Research project

Neither man nor woman, neither human nor god.
Gender liminality in the Roman cults of Cybele and Dionysus

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Introduction

This project will explore the link between religion, society and gender issues in the Graeco-Roman world on the basis of the cults of two 'imported' gods: Cybele and Dionysus. These two deities shared a foreign origin and an ambiguous gender identity that contrasted with common gender construction in Roman society. Nevertheless, their cults were very popular and left a mark on Roman culture, as shown by a variety of material and literary sources.

This project's aim is twofold. Firstly, to understand how and why these gender ambiguous deities were included in the Roman religious landscape, despite a widespread socio-cultural contempt for gender ambiguity. Secondly, to investigate whether these cults had an influence on the Roman construction of gender. To attain these goals, it is paramount to analyse how Roman society responded not only to these gods, but also to their priests and attendants, whose liminal gender identity - at the border between masculinity and femininity - was determined by their religious allegiance and conflicted with the cultural classifications and rules of Roman society. Thus, the question to be answered is: how and why were gender ambiguous deities and priests part of a society that tended to stigmatise expressions of gender liminality?

The case-study

The cults of Cybele and Dionysus had a parallel history in Rome. They both arrived around the 4th-3rd century BCE and they were part of the Roman religious system until the rise of Christianity (3rd-4th century CE). Moreover, they showed striking similarities. Firstly, they both had a remarkable impact on Roman culture, to the extent that affiliation to these cults often influenced political discourses and action in ancient Rome (Roller 1999, 287-326; Wyler 2013).

Secondly, Cybele and Dionysus were considered to share an eastern cultural origin. This means that, despite their integration into the Roman milieu, literary sources repeatedly linked their most peculiar features to their "un-Romanness". For instance, they were both often associated with the wilderness, being represented together with exotic animals, such as lions (like the ones towing Cybele's cart) and panthers (Jàcome 2013). The most un-Roman characteristic ascribed to these deities and to their

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priests or attendants was an identity in between male and female (gender liminality). The goddess Cybele was characterised by both feminine and masculine features, including warlike traits and a typically "masculine" sexually active behaviour towards her male companion, Attis (Roller 1999, 237-258). Dionysus, though mainly addressed as a male god and endowed with phallic attributes, is also called the "woman-looking" (θηλύμορφος) (Csapo 1997).

Lastly, Cybele and Dionysus seem associated in the Roman religious system, appearing in the same rituals and mythological narratives (Roller 1999; Panoussi 2003; Beard-North-Price 1998, II.132-133). Furthermore, their devotees present strikingly similar features. Both Cybele's priests, the galli, and Dionysus' mythical followers, the maenads, were characterised by a liminal position. The former are represented by literary and iconographic sources as gender ambiguous: they were men who wore womanly attires, behaved like women, had intercourse with both sexes, honoured their goddess through self-castration in frenzied feasts, and lived at social borders (Beard 1996). As for the maenads, despite the lack of historical evidence, literary sources describe them in detail. The maenads were women who, just like the galli, honoured their god with orgiastic feasts, frantically dancing in the woods in a possession-like state, at the border between the human and the beastly (Otto 1965). By neglecting their roles as wives and mothers and leaving the domestic walls to reach the wilderness (Dionysus' dominion) in a violent frenzy, the maenads broke the constraints that the male-centred society imposed on femininity. Just like the galli did via castration and cross-dressing, also Dionysus' maenads transcended gender limits, albeit only temporarily. Although the maenads are almost exclusively literary characters, Dionysiac followers, who are variously documented in Rome, were often accused of trespassing gender norms with unrestrained sexual behaviours.

Another difference between Cybele's and Dionysus' cults is the social response to the liminality of these deities and their followers. If, on the one hand, their followers were despised for showing gender ambiguity, the deities, on the other hand, had different relationships with Roman society. Whereas Cybele was attached to political power and was honoured with official public festivals (Vermaseren 1977; Roller 1999), Dionysus' inclusion within Roman society was more troubled, as proved by the suppression of his festivals, the Bacchanalia, in 186 BCE (Takàcs 2000). Yet, by challenging the distinction between masculinity and femininity, Cybele and Dionysus (and their attendants) equally questioned the social order deriving from gender classification (Carlà-Uhink 2017).

The similarities and differences discussed above call for a comparative study. However such a study has never been developed so far.

Theoretical framework

The present research is based on three theoretical pillars. Firstly, it relies on the gender theories, developed from the 1980s onwards by scholars such as Foucault, Laqueur, Richlin, Herdt, Gleason and Halperin, which showed that the relationship between biological sexes and culturally constructed gender classifications is not straightforward. Neither was it in the Graeco-Roman world (Holmes 2012),

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as gender identity depended on social behaviour and (sexual) activity rather than on biological sex (Parker 1997; Swancutt 2006). As such, the construction of a gender identity was regulated by specific rules and had social and political significance in Rome, to the extent that those who did not fall into clear-cut gender categories were publicly despised (Hallet-Skinner 1997; Edwards 2002). However, it is still not clear why Roman society, whose gender definitions were profoundly influential at a socio-political level, worshipped gender ambiguous deities. Only recently a new strand of scholarship has started to investigate the relation between religion and undefined gender (expressed in cross-dressing, androgyny or gender swaps), observing that in the Graeco- Roman culture the lack of gender definition was accepted and almost expected only in the religious sphere (Campanile – Carlà-Uhink – Facella 2017). My analysis of the aforementioned cults aims to contribute to and enrich this field of study.

Secondly, I will use anthropological studies about divine androgyny (Delcourt 1958; Eliade 1962) and ethnic boundaries (Barth 1969). Androgyny – a combination of male and female characteristics - in religious characters has been interpreted as a longing for the primordial unity, namely the original totality from which everything sprang. I will apply this concept of divine androgyny to my case studies, in order to understand the role and power ascribed to these two deities in the Roman religious panorama. Moreover, gender indefiniteness was often perceived by Roman dominant culture as a mark of foreignness, or worse, barbarity. And yet, the cults here discussed were incorporated into the Roman religious system. Barth's study about ethnic boundaries is fundamental to analyse the tension between the definition of Romanness and the inclusion of conspicuously foreign deities.

The third theoretical pillar consists of studies about liminality (van Gennep 1909; Turner 1969; Thomassen 2009-2012). This concept was developed to investigate the ritualization of religious gender ambiguity at a social level. It defines a particular state in rites of passage, in which initiates 'slip through the network of classifications' (Turner 1969, 95). Recently, the concept has been used in a wider context and in different disciplines as well (Thomassen 2009, 18). As such, the concept is employed to describe both a variety of human experiences as well as people (called by Turner liminal personae), who are 'between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony' (Turner 1969, 95). Scholars have already demonstrated the applicability of Turner's concepts to Dionysus' cult, especially with reference to Dionysus' role in challenging social and cultural (including gender) boundaries (Segal 1982). Yet nothing similar has been done for Cybele's cult so far. Since gender ambiguity is one of the main criteria that define liminality (Turner 1969, 106-107), studies about liminality will help me understand the liminal nature of both these deities and their devotees.

Aim and research questions

The purpose of the study, as exposed above, will be fulfilled through the following research questions:

How was gender constructed in the cults of Cybele and Dionysus?

What was the consequence of religious gender liminality at a social level?

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Why did the Roman religious landscape allow transgressions to the gender parameters that governed socio-political relationships?

Methodology

The first two research questions will be tackled in the first phase of this study, in which the cults' mythological background and historical evolution will be analysed by means of literary, archaeological and epigraphic sources (see the table below). The variety of evidence is important to get a broad and diverse perspective on the case studies. Literary accounts provide information about the perception of these cults, especially in the highest spheres of Roman intellectual production. The material culture, instead, shows not only how these cults were introduced and developed, but also how they spread at different layers of Roman society. This preliminary heuristic study will be conducted with the methodology of material turn (Tilley et al. 2006) and will allow me to collect enough material to present the similarities and differences between the two cults. Moreover, the archaeological sources offer a different perspective, especially regarding the difference between representation and perception of the deities and their attendants. This is particularly important for Dionysus' followers, whose identity is heavily affected by literary descriptions, which not always corresponds to what material sources show. For each cult, I aim to discuss:

- the cultural background;
- the mythological narrative;
- the iconography;
- the rituals;
- the cultic attendants.

This analysis will allow to describe: a) the gender ambiguity characterising the deities and their attendants; b) define if/how the gods-attendants relationship depends on gender liminality; c) analyse the social response to gender indefiniteness.

The second phase of my study will be devoted to the third research question, trying to explain the contrast between the religious function of gender ambiguity and its social stigmatisation. The core of this phase will be a comparative analysis of cases of religious gender ambiguity from different cultural contexts (Smith 1990), such as the Indian Hijras (Nanda 1999) or the Russian Skoptsy (Engelstein 1999), which are two of the most interesting objects of comparison to explore the connection between gender ambiguity and religious devotion. The Hijras are castrated men dressing like women and devoted to the Mother Goddess Bahuchara Mata; the Skoptsy (the "Self-Castrators") were men and women of a Russian Christian sect who removed all or part of their sexual organs (testicles, penises and breasts) as literal application of a gospel passage (Matthew 19:12). With all due differences, these two cultic groups present some striking similarities with the galli and the maenads, such as the crossing of conventional gender boundaries, the participation in frenzied rituals and a life at the border of society. By establishing a careful comparison with these more recent, better-documented and already thoroughly investigated

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cases of gender ambiguous religious actors, I aim to get a better insight into Cybele's and Dionysus' attendants, especially in order to explain a) their connection to the gods b) their relationship with the society in which they lived c) the (religious) function of their sexual/gender ambiguity.

Scientific impact and anticipated outcomes

This project has not only scientific, but also societal relevance. Firstly, it will contribute to the field of Roman History, as a systematic comparison between the cults of Cybele and Dionysus has never been attempted. Nor has the influence of these liminal deities and their cults on the Roman construction of gender been assessed. Moreover, my research will contribute to religious studies, as it investigates the connection between the socio-political construction of gender and religious allegiance, a topic that has only recently been developed in academic studies.

In addition, this project proves to be urgent also in light of the worldwide spreading debate about gender definitions, as the need to critically approach gender labels becomes increasingly pressing (Samuel 2016). Dealing with gender liminality in Roman culture would allow me to contribute to the (still quite unsatisfying) dialogue between ancient studies and the always-in-progress developments in the field of (trans)gender. Since this subject is currently a hot-topic, my research gives the opportunity to bring ancient studies of gender liminality to public awareness and to provide a new perspective on a greatly debated topic.

Sources	Cybele	Dionysus
Literary sources	- Lucretius, De rerum natura - Livius, Ab urbe condita Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Antiquitates Romanae Ovidius, Fasti Strabo, Geographica Pausanias, Hellados Periegesis	Plautus, Bacchides Cicero, De Natura Deorum Livius, Ab urbe condita Livius, Ab urbe condita Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Antiquitates Romanae Ovidius, Fasti; Metamorphoses
Archaeological, epigraphic and numismatic sources	- Coins (RIC*/BMC**) *Roman Imperial Coinage * Catalogue of the Greek Coins in the British Museum	
	- Inscriptions and epitaphs	

| | Votive inscriptions
Shrine in the Circus Maximus
Temple on the Palatine
-Shrine in Vatican area (Phrygianum) | Underground chamber (Bolsena)
Senatus Consultum Ultimum de Bacchanalibus - Edict of Tiriolo (CIL* 01.00581)
Agrippinilla's thiasos (IGUR** 1.160)
* Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum
**Inscriptiones Graecae Urbis Romae |
| | Representations, e.g. votive objects, private decorative elements, paintings, reliefs, statues | |

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