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"Superstition": "a religious system considered to be irrational, unfounded, or based on fear or ignorance" (Oxford English Dictionary)

When looking at the texts from the late antiquity through the Middle Ages, many confusing and problematic terms arise. As one might tell from the definition at the beginning of this essay, one of these is the word 'superstition'. The biggest problem with this word is how to define it, which is the subject of this discussion. Although this definition touches on some of the points that will discussed, it is a broad and somewhat simplistic interpretation of such a problematic term (as can be expected in a dictionary, no matter how scholarly). I seek to provide some clarity to what it meant to be 'superstitious' in this period.

Throughout this essay, I argue that 'superstition' was a disparaging term meant to malign and minimize another set of beliefs. This is especially true when discussing the way in which Christian writers viewed their 'pagan' counterparts. For reasons that will be outlined later in the essay, 'superstition' was a way for Christians to denigrate 'paganism', a problematic term in itself that I will also attempt to clarify. Finally, as previously mentioned, I will consider various reasons as to why Christians felt the need to use this term.

If not already evident, 'superstition' is a vague and confusing word, one that is difficult to clearly define or exemplify. Modern perspectives seem to be in agreement, however, that the

phrase carries a negative connotation, as the Oxford English Dictionary definition demonstrates. However, there is still the issue of placing this word in the context of the late Roman Empire through the medieval Frankish period. The question remains: how is it that this term and its meaning endured, given the changing times and contexts? We begin in the Roman imperial age.

Much of Roman society seemed to be predicated on notions of order or, in the cases of their enemies, a lack thereof. Romans liked to consider themselves 'civilized', while others who were not 'Roman' were subsequently considered 'uncivilized'. This of course raises yet another problem of how to define what it meant to be Roman. David Frankfurter offers one answer, as he discusses a concept he calls the "discourse of ritual censure" (2005, 255-284). In his article, he outlines the way in which the early Christian church of the Empire interpreted "popular religion" (the religion of the masses), where "the voices of church fathers…[constructed] various boundaries to edit out the magical, the heathen, the heretical, [and] the confused" (Frankfurter 2005, 255-257). This way of censuring certain practices derives from earlier Roman thought, as can be surmised in the quote below:

> Roman notions of a cosmic and civic order maintained through public ritual had their antithesis in another ritual category that denoted secrecy and disruption of the social order: *magia* ('wizardry') and its corollary, *superstitio* ('immoral devotion')…Thus the discourse of ritual censure revolved around foreignness, subversion, manipulation, [and] social breakdown… (Frankfurter 2005, 258)

Although it only discusses this ideology from a religious context, several things can be surmised from this statement. The first is that Roman identity was constructed in the public sphere; to be Roman, one had to have been a social being. To be anti-social or to perform ritual in secrecy meant a willingness to subvert the "civic order" of Roman society. One form of subversive ritual was to enact *superstitio*, translated here as "immoral devotion." Seemingly, what made this devotion "immoral" was to do it away from the public sphere. Although

Frankfurter discusses religion, he simultaneously offers a socio-political construct of Roman identity, where the public is praised while the private is denigrated. Ian Wood offers a similar dichotomy of public/private, although his refers to the dualism of what he calls "public religion" and "private superstition". For Wood, "the superstitions of individuals were associated with the private than public beliefs and practices" (1995, 264).

Here, we have the first pieces of the puzzle in order to define 'superstition'. From the Roman Imperial era onward, it was considered a private act. By the point of late antiquity, however, it was also considered subversive, steeped in secrecy and "foreignness" while good Romans participated in public ritual. According to Wood, the public acts can be deemed a "religion" while the private ones are identified as "superstition".

However, there is an issue with identifying 'superstition' in conjunction with "foreignness". Simply put, what were the foreign entities that threatened Roman social order (especially if the Romans had already conquered enough to be considered an Empire)? The answer to this question would seemingly be a simple one: the barbarians! As Roman imperial power came under threat with the onset of the so-called "Barbarian Invasions of the fifth century", it was only apropos for Romans to direct their insults at the so-called 'barbarian' (Hillgarth 1986, 2). Unfortunately, this notion is rather simplistic and ignores the fact that 'barbarian' is another vague term that must be defined.

First and foremost, however, I must acknowledge that these definitions were not constructs of the so-called 'barbarians' themselves but of people who were hostile towards them. If I were to follow W.R. Jones' argument, the 'barbarian' has a rather complicated and frequently negative history in medieval Europe. Jones, although, attempts to offer a relatively easy, more linear history of the word. It has its roots in the Roman Empire, where it was used as a way for

Romans to distance themselves from the supposedly uncivilized and immoral Germanic peoples (Jones 1971, 378-80). The word then transitioned to a religious context: 'Roman' came to include 'Christian', while 'barbarian' came to include 'pagan' (Jones 1971, 380-392). Jones continues into the later Middle Ages, where it returned briefly to its Roman socio-political roots before progressing to the 'noble savage' ideals of the Renaissance (1971, 392-407). Most relevant to this discussion, however, are the first two definitions (so, forgive the deliberate ignorance of the last two definitions).

As previously outlined, Romans considered themselves 'civilized' creatures. Hence, those who were 'barbarian' were 'uncivilized'. Keeping in line with the first definition, 'barbarians' were essentially the 'other', the outlying foreigners who subverted Roman public order. The ways in which they disrupted Roman society, however, brings me to the second definition. In the last centuries of the Roman Empire, dubbed 'late antiquity' by many scholars, a radical shift came about. Christianity, a "tiny, politically suspect, religious splinter group", began to take hold in the Empire (Clark 2004, 1). (An ironic turn of events, considering the fact that Jesus was executed as a criminal in the most humiliating fashion possible in the Roman era!) However, Christianity faced a formidable foe which threatened its ever-increasing influence in the empire: paganism. This transition will be examined at length later, but the definition of paganism must be dealt with first.

Scholars have discussed the definition (or lack thereof) of paganism almost ad nauseam; it is a difficult concept indeed. As Isabella Sandwell points out, "historians have long been dissatisfied with simply adopting the term 'pagan', because it is a Christian category that flattens out the diversity of religious experience of those in the Graeco-Roman world" (2007, 10). The general consensus seems to be that 'pagan', although a true religion with its own nuances and

variations, was often a Christian construct to designate every other religion. It is a puzzling term, mostly because that designation often translated into denigration by Christians. In other words, "it was generally used in a derogatory sense" (Davies 2011, 1). However pejorative, 'paganism' was at least useful for the Christians who employed it in their rhetoric. According to Owen Davies, "it was a label that Christians applied to others, one of the antitheses that were central to the process of Christian self-definition" (2011, 1).

The problem with these definitions, however, is that they focus primarily on the fact that Christians largely inform the concept of paganism. Not nearly as much time is given to what paganism itself actually consisted of, but there are a few definitions that will be discussed. The first is the one offered by Davies where, "from the 5th century onwards, Christian authors began to reframe it in overtly religious terms, describing the *pagani* as rural idol worshippers" (2011, 2). Here, 'paganism' is portrayed as a rustic religion of a bunch of peasant "idol worshippers". This is obviously problematic because the educated elite practiced paganism as well, such as the teacher and orator Libanius of Antioch (Sandwell 2007, 6).

Other scholars, such as Prudence Jones and Nigel Pennick, argue that all pagan religions have the following characteristics in common: they are polytheistic, accept nature as a "manifestation of divinity", and recognize the existence of the divine female (i.e. the "goddess") (1995, 2). Sandwell, on the other hand, takes issue with the idea that all pagans were polytheistic, stating that this notion "implies a stark contrast with Christianity, namely that all Christians are monotheists while all non-Judaeo-Christians worship many gods" (2007, 10). Given her argument, Sandwell finds it best to avoid using the term 'pagan' altogether, instead replacing it with the word "Greek", the vernacular of the time (2007, 10). My argument, however, demands that I offer some clarity as to what it meant to be 'pagan', although this would require that I take

the Christian perspective into account. For the purposes of this discussion, 'paganism' has to be considered in conjunction with Christianity.

My definition of 'paganism' relates to a public/private dichotomy espoused by both Frankfurter and Wood. As Christianity began to take hold of the Roman psyche, the religion began to inform Roman identity as well. "By the late fourth century, Roman law had established Christianity as the authorised religion of the empire, and people who were classified as pagans, Jews, and heretics came under increasing pressure to conform" (Clark 2004, 7). The Empire was transitioning: 'barbarian' still signified a subversion to the social order, but now that order included Christianity. Pagans were the new 'other'; they had become the 'barbarians'. The next step from this transition would naturally be to define what a 'pagan' was, or more specifically, what a 'pagan' did. As we will see in primary texts, 'paganism' consisted of 'superstition'.

It should be noted that in this sense, Roman society informed the Christian identity just as much as the opposite. As Clark points out, the Christian Church still clung to Roman traditions, even after the disintegration of the empire:

> In the western half of the Roman empire, when imperial government collapsed in the late fifth century, it was the church that preserved and transmitted Latin language and literature, Graeco-Roman philosophical theology, and Roman administrative structures (2004, 7).

Furthermore, although Christian writers frequently challenged Roman social structures, they could never "separate themselves from the society of which they [were] part" (Clark 2004, 117). "Christians were Romans in language and culture, and the 'Fathers of the Church' are the Christian writes who were educated in the rhetoric and philosophy of the Roman empire" (Clark 2004, 116). Clearly, Christians had some fondness for Roman culture because they were Roman!

Thus, it is plausible that Christianity cherished the public sphere 'like good Romans'. After all, the Church is inherently a public entity; it is where people go to gather and worship. As good Romans, Christians considered themselves public beings; their belief system was no different. It was a 'religion', a concept that carries all sorts of connotations of politics and social structure, of a collective which requires some level of order. After all, "religious interaction is always a prerequisite for the existence of religious identities" (Sandwell 2007, 3-4). Meanwhile, 'paganism' was just 'superstition': private, secretive, unordered beliefs that varied between individuals. 'Religion' was what 'civilized' people practiced (together, of course, 'like good Romans'). 'Superstition' was what the primitive rustic practiced, the 'uncivilized' folk. Therefore, when Christians employed the term 'superstition' it was meant to insult, often directed at their pagan counterparts.

'Superstition', along with its sibling 'paganism', occupy a sort of a paradoxical space. They are both lesser entities than 'religion'. And yet, they are the subject of many texts from late antiquity through the Carolingian period. Countless Christian writers spent time pondering over 'pagan superstition', warning their readers to beware of its dangers. Although 'superstition' was the 'other', it was presumably a powerful 'other', with enough strength to potentially subvert the established 'religion'. In the very least, it was enough of a threat to garner the attention of these Christian writers.

One of these writers was Ambrose of the 4th century. At this time, a controversy had arisen in Rome over the Altar of the Statue of Victory. The statue was formed as a testament to Rome's imperial success; it, or at least its altar, was a pagan shrine where "senators burned incense and offered libations" (Croke and Harries 1982, 28). As Christianity rose to power and influence within the senate, however, the shrine was removed by Emperor Gratian, stirring up a

flurry of diplomatic lobbying for its restoration by pagans, namely Symmachus. His opposition

in this war of words was Ambrose.

In his statements written to the emperor Valentinian II (brother of Gratian, who had been

overthrown and killed), Ambrose urged the teenage emperor to hold fast to the Christian belief

and not succumb to 'pagan superstition':

> I ask you not to destroy what your brother [Gratian] in his faith established, nor go back
> on your brother's precedent. In secular business no one believes there is any need to fear
> that a decision once made may be reversed – yet is a principle of religion to be trampled
> underfoot?

> Do not let anyone cheat you because of your youth; if the man making this demand of
> you is a pagan, he should not entangle your mind in the chains of his superstition…
> (Croke and Harries 1982, 32)

Here, Ambrose uses the religion/superstition dichotomy to distinguish Christianity from

paganism. Christianity was the 'religion' in danger of being "trampled underfoot" by the pagan

"chains of…superstition."

The anonymous writer of 4th century work, called "Ambrosiaster", echoes a similar

sentiment in his/her writings. In their refutation of paganism, Ambrosiaster disputes the validity

of the belief system, arguing that its 'gods' were merely people who were later illogically

deemed divine. God (the Christian one) "should be the creator of men", not the other way around

(Croke and Harries 1982, 94). Instead, "they [pagans] give the title of gods to personages who

never venture to claim it for themselves, with the result that man is regarded as the creator of

gods" (Croke and Harries 1982, 94). To further this argument against paganism, Ambrosiaster

calls upon the religion/superstition and public/private dichotomies, stating that:

> I do not understand what justification the pagans can adduce for their daring to join battle
> with us or to make assaults upon our faith, seeing that they have no documentary proof of
> their allegations concerning their superstitions, as I shall call it, rather than their
> religion…we practice nothing in the darkness, nothing in secret. For nothing known to be

honourable is afraid to show itself in public: things shameful or dishonourable, on the other hand, modesty forbids to show their faces in the open (Croke and Harries 1982, 94-95).

In other words, what is "honourable" is the Christian "religion" that is practiced in "public". Contrast that definition with what Ambrosiaster considers "shameful": "superstitions" that are done in darkness or in secret. Paganism is so dishonorable for Ambrosiaster, that he/she does not even consider it a 'religion'; 'superstition' is a much more appropriate term for him/her.

Emperor Theodosius II reaffirms this idea in the *Codex Theodosianus* (Theodosian Code) of the fifth century. What was considered a 'superstition' was a subsequently forbidden and needed to be "utterly rooted out" (Croke and Harries 1982, 19-21). In one code, those found to be performing pagan practices are considered to be "full of offence against religion, [and] he shall be held guilty of sacrilege and shall be punished with the loss of that house or holding in which he is proved to have served a pagan superstition" (Croke and Harries 1982, 24). Here, 'superstition' is not only an offense against 'religion', but it is also relegated to the private sphere ("the house"), similar to Wood's argument.

It should be noted, though, that there were multiple approaches to insulting paganism or pagan superstition that did not involve outright attacking it. Other authors took a more subtle approach, simply giving paganism minimal importance. One of these is the author of the *Life of St. Caesarius of Arles*. Much of this hagiography is devoted to the presumed holiness of Caesarius, such as his devotion to Christianity at an early age and his peaceful nature. Only the most minimal of writings is devoted to his fiery preaching, to his sermons "against the evils of drunkenness and lust, discord and hatred, wrath and pride, the sacrilegious and soothsayers, against the most pagan rites of the Kalends…" (Hillgarth 1986, 41). Out of a somewhat lengthy

hagiography, this is the only mention of Caesarius attacking pagan ritual, and it is yet minimalized by the other sins that surround it.

Some might interpret this as a shift in thought from late antiquity. Rather than outright insulting paganism, Christian writers no longer considered it enough of threat to warrant much discussion. Yitzhak Hen argues a similar point in his article, stating that "paganism and superstitions…[were used] for didactic purposes, while [Christian writers attributed] minor importance to the phenomena themselves" (2002, 232). Especially in hagiographies, "paganism and superstitions" were used more as literary tropes or instructional devices.

I somewhat disagree with this notion. While I concede that this may be the case in some Christian primary texts, this idea seemingly denies that there was a pagan threat to Christianity at all, which is hard to imagine considering other writers spend a great amount of time criticizing it. I would counter this argument with my own interpretation of Caesarius' hagiography. I argue that the minimal importance offered to paganism is in fact another attack on it. Paganism is so much of a lesser being than Christianity that it need not warrant the attention of Christian writers. Or, perhaps it was so much of a threat that the authors did not wish to spend too much time on it. Or, perhaps all scholars are overanalyzing this issue without considering the possibility that the audience for this hagiography was one that knew Caesarius well and could have known what his life was like. After all, "it was written within seven years of Caesarius' death by men who knew him well" (Hillgarth 1986, 20). Still, the main problem with Hen's interpretation is that it describes Christian insults of paganism as merely an accidental phenomenon. As we have already seen in other primary texts, this is often not the case.

It is apparent that in many other instances there was a conscious effort to insult 'pagan superstition', a stark contrast to Hen's interpretation. As Ian Wood puts it, 'paganism' was

constructed as the 'other' to Christianity, especially in the hagiographical genre. (As an aside,

Wood's argument focuses on deconstructing the myth of missionary hagiography as a "genre"

from the fifth century to mid-eleventh century. He maintains that this is an inaccurate assessment

because it gets "in the way of the precise nature of the career of the individual 'missionary'"

(2001, 248). He analyzes some of these hagiographies, with respect to their own nuances and

variations.) Whether real or imagined, Wood argues that Christian hagiographers of this period

believed that there were pagans or pagan practices around and among them (2001, 250). Some

even believed that the outlying pagan peoples were "dog-headed" monsters (Wood 2001, 252)!

By this point, 'paganism' was not only 'superstitious', but its practitioners were not even human.

The 'religion/superstition' dichotomy, which was previously informed by civilized/uncivilized,

elite/peasant, and Roman/barbarian dualisms, thus came to include a dualism between human

existence and the lack thereof.

 During late antiquity, the 'Christian religion' might have been used as a means of

separation by the civilized and educated people from the uneducated peasant class who were

prone to superstition (MacMullen 1997, 33-74). (It should be noted that this reading has rather

elitist overtones. It presents the struggle between 'religion' and 'superstition' as a conflict

between the educated elite and the backwards, primate peasant class.) As the centuries

progressed, this conflict transitioned from a class war to a culture war. The 'religious' fight

against 'superstition' took on an increasingly nationalist tone. During the Merovingian and

Carolingian Frankish periods, "Christ is 'almost a national God'" (Hillgarth 1986, 90), so being

Frankish also meant being a Christian.

 As church leaders like St. Boniface began to wield their ecclesiastical power over

Frankish leaders like Charles Martel, Pepin, and Charlemagne, Christian 'religion' became even

more exclusive. Boniface is notorious for his strict perspective on Christianity; every other belief system, even Christian ones that differed from his own, were 'superstitious'. 'Superstitions' thus became ever more random and unorganized, especially when compared with the more ordered Christian 'religion'. We see this phenomenon in one Frankish document, the *Indiculus Superstitionum et Paganiairum* (*List of Superstitions and Pagan Practices)*. In it, the reader can observe a wide array of what was considered 'pagan superstition'. There is talk of "sacrilege at the graves of the dead", of "sacred rites of Mercury and of Jupiter" (Dutton 1993, 3). Amulets, knots, "fountains of sacrifices", incantations, auguries—even the dung of birds, horses, and cattle are mentioned in this document (Dutton 1993, 3)!

What is most important in this text, however, is that, despite its title, the word 'superstition' is never used. It has been replaced by the word 'sacrilegious'. Some might view this as another transition in thought from antiquity; the Franks seemingly have their own insults to pagan belief. Yet, I argue that while the word has changed, the meaning is the same. 'Sacrilegious' is defined as the "profanation of anything held sacred" (Oxford English Dictionary). Considering that Christianity was held as the most sacred during this time period, what was termed 'sacrilegious' could be defined as something that was 'against (Christian) religion', similar to 'superstition'. What is seen in the *Indiculus Superstitionum et Paganiarum* is not so much a change, but a translation of thought.

This is a phenomenon that is present throughout this discussion. In the Roman Empire, we saw a translation, where 'civilized/uncivilized' was adapted to 'public/private'. This dichotomy then branched out, forming other dualisms such as 'Roman' and 'barbarian'. As Christianity rose to power, it was adopted into 'civilized', 'Roman' identity, while its antithesis, 'paganism' was added to the 'uncivilized', 'barbarian' ethos. As a means of further

differentiating Christianity and paganism, one was deemed the public, socially correct 'religion' while the other was relegated to private, mysterious, and shameful 'superstition'.

There is still the basic question underlying this discussion: why? Why spend time and effort insulting a set of beliefs that were supposed to be beneath Christianity? One answer is the obvious one: religious identity. Implicit in this whole argument is, of course, the idea that Christians used 'pagan superstition' as a means of self-identification. If paganism, the opposition, was 'uncivilized' then Christianity by contrast was the 'civilized' set of beliefs. As James Palmer points out, "'paganisms' were thus not so much coherent rival religions to the Franks, as the antithesis of Christian practice itself" (2007, 404).

However, Isabella Sandwell adds another wrinkle to this idea of religious identity. She argues that religious identity is not merely a way of defining oneself, but also a means of informing one's socio-religious interaction with others. Using the examples of John Chrysostom, a Christian priest and preacher, and Libanius, a pagan teacher and orator, Sandwell contrasts the way in which the two (both from Antioch) observe the importance of religion. Chrysostom took great care to construct Christian identity in contrast with Greek (pagan) identity because it dictated how the two would interact with each other publically. "For Chrysostom, people had to choose whether or they were a Christian or a Greek and there was to be no space for ambiguity between the two because religious identity had to be displayed visibly in every action at all times" (Sandwell 2007, 6). Compare that with the writings of the pagan Libanius, who was aware of this socio-religious identity and allegiance, but still only giving it minimal importance in his writings (Sandwell 2007, 6-7).

Regardless of the reason, it is clear that in its most harmless form, 'superstition' was a form of insult, first by Roman writers directed at their barbarian counterparts, later morphing into

Christian writers insulting pagans. Yet and still, 'superstition', or rather 'pagan superstition'

retained its power, evidenced by the syncretic effect it had on Christianity. As Ramsay

MacMullen points out, certain rhetoric used by the Church was borrowed from its pagan

ancestors:

> The language used toward superhuman Powers, whether precatory or apotropaic,
> borrowed from paganism: candles, for example, or bells, and the marking of objects used
> in address with special signs and letters, all but the cross a part of pagan tradition. A
> propitiating kiss bestowed on the doorpost of a temple was just as well given to a church;
> likewise the honorific bow in the direction of the rising sun, offered 'partly in ignorance,'
> says the pope, 'partly in pagan spirit' by worshippers pausing as they climbed the steps of
> Saint Peter's (1997, 157).

Whatever the cause or context, even after the rise of Christianity, a powerful pagan voodoo

maintained a hold over Europe from late antiquity through the medieval era. It would take an

even more powerful 'religion' to break that stronghold.

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"Pledged"