value lies in its careful documentation, using a great variety of evidence, which ranges from chronicles, through hagiography and Roman and barbarian legislation, to archaeology.

At the same time, in spite of the broad spectrum of issues touched upon by the author — and quite thoroughly at that — this is nonetheless a concise work. The body of the text comprises 183 pages, with endnotes accounting for an additional sixty-seven pages. The author makes good use of literature, and is not afraid to go beyond the chronological and thematic frame work whenever he considers that the information thus obtained allows readers to better understand the analysed topic. Unfortunately, since the publication has no listed bibliography, the reader is forced to use the endnotes, which makes reading somewhat difficult.

In summary, Cecconi’s book is, on the one hand, a solid summary of the state of research, and on the other hand an elaboration and supplementation of the author’s previously published ruminations and opinions. It appears that the natural next step would be to look at how paganism and barbarism functioned as concepts in Constantinople. All the more so because, while in the case of Western Europe in this context we are referring to the Goths or the Franks, in the East we have pagan Persia, which Agathias considered ‘barbaric’.⁴ This fundamentally affects the functioning of the two terms there. That, however, is a topic for a separate study.

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⁴ Scott McDonough, ‘Were the Sasanians Barbarians? Roman Writers on the “Empire of the Persians”’, in *Romans, Barbarians, and the Transformation of the Roman World: Cultural Interaction and the Creation of Identity in Late Antiquity*, ed. Ralph W. Mathisen and Danuta Shanzer, London, 2011, pp. 55–65.