

History of Livy on the Bacchanalia

Introduction

In 186 B.C. the Roman authorities unleashed so violent persecution against the followers of the cult of Bacchus that it had no precedent.

The fact is surprising if we consider that nobody was so tolerant in religious matters, as the Roman State.

The Roman religion, in fact, was characterized by a constant universalism, which made it tolerant towards other religions and sheltered from those degenerations typical of modern monotheistic religions (fanaticism and fundamentalism).

The Romans, as they conquered new territories, strove to integrate not only the peoples who lived there but also the divinities that were venerated there.¹ For them, who did not believe in a single god, there were no false gods. Therefore, although foreign gods were not considered as powerful, all were considered true and therefore worthy of being respected and revered. This polytheistic and multi-religious conception of the *ius sacrum Romanum* is well summarized by Cicero when he states that “*sua cuique civitati religio ...est, nostra nobis*”².

This integration could potentially proceed until it embraced the whole human race. Thus we can explain the frequent adoption of foreign cults such as the *Graecus ritus* of

¹ On the complex phenomenon of relations with the gods of neighbors and with those of enemies, interpreted in terms of "extensions" and "changes" of traditional religion, see: DUMÉZIL 2001, pp. 355 ss., 369 ss.

² CICERONE, *Pro Flacco*, 28.

the Sibyllini books³ and the usual *evocationes* of the gods of the enemy. The sources preserve memory of the *evocationes* of the divinities who protected two historical enemies of Rome, such as the Etruscan city of Veio⁴ and the capital of the Phoenicians of the West, Carthage.⁵ This process of integration has gone hand in hand with the spread of the universal empire and the concept of *humanitas*⁶, that according to the Roman polytheist religion it found, according to P. Veyne, one of the most effective means of diffusion.⁷

However also the great Roman tolerance had an insuperable limit in the *superstitiones*. For the Romans, those religions that involved an excessive fear of the gods were *superstitiones*. They were especially dangerous when the ceremonies aroused excessive emotions (*morbus animi*) and if the believers gathered in private or at night. For the Romans everything had to happen in the light of the sun: they had a sacred terror for everything that they could not control. The history of the word *superstitio* is quite interesting: from the original value of a synonym of *religio* it goes on to designate more and more every illegitimate *religio* that is not ap-

³ MOMMSEN, 1998-1999, p. 91. See as well: SINI, 1994 -60, p. 65 ss.

⁴ Livio 5, 21, 3.

⁵ MACROBIO, Sat. 3, 9, 6-9:

⁶ The attitude of the Roman ruling class is evident in this passage from CICERO, *Ad Quintum fratrem* I, 1, 8, 24: *Est autem non modo eius qui sociis et civibus, sed etiam eius qui servis, qui multis pecudibus praesit, eorum, quibus praesit, commodis utilitatique servire.*

⁷ VEYNE 1989, p. 413: «Not even religion was a barrier; unlike Christianity and Islam, the pagan empire was not distinguished from the barbarians by its beliefs. The gods of all men, civilized or barbarous, were true, or they were the same gods under different names, as an oak is everywhere an oak; Jupiter translates into Greek with Zeus and Celtic with Taranis».

proved by the authorities and not regulated by the *ius divinum*.⁸

We must add that even *superstitiones* were generally tolerated or repressed without excessive harshness by the Roman authorities. The first violent repression against the *superstitio* of a foreign cult is that carried out in 186 against the followers of the cult of Bacchus.

It is not easy to understand why the Roman authorities suddenly unleashed a persecution against the followers of a religious cult.

The main difficulty is due to the fact that almost all the news we have on the persecution are provided by Livy, who dedicates twelve chapters of the 39 book of his stories to the affair of the Bacchanals⁹. He, after about two centuries, gives us information on the persecution that took place in 186 a. C. Already the chronological distance between the events that occurred and the moment in which they are described made a completely objective description impossible. Moreover he uses only sources from elements of the dominant classes that had certainly had an interest in justifying in any way the repressive action of the authorities of 186 towards the cult of Bacchus and to put this religion in a bad light. We do not know if Livio uses sources that report only the opinion of the authorities that decided this persecution, because of his

⁸ Cf. BENVENISTE 1969, pp. 278-279 : «Superstitio, associé de ce fait à des pratiques réprouvées, a pris un couleur défavorable. Il a dénommé de bonne heure des pratiques d'une fausse religion considérées comme vaines et basses, indignes d'un esprit raisonnable».

⁹ LIVIO, XXXIX, 8-19. The Latin text used for translation and commentary is that established by ANNE-MARIE ADAM in *Tite Live, Histoire Romaine*, Tome XXXIX, Paris Les Belles Lettres, 2003. Of the passages of this book, only the chapter and the paragraph will be cited.

choice or because already in his time, there were no other points of view.

We therefore do not have contemporary news of the persecution¹⁰ or the point of view of the followers of the cult of Bacchus or in any case of opponents of the operation that probably took place, even if in the sources, we have, there is no trace.

In addition, the historian writes in the Augustan period and in agreement with Augustus's attempt to restore the *mos maiorum*, considers all that was in contrast with it dangerous. And a foreign cult like that of Bacchus was in many respects certainly irreconcilable with the custom of the ancestors. He accepted therefore without discussing the setting given to the events from the sources he had available. This is also because they were perfectly shared by him. Looking around, he saw the society of which he was a part, extremely corrupt and degenerate, and the customs now very far from the *mos maiorum*. He thought that the causes were to be found in prolonged contacts with material prosperity from the east, in eliminating an external threat and in the possibility of increasing individual wealth. He set the turning point for the degeneration of morality in 187, the previous year of the affair.¹¹ Convinced that history could be *magistra vitae*, he tried to present the past not in its reality but in such a way that it could apply to the present. Those who read his

¹⁰ In reality we have a contemporary document related to the Bacchanalian affair: a copy of the edict of the consuls on the Bacchanalia (CIL X 104) found in Tiriolo (Catanzaro). But it is located chronologically after the persecution and contains the rules that regulated the exercise of the cult of Bacchus for the future. In them there is not the slightest reference to the persecution of the followers of the cult.

¹¹ LIVY, 6,7: *Vix tamen illa quae tum conspiciebantur, semina erant futurae luxuriae*. Cf. PAGAN 2004, p. 56.

pages on the history of the Bacchanals must have found them abominable and avoided at all costs. Exceptional measures were justified, when one considers that a group of foreigners, women and young people conspired against the State and the amplification of their crimes could very well serve better as an example for the future. The reproach for the Bacchanals was also to extend to all foreign cults and to behaviors different from the traditional ones.

In this he gave his contribution to the Augustan program tending, theoretically, to curb the degeneration of customs with the return to the traditional Roman religion ¹². In reality Augustus in the ancient gods and in their cult wanted to find support to give legitimacy to his principality. The religion that he tried to reconstruct became "for him and his successors *instrumentum regni*, that is, a means of domination, according to that method that Varro, with his work of archaeological reconstruction, the *Antiquitates*, had indicated to Caesar".¹³

We must therefore be very careful about what he tells us about the followers of Bacchus. He is sufficiently realistic only when he gives us historical information. When he tells how the scandal was discovered, he talks about the followers of Bacchus or mentions their rites; his reliability is quite reduced, sometimes close to zero. He represents the followers of God as common criminals who committed the worst crimes under the veil of a religion. He represents the elements of the cult of Bacchus in a hostile and prejudiced way. He takes advantage of every opportunity to put his followers in a bad light. The preliminary hostility towards all foreign cults induces Livy to represent various elements of the cult

¹² ADAMIK 2007, p. 338.

¹³ PASTORINO 1967, p. 57.

of Bacchus in a distorted way. Repression is amplified to the maximum. Robinson rightly notes that "Livy gives us a much better chance of understanding the senatorial propaganda of the period than of reconstructing what actually happened."¹⁴ For all these reasons, the information he gives us on the Bacchannals and on the night rituals must be evaluated with great care and caution, but also with objectivity and without preconceived arguments.

¹⁴ ROBINSON 2007, p. 28.