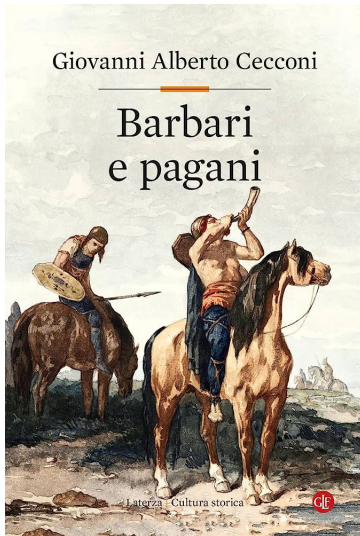


BARBARI E PAGANI



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IN THIS BOOK, GIOVANNI ALBERTO CECCONI attempts to convince us that pagan minorities existed in Western Europe long after the Christian Emperor Theodosius the Great (d. 395) outlawed paganism. He sees a synergy between surviving paganism in the provinces of the Roman Empire and that of incoming barbarians, arguing that western Europe was not an exclusively Christian area but contained nuclei of organised paganism into the early Middle Ages.

In his Introduction, Cecconi signals his opposition to what he considers to be over-rigid approaches to the sources and the questioning of the historical value of saints' lives (a topic discussed at greater length in individual chapters). He notes the tendency in some quarters to deny that grave goods and burial modes can be read as evidence of cultural or religious affiliation (though he thinks that this is going to be

corrected to some degree by work on aDNA). He sets out his criteria for the identification of paganism, the most important of which are: signs or references to rituals and modalities of burial incompatible with Christianity; ceremonies in which the participants cannot belong to the Christian community (they may, for example, not have undergone baptism); the formalisation of religious activities on particular days; and the demonstrability or presumption of the existence of people in charge of such rites.

Chapter I deals with barbarian paganism before the “great migrations”, beginning with Tacitus’ account of the Germanic tribes. Cecconi then moves on to discussion of the pagan *foederati* working for the Empire, supporting the hypothesis that they were permitted to maintain their own religions with archaeological evidence from *Nemetacum* in the province of *Belgica II* (of which more later). He picks out common features of barbarian ritual practices and those of the pagans of the Roman provinces: veneration of columns, especially when surmounted by representations of deities; veneration of stones; reverence for natural forces. He suggests that the harshness of existence might have led recent converts to Christianity to abandon their freshly adopted monotheism and revert to the reassuring shelter of their former beliefs; and he points out that in the late 4th / early 5th century a number of Germanic leaders who fought on behalf of Rome were pagans. In Chapter II, Cecconi offers a panoramic – though unevenly focused – view of the migrations, beginning with the Huns and moving on to the Visigoths, Burgundians, Vandals (where he seems to think that the move into Africa was led by Silings rather than Hasdings), Franks and Ostrogoths. He also mentions later movements: Lombards, Bavarians, Frisians, Vascones and even (very briefly) the Slav, Avar and Bulgar penetration of the Balkans. In the concluding section of the chapter he gives his thoughts on the changes in Late Roman society at the time of barbarian settlement and the relations between incomers and Romans, noting a complex articulation of interactions, with consequences for religion which he will develop further in later chapters. In Chapter III, he postulates a functional nexus between war, paganism and the slowing down of Christianization, arguing that the capture of Christians by barbarians could weaken ecclesiastical institutions, with the Church having to devote resources to the ransom of captives. Moreover, such individuals might be taken a long way from home and forced to participate in non-Christian rituals, thus requiring re-integration into Christian society through penance, when ransomed. Conversely, captive barbarians, set to work on the land as traded slaves, represented a significant injection of non-believers into Christian areas.

Chapter IV presents some of the book’s key evidence. Cecconi rejects what he characterises as the prevalent suggestions that paganism was, in late antiquity and post-Roman society, confined to the margins and a few inaccessible locales and that

terms such as pagan, idolaters, *gentiles* and fanatics are mere labels attached by the clergy to superstitions and popular religiosity. He sets out to reclaim for actual paganism the space – however modest – to which he believes it is entitled, examining what he presents as either the persistence or the introduction of non-Christian rituals. First of all he looks at written evidence, drawn from a range of European sources, for human sacrifice as an aspect of Germanic paganism. He then moves on to archaeological evidence, discussing the excavation at *Nemetacum* (modern Arras), where he interprets burials of animals and human remains manipulated *post mortem* as evidence of ritual sacrifice. This is followed by a section on practices condemned by church councils, including those summoned by rulers, between the 4th and 7th centuries, which he regards as proving the existence of paganism, rather than providing evidence of superstition or folk-customs. Discussing conciliar condemnation of celebrations of the Kalends of January as a pagan rite, he sets out to demonstrate that 6th century Frankish churchmen believed these involved contemporary pagans, who were encouraging non-Christian behaviour on the part of baptised Christians. He detects takeover and re-purposing of pagan temples in early 6th century Burgundy and the ritual hanging of animal heads on trees in 5th century Armorica as well as references to this practice among the Franks in a letter of Pope Gregory I (690-604). He indicates the continued condemnation of Kalends celebrations in Francia at the Council of Tours (567), along with non-Christian rituals for the dead on the Christian feast of the Chair of St Peter and the worship of stones, trees and water. He also focuses on mention of pagan owners of Christian slaves by the Council of Orléans (549) and on the canons of the Council of Clichy (626) forbidding Christians to sell Christian slaves to pagans; to indulge in the pagan habit of augury; and to eat with pagans, idolaters and those who sacrifice (the assumption being that they were consuming animals offered to pagan deities). He indicates a widespread consensus among historians that paganism survived in North-Eastern Gaul around the Moselle and in the Rhineland up to the North Sea coast and criticises the approach that sees the hagiography of the Merovingian age as reflecting the priorities of its Carolingian redactors rather than the realities of the situation on the ground. He concludes with a brief discussion of the term *barbaricus* as a synonym for pagan.

In Chapter V, Cecconi takes us on a series of regional itineraries covering the period from the fifth to the 7th century, to see if there are recognisable pagan groups. He begins with a very brief discussion of Gregory I's strategy for converting the pagan Anglo-Saxons, based on destruction of idols, but retention of buildings and cult spaces. He moves on to what is considered to be the stronghold of pagan practices, the Lower Rhine and Frisia. The furnished burial of Childeric, the pagan father of Clovis, the Frankish leader who accepted Christianity, paves the way for discussion

of other furnished burials from Clovis' time and later, which are presented in the context of warfare and of funerary customs (particularly the practice of slaughtering and burying the horse of the deceased) influenced by a paganizing religious mentality. He quotes a clause relating to East Frisia in the 8th-9th century *Lex Frisonum* referring to the safeguarding of the honour of temples (though noting that this survives in a single manuscript). Gregory of Tours' uncle Gallus' attempts to destroy a pagan temple near Cologne are noted, as is the missionary work of Amand in the region of Maastricht. Cecconi is highly critical of Yitzhak Hen's rejection of the authenticity of the information contained in the *Life* of Eligius of Noyon: he defends the authenticity of its enumeration of *paganorum sacrilegia consuetudines*, even if it has been contaminated by Carolingian redactions and mentions an otherwise unknown deity, *Geniscus*. He points to a reference in the 7th century *Life* of Lupus of Sens (d. 623) to destruction of temples in a district administered by a *dux paganus*, Boso Landegisel, in the time of the Merovingian ruler Clothar II; and the apparently pagan family background of bertulf of Bobbio who was converted by his uncle Arnulf, Bishop of Sens, one of the bishops present at Clichy in 626. Discussing Gregory of Tours' account in his *Ten Books of Histories* of Vulfilaic, a stylite ascetic who took it on himself to destroy statues of "Diana" venerated by pagans in the region of Trier, Cecconi returns to the attack on Hen, who argues that the pagans were a product of the imagination of Vulfilaic, whom he claims must have been mentally ill. He moves on to a discussion of names of Germanic gods Woden and Thunor, found on jewellery from Bavaria and then to references to pagans in Alamannia in the *Life* of Columbanus. He presents references to pagans in Burgundy in (perhaps) the mid 5th century in the *Lives of the Fathers of Jura* and in Bavaria and Alamannia in 8th century law codes. He finds traces of paganism in Brittany (the 6th century *Life of Paternus*, a 5th century churchman) and in Aquitaine where hagiography, including the *Life* of Aredius, of whom Vulfilaic was a follower. For the Iberian Peninsula, he highlights allusions to paganism or idolatry in the 4th and 5th centuries, before turning to 6th century evidence and in particular that of Martin of Braga's *Castigation of Rustics*. He defends the authenticity of its testimony to the existence of divination, observance of *dies idolorum*, animal and even human sacrifice and points to the 7th century hermit Valerius of Bierzo's account of the replacement of a pagan altar near Astorga by a Christian basilica. In the case of Italy he indicates the existence of inhumations accompanied by interments of slaughtered animals, also suggesting the influence of (hypothetical) remnants of Alaric's Visigothic armies settled in Italy on the continuation of the Roman *Lupercalia*. He writes of paganism to the north in *Noricum Ripense* (which could be indigenous or that of the Rugi who settled in this area) and also suggests that we cannot exclude the existence of a percentage of pagans among Theoderic's Ostrogoths. He notes the *Dia-*

logues' presentation of rural cults re-using the ancient sanctuary of Apollo on Monte Cassino; Gregory I's letters referring to idolaters in Terracina, Sicily as well as Corsica and Sardinia, already mentioned in Chapter III; and the complex religious make-up of the incoming Lombards, some of who remained pagan. The chapter concludes with a brief section mentioning the Avar, Slav and Bulgar invasions of the Balkans. Chapter VI investigates the politics of Arian rulers toward paganism. Dealing in turn with Vandal North Africa, Visigothic Spain (as presented by Gregory of Tours) and the Visigoths in Gaul in the Breviary of Alaric, with a brief excursion into 6th-century Francia (non-Arian but another mature barbarian kingdom) and returning to his theme via a consideration of the Ostrogoth Theoderic in Italy, he concludes that there are no examples of strong anti-pagan coercion by Arian powers – either through choice or *laissez-faire*. An added section on 16th century Peru suggests that the reader will see resemblances between the private and highly organised non-Christian observances practised by indigenous Peruvians who were largely baptised Christians and the ideas he has presented throughout his book.

Cecconi re-states his main points in an Epilogue. He contends that we are looking at the tip of an iceberg where a “re-paganization” through the introduction of new elements reactivated traditional paganism, creating syncretisms which excluded Christians. He rejects the idea that Western Europe was an exclusively Christian entity, also containing some superficially Christianized elements with a propensity to welcome or conserve superstitions and incantations (as, he thinks, is the case nowadays in societies where Christianity is the majority religion). While accepting that paganism was to be encountered principally in the countryside, as modern scholars agree, he claims that it was also to be found not just in relatively inaccessible spots but also nearer cities and towns, and sometimes even within city walls. He argues that it was relatively organized and while conceding that indications are not always obvious, maintains that in some cases it has been possible either to see or suggest this.

These arguments suffer from major evidential and conceptual problems.

Whatever claims Cecconi makes for the existence of suburban and even urban paganisms are undermined by the way in which many of his examples confirm that by the 6th century the majority of non-Christian activities took place either on outside the northern and eastern frontiers of the areas directly controlled by Frankish rulers or in relatively inaccessible or semi-deserted areas of western Europe. To take two examples of the latter, he notes that the *Life* of Aredius of Limoges portrays Gallo-Roman *Argentomagus*, once a prosperous city, now inhabited only by the poor and sick who worshipped “demons” and were hostile to intruders. More tendentiously, he also highlights how, in Galicia, Martin of Braga referred to both animal and even human sacrifice. He fails to point out either that Martin was working in an area of ethnic

heterogeneity in which socio-economic power appears to have been exceptionally devolved and fragmented, not least on account of topography; or that he wrote about animal and human sacrifices in a highly colourful account of how pagan gods and lesser supernatural beings (all characterised as demons) had in the past acquired power over the local *rustici*.

Cecconi's treatment of archaeological evidence is limited and his interpretation of the findings from *Nemetacum* (Arras), which he presents as an important example of ritual sacrifice imported by Germanic troops into Roman territory, is highly misleading. He suggests that the way in which animal and human bodies were left to decay before the bones were repositioned is comparable with findings from much further east at Regensburg-Harting in Bavaria where the funerary rites at a 4th century site were accompanied by what he calls 'actions of sacred violence' which he interprets as evidence of human sacrifice. This presumably refers to the marks of violent blows on the Regensburg skeletons. But such marks are absent at *Nemetacum*, as its excavator pointed out. Cecconi (who thinks the burials of young children here are more like to indicate ritual killing than death from natural causes!) fails to recognise the widespread funerary custom of leaving bodies to decay (here in a pit) followed by the re-burial of the skeletons, often disarticulated, when the flesh has decomposed and the spirit is thus considered to have made a safe transition to the afterlife. This, rather than ritual sacrifice, is the Germanic custom introduced to Arras, where it was practised at a shrine dedicated to a Germanic god, separate from the burial places of other elements of the population. Germanic groups that had converted to Christianity took a long time to abandon funerary rites of transition of this nature, even though they might, as Cecconi suggests, have given up the practice of sacrificing and burying animals as part of these rituals.

The presentation of evidence from the sermons of Cæsarius of Arles and the canons of Church councils as an indication of paganism is particularly unhelpful. Cecconi rejects valuable insights offered by Klingshirn in the 1990s. He considers that Cæsarius made a clear distinction between pagans and Christians: but as Klingshirn pointed out, it is impossible to determine the actual religious affiliation of those whom the Bishop of Arles condemned as pagans. Cæsarius' frequently-employed distinction between baptized and non-baptized, which Cecconi takes at face value to mean Christian and pagan, is invalid, because not everyone who regarded themselves as Christian at this stage had actually been baptized. While infant baptism gradually became the norm in the 6th century, many individuals still deferred baptism, technically remaining catechumens for most of their lives. To muddy the waters further, Cæsarius' sermons also indicate that many who followed what he condemned as pagan practices were, in fact, baptized Christians who had, as Klingshirn put it,

a complex relationship to Christianity and what he classifies as traditional religion, with strong loyalties to both. The sermons do indeed contain evidence of the existence of groups who had no loyalty to Christianity at all: but their wording indicates that these were peasants or slaves and that Cæsarius was exhorting their landlords or owners to bring them into the Christian fold, by coercion if necessary. The letters of Gregory the Great suggest a similar approach on his part to such groups in a few areas of Italy, Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica. This is not the sort of resilient organised paganism infused with vitality by contact with Germanic groups or ransomed hostages in which Cecconi would have us believe, but the continuation of traditional calendar rituals, or rites connected with on sacred springs and lakes, trees, *simulacra* and shrines, by peasants or slaves. The condemnation of similar practices by Gallic councils of the later 6th century, Tours (567) and Auxerre (561 x 605) reflect the reception of Cæsarius' sermons in these regions. And when a sermon condemning the celebration of the Kalends of January, "borrowed" by Cæsarius from the 5th century Bishop Faustus of Riez, arrived in Noyon later in the 6th century, it was amended to make clear that it addressed free men who were to forbid such celebrations to their servants or slaves rather than their families. These changes underline a move, between the 5th and 6th centuries, towards identification of pagan or paganising practices with lower social strata or the unfree. Cecconi – who mines conciliar decisions for signs of supposed paganism rather than emphasising their role in underpinning a dominant Christian discourse – also singles out several canons of the Councils of Orléans (541) and Clichy (626) as indicating the existence of pagan customs and groups. However, it should be emphasised that both were "national" councils attended by a large number of bishops – including representatives from the north-eastern frontier of Frankish territories.

Cecconi presents no convincing evidence for the survival of groups cut off from the main Visigothic movement through Italy and into Gaul. His vision of pockets of indigenous Roman provincial paganism reinforced by Germanic groups abandoned by or cut off from transient armies ignores the political dynamics of the conversion of Germanic pagans to Christianity from the 4th century onwards. Christianity was the religion of the Roman Empire, the wealthiest and most powerful polity known to the barbarians and as such was attractive to many of their chiefs who associated it with opportunity and power. He points out that in the late 4th and early 5th century a number of important barbarian leaders served Rome but remained pagan: this is indisputably the case, but after this stage we see the emergence of a distinct trajectory in the direction of conversion to Christianity, Nicene or Homoian, as barbarian groups moved into and settled in Roman territory. Homoian Christianity, although it was diffused by the Visigoths in an attempt to establish hegemony over other barbar-

ian peoples and developed a distinct link with booty/land distribution and political loyalty, also represented the Christian God in a way cognitively attractive to pagan barbarians. It is possible that in Burgundy it encouraged the Christianization of remnants of the Hunnic armies after the death of Attila in 453.

Cecconi's book fails to engage properly with theoretical developments in the study of religion. I have already mentioned its lack of understanding of funerary ritual. Further, in postulating a resemblance between the paganism of the Roman provinces and that of barbarian incomers, Cecconi poses the rhetorical question of whether an affirmative answer might indicate an artificial and ideological interpretation of the sources. Absolutely not! Awareness of ideas drawn from the Cognitive Science of Religion and their application to the study of this period would have helped him understand that both were based on intuitions and non-reflective belief in the special powers of trees, water and stones; in supernatural beings who require propitiation; and in the significance of certain days of the week and times of the year. In the second half of the 6th century the works of Gregory of Tours and Martin of Braga demonstrate the Church's recognition of the power of such non-reflective belief in the minds of those who were technically Christians and the need to replace it by a version which bound them to itself. Both authors recommended visits to the shrines and relics of saints as properly Christian substitutes for rites at rocks, trees, springs, lakes and images or altars considered to embody healing power, the ability to ensure good harvests and ward off misfortune. And while both applied the rhetoric of demonization or paganization to such practices, any actual paganism in western continental Europe was, despite Cecconi's claims, only to be found to the north and east of the areas directly controlled by Frankish rulers and elsewhere – perhaps – in a few cut-off communities in remote areas.