

The Rhetoric of a Pagan Past: Lactantius and Varro
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While many recognize Lactantius, a Christian rhetorician and author of the early 4th century, for his extensive use of pagan sources in his writings (Pichon 218-45) and how he relies heavily on Cicero and Virgil, but also made use of Varro, a contemporary of Cicero, little attention has been paid to questions of why or how. Ogilvie merely dismisses Lactantius' use of Varro as "schoolmaster's knowledge" (Ogilvie 52). Lactantius clearly admired Varro, based on the similarity of his use of Cicero and Varro and his obvious love of Cicero (Pichon 246-66; Nicholson 368-69; Ogilvie 59-82). Varro is instrumental in Lactantius' attempt to defend Christianity against contemporary pagan attacks in three ways: his reliance on the Sibylline Oracles, his assertion of the superiority of the Latin world over Greeks and barbarians, and as a Euhemerist authority. However, before examining these three uses in particular, I will attempt to address the purpose and method of Lactantius, the *Divine Institutes*.

Around the year 300, Lactantius moved from North Africa to teach rhetoric in Nicomedia where Diocletian held court (Lactantius, *Div. Inst.* 5.2.2; Jerome, *Illustrious Men* 80). An ongoing propaganda war raged until the Great Persecution started in 303 (Frend 1987, 1-18). Lactantius himself heard two of the pagan opponents of Christianity during this period at Nicomedia, one who "claimed himself to be a master of philosophy" and the other who was one of the "judges" (*Div. Inst.* 5.2.3 and 5.2.12). The 'judge' was Hierocles, the governor of Bithynia at the time, as both Lactantius and Eusebius give the same title to his work and Eusebius names him (*Div. Inst.* 5.3.22 and Eusebius, *Against Hierocles* 1.1). In the last decades, scholars have contested the identity of the philosopher, but it seemed that Lactantius wrote in response to

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Porphyrus's *Philosophy from the Oracles* (Schott 2008, 52-3, 177-185; Freund 2006; Edwards 2007; c.f. Barnes 2001).

One of Porphyry's arguments in the *Philosophy from the Oracles* was not that Christians should denounce Christ, but rather that he should be revered as a man. In worshipping a man, Christians were acting foolishly and traitorously (Digeser 2000, 5-7; Augustine, *City of God* 19.23). Porphyry was also concerned that "Christians disrupted the polarized Greek/barbarian distinction by mimicking Greco-Roman philosophers," which challenged Porphyry's beliefs about the superiority (though not exclusivity) of Greek philosophy (Schott 2005, 280). Christians threatened this by claiming that their own path was not only the best, but also that it was the only possible path to the truth (Digeser 2001). Porphyry relied on oracles of Apollo and Hecate. It was an oracle of Apollo at Daphne, which led to the purge of Christians from the army in 299, and an oracle of Apollo at Didyma that led to the Great Persecution in 303 (Digeser 2004).

Lactantius cites Apolline oracles four times; most interesting is the second time (*Div. Inst.* 1.7.9-10). Lactantius 'corrects' it by referring to the Sibylline Oracles (*Div. Inst.* 1.7.13). After Lactantius gives the third Apolline oracle, he immediately says that it has "lied" and asks, "How do you respond to this, Apollo?" (*Div. Inst.* 4.13.11-14) Later, Lactantius cites for the fourth time an oracle from Apollo without discussing it. He then asks, "What about the Sibylline Oracles? Don't they declare this?" (*Div. Inst.* 7.13) The Apolline Oracle is useful only so far as it agrees with Hermes Trimegistus and the Sibyls.

Throughout his work, Lactantius uses quotations from a number of Sibylline Oracles (Pichon 207-13). Bowen and Garnsey count 57 citations of the Sibylline Oracles throughout the *Divine Institutes* (18). He quotes them only as sources of truth, never calling them "liars" as he does the Apolline Oracles. Lactantius was looking for some sort of divine authority that would

support Christianity while not being traditionally thought of as “Christian,” since that would put off his potential audience. The Sibylline Oracles fit this bill perfectly – probably because Christians had clearly doctored them at some point (Ogilvie 24; 54-5).

Lactantius also needed to convince his readers that the Sibylline oracles were superior to Porphyry’s. Lactantius’ use of Varro as an authority for the Sibylline Oracles is one way in which he asserts this superiority. Lactantius closely connects Varro with the Sibyls early on in the *Divine Institutes*. An extended quotation of Varro details the number and origin of all ten Sibyls (Bowen and Garnsey 70n32). Furthermore, after the story of the Erythraean Sibyl is told under the authority of Fenestella, Lactantius tacks on “Varro has said the same thing, as I have shown above” (*Div. Inst.* 1.6.14). In fact, Lactantius has not shown this above. The affixation is entirely gratuitous, but does add the weight of Varro’s authority. Lactantius had no reason to quote Varro unless he thought that his readers would hold Varro in high regard.

Lactantius was well aware that certain Sibylline Oracles were suspected of Christian editing. But in a deft bit of sophistry, he dismisses this objection to their antiquity by calling upon Cicero and Varro. Since those authors (who died before Christ’s incarnation) discuss the Sibylline Oracles, he says, along with ‘other ancients,’ who could deny that the Oracles were pronounced before Christ’s incarnation? (*Div. Inst.* 4.15.26-7) One of the major arguments against Christianity was its relative newness (Frend 1987, 8). Lactantius can even use Varro to argue that Christianity is an ancient religion.

Varro is instrumental in establishing Lactantius’ oracles as superior to Porphyry’s due to their Roman-ness, rather than their Greek-ness. Lactantius cites Roman authors: Varro, Cicero, Fenestella. He tells two stories about their arrival in Rome, the Cumaean Sibylline Oracles under Tarquinius Priscus and the Erythraean Sibylline Oracles under C. Curio (*Div. Inst.* 1.6.10-4).

For Lactantius, the Sibyls may have been Greek in language but they were Roman in religious culture.

Schott asserts, “Porphyry staunchly identified himself as a Greek” and “never abandon[ed] the asymmetrical distinction between Greeks and barbarians” (Schott 2005, 279; 293). Eusebius of Caesarea likewise famously wrote, in an apologetic work slightly later than the *Divine Institutes*, “Someone may first ask...what we are, Greeks or barbarians? Or might there be something between these?” (*Preparation for the Gospel* 1.2.1) As for Lactantius’ opinions, Elizabeth Digeser states that “he disliked much that was Greek” (Digeser 1994, 44n).

This discussion of cultural superiority explains Lactantius’ use of Varro in two ways. First, it clears up a curious statement that has not received much attention. When he begins to give Varro’s list of Sibyls, Lactantius says, “Certainly among the Greeks, no more learned man ever lived than Marcus Varro” (*Div. Inst.* 1.6.7). In the context of cultural rivalry, this statement becomes more than just passing praise. Lactantius is directly connecting the superiority of Roman knowledge (Varro) with the superiority of Roman religious traditions (the Sibyls). Varro stands in stark contrast with the Greek authorities on which his opponents would have relied. This use implies that Latin authors were superior to Greeks. Although Lactantius had initially stated that he would rely on pagan authors because his audience might not believe in Christian sources of inspiration, he is much subtler in practice. Lactantius uses *Latin* pagan authors against *Greek* pagan authors. The conflict is not just over religion, but over culture.

Lactantius also names Varro as one of several authorities for three Euhemerist arguments, including the argument that Hercules and Jupiter were historic persons (*Div. Inst.* 1.13.8, 1.22.10-1, 1.17.8). In part of the first book of the *Divine Institutes*, Lactantius castigates Hercules and Jupiter (*Div. Inst.* 1.9, 1.11, 1.62-65). These are veiled political diatribes against Maximian

(who had taken the tetrarchic name Herculus) and Diocletian (likewise, with Jovius). Once more, Varro becomes relevant in Lactantius' 4th-century setting; Maximian and Diocletian are not gods, or even god-like; if they seem similar to Hercules and Jupiter, it is in their depravity. Lactantius needed to prove that "to tolerate Christianity was not to foster sedition but to practice *Romanitas*, not to promote deviance but to return to the core of Roman practice" (Digeser 2000, 113). With Varro, Lactantius can show that the Sibyls are more 'Roman' than the Apolline Oracles, and he can also show that the worship of one God was a better 'Roman' practice than the worship of 'gods' who were really men.

More than just "schoolmaster's knowledge," Varro plays an important role in the works of Lactantius. These arguments were central to Lactantius' attempt to turn pagan criticisms of Christianity back against the pagans. Varro was not "a stick with which to beat the pagans," as Mark Edwards describes Augustine's use of Varro (1999, 217n74), but rather a carrot to lead the Romans to Lactantius' Christian truth. This represents a very different method of incorporating Rome's pagan past from the Augustinian method that eventually became dominant.

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