Violence and Religion
The Reverence of Bandits, Pirates and Rebels in the Roman World

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Περίληψη: Στο άρθρο αυτό παρουσιάζονται ορισμένα χαρακτηριστικά παραδείγματα βίαιων συμπεριφορών στην ελληνική και ρωμαϊκή αρχαιότητα που αποδίδονται σε ληστές, πειρατές και εξεγερμένους δούλους. Όπως υποδεικνύουν οι επιλεγμένες μαρτυρίες, οι βίαιες συμπεριφορές ανθρώπων και ομάδων που παρέβαιναν τον νόμο και που κάποτε αμφισβητούσαν την καθιερωμένη κοινωνική τάξη συνοδεύονταν συχνά από έντονες και ιδιότυπες θρησκευτικές πεποιθήσεις και διακηρύξεις.

Summary: The present article discusses characteristic examples of violent behaviour in Greek and Roman antiquity that were attributed to bandits, pirates and rebellious slaves. As suggested by the selected testimonies, the violent conduct of individuals and groups that transgressed the law and occasionally challenged the established order was often accompanied by intense and peculiar religious convictions and declarations.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά: βία, εξέγερση, ληστές, πειρατές

Key-words: violence, rebellion, bandits, pirates

Rebels and criminals of various kinds were often seen in the Roman world as sensitive to religious ideas – and, occasionally, as performing distinct and remarkable religious deeds. More importantly, it was sometimes felt that their religiosity was an integral part of their rebellious or criminal inclination and behaviour. To illustrate this topic, which has not received much attention in current scholarly debates, I have selected a few characteristic examples.[1]

During the Late Republic, piracy was widespread in the eastern parts of the Mediterranean. According to Plutarch,

> The power of the pirates had its seat in Cilicia at first, and at the outset it was venturesome and elusive; but it took on confidence and boldness during the Mithridatic war, because it lent itself to the king's service. Then, while the Romans were embroiled in civil wars at the gates of Rome, the sea was left unguarded, and gradually drew and enticed them on until they no longer attacked navigators only, but also laid waste islands and maritime cities. Men whose wealth gave them power, and whose lineage was illustrious, and even those who laid claim to superior intelligence, began to embark on piratical craft and share their enterprises, feeling that the occupation brought them a certain reputation and distinction. There were also fortified roadsteads and signal-stations for piratical craft in many places,

[1] I do not discuss the Jewish revolts that were religious as well as national.

> and fleets put in here which were not merely furnished for their peculiar work with sturdy crews, skilful pilots, and light and speedy ships; nay, more annoying than the fear which they inspired was the odious extravagance of their equipment, with their gilded sails, and purple awnings, and silvered oars, as if they rioted in their iniquity and plumed themselves upon it. Their flutes and stringed instruments and drinking bouts along every coast, their seizures of persons in high command, and their ransoming of captured cities, were a disgrace to the Roman supremacy. For […] the ships of the pirates numbered more than a thousand, and the cities captured by them four hundred. Besides, they attacked and plundered places of refuge and sanctuaries hitherto inviolate, such as those of Claros, Didyma, and Samothrace; the temple of Chthonian Earth at Hermione; that of Asclepius in Epidaurus; those of Poseidon at the Isthmus, at Taenarum, and at Calauria; those of Apollo at Actium and Leucas; and those of Hera at Samos, at Argos, and at Lacinium.

Sanctuaries, of course, stored great treasures and were often easy targets; but Plutarch found in his sources that the issue was far more complicated. He was thus led to connect such attacks to the peculiar religious beliefs of the pirates, since they performed "[…] strange sacrifices of their own at [Lycian] Olympus, and celebrated there certain secret rites, among which those of Mithras continue to the present time, having been first instituted by them."

The introduction of Mithraism to the Roman world by Cilician pirates has been disputed, since its first clear indications are of a later date. Plutarch, however, seems to have been well informed and aware of interesting details, adding that:

> Whenever a captive cried out that he was a Roman and gave his name, the pirates would pretend to be frightened out of their senses, and would smite their thighs, and fall down before him entreating him to pardon them; and he would be convinced of their sincerity, seeing them so humbly suppliant. Then some would put Roman boots on his feet, and others would throw a toga round him, in order, forsooth, that there might be no mistake about him again. And after thus mocking the man for a long time and getting their fill of amusement from him, at last they would let down a ladder in mid ocean and bid him disembark and go on his way rejoicing; and if he did not wish to go, they would push him overboard themselves and drown him.[2]

Pirates were clearly seen by Plutarch as motivated in their behaviour by both strong anti-Roman sentiments, as well as by peculiar religious beliefs of their own. Indeed, he recognised them as missionaries of forms of worship that should replace traditional ones.

Since the Cilician pirates were finally defeated by Pompey in 68 BC, it is conceivable that Mithraism spread to Rome through the enthusiasm of some of the brigands brought there as prisoners, just as a Jewish community was established a little later across the Tiber by captives from Jerusalem.[3] In any case, through a process that is not altogether clear, the rites of Mithras were gradually adopted by Roman soldiers themselves and reached the frontiers of the empire. It is even likely that Pilate's cohort who mocked Jesus at his trial and dressed him up in purple, saluting him and going down on its

[2] Plutarch, *Pompey* 24 (translation by Bernadotte Perrin). Cf. Lucius Annaeus Florus, *Epitomae Historiae Romanae* 1.41, who also mentioned clapping as a typical expression of submission.

[3] Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, New York: Dover Publications, 1956, pp. 36-37.

knees to pay him homage was inspired by the way in which Cilician pirates usually treated their captives – especially when they despised their religious beliefs.[4]

As is evident from his account, Plutarch had no difficulty in believing that a religion such as Mithraism, which, by his own time, was both respectable and widespread, had its origins in the criminal activities of the pirates who had seriously challenged the Roman order.

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I draw my next example from a very different category of violent outbursts, the slave wars in Sicily and Southern Italy during the 2nd and 1st centuries BC. Just like soldiers, armed rebels were particularly sensitive to omens and heavenly signs. They often resorted to using temples of local deities as headquarters,[5] and they also regularly offered sacrifices to the gods, assigning the task to their womenfolk when they were themselves hindered by warfare.[6] More significantly, they chose their leaders by taking into account their religious practice.

I begin with the case of Eunus, a Syrian born in Apameia. Regarding the general circumstances, Diodorus made the following remarks. Many young slaves were used as cowherds, and others in whatever ways happened to be useful. They were treated with a heavy hand in their service and were provided with the most meagre care and a bare minimum for food and clothing. As a result, most of them made their livelihood by brigandage, and there was bloodshed everywhere, since the outlaws were like scattered bands of soldiers.

Of Eunus in particular, Diodorus said that:

> […] he was a magician and conjuror; he pretended to foretell future events, revealed to him (as he said) by the gods in his dreams, and deceived many by this kind of practice. Then he proceeded further, and not only foretold things to come, revealed to him in dreams, but pretended that he saw the gods when he was awake, and they declared to him what was to come to pass. And though these were tricks that he played, yet by chance many of the things afterwards proved true. The predictions that were not fulfilled were ignored, but those which did come to pass were everywhere applauded, so that he grew more and more celebrated. By some artifice or other, he used to breathe flames of fire out of his mouth as from a burning lamp, and so would prophesy as though he had been at that time inspired by Apollo [...] Before the revolt of the slaves this man boasted that the Syrian goddess had appeared to him, and told him that he should reign, and this he declared not only to others but often to his own master.

Since his claims were treated as a joke, Eunus was introduced by his master at dinner parties, where he was questioned about his kingship and the way he would treat those present. And he:

> […] readily went on with his story, and told them that he would be very kind to his masters and like a conjuror using many monstrous magical terms and expressions, he made all the guests laugh, upon which some of them as a reward gave him large helpings from the table, and asked him to remember their kindness when he came to be king. But all this jesting at length really did end in his advancement to be king; and all those who at the feasts by way of ridicule had been kind to him, he rewarded in

[4] Mark 15:16-20.
[5] Diodorus 36.3.3.
[6] Plutarch, *Crassus* 11.3.

earnest.[7]

Despite the mocking character of the presentation, it appears that some sort of revolutionary programme was proposed and taken seriously by the rebels. It is echoed in the Gospel account of the penitent criminal requesting to be remembered by Jesus when he came into his kingdom.[8]

Being a good general as well, Eunus gathered an army of rebellious slaves and was declared king *c*. 135 BC, while proclaiming his Syrian wife queen. His kingdom lasted for about three years.[9]

Around 104 BC, a slave named Salvius became illustrious in Sicilian Heraclea. He was chosen king by an assembly of rebels because of his reputed skill in divination and his fame as a flute player of frenetic music at performances for women. Having mustered a great army, he made a sacrifice to the local heroes, the Palici, and dedicated one of his royal robes to them in gratitude for his victories.[10] Actually, the sanctuary of the Palici had been venerated since ancient times by slaves, especially those who had fallen into the hands of brutal masters.[11]

During the same period, Athenion, a Cilician by birth, was also distinguished as a rebel leader. Being of outstanding courage and very skilful in astrology, he won over first the slaves who were under him and then those in the vicinity. According to his claims, the gods had predicted, by the stars, that he would be ruler of all Sicily. Consequently, he was chosen as king and assumed the diadem. Finally, when he had assembled a great force, he ventured to lay siege to Lilybaeum. Having failed to achieve anything, he ordered a retreat, saying that this was by order of the gods and that if they persisted in the siege they would meet with misfortune. While he was making ready to withdraw from the city, ships arrived in the harbour bringing a contingent of Mauretanian auxiliaries, who had been sent to reinforce the city of Lilybaeum. While Athenion's forces were attacked with serious casualties, the rebels marvelled at his prediction of the event by simply reading the stars.[12]

The Romans managed to supress the first great rebellions with great difficulty and heavy losses. To secure their victory, they even felt compelled to perform sacrifices and public expiations in manners totally novel to them, introduced from Phrygian Pessinus.[13]

The best known of the slave leaders was Spartacus, of Thracian origin, who led the most formidable revolt in 73 BC. Of him Plutarch reported that he was a man of high spirits and more Greek than the people of his country usually were. We are not told whether he was religious himself, but he was certainly seen by others as chosen for the task by divine providence. It was thus said that, when he came to be sold in Rome, a snake coiled itself upon his face as he lay asleep. Being a prophetess and possessed with a bacchanal frenzy, his wife, who was of the same tribe, declared that the snake was a sign of a great and formidable power, which would attend Spartacus to a fortunate issue.[14] Interestingly, Spartacus contacted Cilician pirates who were active in the region, but the pirates, having received gifts from him, deceived him and fled.[15]

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I choose as my next example peasant uprisings. Special among them and the best

[7] Diodorus 34.2 (translation from Livius.org website).
[8] Luke 23:39-43.
[9] Additional information is given in Florus' *Epitome* 2.7. Cf. Plutarch, *Sulla* 36.
[10] Diodorus 36.4.4, 36.7.1.
[11] Diodorus 11.89.6.
[12] Diodorus 36.5.
[13] Diodorus 36.13.
[14] Plutarch, *Crassus* 8. Cf. Diodorus 38/39.21, Appian, *Civil Wars* 1.14, Florus, *Epitome* 2.8.
[15] Plutarch, *Crassus* 10.3-4.

known is the case of the so-called *boukoloi* in Egypt.[16] The Greek word *boukoloi* means shepherds, but significantly it was also employed in at least some late Orphic texts to designate those who offered sacrifices and those who prayed or sang hymns in a priestly manner. In an Egyptian context, it may have also been used by Greeks for the initiates of Serapis.[17]

Egyptian *boukoloi* may have existed as a social category since the early Hellenistic period and even earlier.[18] Harsh life often made shepherds aggressive and belligerent. Some actually joined the army of Spartacus.[19] Around the year 172 BC, the *boukoloi* of Egypt, joined by other oppressed groups, revolted for an extended period until they were finally crushed by the Roman army. The historian Cassius Dio, who provided this information, stated that during the disturbances the rebels were led by a priest called Isidore. Under his guidance and disguised as women, they deceived a Roman centurion. They killed him and sacrificed his companion, swearing an oath over his entrails before eating them.[20]

Modern historians are reluctant to accept this account, arguing that Cassius Dio (or his source) was clearly biased. First of all, he could hardly have obtained accurate information of such performances. Next, and more signify-cantly, the atrocious details given have a long history, ascribed to various kinds of people. They were attributed to tyrants already from the 3rd century BC,[21] to magicians in the 1st century AD[22] and to rebellious Jews in the 2nd century AD.[23] The idea was clearly to draw a line of demarcation between criminals capable of such deeds and the rest of civilized humanity. Human sacrifice was barbarous and inhuman and thus the exact opposite of what should be expected in orderly societies.

It seems indeed extremely unlikely that the account given by Cassius Dio has a historical basis. However, the idea that rebellious peasants were religious extremists was certainly widespread, as can be surmised by almost all known ancient Greek novels. Peasants were accused, among other things, of ritual human sacrifice associated with cannibalism. Despite the many learned articles that have been written on this subject, some of the most important questions remain puzzling, for it is not easy to explain the persistency or the intrinsic meaning of such accounts. In any case, as has been often argued, the relevant slander resembles in many substantial ways the similarly common (and likewise unfounded) accusations of cannibalism and other serious crimes against Christians in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, often codified as Thyestean banquets and Oedipodean inter-courses.[24]

Marsh-dwelling warriors with uncivilised customs living around the Nile are mentioned in Heliodorus' *Aithiopika* and in Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Cleitophon*. They also appear as slave dealers, simply called shepherds (*poime-nes*) in Xenophon's *Ephesiaka*.

Achilles Tatius' novel gives details of their rituals. The *boukoloi*, he argued, improvise

[16] Ian Rutherford, "The Genealogy of the *Boukoloi*: How Greek Literature Appropriated an Egyptian Narrative-motif", *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 120 (2000), pp. 106-121.
[17] Livia Capponi, "Serapis, Boukoloi and Christians from Hadrian to Marcus Aurelius", in: Marco Rizzi (ed.), *Hadrian and the Christians*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010, pp. 121-139.
[18] Strabo 17.1.6.
[19] Plutarch, *Crassus* 9.4.
[20] Strabo 72.4.
[21] Diodorus 22.5.1.
[22] Philostratus reported it as a false accusation against Apollonius of Tyana 7.11 and 20. Cf. Polyaenus 6.7.2, Plutarch, *Sera Num. Vind.* 556d and Aelian, *VH* 14.41.
[23] Cassius Dio 68.35.
[24] J. Rives, "Human Sacrifice among Pagans and Christians", *Journal of Roman Studies*, 85 (1995), pp. 65-85, and Jan Bremmer, "Early Christian Human Sacrifice between Fact and Fiction", in: F. Prescendi and A. Nagy (eds), *Sacrifices humains. Discours et réalité*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2013, pp. 165-176.

an altar of earth and place a coffin near it. Two of them lead a captive girl to the altar with her hands tied behind her back. They pour a libation over her head and lead her around the altar to the accompaniment of a flute and a priest, intoning an Egyptian hymn. Then, at a signal, they all move far away from the altar. One of the attendants lays the girl on her back and ties her to stakes fixed in the ground. He next raises a sword and plunges it into her heart and then saws all the way down to her abdomen. Her viscera leap out. The attendants pull out her entrails and carry them in their hands over the altar. They are then cooked and carved up, and all the bandits share the meal. The ceremony is concluded by placing the body in the coffin and covering it with a lid, razing the altar. At long last, the criminals start running away without looking behind them. All this is done according to directions sanctioned by a priest, who, very interestingly, is also their military leader.[25]

Similar information is provided in a surviving fragment of Lollianus' *Phoenician Story*. The ritual is performed by a member of a group who could have also been a *boukolos*, though this is not explicitly stated. He appears naked, except for a purple loincloth, and throws a boy onto his back. He then removes the boy's heart and places it over the fire. He cuts it in half, sprinkles it with barley and drenches it with olive oil. When the heart is adequately cooked, he distributes it to the initiates. While holding it, they swear an oath over its blood neither to abandon nor to betray, not even if they should be carried off or be tortured or have their eyes gouged out.[26]

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I will conclude my overview with common criminals. One of them made his appearance at the side of Jesus on the cross. What little is known about him reveals much of importance regarding early Christian beliefs. The criminal's major achievement, according to the Gospel of Luke, consisted in the way he understood the messianic mission. Instead of demanding from Jesus visible proof of power and immediate salvific actions, in the manner of his fellow crucified criminal, he acknowledged him as the Christ with no reservations. Accordingly, he accepted both his own guilt and the death sentence, expressing the hope of being remembered in the future kingdom: a request readily granted by Jesus, who promised him direct entry to paradise.[27]

The idea that even a criminal could be granted salvation by repenting at the hour of his death was essential to the Christian message. Jesus is reported to have been mainly concerned with sinners, not the righteous.[28] It is therefore understandable that outlaws of various kinds made their presence clearly felt in the early stages of the Christian movement. Bandits, of course, are plentiful in the lives of saints, monks and ascetics, as well as in many other accounts of pilgrimages and travels for religious purposes. They were a real menace in the Roman world, making all isolated habitations and private journeys dangerous. However, besides threatening and assaulting the desert fathers or Christians travelling long distances by sea or land, they are also characterised as susceptible to conversion. Several prominent ascetics are actually reported to have been former bandits, called *lestai* in Greek, just like the criminals on the cross.

Paphnutius the Anchorite, who lived in Egypt in the 4th century, is reported to have

[25] Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon* 3.15 (translation by J. J. Winkler).
[26] A. Henrichs, "Pagan Ritual and the Alleged Crime of the Early Christians: A Reconstruction", in: *Kyriakon. Festschrift Johannes Quasten*, vol. 1, Münster 1970, pp. 18-35.

[27] Luke 23:32 ff.
[28] Luke 5:32.

asked God, after many years of hardship, to make known to him which saint who had led a virtuous life he most resembled. Surprisingly, he was led to meet a flute player. As soon became apparent, this flute player was a drunkard and a fornicator who had only recently abandoned the life of a brigand. Investigating the case further, the anchorite found out that, while a brigand, the flute player had once saved a nun who was about to be raped by a gang of robbers. On another occasion, he had offered hospitality in his cave to a beautiful woman who was being regularly flogged by tax collectors. Furthermore, besides providing her with 300 gold coins to clear her debt, he had secured the release of her husband and children as well. Paphnutius realised and acknowledged that such achievements surpassed his own by far and he persuaded the flute player to accompany him into the desert in order to devote himself to hymns and prayers.[29]

This story verifies the ease with which a former sinner could become an ascetic, but is also revealing in another sense. Many bandits led lives that resembled in significant ways those of the desert fathers. They inhabited caves, remained isolated for long periods and, occasionally, contacted other bandits to collaborate with them on common enterprises or to advise and even correct them. Such sinners could even be considered, while still criminals, as prone to virtuous deeds: as potential ascetics who were not yet conscious of their calling. The flute player, as is clearly stated in the account, resembled Paphnutius.

Just how similar to brigands some fervent early Christians appeared to the outside world is made apparent by an incident that took place in late 2nd-century Syria. Convinced by their leader that the second coming of Christ was imminent, a whole community, including the women and children, abandoned its houses and went to live in the desert to await the end of the world. Wondering around hills and highways, the whole lot was arrested by the local authorities, mistaken for a gang of robbers. Indeed, their conduct almost led to the persecution of all Christians living in the area. Fortunately, the misunderstanding was resolved thanks to the good service of the governor’s wife, who happened to be a Christian herself.[30]

The local authorities regarded it as only very natural that a gang of robbers also held extreme religious beliefs. Accordingly, from the wondering community, they turned their attention to Christians living in normal dwellings, as if their common religion meant that they also had a mutual inclination to criminal activities.

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To conclude, we must be reminded that the Roman world was very pious. There was hardly a private or a significant public activity that did not involve some kind of devout ceremony. Roman reverence and even superstition became almost extravagant during warfare and in the course of all demanding military affairs. Every kind of violence was also associated to religious practices. Acts with great social or political impact that were by nature criminal or seen as criminal, because they threatened to turn the established order upside down, such as brigandage, piracy and rebellion, were often associated with the most extreme beliefs regarding the divine realm; and leaders who were capable of bringing rebellious enterprises to a successful end were seen as both military and religious experts. According to the Roman way of thinking, violence and religion developed hand in hand. It is, therefore, understandable that any sort of social innovation was also seen as a religious subversion and vice versa.

[29] *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* 14.2 ff. (translation by Norman Russell).

[30] Hippolytus, *On Daniel* 4.18.