The Monk Hypatius and the Olympic Games of Chalcedon*

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ABSTRACT

A passage of the Life of Hypatius, written by Callinicus of Rufiniana about 450, provides interesting information concerning the pagan cults and spectacles in the Bithynian countryside in the first half of the fifth century. According to Callinicus, Leontius, Praefectus Urbis of Constantinople in 434-435, decided to reestablish the Olympic Games at the theatre of Chalcedon. This local festival was presumably composed of athletic, literary, and musical competitions. The pagan element in these shows did no longer exist in that time because paganism had been banned by Theodosius the Great in the previous century. Nevertheless, the response of Hypatius, the founder and first abbot of the monastery of Rufiniana (near Chalcedon), was a forceful one. He accused these games of promoting idolatry and, having assembled twenty monks, marched on Chalcedon with the intention of entering the theatre and killing the Praefectus if it was necessary. Frightened, Leontius revoked his decision of offering games and Hypatius appeared as a champion of the faith.

The opposition of the monk Hypatius to the Olympic Games of Chalcedon is an interesting example to illustrate the struggle between an expanding Christianity and a dying paganism in the Later Roman Empire. It also provides information concerning the pagan cults and spectacles in the Bithynian countryside in the first half of the fifth century.

The source where this episode can be found is the Life of Hypatius, written by Callinicus of Rufiniana about 450 AD. This is the biography of Hypatius, a monk who was the founder and the first abbot of the monastery of Rufiniana, near Chalcedon. His life is full of stories about his wisdom and sanctity, his love for poverty, his asceticism, and his contribution towards the Christianisation of the region plus his fight against what was left of paganism.1

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Studia Patristica LX, 39-45.
In this sense, we find an interesting anecdote in chapter 33 of the *Life of Hypatius*. The story is as follows: Leontius, the prefect of Constantinople, decided to establish the Olympic Games at the theatre of Chalcedon. When Hypatius knew the news, he cried because he thought that he was going to see the rebirth of idolatry. Then, he assembled twenty monks and went with them to see the bishop Eulalius. Hypatius announced to the bishop that he was ready to die in the theatre before permitting such a return of idolatry. Eulalius did not agree, because they were not obliged to offer sacrifices, and asked Hypatius to keep calm. But the monk replied that if Eulalius did not do anything to hinder the celebration, he would go to the theatre with his monks and, when the prefect held the presidency of the games, he would throw him from his podium, even if this assassination meant that Hypatius and his followers would be executed; they preferred to die as martyrs before permitting the rebirth of pagan religion.

When Leontius heard that those threats had been hurled against him, he was really scared, decided to stay in Constantinople, on the other side of the Bosphore, and refrained from organizing the Olympic Games. This was a very great success for Hypatius, whose fame of sanctity increased enormously. As a result, the bishop Eulalius realized that Hypatius was a man of God, and respected him as a father. Callinicus ends this episode by stating that Hypatius did not know exactly what the Olympic Games were. Then God sent him a man called Eusebius who knew this topic very well and explained to him that the Olympics were a very fearsome festival of Satan, the culmination of idolatrous madness, and a cause of corruption to Christians.\(^2\)

This episode is full of clichés, so we cannot know how much of this is true. In any case, it is possible to give it a (dramatic) date. Indeed, Callinicus said that it was Leontius who wanted to organize the Olympic Games at Chalcedon, and thanks to the prosopographical studies we know that Leontius was the prefect of Constantinople between 434 and 435.

This episode also provides a large amount of interesting information. In the first place, there is the topic of the organization of the Olympic Games at Chalcedon. It is well known that Olympia was not the only city where the Olympic Games were celebrated in the Antiquity.\(^3\) Many other cities held games in imitation of those at Olympia.\(^4\) And without any doubt, the most renowned

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\(^3\) About the end of the Olympic Games of the city of Olympia, see Iole Fargnoli, ‘Sulla “caduta senza rumore” delle Olimpiadi classiche’, *RIDA* 50 (2003), 119-54.

games made in imitation of those at Olympia during Late Antiquity were the Olympic Games of Antioch, which continued to be held until they were abolished by the emperor Justin in 521.5

The programme of the games usually included theatrical performances, chariot races, sometimes uenations, and mainly athletic contests,6 as Libanius affirmed in one of his letters: ‘Our Olympic Games will take place soon, and in this festival the most important thing is athletics’.7

Moreover, they were held in honour of the Olympian Zeus. The religious nature of the Olympic Games was still very present in the fourth century, as we can read in some of the Libanius’ letters related to the Olympic Games of the year 364. In one of those letters, Libanius praised Candidus, the alytarchos, for honouring Zeus thanks to his own expenses.8 And in a letter addressed to Hierius, prefect of Egypt, he said that it was possible for the prefect to honour Zeus through athletes.9 Libanius also asked Clearchus, vicarius of Asia, for athletes and told him that if he provided athletes, his government would be favoured by Zeus, whom he had honoured.10 Thus the Olympic Games were clearly offered in honour of Zeus, and their organizer was the servant of Zeus and his personal representative.11

According to Libanius, in the past the competitions were reserved to a small elite of spectators, who attended the event quietly and in such a solemn manner as if they were attending religious mysteries.12 But in his lifetime, almost everybody could come to the events, and the behaviour of the spectators was very different: indeed, noise and disturbances increased enormously, which resulted in the disappearance of the solemn nature of the festival.13 Paul Petit says that in fact it was a secularization of the Olympic festival.14

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5 Malalas, Chronographia XVII 417; PG 97, 616-7. About the religious interaction in Antioch in the fourth century, see Isabella Sandwell, Religious Identity in Late Antiquity: Greeks, Jews and Christians in Antioch (Cambridge, 2007).
7 Libanius, Epistulae 1182, 2, ed. Richard Foerster (Leipzig, 1922), XI 266.
8 Libanius, Epistulae 1181, ed. R. Foerster, XI 266.
12 Libanius, Orationes 10, 6, ed. Richard Foerster (Leipzig, 1903), I 2, 403.
14 P. Petit, Libanius et la vie municipale (1955), 143: ‘Il s’agit en réalité d’une laïcisation (…) des fêtes olympiques, et c’est ce qui chagrine notre vieil Hellène. La foule se rue au spectacle du Plêthre, mais elle y apporte, comme aux autres, sa violence profane et sa vulgarité’. Emmanuel
But as the Olympic Games were nominally still a festival held in honour of Zeus, the hatred that some rigorous Christians, such as Hypatius, felt against them seems quite obvious. The Christian writers always criticized the Roman shows and those of the Hellenic tradition. On the one hand, they censured them because they were consecrated to the gods, and therefore they were a sign of idolatry. Thus, the Christians who came to watch them indulged in the worst of crimes: idolatry. On the other hand, the Christian writers attributed to them a number of moral sins, each sin related to a specific sort of show: furor to the circus, lust to the theatre, and cruelty to the amphitheatre.

Tertullian, with his *De spectaculis*, had a great importance in the creation of these accusations. His arguments were collected by later writers, who sometimes repeated them almost literally until those arguments became authentic tópoi. Therefore, the reaction of Hypatius sounds logical when he heard the news that Olympic Games were going to take place in Chalcedon. Indeed, according to Callinicus, Hypatius, moaning and crying, complained to God saying: ‘My Lord, will I ever see idolatry revive during my lifetime?’ and when Hypatius spoke with the bishop Eulalius, he told him: ‘I have heard and known that manifestations of idolatry in the Olympic Games near us and the holy Church of God are about to occur’.

But was Hypatius right in making these protests and accusations against the games in the fifth century? In our opinion, he was not. Hypatius was only repeating the accusations that many other Christian writers had been throwing against the games for generations.

Soler does not agree with this hypothesis and prefers to speak of a Dionysian drift of the Olympic Games; see Emmanuel Soler, *Le sacré et le salut à Antioche au IVe siècle apr. J.-C. Pratiques festives et comportements religieux dans le processus de christianisation de la cité* (Beyrouth, 2006), 89: ‘L’attitude du peuple était déterminée par des formes de conscience religieuse collective. Le fait que les Antiochiens aient eu un comportement plutôt dionysiaque au cours des Jeux olympiques ne permet pas de parler de laïcisation, mais témoigne simplement d’une dérive festive dionysiaque silencieuse sur le nom du dieu sous-jacent’.


However, in the fifth century the games had become a secular phenomenon disconnected from any kind of pagan festival. In fact, between the years 390 and 392, the emperor Theodosius abolished the pagan rituals, both public and private, which means that it was not allowed to worship images, to make offerings (neither sacrifices nor libations), and to visit sanctuaries. The result of this policy was that the Olympic Games lost all trace of their religious component, and in consequence they became only an artistic and sporting manifestation. A few years later, in 395, Honorius and Arcadius ordered that pagan festivals were all excluded from the official calendar. Henceforth, games continued to be held, although unrelated to any religious manifestation, as we observe in the comparison of the calendars of Philocalus (354) and Polemius Silvius (448/449).

The objective of this legislation was to abolish paganism while maintaining intact the Roman shows, a magnificent way of protecting political propaganda and popular entertainment. But the Christian religious authorities never wanted to recognise this secularisation. Indeed, after the process of secularisation of the Roman games, the Christian leaders continued to criticise them as an expression of pagan religion, as we can see in the episode of Hypatius.

So, when the prefect Leontius tried to establish the Olympic Games in Chalcedon, his purpose was not to revive a pagan celebration, because in doing this he would have infringed the law; his intention was to create a contest, in that moment definitively secular. Leontius intended to perpetuate many of the ideals inherited from the classical world, and, in this way, to preserve the mos maiorum. Accordingly, we do not agree with some modern scholars who think that ‘the invocation of the Olympian gods, burning of incense, and consumption of slaughtered animals (…) were necessary adjuncts to the ceremonial, even if

19 Codex Theodosianus XVI 10, 10-2, ed. Theodor Mommsen (Berlin, 1905), 899-901.
21 Codex Theodosianus II 8, 22, ed. Th. Mommsen, 89.
conducted privately’. Doing this in the year 434/435 would have been simply going against the law.

On the other hand, Callinicus also said that before Leontius had attempted to establish the Olympic Games, they had been abolished ‘by the ancient emperors and by Constantine of eternal memory’. But this is not correct. If we examine the imperial legislation of the fourth and fifth centuries related to the shows, we observe that no emperor did ever do anything against the spectacles because, as we have already said, they were a magnificent type of political propaganda and popular entertainment. The prohibition of the games is a historiographical myth created by authors such as Eusebius of Cesarea and other ecclesiastical historians, who specifically affirmed that Constantine banned the gladiatorial shows. Nevertheless this prohibition never took place, and we cannot even interpret as a prohibition the rescript of Berytus of the year 325.

When Leontius tried to establish some Olympic Games in Chalcedon, other similar festivals still existed in the Oriental Mediterranean. We must remember that those of Antioch lasted until the year 521. It goes without saying that they enjoyed no longer the same splendour as in a previous period, mainly because they had become a secular ceremony in the fifth century. What made them particularly significant, i.e. their religious component through their being dedicated to Zeus, had disappeared.

Hypatius had planned to put an end to the Olympic Games bursting into the stadium with his monks and killing the prefect when he was presiding at the games. And it was just the threat of using force that made Leontius give up his idea of organizing Olympic Games in Chalcedon. However, the idea of going to a place where shows were being planned with the intention of provoking riots in the name of God was not exclusive of Hypatius. The ancient record allows us to learn of similar cases. In the middle of the fifth century, Theodoret of Cyrrhus narrated in his *Ecclesiastical History* the story of Telemachus, an oriental monk who travelled to Rome with the aim of putting an end to the gladiatorial shows.

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He entered into the Colosseum where some combats were taking place. Then, he went down to the arena and separated the gladiators. This interruption of the spectacle angered the spectators, who stoned the monk. As a result of this lynching, Honorius included Telemachus among the martyrs and also abolished the *munera gladiatoria*.\(^{27}\) This is an entirely legendary story,\(^{28}\) although at the same time it explains how some fanatical Christians could cause disturbances during the shows. Augustine of Hippo also said that a pious man could attend the amphitheatre with the purpose of liberating a gladiator,\(^{29}\) an allusion that reminds us of the legendary story told by Theodoret.

Be that as it may, these acts were a reality, if to some extent a literary one. Two laws from the *Theodosian Code*, issued by Theodosius II the years 416 and 418, are significant in this respect.\(^{30}\) Their objective was to regulate the activities of the *parabalani* from Alexandria, some individuals, probably minor clergymen, famous for their fanaticism. The abuses of the *parabalani* caused terror among the inhabitants of Alexandria, who sent an embassy to the Court in order to request an end to these excesses. The imperial answer categorically forbade the *parabalani* to access the public shows, the curia, or the courts of justice. And the reason why the *parabalani* were banned from entering into the theatres or similar buildings by Theodosius II may be due to the conflicts they had previously instigated in these places.

Hypatius did not mind resorting to the threat of using force to put an end to what he considered a manifestation of idolatry, a relatively common use among certain sectors in the East, particularly monastic places. His triumph, thanks to the threat of force, was seen as a new sign of his sanctity. We must remember that, according to Callinicus, after the triumph of Hypatius, the bishop Eulalius realised that the monk was always acting for God and for God he succeeded; and because of this, the bishop showed him his respect almost like a father.\(^{31}\)

In conclusion, this episode of the *Life of Hypatius*, despite its brevity, provides interesting information about multiple topics, such as the struggle of Christian leaders against the games (although these were a secular phenomenon in the fifth century), the process of Christianisation of the Bithynian countryside, the occasionally difficult relationship between the bishop and monks, and the violence sometimes used by monks to achieve their objectives.


\(^{28}\) Juan Antonio Jiménez, ‘El martirio de Almaquio y la prohibición de los espectáculos de gladiadores’, *Polis* 20 (2008), 89-165.


\(^{30}\) *Codex Theodosianus* XVI 2, 42-43, ed. Th. Mommsen, 850-1.