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‘WE KNOW WHAT YOU REMEMBER’

NOTES ON THE ECCLESIASTICAL DISCOURSE ABOUT RELIGIOUS ACCULTURATION AND SUBALTERN MEMORIES IN LATE ANTIQUE AND EARLY MEDIEVAL GAUL

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Abstract: The article studies the literary representation of subaltern religiosities in the context of Late Roman and Early Merovingian ecclesiastical writing in Gaul, and its relationship with Late Antique ideas about the characteristics of rural societies. By projecting an image of an atavistic rustic mass of religiously substandard commoners, who moreover were unable to participate constructively in most kinds of religious acculturation, the episcopal hierarchy of Gaul was able to tap into a powerful source of legitimacy for their privileges. These chains of utterances, examined through the *acta* of church councils and synods and compared with hagiographical writing, gained plausibility from their very participation in a literary tradition of ethnographicising expositions of subaltern religiosities. By studying techniques of vicarious memory ascription, knowledge ordering, and both intra- and inter-generic enrichment of ecclesiastical texts, I hope to provide some new angles into the Gallo-Roman and Merovingian ecclesiastical writing on lower-class religiosity, which is too often read as a straightforward reflection of conversion processes among the general population. It is suggested that in some historical contexts, socially unequal memory-ascriptions made within conversion narratives can usefully be examined through comparisons with colonial subaltern studies.

Keywords: Conversion narratives, religious acculturation, representations of memory, subaltern studies, Gallic councils, hagiography, Late Antiquity, Merovingian Gaul

Introduction

Imagining what other people might remember is a rather advanced act of ‘mindreading’.¹ Naturally, we base our assumption on what we think the person

¹ ‘Theory of mind’ (or ‘mindreading’) as the framework within which we attribute beliefs, knowledge, emotions and other mental processes to, and understand them in, individuals or out-groups: Barr – Keysar 2005, 271–74; Reeder – Trafimow 2005, 108–20. On ingroup favouritism, see Scaillet – Leyens 2000; Ros et al. 2000.
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might know now, and what they might have experienced in the past; moreover, we might have a general idea of whether that person tends to either embrace or eschew new habits of thought or action. But what about ‘mindreading’ the memories – and more particularly the religious memories – of an entire outgroup? And how meagre should we assess our chances of learning about past historical contexts of imagining the religious memories of outgroups? In this article, I would like to offer some preliminary observations about the social and ‘literary conditions that could have affected the ecclesiastical portrayal – represented by hagiographical texts and synodal canons – of the lower social orders’ attachment to their pre-Christian religious practices and sentiments.

It is nowadays a standard *caveat* to caution against taking the hagiographies’ testimonies as indicative of broader societal dynamics. This article aims to explore preliminarily the extent to which we should be similarly sceptical of the Late-Roman and Merovingian hagiographers’ ascription of religious memories to the lower orders, and the depiction of their social inferiors’ participation in religious acculturation. As noted by Brigitte Meijns in the context of conversion narratives in Gaul, it is often completely impossible to discover the historical reality behind hagiographical *topoi*.² Along the same lines, Bernadette Filotas, in an important study on the early medieval pastoral literature’s image of ‘pagan survivals’, notes the following:

“[T]he texts represent mainly the perspectives of the clerical elite, whose literary training (in the Bible, the writings of the Church Fathers and, to a certain extent, the classics) and professional preoccupations tended to make them value literary tradition as highly as practical observation and inclined them to focus on certain groups in society (notably clerics, peasants and, in some cases, women) and on certain types of behaviour at the expense of others”.³

It also needs to be borne in mind that ancient and early medieval writing of the rustics, especially those perceived to retain religious atavisms or other cultural traits perceived as throwbacks, can be usefully read as kind of ethnographical – or at least ethnographicising – writing. Recently, Todd S. Berzon has studied Christian heresiology as a manifestation of the ‘ethnographical disposition’, pointing out among other valuable findings that heretics were essentialised and compartmentalised very much along the ways in which the preceding tradition of ethnographicising writing had treated *ethnē*.⁴ There is very little reason to expect the ecclesiastical elite to have been aiming at an accurate representation of the popular religiosity. But crucial to the compelling moralising argument made in a given hagiographical text was the claim to do exactly that: to repre-

² Meijns 2012, 115.

³ Filotas 2005, 10; cf. *ead.* 44.

⁴ Berzon 2016.

sent the practices, allegiances and memories of the *populus*. The hagiographical text drew much of its persuasive power from its claim to represent the condition of the Merovingian kingdom itself – and the same can, perhaps, be said of the conciliar and synodal *acta* as well, at least to a certain degree. These two registers were certainly protreptic in nature.⁵

It has been noted in the context of other depictions of peasant religiosities, such as the myth of the Russian peasantry as deeply devout and religious, that an image was perpetuated by the chronicle tradition before being taken up by nationalist identity construction.⁶ But just as the Christian devotion of the peasantry has often been a literary artefact, the same can be said about the structurally related idea of their alleged clinging to ‘pagan’ vestiges. Both of these visions have been imposed by the elite’s (in a broad sense) top-down ascription of ‘essentialist’ characteristics to the lower social classes. Such vicarious ascription would obtain much of the rhetorical force of ‘collective memory’ (for instance in the case of the believers’ chain of memory validating the exemplary position of the saint), but its actual uses would have had much to do with the social and political status quo of the religious specialists engaged in the process of ascription.⁷ The memory of earlier Christian figures could make architectural remains valuable for new religious foundations – as in the case of Martin of Tours’ alleged recitation of mass endowing certain ruins with a spiritual value in Gregory’s *VP* 15,1. Relics of the saints were another physical manifestation of memorising the sacred history.⁸

I would not wish to claim in this article that the idea of rural groups of people as unsusceptible to religious acculturation was wholly and exclusively a literary creation. That can hardly have been the case, and is also made more unlikely by extensive comparative material on rural religious acculturation in many historical contexts: sometimes it is indeed among the rural groups that conservative forms of religious culture persist.⁹ But it may be worth considering to what degree the Gallic elite was motivated in their descriptions of the

⁵ On hagiography’s valorising posture as the ‘mirror of the kingdom’, cf. Kreiner 2014, *passim*, but e.g. 128–29.

⁶ Cf. Sarris 2011, 1–3. For a fascinating study on the tradition of describing the ‘ethnic’ subalterns in Russian Siberia: Leete 2014, e.g. 91 on the paternalistic and essentialising recommendations of conversion strategies.

⁷ For collective memory and the Christian normativity, cf. Castelli 2004, 136–8. For literary representations of collective memory more generally, Neumann 2010; Erll 2011, 105–12; it must be noted, however, that none of these memory studies addresses the socially enmeshed phenomenon of literary elite ascribing memories to the subaltern – especially in pre-modern contexts, this seems like a rarely visited viewpoint.

⁸ On Gregory, see Effros 2001, 93.

⁹ Bowes 2008, 125–187.

atavistic rustics by ‘real-life’ information about their religiosity, or whether social considerations of status and the prevailing literary posturing – with its images of the ‘backward rustics’ – could also have had an important role. Ethnic groups both outside and inside the Roman empire, as well as several social or occupational groups within it were essentialised as a matter of course in the elite world view. I would like to suggest that within the Christian writing and knowledge-ordering, we have a broadly comparable situation where the Church Councils of the Gallic bishops already know what to expect from the Gallic countryside.

Late Imperial Gallic elite and the image of atavistic rustics

Early Imperial evidence for the Roman literature’s emphasis on subaltern groups’ religious memories can occasionally be found in the ethnographicising register, such as in the geographical work *De situ orbis* (*Chorographia*) of Pomponius Mela. In his description of the Gauls he foregrounds their slow religious acculturation – indeed, they seem barely able to contain their atavistic cruelty.

Gentes superbae superstitiosae aliquando etiam immanes adeo, ut hominem optimam et gratissimam diis victimam crederent. Manent vestigia feritatis iam abolitae, atque ut ab ultimis caedibus temperant, ita nihilominus, ubi devotos altaribus admovere, delibant. Habent tamen et facundiam suam magistrosque sapientiae druidas. (Mela, *De situ* III 18)

A writer engaging in a genre that almost by definition would have included ethnographical descriptions was not bound by any convention to try and convey new information to his audience.¹⁰ Indeed, depending on the context and the aims of the writer, they might sometimes aimed solely to trigger imagery and notions already present in the minds of their audience about a foreign group and their religiosity. In the era of emperor Claudius, during which Mela was writing, the details about the druids would almost certainly have belonged to this latter category: they were well-known, distinctive, and expected by the audience.¹¹ Importantly, the civilizational improvements among the Gauls remained a source of concern and unease among the Romans, and religion – as so often, a

¹⁰ For ancient ethnographic writing, see e.g. Woolf 2011, 32-88; the contributions in Almagor – Skinner (edd.) 2013.

¹¹ The distinction-making potential of an ethnic practice is frequently an important factor in an author’s inclusion of it. In propagating the literary image of the religion of northerners, ancient writers would probably have presented as ‘regular cults’ ritual observations which would have been exceptional in the societies concerned: Marco Simón 2007, 184.

condensed cipher for many broader cultural perceptions in ancient literature – was amenable to be seen as revealing the latent, barely contained savagery behind the marginally changed practices of the Gauls.¹² In the view of the colonising power, the provincial remembers, and even bears a grudge (as in Albert Memmi’s famous socio-psychological essay *The Colonizer and the Colonized*).¹³

Even if we only stay within the Gallic provinces, in keeping with the regional focus of this article, memory ascriptions regarding the ‘traditional’ religiosity of the provincials can be found from the Early Imperial era onwards, as Mela shows.¹⁴ High Empire provides further examples of the same. Lucian’s prefatory *prolalia* speech *Heracles*, from the second century, similarly attributes a grudge to Gauls, although in this case the memories of provincial groups are used as a central twist in the narrative designed to introduce the speaker to the audience and provoke their interest.¹⁵ In it, Lucian invites his audience to follow his humorous *ekphrasis* of a Gallic depiction of their local variant of Hercules, known as Ogmios, which differs greatly from the canonical iconography, and offers his own interpretation about why the Celts might want to portray him in this way.

ᾧμην οὖν ἐφ’ ὕβρει τῶν Ἑλληνίων θεῶν τοιαῦτα παρανομεῖν τοὺς Κελτοὺς ἐς τὴν μορφὴν τὴν Ἡρακλέους ἀμυνομένους αὐτόν τῇ γραφῇ, ὅτι τὴν χώραν ποτὲ αὐτῶν ἐπῆλθεν λείαν ἐλαυνῶν, ὁπόπε τὰς Γηρυόνου ἀγέλας ζητῶν κατέδραμε τὰ πολλὰ τῶν ἐσπερίων γενῶν. (Lucian., *Herc.* 2)

As his take on the image Lucian suggests, of course half in jest, that the Celts must still harbour resentful feelings towards Heracles due to his ancient acts of terror in the West, and thus want to pay back at the archetypal macho hero of the Greeks. The final allegorical explanation – that Hercules as a symbol for eloquence should be portrayed as an old man, since experience fosters eloquence better than youth: an excuse for Lucian’s own performance when already getting on a bit – is provided by a supposedly local informant, a learned

¹² Cf. Strabo’s technique of on the one hand giving a lengthy description of Gauls’ head-hunting practices (lifted from Posidonius), yet finishing the description with a cursory point about the Romans having abolished these customs (Str. IV 4,5: cf. Lampinen 2014, 228). The ethnicised practices were far too interesting and revelatory about the Gallic characteristics for them not to be given the pride of place.

¹³ Memmi 1974.

¹⁴ Woolf 2011 provides much useful background for the ethnographicising gestures about the Gallic area: 18-24, 29-31, 105-11.

¹⁵ Woolf 2011, 116 observes that for all we know, Lucian could well have invented the image for his rhetorical purposes.

Celt (quite possibly a local sophist colleague).¹⁶ Even so, it is Lucian's own memorable and essentialisingly cast conjecture, given above, that stays in the audience's minds quite as vividly, following as it does an impressive depiction of the physiognomy of the old Heracles, and underpinned as it is by a well-known tradition about Hercules and the Gauls.

The Roman urban elite's social distrust towards rural populations certainly influenced rhetorical portrayals of the peasant unrest found in the *XII Panegyrici Latini*. The Panegyrist of year 291, for instance, praises Maximian for his clemency in dealing with rustic insurgents, but he also refers in a hazy manner to the memory of their grievances.¹⁷ These upheavals have been ascribed to the movement of the *Bagaudae*, but the unity of such a 'movement' is probably an illusion.¹⁸ The more likely explanation for the continued currency of the term is that the later authors found this term from earlier accounts, and that it was plausible enough to be used regarding a perceived low-class unrest in the Western provinces.¹⁹ The audience of the Gallic panegyrics was not only composed of the court functionaries and provincial notables present at the delivery: it also consisted of the members of the elite in the Gallic *civitates* to which the returning delegates carried their impressions and memorized snippets.²⁰ The creation of a conflict with the social subaltern was thus projected to audiences beyond the immediate context of the speech, and would have reflected to a certain extent the distrust that the Gallo-Roman elite felt towards their social inferiors.²¹

Finally let us consider a piece of evidence properly stemming from Late Antiquity. In a passage from the *Querolus* (also known as *Aulularia*), a play possibly of fifth-century origin from the south of Gaul,²² the titular character speaks with his *Lar*, the home god, expressing his wish to have power to do whatever he wants, so that he might be allowed to rob or slay whomever. The *Lar* comes up with a solution: Querolus should go live around the river Loire,

¹⁶ On Lucian's interlocutor and the ethnographicising gestures in the speech, see Amato 2004; Nesselrath 1990, 135; Elsner 2007, 204.

¹⁷ *Pan. Lat.* XI (3),5,3; cf. also *Pan. Lat.* VII (6),8,3 *priorum temporum iniuriis efferatas*, probably in a conscious act of emulation: Nixon 1990, 25.

¹⁸ For discussions on the Bacaudic disturbances, see e.g. Van Dam 1985, 25-58; Drinkwater 1992, 217; Sánchez León 1996; Brown 2012, 403.

¹⁹ Drinkwater 1984, 349-71, 370.

²⁰ Nixon 2012, 234-8.

²¹ Rut. Namat., *De reditu suo* I 213-16 on 'people being slaves to their own slaves'. Anti-establishment motives are also projected to the Bacaudae by Zos. VI 5,3 and Hydat. 133 s.a. 449. Cf. how Const. Lugd., V *Germ.* 40 speaks about the 'undisciplined people' very similarly to the way used of all Gallic disturbances previously; the *populus*' rebellion is moreover called *pristina*.

²² Perhaps from Massilia as per Golvers 1984, or at least the Southern Gaul, as in Sánchez León 1996, 78-9.

where people live *iure gentium* (according to natural law), where no distinction of office is observed, and where capital punishments are handed *de robore* ('from the oak') and inscribed in bones: *rustici* ('countryfolk' or even 'yokels') are the lawyers there and private persons the judges. Everything goes.

[Quer.:] *ut liceat mihi spoliare non debentes, caedere alienos, vicinos autem et spoliare et caedere.* [Lar.:] *hahahe, latrocinium, non potentiam requiris. hoc modo nescio edepol, quem ad modum praestari hoc possit tibi. tamen inveni, habes quod exoptas : vade ad Ligerem vivo.* [Quer.:] *quid tum ?* [Lar.:] *illic iure gentium vivunt homines, ibi nullum est praestigium, ibi sententiae capitales de robore proferuntur et scribuntur in ossibus ; illic etiam rustici perorant et privati iudicant : ibi totum licet.* (Quer. 1,2)

It is a fascinating passage, and has attracted a wealth of scholarly commentary,²³ but the safest, perhaps most minimalist conclusion is to interpret the play as intra-elite communication of shared values, based on their classical learning and identities. Along the way the passage showcases some of the perceptions among Gallo-Roman aristocrats about what the *rustici* were capable of. In their view, the *rustici* are susceptible to slipping back into their ancestral mode of life, which in the literary culture of Late Roman Gaul was 'known' to have included human sacrifice, a particular reverence of oaks, and a tendency to anarchy.²⁴ This act of memory ascription would have relied upon the Gallo-Roman elite's inherited socio-cultural distaste towards the lower social classes, and their slightly nervous dismissal of the backward *rustici*.

As the *Querolus* and other literary pieces show, in the Late Roman Gaul the classicising mode of writing was vigorously cultivated, outlasting the disappearance of Roman administrative structures. Cities remained important, and bishops often remained based in the old *civitas* capitals, which constituted the sites of memory encapsulating the joining of Gallic and Roman – an alliance that late authors like Ammianus (Amm. XV 12,6) and Sidonius Apollinaris were more inclined to express than earlier Imperial writers.²⁵ This resilience can partly be contextualised by relating it to the success with which post-Roman Gallic aristocrats of the fifth century managed to re-negotiate their cultural identities and *Romanitas* in a changed context and to set apart their classicising endeavours from the fact of Roman political structures. Classicising dic-

²³ Previous scholarship on this intriguing piece is summed-up in Sánchez León 1996, 78-83. Thompson 1952, 19, in keeping with his overall view of the Bacaudic disturbances, wanted to interpret the passage as 'a characteristic piece of distortion of a landlord-less society [...] written by a hostile writer'. See also Dockès 1980, 214-18; Drinkwater 1984, 363, 370.

²⁴ Cf. Marco Simón 2007, 177 on the 'religion of the Celts' as an image.

²⁵ On Ammianus and ethnography, see Woolf 2011, 105-16; on Sidonius Apollinaris, see Harries 1992, 301.

tion and turns of phrase continued in use far beyond the impressive sunset of the traditional curriculum in post-Roman Gaul. The late-seventh century *Vita Wandregiseli* (V. Wandr. 16 MGH SSRM 5), for instance, could still describe the paganising provincials in a time-honoured formulation as *feroces vel immanes barbarae gentes nuper christianae* – a phrase harking back to an influential pairing of adjectives found already in Cicero.²⁶ Aesthetic aims and interests from Late Antique were available to be adopted as authority-building devices in hagiographical writing. Even in the case of such an ostensibly simple listing as the *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum*, a reference to the Late Antique compilatory aesthetics and the associative powers of the list form is not out of place.²⁷

By narrative manipulation, the Late Antique Gallic *populus* could be made to work for the glorification of the church and faith, but this would in many cases have required it to overcome its essentialist characteristics. Mamertus of Vienne was in Avitus' presentation particularly anxious to overcome the 'sluggishness of the *populus*' which could have undermined the success of his innovation, the rogational procession.²⁸

explorante autem episcopo fervorem inchoationis, et maxime verente ne, ob tardam populi sequacitatem, paucioribus eductis observatio ipsa confestim in sui novitate revilesceat. (Avit. Vienn., Hom. in rogat. 110; PL 59, 292A)

The ritual innovation is successful, and the *multitudo* of people is *copiosa* – which is exactly as it should have been in such a scene.²⁹ Whether a legitimating or a threatening mass, the quality of the *multitudo* or *turba* always derives from its quantity – a 'mark of the plural' which ties the Roman and post-Roman representation of social inferiors into the dynamics of colonial writing.³⁰ In writing, the *populus* constituted a necessary component in compellingly narrat-

²⁶ The dating of Wandregisel's *vita*: Lifshitz 1995, 221. Cf. Cic., *Font.* 31, *Div.* I 1,2, *N. D.* I 23,62; also [Quint.] *Decl.* III 3,5. Ciceronian references in early Gallic homiletics are commonplace (Bailey 2010, 4 on *Eusebius Gallicanus*), and would have entered the tradition often via Augustine and Caesarius (*ead.* 129).

²⁷ On the ideals of compilatory writing and aesthetics of *varietas*, see many of the contributions in König – Whitmarsh (edd.) 2007; also Bjornlie 2015 in the Late Antique context of Cassiodorus' *Variae*; esp. 289. On the uses that 'Christian ethnography' (especially heresiography) found for the list-form: Berzon 2016, 218–45. Hen 1995, 180 on how the *Indiculus* resembles Julius Obsequens' work in that it aims to provide useful structure for more elaborate discussions of non-standard religious *praxis*; cf. this with what we know about authority-building in ancient technical writing: the editors' 'Introduction' in König – Whitmarsh (edd.) 2007.

²⁸ On this homily, see Wood 2013, 86–87.

²⁹ Cf. Jussen 2001, 174.

³⁰ The 'mark of the plural': Memmi 1974, 129.

ing such communal rites as processions, rogations, or episcopal funerals: indeed, their presence lent legitimacy and authority to the bishop's communal leadership. But the same hazy and conveniently deployed *populus*, especially when composed of *rustici* or *vulgus*, could help the clerics accomplish very different things in other narratives.³¹ It is likely that bishops acted in many matters of ecclesiastical practice on the basis of their preconceived notions of what the essentialisingly presented qualities of the *populus* were. For the Gallo-Roman church elite, particularly the bishops, the *populus* was more of a hindrance than a helper in many cases, although ironically narratives of such things as popular acclamations of saints and spontaneous displays of extraordinary mourning at their burials was something for which the *populus* (who seems frequently to have gotten rid of their *tarda sequacitas* in these moments) was absolutely vital.

Associations about the commonfolk's religious capabilities and their portrayal in writing were influenced by the terminology used by the ecclesiastical register. *Populus*, in particular, had rather prominent associations with paganism, yet without ceasing to mean just 'people' in more general sense.³² *Vulgus*, *rustici* and *turba* are more ambiguous expressions: their assimilation and the tenor of their depiction depends on their role in the narrative. When they are the explicit target of a piece, such as in Martin of Braga's *De correctione rusticorum*, it is because of them being perceived as a collectivity that is weighed down by their past and dragged back to the *pristina superstitio* (Mart. Brag., *De corr. rust.* 1). *Rustici* or *rusticani* are not just the inhabitants of the non-urban countryside; they were also 'uncultured' and – crucially for the conversion narratives – prone to inhabiting the past.³³ The nature of the memories ascribed to the *vulgus* or *rustici* tends to be less constructive than the hagiographically affirmative memory of the *populus*. In other occasions, the indefinite but cer-

³¹ Cf. Jussen 2001, 174-79.

³² *Conc. I Aur.* (538) c. 31(28): *quia persuasum est populis die Dominico agi cum caballis aut bubus et veiculis itinera non debere neque ullam rem ad victum praeparari [...]*; *Conc. Tur.* (567) *epist.*: *pontificalis est ordinis ad suam sollicitudinem infatigabiliter revocare, quidquid ad correctionem populorum, immo magis filiorum spiritalium, quantum est fas intellegere [...]*. *Conc. Germanicum* (742), c. 5: *Decrevimus [...] ut populus Dei paganas non faciat, sed ut omnes spurcicias gentilitatis abiciat et respuat, sive sacrificia mortuorum sive sortilegos vel divinos sive filacteria et auguria sive incantationes sive hostias immolaticias, quas stulti homines iuxta ecclesias ritu pagano faciunt [...]* On *populus* as a denomination for the 'pagans': [Ven. Fort.] V. Paterni 5,16 (MGH AA IV 2 p. 34): *ad quod fanum populus dum ex consuetudine per sacra execrabilia debaccharet, admonitus est a sanctis viris, ne vana colendo se crederet salvari [...] quae plebs reverendos viros inreverenter despiciens, ritum quem pessime coeperat, pertinaciter exercebat.*

³³ Clark 2001, 266f.

tainly outcasting *homines stulti* is the only denomination with which an ecclesiastical text deigns to identify the ‘paganising’ wrongdoers.³⁴ *Paganus* is a challenging term with quite significant fluctuation in its meaning. In all of its associations, however, *pagani* were decisively an outgroup when looked from the communicative context of the surviving texts: even when used in a homiletic situation with parts of the rustic *populus* of the congregation in attendance, *pagani* could denote those who had not made it to the church.³⁵

Gallic church councils and synods on the religious acculturation of the *vulgus*

The Gallic conciliar and synodal canons from between the fifth and seventh centuries are strikingly repetitive in describing the substandard forms of popular religiosity, even down to the level of verbal similarities. Paternalistic thought patterns and rhetoric are widespread: there is no reason to expect otherwise. Warnings about remnants of tree- and stone-worship, pagan festivals still being celebrated in hiding, and all kinds of stubborn boorishness are rearticulated time and time again in the conciliar and synodal *acta*, leaving the conversion of the Gallic area seemingly in a curious stasis for centuries. The canons devoted to the physical vestiges of the pagan past visible in the Gallic countryside tend to grow longer and more elaborated as time passes. The second council of Arles (452 CE) provides a typical early example:

si in alicuius episcopi territorio infideles aut faculas accendunt, aut arbores, fontes vel saxa venerantur, si hoc erueri neglexerit, sacrilegii reum se esse cognoscat. (Conc. II Arl. (452) c. 23)

By the seventh century (if that is when the Council of Nantes was held), the elaboration of such set-pieces had led to much enhanced feeling in similar synodal warnings:

Summo decertari debent studio episcopi et eorum ministri, ut arbores daemonibus consecratas, quas vulgus colit, et in tanta veneratione habet, ut nec ramum vel surculum inde audeat amputare, radicitus excidentur atque comburantur. Lapides quoque, quos in ruinosis locis silvestribus daemonum ludificationibus decepti venerantur, ibi et vota vovunt et deferunt, funditus effodiantur, atque in tali loco proiciantur ubi numquam a cultoribus suis venerari possint. Et omnibus annuncietur quantum scelus sit idolatria, et qui haec veneratur et colit quasi deum suum negat, Christianitati abrenuntiat, et talem penitentiam inde debet suscipere, quasi idola adoras-

³⁴ Hen 1995, 161.

³⁵ On *paganus* as the ‘other’, see Filotas 2005, 15; *ead.* 20–22 on terminology (including *gentilis*, *paganus*, etc.).

set, omnibusque interdicatur ut nullus votum faciat, aut candelam vel aliquod munus pro salute sua rogaturus alibi deferat, nisi ad ecclesiam Deo suo. (Conc. Namn. c. 18(20))³⁶

The councils' routinely included references to these conventional talking points and subjects of suspicion are extremely formulaic and often – as noted by Yitzhak Hen – 'totally detached from the council's main interest'.³⁷ Caesarius of Arles (468-542) may have been an important extra-generic influence on the involution of the synodal register: in his sermons, listings of paganising practices of the *rustici* are frequent and already more elaborated than in the early Gallic councils:

Iterum admoneo vos, omnia fana destruere, ubicunque inveneritis. Nolite ad arbores vota reddere; nolite ad fontes orare. Praecantatores quasi venenum diaboli fugite. Phylacteria diabolica, characteres, sucinos et herbas nolite vobis et vestris adpendere, quia, qui hoc malum fecerit, sacrilegium se non dubitet admisisse. Quicunque iuxta domum suam aras aut fanum aut arbores profanes, ubi vota reddantur, esse cognoverit, studeat confringere, dissipare atque succidere. (Caes. Arel., Sermo 14,4).

In Hen's view, Caesarius' homiletic emphasis on the 'paganising' parts of the population constituted an effort to forge a sense of group-identity and shared values among his congregation.³⁸ If this is the case, Caesarius chose to facilitate his creation of such rhetorical 'groupiness' by making it clear that clinging to any vestiges of non-Christian ritualism was a sign of *rusticitas*, and such persons, the *rustici*, would almost by definition have been a section of the commonality of his congregation (often *fratres carissimi*) who were not present at the sermon.³⁹ They were part of the *populus*, even covered by *vos*, but their absence itself made them something of an outgroup: no names are named, but the stigma is left to hang in the air.⁴⁰

³⁶ The canons being quoted by Regino of Prüm (*Libri de synodalibus causis* II 359) and Burchard of Worms (*Decret.* X 10). For the likely dating and historicity of the Council of Nantes, see Aupest-Conduché 1973.

³⁷ Hen 1995, 178.

³⁸ Hen 1995, 162-72.

³⁹ As noted by Filotas 2005, 21: "The faithful were told in so many words that they followed pagan traditions, that they behaved like pagans, that a custom was a survival of pagan observances, a part of pagan traditions or 'the filth of paganism' or outright pagan observances; that they wasted their time in pagan idleness or performed rites invented by pagans or acts similar to the crime of pagans."

⁴⁰ On such an 'encoded audience' – an audience rhetorically addressed but not present at the delivery – in homiletics, cf. Clark 2001, 271; cf. also 273 on the different possible reasons for some urban preachers not to address peasants among his audience, which range from issues of politeness to those of relevance.

Pagan shrines and natural places of worship, the most effective symbols of the paganising *vulgus* – and the most useful focal points in which scenes of conflict and triumph could be set – are mentioned with notable regularity: *Conc. II Arel.* (452) c. 23⁴¹, *Syn. dioc. Autiss.* (561-605) c. 3, cf. *Conc. IV Aur.* (541) c. 16, *Conc. Tur.* (567) c. 23(22); cf. *Conc. Namn.* (mid-seventh century?) c. 18(20). The canons devoted to these elements appear to grow longer and more elaborated as time passes. It may also be useful to bring to play even as late a piece of testimony as the response to such canons by the Frankish royalty, whose view of the ‘pagan survivals’ could not have ignored the (purportedly descriptive) decrees sent out by the synods. One may cite for instance the *Capit. reg. Franc.* t. 1 p. 59 Boretius (*Die XXIII Mar.* 789), though it dates as late as Charlemagne: the formulation of *de arboribus vel petris vel fontibus* certainly highlights the way in which even secular legislation could participate in knowledge ordering and processes of *imitatio* that had been shaped by the concerns of ecclesiastical register already for centuries. The worshipers in the Carolingian *capitulum* are defined as *aliqui stulti* – the social definition of the culprits was sometimes most effective when it was kept as hazy as possible.

As pointed out above, on a general level certain of the themes and denunciations in the synodal register even became more vehement as time went on – leading to the paradoxical impression that paganism in the Merovingian Gaul was becoming more entrenched instead of being quietly sidelined. It is worth noting that generally more attention was directed at places and *loci* of standard popular worship, than at divinities or entities worshipped.⁴² Councils and synods recording canons against divination include *Conc. Agath.* (506) c. 42, *Conc. I Aur.* (511) c. 30, *Conc. IV Aur.* (541) c. 15, *Conc. Asp.* (551) c. 3, *Syn. dioc. Autiss.* (561-605) c. 4, *Conc. Narb.* (589) c. 14, and *Statuta Ecclesiae Antiqua* c. 83 (CCSL 148 p. 179). Idolatry, vows, and sacrifices to pagan gods are condemned in *Conc. II Aur.* (533) c. 20, *Conc. IV Aur.* (541) c. 16, and *Conc. Clipp.* (626-27) c. 16. Another very traditional worry, deriving from Italian homiletic models, was the celebration of the Kalends of January: it is mentioned, amongst others, in *Syn. dioc. Autiss.* (561-605) c. 1, *Conc. Tur.* (567) c. 23(22) and *Synod. dioc. Rothom.* (650) c. 13 (SCNAC vol. X col. 1202 B-C).

It should perhaps be restated that memory ascriptions and the assessments of lower-class capability to participate in religious change are, naturally, speech acts mired in social preconceptions. The way in which these can be directed

⁴¹ Also cited in *Vetus Gallica* 44,2; the collection VG was put together around year 600 in Burgundy: Markus 1992, 160.

⁴² Filotas 2005, 68.

narrowly against certain marginal groups comes particularly vividly across from the canons of the Synod of Rouen, convoked by bishop Dado (Audoin) in 650. In its canon 14 (SCNAC vol. X col. 1202 C-D), the professions of cowherds, swineherds, shepherds and hunters are singled out for meriting attention as for their attendance in church services: the priests are told to admonish the *plebs under their charge*. In addition, these professions, connected by necessity with the forested areas beyond the urban centres, are dehumanised by saying they are ‘living like animals’ (*more pecudum*).⁴³ From Augustine onward, the sermons had stressed the idealised case in which country-people from the farms and mountains would flock to hear the preacher (*Enarr. in psalm. 134,22; CCSL 40, 1954*).⁴⁴ But this was not exactly the attitude taken by the Synod of Rouen: canon 4 issues a call to ‘scrutinise thoroughly’ if any swineherds, cowherds or hunters say ‘diabolical spells’ over their bread or over herbs, or use forbidden talismans hidden in the woods or crossroads to keep their beasts healthy.

A church council that would have omitted warnings about the back-sliding *populus* could have appeared half-hearted and suspect in its proceedings, since its predecessors had emphasised the subject to such a degree. It would thus be among the inheritors of the Imperial rhetoric of *renovatio*. Concurrently, alluding to or invoking the prestige of an earlier church council in the heartland of the Early Church would have lent credibility and authority to the later synod, as noted by Filotas.⁴⁵ For practical reasons the guidelines as for what to do with the visible ‘evidence’ of paganising worship must have capped at a certain point, though innovation could still be displayed in the details of *how* one was supposed to dispose of the materials. The uniformity of the denunciations in these writings, produced across a wide variety of contexts and areas, is one strong argument for considering them textual *imitatio*, a self-reinforcing ‘chain of utterances’ in a Bakhtinian sense.⁴⁶

If the conciliar discourse constituted a paternalistically articulated chain of utterances, its motor would have been the bishops themselves, conscious of the need to appear at least as rigorous and zealous in legislating against pagan vestiges as the previous councils had been, and thus built upon previously-uttered warnings. The bishops’ legitimating argument for their own necessity in con-

⁴³ Cf. Cracco Ruggini 1992, 146f.; Oexle 2001, 103-5.

⁴⁴ Frend 1979, 41f. on Augustine’s tacit assumption of the urban superiority over countryside; cf. Clark 2001, 267ff.

⁴⁵ Filotas 2005, 52.

⁴⁶ Bakhtin 1986, 64f., cf. 91: “Each utterance refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies on the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account.” Cf. Filotas 2005, 45.

verting a constantly backtracking *populus* exposed them to an obvious counter-argument: that despite all the royal support and vast privileges they clearly were not doing a very effective job, judging by the omnipresence of ‘paganising’ rustics so constantly evidenced in their literary output. I would suggest that the recurrent character of an *episcopus neglegens* was found to be a useful device in demonstrating that unlike the bishops as a whole – when deliberating in a synod or emulating the model of a saint – there were unnamed individuals among their number who were lax or *neglegentes* in their duties, thus partly explaining (in addition to the essentialist atavism of the *plebs*) why the paganising *rustici* still existed.

The apparent lack of diachronic relaxation in denunciations of ‘paganising’ practices – and the fact that this makes the texts very unlikely to reflect the actual processes of Christianisation – has been noted in the case of penitential texts by Hen; the main weakness in his interpretation is that the only explanation he can offer for this persistence of the themes is again the ‘fear and anxiety’ which in his vision seems to have plagued the Merovingian churchmen with great intensity.⁴⁷ The interlinked techniques of *imitatio* and elaborative or involuntary *inventio* can explain much of the details found in the synodal and conciliar *acta* of Merovingian Gaul, as well as their wider chronological and cultural exemplars: in this they are broadly similar to the homiletical and hagiographical registers of the same period, which will be examined next.

Hagiographical *vitae* and the representations of rural religiosity

Hagiographical writing in Late Antiquity resembled rhetorical historiography in that it sought to impart moral lessons, and recommend patterns for correct behaviour through exemplary narratives; it was persuasive in its character. As Kreiner has pointed out, this is true also of the Merovingian hagiographies.⁴⁸ Research following the initiatives of Peter Brown has particularly emphasized the study of social forces that benefited from the promotion of the cult of saints via hagiographical texts. J. Howard-Johnston has described this scholarly tendency:

“[Hagiographic] Lives are viewed as created artefacts, shaped by general and local traditions which had their own internal literary dynamics. [...] Behind the veil of the texts vested interests of several sorts (royal, aristocratic, episcopal, monastic) are discerned at work, striving to legitimize or to enhance their power”.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Hen 1995, 185–6. The same explanation is casually mentioned by Markus 1992, 161.

⁴⁸ Kreiner 2014, 2, 8, 35ff.

⁴⁹ Howard-Johnston 1999, 7.

He goes on to note that the saints' Lives are, in a Brownian tradition, presented as active agents in the interaction between competing social and political forces in addition to their explicit purpose of moral edification. So far so good. But texts are not active agents on their own: they are the tools wielded by the agents in pursuit of their vested interests. And in addition to hagiographic writing, the same instrumental considerations should be appreciated in the context of other writings stemming from Late Roman and Merovingian ecclesiastical elite, such as the tradition of synodal writing examined above.

The *Vita Paterni*, attributed to Venantius Fortunatus, tells how the holy man occupies a *fanum profani cultus ereptum hominibus*, without any indication of 'paganising' worshipers even using the temple anymore, and converts it into a cattle shed in a way that seems to be designed as an insulting reference to the lack of humanity of 'pagans'.⁵⁰ Such elements in the hagiographical stories do not need to be taken as accounts of real-life events: the symbolic power of such 'rituals of possession' works just as well on a purely textual level, deriving from the voluminous and authoritative *exempla* they evoked and the 'just-so' narratological aptness of such a repossession. Bonnie Effros wonders why the clerics of late antique and Early Medieval Gaul did not find sites formerly associated with paganism more dangerous.⁵¹ One possible response would be that the sense of danger was directed at the ill-defined *vulgus* instead, since there simply was no believable way to sustain an argument for the ruins themselves posing a danger for the Christians. Reoccupation of ruins certainly happened – the bishops themselves made sure of this – but since most of the actual ruins of any utility (as opposed to the literary image of 'ruins in the forest') were situated in towns, there was very little possibility to claim that the rural *vulgus* would have been operating in them. Ruins seem to have been useful as a backdrop for scenes of expelling demons, but they were primarily recognized as 'ancient', not necessarily as 'pagan' sites.⁵²

So it might be that it was the *vulgus* itself who was more usefully constructed in hagiographical *vitae* as the carrier of the memories of paganism. In the *Vita* of Eligius of Noyon – probably written by the council-organising bishop Dado (Audoin) of Rouen (see above) about a decade after Eligius' death (in 660), but extensively reworked during the Carolingian era – we meet with many literary references to pagan practices. The Eligius constructed by (and within) the *vita* has been noted to obsess over paganism, whereas his preserved

⁵⁰ [Ven. Fort.] *V. Paterni* 10,30 (MGH AA IV.2 p. 35); cf. *Synod. dioc. Rothom.* (650) c. 4.

⁵¹ Effros 2001, 102.

⁵² Effros 2001, 108f. (cf. 115), citing the examples of Const. Lugd. *V. Germ.* 10; and *V. Caes.* II 22.

sermons do not betray any such preoccupation.⁵³ In *V. Elig.* II 16, for instance, Eligius warns his congregation against observing any of the sacrilegious habits of the pagans. The nefarious practices include consulting soothsayers, auguries, the premonitions made on occasion of sneezing, and celebrations canvassed broadly as including paganizing elements.⁵⁴ The warnings are passionately argued but generally topical in nature: the impression of bullet-point listing is reinforced by the repetitions within the passage.⁵⁵ In Pirmin's *Scarapsus* 22 the denunciation of dancing follows a rather similar form as in *V. Eligii*, behind both of which may stand Caesarius' *Sermo* 13 (*PL* 39, S. 265), attributing this to *infelices et miseri homines*. Singing is condemned by Regino of Prüm as typical to *ignobile vulgus* (*De syn. causis* I 73).

The influence of Caesarius of Arles is strong in *Vita Eligii*'s warning about the nefarious practices of the lower orders, and may have been both direct and accessed through Martin of Braga's *De correctione rusticorum*.⁵⁶ Later in the same passage we find an interesting list of divinities against the worship of which Eligius is said to have admonished his flock not to worship or believe in the names of demons, Neptune, Orcus, Diana, Minerva or 'Geniscus', or 'other such nonsense':

nullus nomina daemonum aut Neptunum aut Orcum aut Dianam aut Minervam aut Geniscum vel cetera huiuscemodi ineptia credere aut invocare praesumat. (*Vita Elig.* II 16a)

The above-mentioned combination of influences in Dado's writing about pagan vestiges of the lower classes comes across from this latter section, as well: Caesarius, as noted by Hen, is a strong model, but in this list the presence of both Neptune and Diana brings to mind Martin's *De correctione rusticorum* 8.⁵⁷ 'Geniscus', on the other hand, cannot in this form be explained by a direct literary model, but is probably a corruption from *genius*. It may be suggested that, much like in Gregory of Tours' hagiographies, Dado's narrative in the *Vita Eligii* was closely tied with the institutional and political aims of the author.⁵⁸

⁵³ Markus 1992, 166; Hen 1995, 197.

⁵⁴ *V. Elig.* II 16. Material is partly from Caes. *Serm.* 50-52, 54, 192-193; for the early part also Pirm., *Sc.* 22 (Hauswald). For the terms and their probable interchangeability, see Filotas 2005, 220-27.

⁵⁵ Cf. Pirm., *Sc.* 22; influenced by Caes., *Sermo* 14,4; also cf. *Indiculus* 10.

⁵⁶ Caesarius' influence on Dado: Hen 1995, 162: cf. Caes., *Sermo* 33 (Ps.-Aug. S. 277, Migne in *PL* 39, c. 2266-68); S. 54 (Ps.-Aug. S. 278, Migne in *PL* 39, c. 2269); S. 129. Note a parallel with the Mart. Brag., *De correctione rusticorum* 11.

⁵⁷ Mart. Brag., *De corr. rust.* 16 is probably behind the references to Minerva still in Eligius (cf. Filotas 2005, 73), although Diana does make an appearance in the *Vita* of Caesarius (II 18) as a demon.

⁵⁸ Cf. Fox 2014, 77-79, 130-31; Kloník 2007, 461-524; cf. Hen 1995, 196-97.

Set-piece scenes of dramatic confrontation with the atavistic rustics were also a feature of the mature form of Gallic hagiography. Dado (or a Carolingian rewriter of the *vita*) made villagers near Noviomagus regard Eligius as a ‘Roman’ who had come to upset their ‘supposedly rightful old customs’ (*quod ferias eorum everteret ac legitimas, ut putabant, consuetudines exinaniret*). The hagiographer has ascribed to the rustics a worldview where the Christianity and southern origins of Eligius make him a ‘Roman’, and where this is to them an alienating characteristic. The plan of the boldest villagers to kill Eligius, should he try to meddle in their affairs, kindles a ‘huge desire for martyrdom’ in the holy man, who then forces a confrontation with the *turba* (2,20). The response of the *turba* to the admonitions of Eligius stands as one of the rhetorically most elaborated cases of vicarious memory-building for the Gallic commoners, and thus deserves to be quoted in full:

Ad cuius exhortationem vehementer turba commota, probrosa ei verba cum ingenti protervia respondebant, interitum ei minitantes atque dicentes: ‘Nunquam tu, Romane, quamvis haec frequenter taxes, consuetudines nostras evellere poteris, sed sollemnia nostra sicut actenus fecimus, perpetuo semperque frequentabimus, nec ullus hominum erit, qui priscos atque gratissimos possit nobis umquam prohibere ludos.’ (V. Elig. II 20)

The members of the rustic *turba* respond with hostility and ‘immense insolence’ to Eligius’ reproaches, stating that ‘the Roman’ could never, however hard he tried, get the rustics to ignore their ‘own customs’, and that they would continue to observe their *sollemnia* in perpetuity as they had done up to that time, and that there was ‘no human being who could prohibit their games’. The scene is a transparent set-up for what follows next: it is indeed not a human being but divine intervention that frightens the peasants out of their practices. Eligius’ *turba* presents itself in an essentialised connection with its own past, and decisively in favour of maintaining this link, no matter what the ‘Roman’ bishop will try. The ‘games’ are ‘ancient and most pleasing’ to the common-folk, but left suitably hazy by way of detail – although the emphasis is on their residual quality.⁵⁹ Moreover, the theatricality of the scene is obvious, with the multitude of the *turba* being set in contrast with the few companions of Eligius, and the punishment for the hubristic villagers not being long in the making. In what follows after the quoted passage, the ‘proud and audacious’ answer of the rustics – unsuitable to their status – leads Eligius to pray for divine intervention, which comes in the form of the malefactors among the crowd being pos-

⁵⁹ The *saltationes*, as well as the expression *daemonum ludi* ties the description into the tradition of Caesarius and Pirmin (see above).

sessed by ‘unclean spirits’ (*inmundo afflati spiritu*). The episode, a clear literary creation, is no evidence at all of actual ‘non-Christian’ practices.⁶⁰

In the fairly late (early ninth century?) *Vita Audomari*, (MGH SSRM 5, 753-64; c. 5 p. 756) many of the *Terwanenses*, even those who had previously been baptised, have been slipping back to *idolorum cultura*. In chapter 6, the bishop:

salutifera divini verbi precepta stolidis paganorum cordibus tradidit, ferasque eorum mentes, tetrīs ignorantiae caliginibus caecatas, largo euangelii lumine inluminavit vanaque simulacra destruendo igni tradidit sacrilegamque idolorum culturam in predicta urbe funditus evertit omnemque in ea habitantem populum ad fidem convertit catholicam.

Not only is the wording given to the bishop’s acts vague and conventional, but the adjectives characterising the *populus* are entirely traditional (e.g. *stolidis ... cordibus*, the almost Ciceronian *ferasque eorum mentes*, and *ignorantiae caligine caecatas*). *Vita Amandi*, probably written in the eighth century, was able to construct the paganised landscape out of the same inherited motifs, such as in *V. Amand.* 13:

Per idem autem tempus, cum loca vel dioceses ob animarum sollicitudine vir Domini circuiret Amandus, audivit pagum quendam praeter fluentia Scaldi fluvii, cui vocabulum Gandao indidit antiquitas, diaboli laqueis vehementer inretitum, ita ut incolae loci illius, relicto Deo, arbores et ligna pro Deo colerent atque fana vel idola adorarent. Propter ferocitatem enim gentis illius vel ob terrae infecunditatem omnes sacerdotes a praedicatione loci illius se subtraxerant, et nemo audebat in eodem loco verbum adnuntiare Domini.

The passage is highly interesting on several accounts, and its description of the episcopal engagement with the rural religiosity comes across as a refined literary exercise shaped by a long tradition. The bishop’s touring of his diocese is not prepared in any way (which in real-life terms would have been almost necessary⁶¹), and is clearly mentioned simply so that he could happen to hear of the inhabitants of the *pagum* – who are not called *pagani*, but just *incolae loci illius* in the first place, after which their characterisation is notched up quite significantly by referring to the *ferocitas gentis illius*. This, combined with the explanation from the pooriness of the soil in that area, seems like a more dramatic explanation for the supposed persistence of ‘paganism’ – or more properly, return to it (*relicto Deo*) – than the *simplicitas* and *ignorantia* of the common people which Caesarius had used as an explanation for the persisting ‘paganising’ elements in popular religiosity (Caes., *Sermo* 54,6). Tellingly, the relapse of the inhabitants by the river Scheldt in *Vita Amandi* is said to depend from the absence of *sacerdotes* in their lands: if the *verbum Domini* is not constantly

⁶⁰ As pointed out by Lifshitz 1995, 30.

⁶¹ Le Jan 2001, 243-44; cf. Fox 2014, 124.

spread, the *vulgus* will go back to their atavistic practices. Such a slippage of the subaltern group, in the absence of the ‘civilizing’, hegemonic colonialist/elite influence, to the ‘essential’ constituents of the group’s perceived ‘nature’, is paradigmatic for the description of ‘internal outgroups’.⁶² Their unity with the land is paramount, and just as in the ancient climatological tradition, poor lands generate savage ways.

Vicarious memory construction and the social limits of knowledge acquisition

It is well known that the political or religious agendas of many historiographers of Late Antiquity make their texts ill-suited to be used as sources of actual religious practices of provincial groups and social outsiders, or for conversion processes, for that matter. The ecclesiastical sources of the same era and later centuries were hardly more objectively poised in narrating the religiosity of the provincials. Indeed, a conversion narrative is by definition a register of manipulated testimony, with a clear lack of source value for ‘paganisms’ and actual conversion processes.⁶³ As Meijns notes, certain types of sources tend to get ‘more loquacious the further the facts being discussed are from the time of writing’.⁶⁴ This tendency has been amply demonstrated above, and in terms of authorial motivations it is relatively easy to see why this is so. It does not seem likely that ‘field reports’ of any kind were an important influence on the deliberations of the Gallic church councils, at any rate. Hagiography, being an exemplary, protreptic and highly traditional genre, would similarly have been quite limited in the ways that it could disseminate new information about the lower classes, or would have been interested in doing so. Both genres, to a degree, participate in a kind of Christianised ‘ethnographical disposition’, the likes of which Todd Berzon has recently studied in his book on heresiology.⁶⁵

Several scholars have provided critical and contextualising analysis regarding our original sources, and their lack of suitability to be used as uncomplicated testimonies to the conversion processes in Merovingian Gaul.⁶⁶ Hen has pointed out that even before the Frankish conquest, Christianity had essentially obliterated all rivalling forms of religious systems from Gaul.⁶⁷ There is no doubt that at varying points of time actual pagan holy places were abandoned

⁶² On the ‘essential nature’ of the colonised, cf. Memmi 1974, 40, 115-16, 125-26, 129.

⁶³ Cf. Mériaux 2006, 21-51.

⁶⁴ Meijns 2012, 115.

⁶⁵ Berzon 2016.

⁶⁶ Hen 1995, 162-97; Wood 1999; and to a certain extent also Filotas 2005.

⁶⁷ Hen 1995, 160, 165, also cf. 193, noting the biblical exemplars for the temple-destruction topos.

and even destroyed – probably wilfully, and perhaps even by holy men in some cases – but this happened in contexts which our hagiographical and synodal texts do not illustrate.⁶⁸ The destruction of holy places in our texts is a reflection of a very influential literary model, not real-life circumstances. The pattern had been established by literary accounts many centuries before, and this literariness is supported by the observation that concurrently with the motif of destroying pagan shrines, other old narrative elements – such as that of the exorcism – likewise continued to be used in the hagiographic literature of Merovingian Gaul.⁶⁹ If fifth or sixth century churchmen demolished ‘pagan’ places of worship they believed themselves to have found, we are dealing rather with the behaviour known as ‘quasi-ostension’ in the folklore studies: the tendency for individuals to act out in a ‘memetic’ fashion pieces of urban myths, folklore, and mythical narratives either knowingly or – more often – without recognising themselves to be doing so.⁷⁰

There is a remarkably stable selection of physical *loci* which the Late Antique and Merovingian Gallic writers presented in connection with the ‘paganising’ past. These actual *lieux de mémoire* often have a close connection with natural settings, and are almost always located in the countryside or peripheries of episcopal power. The *locus silvestris* had been a crucial setting for popular religiosity already in the pre-Christian Roman literature – whether the shepherd’s cults to nymphs or the much more sinister groves of the northern peoples – and we cannot discount the possibility that it was because of this that the earlier generations of Christian Gallo-Roman writers found these *loci* so believable as the sites of ‘remembered paganism’.⁷¹ The Late-Roman distrust felt by the Gallic aristocrats towards the lower orders were certainly localised into particular natural settings, as in the fifth-century play *Querolus*.

Even if there was some stalling in the penetration of Christian ritualism due to the settlement of still ‘pagan’ peoples in the fifth and sixth centuries in northern Gaul, the organisation of the church would have remained more or less intact. It can even be questioned to what extent observation of the lower classes would have been possible (or of interest) to the bishops: as has been pointed out by Kreiner the episcopal retinues and entourages, even as they acted as a legitimating power display, would have acted as an effective block to the bishop’s contact with the lower orders.⁷² There is but little reason to expect that

⁶⁸ Cf. Effros 2001, 94-6, 100 (cf. 111).

⁶⁹ For exorcism as an older hagiographical dramatization of conversion: Price 1999, 218.

⁷⁰ See in Dégh – Vázsony 1983; as well as Dégh 1995.

⁷¹ On *locus silvestris* and the grove (*lucus*) as a site of ‘paganising’ vestiges, see Filotas 2005, 194-99.

⁷² Kreiner 2014, 170, cf. 180.

the bishops sought to establish an actual connection in the first place.⁷³ As Filotas points out, the parish priests would have been in a much better position to know about popular religiosity than the bishops.⁷⁴ Although they would have known the local conditions better than the convened bishops, their impact within the processes of knowledge ordering, local reporting, and information being carried upwards to the bishops is difficult to assess. Meanwhile, the rhetorical, politically motivated stance of the bishops as the mediators between the royalty and the *populus* as well as the shepherds of the common flock, is belied by the actual opportunities to act out this idealised posture.⁷⁵ The ‘common folk’ was most useful for the bishops when left only vaguely defined: this is what Kreiner observes regarding the term *pauperes*, but the same could be said of the other social denominations, such as the *rustici* or *vulgus*.⁷⁶ The bishops also commanded significant economical hold over the lower social classes, and casting this unequal relationship in terms of spiritual tutelage would have helped to solidify and legitimise it significantly, as well as sanctioning diocesan action against recalcitrant peasantry.⁷⁷

Concluding remarks

Whether scriptural passages, traditional tropes of Christian literature, or modified versions of (pseudo)ethnographical topoi, the descriptions of lower-class religiosity in the Merovingian Gaul partook in a literary tradition that reached back not only to the very influential fifth- and sixth-century writers such as Caesarius and Hilary, but beyond them to the polemics of Late Antiquity and the social and cultural perspectives of the traditionally educated fourth-century elite. Processes of mimesis and rewriting – akin to the metaphrastic plasticity of the hagiographies in Eastern Christianity – allowed for a remarkable flexibility in incorporating traditional motifs and variably modified episodes into later texts. By presenting themselves as crucial special operatives in an ongoing fight against the paganising *vulgus*, even in the heartlands of the Merovingian kingdom – and by emphasising the significance of receiving royal support – the Gallic ecclesiastics were able to tap into a strong legitimizing factor. This allowed them to maintain a discursive register that was useful for justifying and

⁷³ See Jussen 2001, 172-5.

⁷⁴ Filotas 2005, 147; cf. 44.

⁷⁵ On the bishops’ posture as mediators between the royalty and *populus*: Filotas 2005, 8, cf. 22, 129, 170-1.

⁷⁶ Kreiner 2014, 171.

⁷⁷ Cf. Sarris 2011, 2-3; also Jussen 2001, 149, 185.

explaining episcopal privileges, as well as extending an idealized power-sharing offer at the Frankish rulers. This representation of the rustic population as atavistic, wilfully conservative, and prone to religious backsliding into paganism was also made more plausible by it being so well-grounded in the earlier literary tradition and the worldviews it had fostered. This is comparable to the coloniser's ethnographicising gaze: for them, as for the Roman and post-Roman elite looking at their 'internal outsiders', it is most comforting to understand the colonised as being unable to dissimulate: they remain true to their essence, understandable, and hence must correspond to the already established image.

As a type of ethnographical discourse, writing about the lower-class religiosity in Late Antique and Merovingian Gaul is directly linked into the preceding elite literary stance of describing non-urban societies within the Roman empire. In addition to this, descriptions of subaltern religiosity, especially when met in the context of the rural societies, can be (and has been) read as a Christian self-fashioning and the patrolling of normativity in religious praxis. But what I have been arguing in this article is that the notions inherited from previous ancient tradition meant that these ecclesiastical constructions of substandard rural religiosity also had a temporal implication. The bishops and their towns came to stand for the current Christian era, and implicitly its soteriologically inflected future, while the rural areas became clearly associated with the past, metaphorically described through the imagery of darkness, vegetative growth, ruination, and wild animals.

Essentialising the rustics and their religiosity and representing their collective memories about their own past helped the Gallic ecclesiastical discourse to place the subalterns of their society within the broader image of Christian salvation history. Essentially, these constitute memories which the hegemonic spread of Christianised time should have made obsolete and redundant, but which were presented as motivators for conflict if the *vulgus* still continued to cling to them. In certain textual situations, the narrative – in the broadest possible sense, since in this brief article I have only looked at hagiographies and the synodal canons – would have made it possible for the ecclesiastical shapers of discourse to construct what can be termed 'vicarious memories' for the *vulgus*. In the construction and ascription of these memories, the abilities of common people to participate in religious acculturation were presented as severely handicapped due to the essentialisingly portrayed and almost ethnographically cast qualities of the rustics.

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