

On the supposed suppression of Olympic Games in 393 a.d.

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The Olympic Games suppression in the ancient world shows how through “the social history of sports” you can catch the sense of an age. The games suppression is, actually, part of that decisive IV century, when, thanks to the marriage with the imperial power, Christianity becomes a revealed and dogmatic religion; the ambiguous and controversial relation (sometime of collaboration, sometime of antagonism), unknown to classic world, between State and Church. And in the conflict of paganism and christianity it takes place the prohibition of pagan demonstrations like *ludi* joyful mimesis of *virtus romana*.

The transit from the pagan to the Christian society and from the classic culture to the late-roman one shows a complexity of aspects. On one side the intolerance and the heavy oppression (particularly the fiscal one) induces *humiliores* to be submitted to *potentiores*, on the other side it causes a democratization of culture that means an active ideological participation of the Christian plebs. But the conflict between the two laws: the human and the divine one, persists. The last one penetrates the State and corrodes its pagan traditional structures. Christianity distinguishes cleanly between religiosity that is celebrated *intra ecclesiam* and public life of the political citizen. The pagan world never has such a net distinction. The Roman Emperor is also *Pontifex maximus*.

The first Christian emperor, even keeping in his name the title of *Augustus* (title that remains for all Christian emperors without showing the original pagan and charismatic meaning) and being *Pontifex Maximus*, in 325 (Nicea Counsel) considers himself like “bishop of those who are out”, that means bishop of laymen out of the clerical organization. This is the beginning of a new concept of relation between State and Religion, concept that Ambrogio develops. The bishop of Milan, indicated as *vir spectabilis*, gives a contribution to the death of the classic world (that means of the classic state) more than the heroic martyr Priscilliano and Girolamo did¹. Christians like Ambrogio dislike performances, athletic exhibitions and circus *ludi*: Christianity requires spiritual concentration. Ambrogio’s charisma acts widely both on religious and cultural fields, so his authoritativeness appears at emperors’ eyes (Graziano, Valentiniano II, Teodosio I). It’s worth remembering the Aquileia Council when the two maximum representatives of the omea variant of the Arian faith Palladio of Ratiaria and Secondiano of Singidunum were excommunicated (the moderate variant asserting the likeness of Father and Son against the concept of the same-essence of them) and their creed was officially condemned. It’s evident the forcing of the bishop of Milan, who, taking advantage from Graziano’s favour and from the present bishops’ support (he called only western bishops all well disposed towards his statement) obtains the success of his creed, coloured of a certain intolerance.

The firm certainty of Ambrogio is that “emperor is in the Church, not over it”². So only bishops can judge bishops, and this is valid also for Palladio, who, on the contrary, expects support from the other components of society: the laical and the Jewish ones. This is not admissible to Ambrogio’s eyes, who considers a big danger the Palladio’s position who wants to bring the doctrine discussion outside synod sites.

It is explicative on this matter the statement issued by Teodosio in 388: “no-one is allowed, in public areas, to discuss about religion or to formulate proposal...”³

1. Conflict between paganism and Christianity

Going forward of nearly three years, the struggle of ideas develops with the event of the Victory Altar and the battle against Simmaco. This event happens soon after Graziano's death, when Valentiniano's position risks ruining the work of the bishop of Milan. In 382 Graziano, according to some current opinions not for influence of Ambrogio, ordered to remove the statue of Victory, being it the symbol of the link of the senate (still prevalently pagan) to traditions of *mos maiorum*.

The altar had been already removed by Costanzo II in 357, later reallocated, as was predictable, by Giuliano the apostata, then Valentino II respected it and then, again, removed by Graziano as one of antipagan measures he took (he refused even the title of Pontifex Maximus). Senators, headed by that Quintus Aurelius Simmacus who, in 391 was also consul, a very representative person of the ancient culture, ask for a re-allocation of the altar in the Court Iulia, place symbol of the protection of Victory over the roman people and guarantee of three centuries of safety. The first allocation in the Court (the place where the senate sat) dates back to Ottaviano Augusto, who meant to thank the Victory Goddess for his success against Antonio. It's easy to understand this fact brought to a competition between the roman tradition and the rising strength of Christian empire. Ambrogio intervened in this important struggle reprimanding the emperor Valentiniano II to act closely to his duty of Christian⁴.

Simmaco, on his side, clarifies the sense of religiosity compared the the Christian one, asserting that “each people has its own custom and religion” explaining that “mainly gods, Greek or roman, or the ones of oriental religions, are only representations of the Sun”, and that to understand “such a great mystery it cannot be followed only one track”: he only requests to restore the old condition of religion that so much and so long helped the State. I remember that on this matter of the loss of *pax deorum* and consequently of the roman pax, Zosimo, in the first decades of the VI cent. writes:

“as long as these rites were celebrated the roman empire was steady and kept its leadership all over the world, but since Diocleziano renounced the power spectacles were neglected (public rites of *ludi secolari*): the empire declined slowly and, without awareness, it was conquered by barbarians, as events showed”⁵.

The delicate question concerning the state of pagan temples, for centuries heart of public life, moves to the same direction, during the IV cent. they were sacked, destroyed and were objects of bitter quarrels between Christians and pagans. In 342 the emperor Costanzo ordered to keep temples out of walls *intacti incorruptique*⁶ giving as reason of this decision the fact that they were the place where games of *ludi circenses et agones* were born. In 382 Teodosio *the great* orders⁷ to keep open the Edessa Temple at visitors' disposal, and consequently to keep the celebration of all performances. The legislator's position towards the pagan faith and its ministers is of condemnation, but the position is not so net towards spectacles and games.

It's not so easy to cancel rites and traditions with steady roots in people's custom. The origin of them is religious with no doubt but later they developed laically and had such a charm to attract even Christian people. The legislator means to cancel only those spectacles and games strictly linked to pagan rites, saving temples with evident artistic value⁸, he fears that games could be a danger for public and religious order. It's worth remembering the event of Tessalonica, late spring 390: Boterico, leader of barbaric troops in the capital of Macedonia, was murdered by the crowd for having ordered to capture a circus jockey. The emperor

Teodosio, after that, to give a strong message to other towns ordered the massacre of the crowd in the circus.

Ambrogio, for the gravity of the fact, forced the emperor to do a public penitence: this fact states the principle of the *humilitas* of the emperor towards God and His bishops. This fact has been recorded by Teodoreto di Ciro⁹ and by Rufino in his History of Church and by the same Ambrogio in *De obitu Theodosii*. Relevant is also the letter Ambrogio sent to the emperor, kept out of collection, and discovered only in the IX cent.

This episode constitutes an important example of the actual relations between State and Church but the turning point in the process of submitting the empire power to the ecclesiastical authority is the case of the synagogue of Callinicum on the Euphrates river happened in 388.

According to the version of the same Ambrogio, he obtained a revision of the order the emperor gave to the bishop of the region to reimburse the Jewish community for the damage caused by a fire at the synagogue and, moreover to revoke the punishment inflicted to responsible people.

This fact underlines how the bishop of Milan, in his fight for the faith victory, pretended the heaviest measures, even against other “religions” freedom.

After the edit of Tessalonica of 380, that is the formal birth date of the confessional and Christian empire, it’s mandatory to abolish any kind of games related to the cult of “false and lying gods”.

The abolishment of the games is an umpteenth stroke to paganism.

The *Cunctos Populos*¹⁰ discriminates the subjects on the base of their religious faith. Emperors issue dispositions not always homogeneous, different according to circumstances and places but all accordingly addressed to declare paganism a *religio illicita* on juridical basis, a *superstitio* to be eradicated.

2. The legislation of Teodosio I

In 391¹¹ Teodosio I forbids any pagan ceremony; in 392, with an edit issued in Costantinopoli¹², he forbids people of any social condition and in any place to meet to celebrate paga sacrifices and rites¹³. The social atmosphere is pregnant of devils’ fear – the mass of which enriches with all pagan gods – who hide themselves behind sport games.

Paganism represents the old imperial tradition not reconcilable with Christianity. But the new history cannot kill completely the old one.

First of all it’s necessary to explain to pagan people the Hebraic version of history (cultured pagan people of Roman Empire are not informed on Hebraic history, their knowledge is of second hand and deformed, like what we can read in Tacito). As second step Christian historians have to fight against the opinion that Christianity is new and, for this reason, not completely respectful. At last facts of the pagan life have to be placed somewhere in the scheme of Hebraic-Christian redemption.

A universal chronology in the Christian sense must necessarily take in consideration not only the beginning but also the end. Chronology and eschatology come to constitute a unique whole. Chronology is something that is in the middle between science and advertisement.

We have to recognize that, refusing to admit millenarian dreams, both Eusebio and Gerolamo, who went later, had a great part in discrediting them. Of course they didn’t succeed in

canceling them completely. Millenarian calculations reappear in *De cursu temporum* of the bishop Ilariano at the end of the IV cent. and also in the thought of Sulpicio Severo. And, then, what about the oracle of Flaviano¹⁴ (who, in *Saturnalia* of Macrobio is represented as expert of *scientia iuris auguralis*), recorded by S. Agostino, predicting the end of Christianity exactly in 394, lasting as many years as the days of a year?

The result is that, in opposition to the pagan chronology the Christian one became also a philosophy of history¹⁵.

Surely the historical contest is of a maximum ideological intolerance and the work of writers of Codex is guided by the need of a wise dosage between the new political and juridical reality matured after the constantinian evolution and the ancient traditions of the Roman law.

This mediation work I done not by theoretical people but by law operators, government people directly involved in political and administrative businesses.

To understand the sense of the edit with which Teodosio I, at the end of 393, ordered the abolishment of Olympic Games, prohibiting from calculating the time in Olympic years, it's necessary to track the attitude of the society towards them. It is significant that this fact is not recorded by Teodosian code writers or in the Giustinian one. The only track is in *Historiarum Compendium* by the ecclesiastical historian Giorgio Cedreno of which it remains only one edition edited in two volumes by Bekker in 1838-39, and again without any change in *Patrologia Greca* by Migne, less than half a century later¹⁶.

3. Causes and circumstances of abolishment

From the analysis of Cedreno's testimony interesting results rise, even peculiar ones.

First of all the destruction of the synagogue in Bisanzio, occurred under Teodosio II, is confused with the fire of the synagogue of Callinicum –we have already treated of it- occurred under Teodosio I and it was cause of the heavy reaction of the emperor, who ordered the local bishop to re-build it, fact that lead to Ambrogio's intervention who didn't tolerate that Christians had to obey to others than bishops. He considered the intervention of the emperor a submission of Christianity in respect of Hebraism comparing this to a previous episode when pagans destroyed a Christian temple and the emperor didn't interfere. This last one is the explanation of that fact which cannot to be considered a prevarication of Ambrogio against the emperor.

An other imprecise reference is the one we find in Cedreno to the kingdom of Manasse king of Giuda (687-642 b.C. according to Bible sources) indicated as contemporaneous of the beginning of Olympic Games that is, according to the chronology of Eusebio of Cesarea, in 776 b.C. This imprecise reference might answer the practical scope of linking any event to the sacral history, typical of didactic historiography of Byzantine monasticism, but it seems not plausible. In fact, Cedreno writes his universal chronic in between the end of the XI century and the beginning of the XII., that is that the Byzantine monk is inclined to "Hebraicize" the games, looking at them like at a Hebraic phenomenon to be eradicated. But this link between sport and Hebraism (ambiguous and without any fundament since the Hebraic tradition has always been strongly against sports), has been done by Teodosio I in the IV cent. or, more probably, it is a typical literary middle age "escamotage" by Cedreno? On the ideological level it is surely fruit of the period of the "very Christian" Teodosio I and of the intolerance of Ambrogio¹⁷.

Any rule against pagans and Hebrews is inclined to privilege the State Religion but the problem is to assume religion a unique, invading and pervading ideology; Absolutism does

nor relate only to contents but it is stressed to create a society purely religious and, consequently, intolerant. A growing censure and inquisition organization penalizes heavily, inhibiting any possibility of free development, the “Hellenic” culture which for many centuries has developed freely, open to unlimited competitors and syncretic mixture – non only “tolerance”, but normal and quotidian coexistence. This passage towards the reasons of intolerance is net in Agostino¹⁸. In this specific case, the intolerance arises when the suppression of the games appears directly connected with a different kind of repression the anti-Semitism. In fact, during the IV cent. the Judaic cult, by itself, was not considered a “*crimen*” and its ministers had been reconfirmed some privileges already recognized during the roman empire. Nevertheless they were forbidden to make proselytisms, and even if old synagogues were left safe it was forbidden to build new ones. It looks like that emperors, with their dispositions, want to clear that the old Judaic religion, generating Christianity, can survive only if resigns itself to be a cult of the past, not worth of development and obliged not to worry the State religion¹⁹. The fact that in 393, together with this protective law, it was issued a clearly repressive and oppressive rule like the one referred by Cedreno appears unbelievable even if it cannot be excluded.

It's worth of consideration the fact that during the 16 years of Teodosio I only seven laws on Judaism were issued among which, four during the period 380-390 with a more repressive-anti Judaic characterization and the others in the period 392-395 showing a more protective and cautious attitude, even if in this period Judaism became one of the most important theme of ecclesiastical preaching. Church interferes in the empire dispositions to fight against the current syncretism inside itself, and more precisely, against connected liturgical practices.

It's evident the influence of Ambrogio who, from Milan, presses the court closer to him without saving the far one. It's worth remembering that in 383 there was a contemporaneous rule promulgation on apostates in East like in Western court (it's evident that there were trouble on the efficiency of rules issued in one *pars Imperii* in the other *pars*). The East law doesn't mention the passage of Christians to Judaic faith; the disposition of the western rule is more complex²⁰: the passage to Hebraism is punished like the one to heretic and pagan faiths. The legislator uses the word *polluere* - that has an implicit condemnation: when a pagan, an heretic or a Hebrew tries to convince a Christian to change faith, he makes a contamination (expressed by *polluere*) that causes the reaction of the state (the following sanction puts them out of *ius Romanum*). Furthermore it says that the contamination comes from the “contagion” (transmission of moral evil) typical of Hebraism²¹.

4. Agonistic spirit, religion, politics

In spite of this climate the condemned crime for a Christian is not being Hebrew but the more specific fact of becoming Hebrew. The Christian legislator moves and will move for decades between religious tolerance and integralism. The good of empire depends on religion and empire and religion are interdependent, Teodosio II will say later in the letter opening of the Efeso council. As time passes the caesarpopism shows all its ambiguity, but also its indissolubility since the two powers, in their complexity of functions, and often, in their contrast of interests, cannot do without each other.

In this complexity of historical process is to be placed the prohibition of ancient agonistics, more than once proclaimed in empire statements. The frequency of issues shows that those prohibitions came from the height of the State not accepted by the base that often forgot to respect them. This challenge lasted until 549, when the last horse-racing games were organized by the gothic king Totila. In fact, although Games were formally abolished in 393,

they were played even after the 426 when Teodosio II ordered the destruction of the temple of Zeus at Olympia.

Other similar spectacles, like Antiochia Games, were celebrated even after 392²² becoming the most important sport games of the empire so that in 409, the *Lapidarius*, responsible of the games, was recognized by emperors Onorio and Teodosio II as the most relevant city authority²³.

This, according to some commentators, means that the constitution by Teodosio, referred by Cedreno, was concerned only to Olympia games and not to all sports that were practiced all over Ellade and in the Hellenistic East until 521, the year of the Justinian reform conforming customs to Christian ones. Agonistic spirit is too inherent to empire culture: love for competition wasn't exclusive characteristic of Greeks but also of Romans in different forms (gladiators, *venations*, horse racing).

The hardness of all Christian culture (Tertulliano, Lattanzio, Agostino, Prudenizio, Orosio and Salviano), against the games make the prohibition of them a religious persecution too. It's not a secondary aspect in a dramatic epoch turning.

After *Graecia Capta*, that is the definition of the victory of the conquered Greece in culture, body arts and spirit on the winner Romans. It can be said *Iudaea Capta*: Agostino used a definition similar to the Orazio's one (*De civitate Dei* 6.1) saying "conquered people gave their laws to winners" that means that Hebrews, vanquished and wasted by Romans, imposed them, through Christians, their culture with contempt for ancient gods together with games, sacral practice and performances of winners' strength that vanquished people couldn't do other than loathing²⁴.

The exact moment when games finished is impossible to understand mainly in consideration of what we say, that institutional games had the most popular moment in VI and V centuries, then a slow but irrevocable decline phase began, the reasons of which are to be ascribed to the ideal and cultural crisis, to the sunset of the classic culture, to the Hellenistic cosmopolitanism and to the spoiling of the agonistic spirit.

The Roman Empire underlined the crisis elements in the concept of sports and physical activity in general. Romans accepted the Olympic Games – since under Silla and then under Pompeo, Giulio Cesare and Nerone- but they were never part of the social life like *Numera* of gladiators or *venations* of Etrurian origin. Moreover Romans used to mix different sport activities, as Svetonio says, Caligola inserted fightings of boxers coming from Africa and Campania among gladiators' games. According to what we say this could justify the condemn attitude of Church Fathers towards all this activity considered corrupted and dangerous and Olympia Games were part of it.

The source of we on this matter is *Vita Hypatii* written by the monk Callinico among 417 and 450 A.D. where the abolishment of Olympic Games are dated under Costantino. This is clearly not true as we have tracks of the 292th Olympiad taken in 385, but it proofs that Callinico places the suppression of the Games in a period before the time of his work but also before the event he treats that is in 434-435.

We can refer also to another indirect source the *Rhetorica praecepta* of Luciano, saying that "Olympic Games began at Hebrew timeslasted until Teodosio the young, Arcadio's son. After the fire of the Giove Olimpio's temple also the celebration of Olympic Games finished". So, with an expression similar to the one used by Cedreno, it is said that the Olympic Games vanished, declined, disappeared, and not that they were abolished.

5. Conclusions

Following to what said before the death of Olympic Games is to be placed after 385 and before 435. This, if we believe in Cedreno's testimony, under chronological profile, who says it happened under Teodosio the Great. Later sources mention Teodosio I like the emperor who defeated paganism (in spite of the fact that objects, like *contorniati*, were still produced with pagan figures of races and circus games even after 394, year of the battle on the river Frigido).

Certainly the durable presence, for centuries, of the athletic games of Antiochia, of hippodrome races and other performances requires a deeper searching that could lead to new study perspectives. What said, together with the assertion of the lack (not proved) of a specific abolishing rule obliges to reconsider the thesis that attributes to Christian Church the discredit towards the Games and consequently their vanishing.

For more than a millennium, drastic prohibitions of Christian-imperial laws cut any possibility to link the culture to ancient tradition, depreciated as "pagan", damned as diabolic, buried, with its authentic values, under silence and historical oblivion.

"A new religion may stay beside the old one, may share the world with it, but it's impossible that it can replace it, even if very popular among masses, if the state power doesn't interfere in the process. Each religion, of high culture range, lasts for ever (as long as the people professing it) in case of no state persecution. But against the violence, especially the one of the Roman Empire, unavoidable, nothing can be done. Without the empire legislation, (...) the Greek-roman religion would still be alive today"²⁵

The cause of the suppression of Olympic Games in the ancient world is to be found in the ideal struggle of the IV century, in its characters, in its events and in the social-cultural aspects that identify strongly this period of the roman history and our culture.

Is the Olympic Games suppression the end of pagan Rome or the beginning of Christian Middle Age? As Lucrezi says, the answer to this question is "not a historical choice but, more likely, a fact of individual sensibility, of values hexarchy, of datum-point, of personal history cycles reading"²⁶.

¹ Mazzarino Sante: *Social history of bishop Ambrogio*, Rome, 1989, p.21

² Ambrogio: *Sermo contra Auxentium*, 36

³ Codice Teodosiano XVI, 4, 2

⁴ Letter 172 Epistolario di Ambrogio

⁵ Zosimo : *Storia nuova* II,7,1

⁶ CTh. XVI, 10, 3

⁷ CTh. XVI, 10, 8

⁸ CTh. XVI, 10, 8

⁹ Teodoreto di Ciro: *Storia Ecclesiastica*, libro V

¹⁰ CTh. XVI,1, 2,

¹¹ CTh. XVI,10,10

¹² CTh. XVI, 10, 12

¹³ Cfr. De Giovanni Lucio: *Chiesa e Stato nel Codice Teodosiano*, Naples 2000

¹⁴ Macrobio: *Saturnalia* , I. XXIV.17

¹⁵ Momigliano A : *Il conflitto tra paganesimo e cristianesimo nel IV secolo*, Torino, 1968, pp. 94 ss.

¹⁶ Biscardi Arnaldo: 'Una costituzione poco nota di Teodosio I', in : *Atti Accademia Romanistica Costantiniana*, IV, Perugia, 1981, 369 –378, p.370

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- ¹⁷ Bonaiuti Ernesto: Sant' Ambrogio, Milano 1941, pp.10 ss.
- ¹⁸ Agostino: *Confessioni*, libro X
- ¹⁹ CTh.XVI, 8, 9
- ²⁰ CTh. XVI, 7 3
- ²¹ De Bonfilis Giovanni : *Roma e gli ebrei*, Bari 2002, pp.203 ss.
- ²² CTh. XVI,10,12
- ²³ CTh. II, 8, 25
- ²⁴ Manacorda Mario Alighiero: "L'Impero dei giochi", in: *Lancillotto e Nausica*, anno XIII- n. 1-2-3, 1996, 8 – 17, p.16
- ²⁵ Burekhardt Jacob: *Riflessioni su la storia universale*, tr.it. Rizzoli, Milano 1966, pp.79-80
- ²⁶ d'Ippolito Federico Maria - Lucrezi Francesco: *Profilo storico istituzionale di diritto romano*, Napoli, 2003, p. 346