THE TEMPLE OF FLORA OR VENUS BY THE CIRCUS MAXIMUS AND THE NEW CHRISTIAN TOPOGRAPHY: THE ‘PAGAN REVIVAL’ IN ACTION?

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Abstract

This article argues that we can perceive a continuing and persistent pagan tradition in Rome throughout the 4th c., rather than a ‘revival’, through the archaeological, literary and calendrical evidence. Repairs of pagan structures continue to take place in the city in the mid- to late 4th c., notably of a Temple of Flora or Venus next to the Circus Maximus. Such temples were the foci for cultic festivals that were still taking place in the 4th c., and thereby represent the continued vibrancy of pagan traditions in the centre of Rome. This area of the city was home to other notably persistent pagan festivals, and so a newly built Christian church in the area does not seem to have affected matters. Is this an indication of a conciliatory and harmonious topography that saw pagan and Christian buildings working peacefully alongside each other in the Latin West?

INTRODUCTION

The late story of paganism in Italy and the West is not an easy one to tell. The fragmentary and potentially misleading evidence and its paucity, whether written, epigraphic or archaeological, have meant a lot of assumptions have been made on this subject based on very few facts. Two of these include: the occurrence of the so-called ‘pagan revival’ in the late 4th c., a paradigm which has only been challenged relatively recently; and the steady material decline of the temples in spite of this apparent resurgence.1 In this article I will confront these assumptions by examining one specific area of Rome, namely that around the Circus Maximus, and particularly a Temple of Flora or Venus, which was situated on the Circus’ south side at the foot of the

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1 E.g. Bloch (1945) and (1963); cf. Cameron (1999) 114.
Aventine hill (Fig. 1). The reason for the uncertainty surrounding the identity of the temple I wish to focus on, and why we are examining it in this context, is that we know from an anonymous poem of the 4th or early 5th c., the *Carmen Contra Paganos*, that a temple in Rome dedicated to one of these goddesses was restored at that time, but it is not clear from the passage which of them it was. I will suggest that this restoration took place next to the Circus, and coupled with other restorations and building activity in the area, as well as other evidence, implies that Rome was a city that still engaged in public pagan traditions, albeit largely secularised, well into the 5th c., and occasionally restored its pagan buildings.

The decline in temple repairs—a phenomenon that began in the 3rd, not the 4th c.—was made worse by the removal of the public funds given to temples in A.D. 382 and by the eventual banning of pagan worship altogether by Theodosius I ten years later. There is no reason to believe that, until then, pagan observance had appreciably fallen in Rome or indeed anywhere else in the West. The restoration of a Temple of Flora or Venus, probably after 382, and the active paganism of the person that is the subject of the *Carmen*, is, therefore, more a sign of the continuing health and visibility of paganism, amongst elements of the Roman elite at least, rather than a sign of a ‘revival’. The growth of Christianity and its commensurate topography at this time has led to the idea of a pagan ‘decline’, and therefore the paradigm of a ‘revival’. As we will see though, this Christian topography did not challenge the existing pagan landscape but rather worked alongside it. The city of Rome was still overtly pagan in character well into the 5th c., yet soon became the centre of Christianity in the West, which led to an unusually polarised religious atmosphere. Thus, to describe Rome as ‘conservative’ or ‘traditional’ is too simplistic, as is the idea that it is representative of Italy and the West in general.

Further, Rome was unique and unrepresentative because of the numerous and still wealthy aristocracy who resided there, or who had strong links to the city. The city’s status attracted unusually large and generous patronage. To fund games or the restoration of an important building in Rome had a great deal more cachet and prestige attached

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2 The uncertainties and problems surrounding this source will be discussed below, but the idea that it cannot be trusted at all is an overreaction.