

Investigation of pagan monotheism on the Story of Books of Numa

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Abstract: Pagan religion in ancient Rome was well established and embedded into a bordered religious frame but “open” to new ideas and deities from other cultures (sometimes “weird” or exotic like Magna Mater, Isis, Mithras etc), adopted most of the times as local gods. Despite though this absorbing culture there has also been religions (like that of Bacchus) forbidden and characterized as *superstitio*. In the current work a systematically investigation on the story of burning of Numa’s books is presented. Motivation of this work was the understanding of the story itself and its causality. In order to do it, firstly some background information about Numa, Pythagoras and for the specific story is given, followed by a brief discussion on the sources (focusing mostly on their differences). Afterwards a critical literature review, identifying the different point of views scholars approach the issue, is provided. Further, a discussion on reasoning of that action is provided based both on scholar’s conclusions and on main source author’s personal beliefs. It is shown that some aspects of the story has not been clarified yet and it is very likely that the burning of that books was not only a “theological” action.

Keywords: Numa, multi-perspective, religious roots

INTRODUCTION

In order to identify the roots of modern religions in Europe someone has to “dig” deeply inside the Graeco-Roman world; thus follow the evolution from polytheistic to monotheistic religion [1-2]. Five years after *senatus consultum de Bacchanalibus* (senatorial decree concerning the Bacchanalia), in 181 BC, another decision made by senate was the burning of some books, known as the books of Numa, that were accused of being against traditional religion due to their connection with Pythagorean philosophy.

Several authors were interested in the story of burning of the books of Numa, amongst them Plutarch[3], Marcus Varro [4], Cassius Hemina[5], Livious Titus [6], (Livy) and St. Augustine [7]. The oldest saved story is that of Livy followed by the stories of Plutarch and St. Augustine [25, 22]. One interesting thing is that both Livy and St. Augustine refer to the story given by Varro and Hemina, while a historian named Antias is cited by Plutarch (“...ὁ δ’ Ἀντίας ἱστορεῖ ὅτι δώδεκα μὲν βιβλίοι ἱεροφαντικά...” as referred on Ragavis’ translation) [26]. Before getting though into the story itself, a brief description of Numa and Pythagoras, the two main actors of the actual story, is provided.

Numa Pompilius (753–673 BC), a man of Sabine origin, was the second king of Rome, after Romulus, although it is not clarified if he actually was a real person. Following Plutarch’s story Numa was one of the most wise and honoured men of his age, establishing between others almost every priesthood college (eg flamines, augures, pontiffs (also became the Pont Max) etc). He prohibited Romans both to make sculptures of the God(s) - Plutarch is referring to a Divine Being- because of their spiritual nature (catachrestic term) and to sacrifice animals. Pythagoras of Samos (ca 570- ca 490 BC) was a Greek philosopher, founder of the religious movement called Pythagorism (connected with the worship of Apollo). It was believed that he worshiped in non human like God(s) and he loved silence. He believed in a circle of human soul (catachrestic term) due to rebirth and thus he rejected sacrifices with meat [8]. The similarities pointed on their religious beliefs and philosophy made people believe that these two men were connected to each other not only by friendship but with educational (teacher-student) relationship too (although different authors alternate the role of teacher and student amongst the two men).

The story of Livy (Livy XI.29 translated by Baker [9] is claimed to be the most accurate from a historical critical perspective [10] Gruen:

“In the same year [181 BC], some workmen...discovered two stone chests...had inscriptions in Greek and Latine letters, one signifying that therein was buried Numa Pompilius, son of Pompo, and king of the Romans; the other, that therein were contained the books of Numa Pompilius.... in the other [second chest] were found two bundles, tied round with waxed cords, and each containing seven books, not only entire, but apparently quite fresh. Seven were in Latine, and related to the pontifical law; and seven in Greek, containing the doctrines of philosophy, such as might have been known in that age... Valerius Antias adds, that they contained the doctrines of Pythagoras, supporting, by this plausible fiction, the credit of the vulgar opinion, that Numa had been a disciple of Pythagoras...On reading the principal heads of the contents, he [Quintus Petillius, the city prætor] perceived that most of them had a tendency to undermine the established system of religious doctrines...the books, however, were burned in the comitium, in the view of the people, the fire being made by the public servants, whose duty it was to assist at sacrifices.”

The base of the story is the same, but several technical details vary between different sources. The most cited difference [11] is the variation of number of books (fourteen according to Livy and twenty four according to Plutarch), although every source confirms that some books were burned. In addition, some sources refer to burning of all the books while other only to the half of them (written in Greek and contained the doctrines of Pythagoras). The decision for burning is also a debatable issue. According to Livy the context of the books “*had the tendency to undermine the established system of religious doctrines*”, while Plutarch says senate didn’t find it right or proper to publish the context of the books. In addition a debate has been given in whether Numa’s life could coincide with that of Pythagoras, due to the almost 150 years between their lives. It is worth noting that although Plutarch knew it was implausible the two men ever met each other, he claims that the way of accounting the years based in Olympic Games is not accurate enough in order to provide evidence of their genealogical separation. He further gives several evidence of Numa’s influence from Pythagoras. Lastly several discussions are provided, after Pliny’s (XIII.70) [24] first notation and Hemina’s investigation, on whether the use of papyrus by Numa’s years was possible. Working in that direction Hemina[11] is dealing with technical details that could make such an existence possible. Furthermore he deals with the fact that even if the use of papyrus was known at that time (time of Numa) it

would be extremely difficult to be conserved fresh as stated by Pico (and referred by Livy) [12].

CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

The story of Numa’s books has attracted a lot of great historians in the past. Despite that it is not investigated as much as it worth [10]. A little more than a century ago Gudeman [13] working in the field of some false texts called *ψευδεπίγραφα* (pseudepigrapha) - texts signed with other than the author’s name in order either to harm someone or to cheat upon the reader- he included Numa’s books in a special category that “*owe their existence to the enthusiasm of the scholars of the Renaissance*”. While Gudeman seems to be led by his own research about false texts, his work incorporates useful suggestions about the origin of the books. Based on the discussion about papyrus-use-anachronism (referred by Hemina) and taking into account Numa’s semi-mythical substance (due to lack of written evidence about his existence) he claims that Numa’s books are “*a direct outcome of political partisanship or even personal malice*”. He bases his assumption on the fact that Romans were such practical and matter-of-fact minded men, that construction of *ψευδεπίγραφα* had nothing to do with philosophy, religious or literary forgery “*for its own sake*” but had to do with more practical and cost-effected issues. Unfortunately Gudeman makes no effort to explain the possible political gain from an effort like this.

After Gudeman’s work the issue kind of stopped to be amongst the “hot” topics, although the work of Delate [14] has useful information about the technical details of the story. Most of the recent works were presented after mid 50’s. Amongst others the works of Gag  [15] and Pailer [16] are most frequently cited [11]. A general drawback of these works is that they are more interested in the fact of burning and the technical details about it (eg how could the books be conserved fresh after so many years, or how could Numa know Pythagoras and even if the books were burned at all). On the other hand, Gruen [10] in his work after a brief discussion about the technical details of the story and a presentation of his own beliefs about it (which coincide with the beliefs of previous scholars) he more critically discuss the reasoning of that burning. Despite the apparent affection of his Greek literature education, Gruen’s effort to investigate the causality of the facts based on the general political and religious frame of that time seems to be well established. Apart of these sources no other, more recently, source (in the mean of critically analyze the fact not only refer it) could be found. Kahn [17] in his book upon Pythagoras and Pythagorism consider the story more as a legend due to the fact that the generations splitting the two men make

their connection impossible. Despite though, he considers the folklore as a proof of Pythagoras continuing prestige at Rome and thinks that it “*provides the background for the famous passage in Ovid [18]’s Metamorphoses*”. In a more recent work Bremmer [19] makes an effort to identify connections between ancient Greek holy books and the Bible in order to link the pagan tradition with Christianity and Islam. Working in that area, based on the characterization of Numa’s books as *ἱεραὶ βιβλίοι* (holy books) from Plutarch, he describes the tradition of Romans (in contrast to Greeks) to have knowledge-including-holy-books that could be read only by a small caste. He further refers to the story of Numa’s books as an attempt to construct such holy books. Eventually Bremer in his 123rd footnote recognize that the words *ἱεραὶ βιβλίοι* could be an anachronism used by Plutarch. Such an anachronism, as he claims, has happened only two more times from authors that originated from Greece too. Finally the monograph of Willi [20] titled: Numa’s dangerous books: the exegetic history of a Roman forgery” (unable to be found) is cited by the majority of authors, eg from Silk [21] who, in a more philological way, tries to connect Numa with the idea of the modern civil religion in the west.

DISCUSSION

Following the above mentioned literary texts and literature review we identified several issues that need further discussion. The first important issue is that Numa and Pythagoras could not coexist according to the calendar. Livy strongly resists their coexistence while Plutarch is trying to prove their relation. The literature give credits to Livy based on several other records such as those of Dionysios of Halicarnassus [23], Vorro and Hemina. Gruen tends to believe Livy’s story too, but he skeptically sees the effort of all authors to further prove that these two men were or not friends, despite the calendar evidence each of them provides. In his mind it depicts author’s uncertainty for the truth, that in its turn convince as about the existence of two different schools: one that tried to expel Pythagoras from Numa’s legend (represented by Emperor’s historian) and the other trying to establish a link between Roman culture and Greek philosophy – mysticism (represented by a Greek philosopher and priest of Apollo). This could be an evidence that a “religion” or stated better a philosophical cult was trying to be established in Rome by these times not accepted by the emperor (Augustus) [22].

The second important issue is the burning of the books themselves. The fact that despite their variations ancient sources describe the burning of some books proves that something has happened in the religious

frame of Rome by that time (republic period – 181 BC). Either these books were original or fake they were consumed as enemies to traditional religion and destroyed. Gruen points on two different reasons for an action like that. Firstly, he claims that Roman republic praetors feeling strong about their achievements wanted to dispel from their origin the old legend that linked them with Greek culture. It was a matter of prestige to approve that Rome was self structured and not based on some other country’s philosophy. Secondly, and most important, he imports this action into a general anti-Greek philosophy feeling that was dominated Roman republic by that time, referring to the persecution of Greek philosophers from Roman empire some years later (161 BC). Both these explanations indicate that even a religion or just a philosophical cult, Pythagorism was criminalized and tried to be expelled by senate not for religious but political reasons.

Last but not least it is worth noting that almost every modern author incorporates the burning of the books in a general religious prohibition frame and link it with Bacchanalia or *μευδεπίγραφα*. No effort is given in order to investigate the essence of Pythagorean philosophy and its differences with other similar accepted religions as that of Mithras and Magna Mater (this implies also for the work of Bremmer [19] who touches the issue rather softly from his perspective). Even though it has been noted [11] that Romans were more closely related to the later deities due to their Roman origin and involvement of the Roman aristocracy, philosophical causality identification of Pythagorism’s exemption from acceptant religions would be of great interest (one could say that Pythagorism was closer both to Roman origins and to Roman aristocracy than Mithraism and less exotic from Magna mater).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

An attempt to investigate the story of burning of Numa’s books was presented. The critical literature review and the discussion that followed indicated several issues that had to do both with the burning’s technical details and its casualty. It was shown that the burning of these books could be taken as a real fact, but the exact reasoning for that fact is not clearly defined; assumed to be mostly a political action against the Greek philosophy rather than a religious action against a new threatening religion. Based on several sources it was further shown that this political action against this philosophy continued to be part of senate’s priorities even after hundreds of years. Lastly, a discussion on the lack of sources investigating differences between Pythagorism and other accepted religions designated this way for research as of great importance, although

someone has to be very careful not to enter a master notation locus of pagan monotheistic religion establishment.

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