



CHRISTIANITY IN THE EYES OF A GREEK
INTELLECTUAL: THE NOTIONS OF ΣΟΦΙΑ AND
ΤΕΛΕΤΗ IN LUCIAN'S *DE MORTE PEREGRINI*.

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Résumé : Cet article vise à brosser un tableau général de la perception du christianisme chez Lucien de Samosate à travers l'analyse du vocabulaire particulier employé dans le chapitre 11 de son *De morte Peregrini*, où le christianisme est mentionné comme θαυμαστή σοφία et καινή τελετή. Ainsi, en premier lieu, ont été analysées les différentes significations et l'évolution de ces deux noms dans le contexte de l'histoire de la langue grecque ; en seconde lieu, a été étudié leur usage spécifique aux œuvres de Lucien. Cette analyse préliminaire s'étant heurtée à une difficulté apparente à concilier les deux termes avec la définition de la religion chrétienne, l'attention s'est portée sur leur usage spécifique lié au christianisme dans le *De morte Peregrini*. Quant à θαυμαστή σοφία, le contexte narratif et la connotation particulière de Jésus comme σοφιστής (figurant dans un passage ultérieur et lue à la lumière de la catégorie historico-religieuse de θεῖος ἀνὴρ) ont permis de reconnaître une signification spécifique en tant qu'ensemble des connaissances et des normes constitutives de la doctrine transmise aux chrétiens par Jésus, à savoir en tant que « contenu » du christianisme. La désignation de καινή τελετή qui concerne plutôt la « forme externe » du christianisme, a trouvé une explication dans le contexte de la structure générale du polythéisme grec (au sein duquel le concept général de « religion » est absent), ce qui entraîne l'impossibilité pour Lucien de comprendre et d'expliquer le christianisme en dehors des paramètres traditionnels, et l'amène à l'identifier comme l'une des diverses options de culte dévotionnel et initiatique se répandant au sein de la religion grecque. Enfin, la lecture croisée de ces deux définitions à la lumière du vocabulaire y relatif et de la conception de Jésus en tant que θεῖος ἀνὴρ, a permis de reconnaître chez Lucien une attitude de désintéret général et de légère moquerie

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envers le christianisme, qui le relie à d'autres intellectuels de l'époque, même sur le plan linguistique.

Abstract: This article aims to draw a general picture of Lucian of Samosata's perception of Christianity through the analysis of the peculiar vocabulary used in chapt. 11 of his *De morte Peregrini*, where Christianity is mentioned as *θαυμαστή σοφία* and *καινή τελετή*. To do this, at first, the different meanings and the evolution of these two nouns in the context of the history of the Greek language have been analyzed; subsequently, they have been studied in their specific uses within Lucian's works. After this preliminary analysis, from which an apparent difficulty to reconcile the two terms with the definition of Christian religion has emerged, the attention has been focused on their specific use related to Christianity in *De morte Peregrini*. As for *θαυμαστή σοφία*, the narrative context and the particular connotation of Jesus as *σοφιστής* (given in a later passage and read in the light of the historic-religious category of *θεῖος ἀνὴρ*) have made it possible to recognize a specific meaning as set of knowledge and norms that makes up the doctrine transmitted to Christians by Jesus, i.e. as the 'content' of Christianity; the definition of *καινή τελετή*, which concerns instead the 'external form' of Christianity, has found an explanation in the context of the general structure of Greek polytheism (in which the general concept of 'religion' is missing), which determines the impossibility for Lucian to understand and explain Christianity outside the traditional parameters, and leads him to identify it as one of the various options of devotional and initiatory worship that were spreading within Greek religion. Finally, the cross-reading of these two definitions in the light of the surrounding vocabulary and of the conception of Jesus as *θεῖος ἀνὴρ*, allowed to recognize in Lucian an attitude of general lack of interest and slight mockery towards Christianity, which connects him to other intellectuals of the time, even on the linguistic level.

Introduction

The problem of the relationship between Lucian and the Christians is one of the central issues that has determined our approach to the author from the very beginning. The question, which finds its roots in the entry of the Suda dedicated to him,¹ over the centuries has taken on increasingly huge proportions, with an impressive amount of studies and interpretations proposed.² Opinions on this topic are numerous and often divergent, and the very extent itself





of the Christian presence in Lucian's works is also controversial; the only certain fact is that Christians appear in an unequivocal way solely within the *Alexander* and *De morte Peregrini*.³ In the first of the two writings Christians are mentioned only twice (chapt. 25 and 38), and each time in a very superficial way; they appear in fact in two indirect quotations, reported in the context of public announcements made by the protagonist of the work, who associates them in both cases to the general category of ἄθεοι, together with the Epicureans. The real core of the question is represented, rather, by *De morte Peregrini* (henceforth abbreviated as *Peregr.*); within this satirical writing it is in fact possible to identify a real 'Christian parenthesis', in which the Christian phenomenon plays a central role.

Within the wide context of the question of Christianity in Lucian's corpus, this article intends to focus on a specific aspect of it, namely the lexicon he used in the *Peregr.* to indicate Christianity, globally conceived as religion, doctrine, and social phenomenon; this element will in fact prove to be a precious clue to understand the particular way in which Lucian conceived the Christian phenomenon. Once this has been clarified, it will be possible to proceed with a comparison between Lucian's attitude and that of other exponents of the Greek-Roman intellectual class of the time which, though in different ways and measures, approached the Christian problem with a vocabulary and attitude similar to those of Lucian: this will make it possible to place Lucian's particular vision in a wider context, which shows some common traits in the perception of Christians, and which he fully represents.

1. The 'Christian parenthesis' in *De morte Peregrini*

The *Peregr.*⁴ is a peculiar work composed by Lucian in a time span that goes from 165 to 180, and its explicit aim is to tell (and, at the same time, ridicule) a historical fact: the spectacular and grotesque suicide staged by the homonymous character (also known by the eloquent nickname 'Proteus')⁵ at the Olympics of 165. The work is however not only an account of this event; instead, it is for Lucian a pretext to unmask and demolish the controversial figure of this cynic philosopher, who became famous thanks to his spectacular death, which immediately gave him that





aura of holiness that Lucian was determined to eliminate. The work presents a composite structure – made up of a continuous accumulation of different episodes and situations – and a further factor of confusion is given by the fact that, within it, three different narrating voices act:⁶ with the exception of the introductory and concluding chapters – in which Lucian addresses an unidentified Cronius,⁷ dedicatee of the work – in its first part (chapt. 4-6) the narration is entrusted to Theagen (a cynic philosopher, disciple of Peregrinus), who, in a direct speech, praises his master and announces his imminent undertaking; the second one (chapt. 7-30) consists entirely of the speech of an anonymous speaker (an unknown man whose words and attitude Lucian seems to share totally – and this fact generally induces scholars to consider him as one of the many fictive *alter ego* of Lucian's), who replies to Theagen's words by drawing a ruthless profile of Peregrinus' life and career; the last part (chapt. 31-42), finally, sees Lucian speaking in the first person, as a spectator of the event, and becoming therefore both narrator and character of the work.

The passage in which Christians are mentioned is located in the central body of the work, in the context of the speech delivered by the anonymous protester; the first part of it (chapt. 9-20) is a sort of 'biography' of Peregrinus, which retraces the various stages of his life and his 'career' as a philosopher, with a tone and structure that upset the canons of the encomiastic biographies of philosophers and holy men.⁸ According to this report, Peregrinus, fleeing from his hometown Parium (where he was accused of patricide), found refuge in Palestine, where he came into contact with a Christian community. There, in a short time – thanks to his nature as a skillful swindler and charlatan – he managed to become an important charismatic leader, to the point of ending up imprisoned precisely as a Christian head; shortly afterwards, however, the anonymous speaker tells us, Peregrinus was released from prison and, having been expelled even by the Christians, moved to Egypt, where he embraced the doctrine and lifestyle of the Cynics.⁹ It is precisely in this section of the story (which consists of chapt. 11-13, with a last offshoot at the beginning of chapt. 16), which we could define as the 'Christian parenthesis' of Peregrinus' life (and of the homonymous writing), that we find the most important mention of Christians within the corpus of Lucian. The importance of this section is





determined by two factors; the first and most basic one is represented by the fact that there is no other passage dedicated to Christians of comparable extension in any of the author's writings; indeed, it has already been said that, in all probability, the only other certain mention can be found in the *Alexander*, however limited to two very short quotations, and therefore the parenthesis of the *Peregr.* represents a unicum, a privileged point of observation to investigate the extent of the Christian question in Lucian. Alongside this purely quantitative aspect, the importance of these chapters also depends on the quality of their content; in fact, although the whole episode requires particular caution from the reader – due to the constant parodic and demolishing distortion that runs through the entire work –¹⁰ within this parenthesis Lucian provides an interesting and extensive (albeit confusing and problematic) amount of information on the structure, organization and beliefs of the Palestinian Christian community in the second century. In particular, in chapt. 11, Lucian (by the mouth of the anonymous speaker, in his role as improvised biographer of Peregrinus) addresses the Christian religion twice, with a terminology at first sight surprising; let us see the whole chapter:¹¹

ὅτεπερ καὶ τὴν θαυμαστὴν σοφίαν τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἐξέμαθεν, περὶ τὴν Παλαιστίνην τοῖς ἱερεῦσιν καὶ γραμματεῦσιν αὐτῶν ξυγγενόμενος, καὶ τί γὰρ; ἐν βραχεῖ παιδας αὐτοὺς ἀπέφηνε, προφήτης καὶ θιασάρχης καὶ ξυναγωγεὺς καὶ πάντα μόνος αὐτὸς ὢν, καὶ τῶν βίβλων τὰς μὲν ἐξηγεῖτο καὶ διεσάφει, πολλὰς δὲ αὐτὸς καὶ συνέγραφεν, καὶ ὡς θεὸν αὐτῶν ἐκεῖνοι ἠδοῦντο καὶ νομοθέτη ἐχρῶντο καὶ προστάτην ἐπεγράφοντο, μετὰ γοῦν ἐκεῖνον <ὄν> ἔτι σέβουσι, τὸν ἄνθρωπον τὸν ἐν τῇ Παλαιστίνῃ ἀνασκολοπισθέντα, ὅτι καινὴν ταύτην τελετὴν εἰσήγγεν ἐς¹² τὸν βίον.

It was at that time that he [Peregrinus] learned thoroughly the wondrous wisdom of the Christians, spending time with their priests and scribes nearby Palestine. And guess what? In a short time he made them appear as little boys, becoming their prophet, head of the community and coordinator – all by himself – and commented and explained some of their texts, and many of them he wrote himself, and





they respected him as their god, considered him a spiritual guide and designated him as their champion – of course, after the one they still worship, that man hung to a pole¹³ in Palestine for giving life to this new cult.

The points of interest are numerous, especially from a lexical point of view. For example, one very striking fact is the great confusion of religious terms pertinent to very different contexts: *ιερεύς*, *γραμματεὺς*, *προφήτης*, *θιασάρχης*, *ξυναγωγεὺς*, *νομοθέτης*, *προστάτης*, they all eventually turn out to be broadly generic terms, potentially valid for any ancient religious community (many scholars have in fact recognized here Bacchic, Jewish and Egyptian echoes)¹⁴ and, above all, not very fitting with the reality of the early Christian communities. Another detail that can be highlighted is Lucian's tone, which appears not particularly aggressive, but rather ironic and slightly mocking towards Christians, who are portrayed as poor fools, deceived by the cunning and malicious Peregrinus.¹⁵ Special attention should be given, however, to the two expressions adopted by Lucian to refer to Christianity, which are *θαυμαστὴ σοφία* and *καινὴ τελετή*. Understanding what value these two syntagma assume in this passage of the *Peregr.* means understanding something more about the way in which a second century intellectual like Lucian, strongly imbued with Greek culture despite his Syrian origins, conceived Christianity.¹⁶ To do so, it is necessary, first of all, to understand what value these two words assume in the context of Greek language and religion, and then to verify how Lucian uses them in his works.

2. History and meaning of the terms

The two nouns used by Lucian – i.e. *σοφία* and *τελετή* – are curiously united by a single trait: neither seems to have much in common with the Christian religion. In fact, the former pertains to the field of practical skills and individual virtues, and at most strays into the field of philosophy, while the latter is properly one of the key terms of pagan mystery cults. Therefore, before focusing our attention specifically on Lucian, it may be useful to briefly examine the various nuances of meaning of these two words in the history of the





Greek language, in order to understand which meanings may be the most appropriate for this specific context.

- σοφία:¹⁷ this abstract noun is connoted since its first attestation in the *Iliad* (O 412) – in which it refers to the technical competence of the carpenter – for its pragmatic, concrete value: it indicates the ability in doing something, the ‘skillfulness’, where a ‘skill in handcraft and art’¹⁸ is meant. As is often the case with terms of this type, σοφία has been subject to an evolution towards a progressive abstraction: from the ability in doing something, it came to indicate also the ability in living, the cunning, the ability to make the right decisions in everyday life – that is, the virtue of the so-called Seven Sages, known precisely as σοφοί. A further step forward, which finds its most evident manifestation in Aristotle, was taken between the fifth and fourth centuries, when σοφία finally began to be used also to indicate a speculative form of wisdom, both in the ethical field and in the natural sciences. So, to summarize briefly, we note an evolution of the fields of application of the term σοφία, from basic manual competence to philosophical/scientific knowledge, passing through the field of moral virtues; a contiguity with the religious field, instead, remains apparently excluded.

- τελετή:¹⁹ this term, connected with τέλομαι, carries in itself the value of ‘becoming’, ‘fulfill’, and is used for the first time by Pindar in various passages, with the meaning of ‘rite’, ‘ceremony’.²⁰ It is the noun canonically used to indicate the rites of initiation proper to mystery cults such as the Eleusinian, Orphic or Mithraic ones (which imply, in fact, the idea of the fulfillment of something, the achievement of a particular status), and is sometimes used with the accessory meaning of ‘a making magically potent’. From this original meaning, others have developed; in particular, τελετή indicating ‘priesthood’, ‘sacred office’ or ‘sacrament’, or (but only in plural form) ‘theological doctrines’ or ‘festivals’ (in which mystic/religious rites recur). In the case of this noun, therefore, on the one hand a more limited evolution is recognized, which never goes beyond the original practical and cultic sphere; on the other hand, although it is clearly a technical term of the religious world, it appears, however, fundamentally bound to a single part of it, concrete and episodic, unsuitable to express abstract concepts or religious phenomena in their complexity.

In the light of this very brief overview, while it is





acknowledged that these are important terms in the history of Greek culture and thought, it also appears that neither of them is suitable to express the concept of 'religion'. This does not change even if we broaden our gaze towards the Christian side; σοφία is a recurrent term in the *New Testament* and in early Christian literature in general, and covers a wide range of meanings: it can indicate the wisdom of Solomon, Jesus, or God himself, it can be paired with the concept of the Holy Spirit, or it can indicate the charisma of the Apostles and the common discernment of the good Christian;²¹ in addition, we cannot fail to mention the first chapters of Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians*, which specifically focus on the difference between the σοφία τῶν σοφῶν (also called σαρκική) and the σοφία τοῦ θεοῦ (or πνευματική). Yet, all these cases refer to a spiritual quality, a virtue, or a divine attribute; in conclusion, this term, however important it may be in the context of Christian doctrine, is never adopted to refer to Christianity itself as religion or faith.²² Even less fitting then, in this perspective, appears the use of τελετή: it does not recur in any of the passages of the *New Testament*, and is merely used by Christian authors to generically indicate a sacramental rite, such as baptism or the Eucharist, but never to designate their faith or their community.²³

So far, therefore, Lucian's use of σοφία and τελετή to refer to the Christian religion, momentarily embraced by Peregrinus, seems hard to understand. It is therefore necessary to look for clues within the very corpus of his works, in order to find out what value these terms usually hold for him.

3. Uses in Lucian's corpus

Both terms are widely used by Lucian; in particular, of σοφία there are 56 occurrences, to which another 4 must be added (three in *Tim.* 31-33 and one in *BisAcc.* 8), in which this noun is used as the proper name of the personified Σοφία.²⁴ The value it assumes in almost all cases is quite generic: it is mostly used in an abstract sense as 'wisdom', 'common sense', that is, as a generic moral/intellectual quality or virtue.²⁵ In this general panorama, however, four specific cases stand out, in which an alternative and more connoted meaning of σοφία emerges, which is worth examining:





1) In *Alex.* 47 Lucian speaks of a work by Epicurus, the *Κύριαι δόξαι*, calling it τὸ κάλλιστον, ὡς οἶσθα, τῶν βιβλίων καὶ κεφαλαιώδη περιέχον τῆς τάνδρὸς σοφίας τὰ δόγματα. The term σοφία indicates here of course ‘wisdom’, but should not be intended as a generic virtue, and rather as the specific trait of a philosopher, that is a knowledge composed of δόγματα, which can be summarized in a book.

2) An even clearer example, in this sense, is the case of *Vitarum auctio*; in the fiction of this work, various βίαι (intended as ‘lifestyles’) of philosophers are proposed to different buyers, just as in an auction; when it comes to Socrates, he begins by describing (obviously in a grotesquely parodied manner) his way of life, and after his mention of the communion of women and children within his system, the client replies βαβαὶ τῆς φιλοδωρίας, τῆς δὲ σοφίας τί σοι τὸ κεφάλαιον; (18). In other words, an implicit distinction is here made between the βίος and the σοφία proposed by the philosopher, i.e. between his ‘lifestyle’ and his ‘system of thought’; again the meaning of σοφία here seems to refer to a set of theories and norms that make up a philosopher’s doctrine, which can be summarized in few fundamental points.²⁶

3) A similar case can be found in *Am.* 30, where Theano (the philosopher who, according to tradition, was either wife, daughter or pupil of Pythagoras) is mentioned with the following wording: ἡ τῆς Πυθαγορείου σοφίας θυγάτηρ Θεανώ. Once again, σοφία seems here to apply to ‘doctrine’ of a specific philosopher, more than to simple ‘wisdom’.

4) The final confirmation of this meaning comes from *BisAcc.* 8, where Hermes reassures Justice (which has been abused in the past), by telling her that νυνὶ δὲ Σοφία καὶ Ἀκαδημία καὶ Στοὰ κατέχουσι πάντα καὶ πανταχοῦ σε [*scil.* Δίκην] ζητοῦσιν καὶ περὶ σοῦ διαλέγονται. In this case, the combination with the Academy and the Stoa seems to leave no doubt about the value of Σοφία: it is unquestionably intended as ‘philosophy’.

Although they represent a series of isolated and marginal cases, compared to those in which the value of the term remains generic, these four examples – very consistent with each other – clearly demonstrate that for Lucian σοφία indicates not only ‘wisdom’ generically understood as a virtue, but also a system of thought, a doctrine; perhaps not really a philosophical current in the strict sense, but at least the set of rules and theories that compose it.





Albeit to a lesser extent than σοφία, even τελετή recurs with a certain frequency in Lucian's works: it occurs, in fact, sixteen times.²⁷ The range of its meanings is narrower than that of the previous term, but, as we have seen, this is an innate characteristic of it, largely depending on its very nature as a technical term of cultic ceremonial; whereas its basic value of 'religious ceremony' or 'initiatic/mysteric rite' does not change, only its fields of application vary; more precisely, τελετή can indicate for Lucian:

1) A Bacchic rite (*Bacch.* 15, *DDeor.* 22,1);

2) The celebration of the Eleusinian Mysteries (*Dem.* 11, 34, *Am.* 24, *Pseudol.* 5);

3) An initiatic rite of another kind, or a religious ceremony in general (*Alex.* 38, *Am.* 42, *Trag.* 112, *Salt.* 15, *Peregr.* 28, *ProMerc.cond.* 1);

4) A magical/religious rite (namely, a sorcery ritual made by the Magi in *Nec.* 6, 11).

After this overview we can conclude that, while for σοφία it has been possible to find a partially new meaning (i.e. 'doctrine', 'philosophy' as a set of theories and norms), τελετή instead continues to appear bound to a practical-ritual context that clashes with its use to indicate the Christian religion. Keeping in mind what has emerged from the semantic analysis of the two words, both in general and in Lucian's specific use of them, we will now focus on their application to Christianity within the *Peregr.*

4. Christianity as θαυμαστή σοφία and καινή τελετή: Lucian's perspective

From the analysis carried out up to now it has emerged that, for Lucian, σοφία can mean not only 'wisdom', but also 'doctrine', 'philosophical knowledge', while τελετή always indicates any rite or religious/mysteric celebration. The problem now arises to reconcile these two meanings with the concept of Christian religion and, above all, to understand what these two nouns tell us about the way Lucian perceived Christianity.

In order to resolve the question as clearly as possible, it is perhaps appropriate to continue, for a while longer, to focus on the two terms separately; this approach is motivated not only by practical reasons, but also by the evident diversity of the characteristics and the semantic pertinence of the two





words (too generic and philosophical the former, too specific and religious the latter), and by the two different meanings in which Lucian uses them to refer to Christianity in the two distinct moments: in the first case, in fact, it is about Peregrinus who ‘learns thoroughly’ the θαυμαστή σοφία τῶν Χριστιανῶν, while in the second it is about Jesus who was crucified ‘for giving birth to’ καινή αὕτη τελετή. The two different contexts, and, above all, the two different verbs – ἐκμανθάνειν on one side, εἰσάγειν (ἐς τὸν βίον) on the other – give the two expressions different meanings which, simplifying, could be summed up as follows: in the case of σοφία, Christianity is spoken of as a doctrine to be learned, whereas in the case of τελετή Christianity is understood as a religious phenomenon as a whole. Bearing these fundamental distinctions in mind, let us now finally examine the meaning of these two definitions.

4.1. Christianity as σοφία: a philosophical reading?

Basing on what has emerged up to now, one might be tempted to come to an immediate conclusion: in defining it as a σοφία, Lucian shows that he conceives Christianity as a philosophical movement.²⁸ Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that, although it has been seen that, on a limited number of occasions, Lucian adopts it to speak of philosophical doctrines, these still represent the minority of cases; moreover, it should be also recalled that, even in such cases, it is not appropriate to translate σοφία as ‘philosophy’ tout-court, since it tends to indicate the content of a certain philosophy (i.e. its concepts and norms), rather than a philosophical current itself. Notwithstanding these clarifications, the undeniable fact remains, however, that a connection with philosophy is overshadowed here; but how to explain it then, without falling into easy associations?

Help can come from another passage of the *Peregr.*, which comes shortly after the previous one and is included in the ‘Christian parenthesis’ as well: it is chapt. 13, which represents, together with chapt. 11, the most important moment of the Christian question in the lucianic corpus. Here Lucian describes – in a surprisingly detailed way – some of the beliefs of Christians, and, in a passage highly debated by ancients and moderns, he indirectly mentions Jesus, defining him as ὁ ἀνεσκολοπιζόμενος ἐκεῖνος





σοφιστής. There would be many things to say about this astonishing expression (and about chapt. 13 as a whole),²⁹ but as for now it is important to stress a single lexical detail: Jesus, for Lucian, is a σοφιστής. But what does this term mean to him? Indeed, it covers a wide range of meanings (expert in a certain field, wise, cheater, exponent of the ‘First’ or ‘Second Sophistic’, etc.)³⁰ and it is not easy to understand what nuance Lucian gives to the term by assigning it to Jesus. Of course, the context in which it recurs – that is, the fact that he is not *a* sophist, but ‘*that* sophist hung to a pole’ – has induced many to perceive it in a strongly negative meaning, as a synonym of γόγης, in the sense of ‘charlatan’, ‘cheater’;³¹ others, instead, have emphasized the meaning of ‘wise’ and have therefore recognized in it a neutral value, or even a positive one, taking it as an expression of admiration towards Jesus.³² Lucian, on his side, employs this term several times and with many different facets, which can be summarized as follows:³³

1a. Philosopher, or ‘sophist’ in the philosophical sense; it is assigned, for instance, to Aristotle (*DMort.* 25,3), Gorgias (*Macr.* 23) and Anaxagoras (*Tim.* 10);

1b. Synonym of philosopher, meant as a wise man who transmits rules of life (cf. *Anach.* 22: οἱ δημοσίᾳ πᾶσι πρόκεινται ἀναγιγνώσκειν μεγάλοις γράμμασιν ἀναγεγραμμένοι, κελεύοντες ἅ τε χρὴ ποιεῖν καὶ ὧν ἀπέχεσθαι ... οἱ δὲ ἄνδρες οὗτοι σοφισταὶ καὶ φιλόσοφοι πρὸς ἡμῶν ὀνομάζονται);

2a. Rhetor, grammarian, expert in language (as the protagonist of *Soloecista*);

2b. Fine speaker, good with words (for example, Prometheus in *Prom.* 20);

2c. Good *only* with words, in a pejorative sense comparing to σοφός (cf. *Hipp.* 2 ἐπεὶ οἷ γε τοῖς λόγοις μόνους ἐγγεγυμνασμένοι σοφισταὶ ἂν εἰκότως μᾶλλον ἢ σοφοὶ καλοῖντο);

3a. Generically expert in something (cf. *Philops.* 16), synonym of φιλόσοφος – meant as a learned person – and σοφός (cf. *BisAcc.* 11 οὐκ οἶδα ὅπως ὃ τι καὶ λέγουσιν οὐδὲ συνήμι τὴν σοφίαν αὐτῶν· ὄρειος γὰρ ἔγωγε καὶ τὰ κομφᾶ ταῦτα ῥημάτια καὶ ἄστικά οὐ μεμάθηκα, ὦ Δίκη. πόθεν γὰρ ἐν Ἀρκαδίᾳ σοφιστὴς ἢ φιλόσοφος; μέχρι τοῦ πλαγίου καλάμου καὶ τῆς σύριγγος ἐγὼ σοφός, τὰ δ’ ἄλλα αἰπόλος);

3b. Expert in religion; nevertheless, this nuance needs to





be supported by other terms, as in the case of *Sacr.* 14 (ἦν δ' εἰς τὴν Αἴγυπτον ἔλθῃς, τότε δὴ τότε ὄψει πολλὰ τὰ σεμνὰ ... εἰ δ' ἐθέλεις καὶ ταῦτα δαήμεναι, ὄφρ' εὖ εἰδῆς, ἀκούσῃ πολλῶν σοφιστῶν καὶ γραμματέων καὶ προφητῶν ἐξυρημένων διηγουμένων);

4a. Malicious person; in this sense it is used as insult (as in *DMort.* 11,5 or *JConf.* 19 θρασὺς γὰρ εἶ καὶ σοφιστής);

4b. Charlatan, cheater; it is associated to Pythagoras in *Gall.* 4 as synonym of ἀλαζών and γόης (τὸν σοφιστὴν λέγεις, τὸν ἀλαζόνα, ὃς ἐνομοθέτει μῆτε κρεῶν γεύεσθαι μῆτε κυάμους ἐσθίειν ... γόητά φασι καὶ τερατοουργὸν ἄνθρωπον).

Wise man and philosopher, rhetor and language expert, skilled and learned person, malicious swindler: the possibilities are numerous, and the clues offered by the passage in question are few; particularly significant among the cases listed, however, appears the last one; there, in fact, Pythagoras – defined ‘sophist’ as synonym of ἀλαζών – is described while ‘establishing laws’ (meant as moral rules of life, such as vegetarianism or abstinence from broad beans), and the verb used to say that is νομοθετέω, which curiously fits the other definition of Jesus (given in chapt. 13) as νομοθέτης, always meant as a charismatic guide imparting νόμοι, i.e. rules of life. Basing on this detail we can begin to draw a certain image of what σοφιστής, associated with Christ, can mean: more than ‘wise’ or ‘philosopher’, this term seems here to recall a charismatic figure, gifted with authority in the ethical field, who transmits norms of life to his disciples – a sort of Indian guru, both spiritual guide and object of worship. Said in less abstract terms: Jesus is described, through the definition of σοφιστής, as one of the many θεῖοι ἄνδρες of his time. This is a category well known to scholars of history of religions, which unites a large and heterogeneous group of special individuals of various kinds (poets, philosophers, thaumaturges, etc.);³⁴ this personages, particularly popular in the eastern provinces of the early Empire (where they enjoyed wide success among the lower levels of society), although heterogeneous, have two characteristics in common: the first one is the presence of an audience, that is, a more or less wide circle of followers, over whom they exercised a very strong ascendancy, which often resulted in the assumption of the role of leader, master, beloved spiritual guide, who transmits a new knowledge, a new doctrine, and who, sometimes,





finds *ex novo* a real religious cult;³⁵ the second characterizing factor of the θεῖος ἀνὴρ – closely connected to the first one – is a privileged bond with the divine or supernatural world, which is expressed through the ability to perform miracles, pronounce oracles, heal the sick, cast out the demons and so on. A detail to us critically important is the fact that this ability to perform wonders, which characterizes the θεῖος ἀνὴρ, sometimes goes under the name of σοφία, defined by Bieler as a ‘wirksames Wissen’³⁶: this last step, then, brings us back to our starting point, the question of how Lucian adopts the term σοφία to talk about Christianity. The difficulty emerged was to understand how the notion of ‘Christianity’ could coexist with that of ‘philosophical knowledge’, but the examination of the definition of σοφιστής assigned to Jesus – whom Lucian recognizes as the founder of Christianity – now enables us to reach a likely conclusion. In fact, it has emerged that Jesus, through this definition, is joined by Lucian to other members of the category of the so-called θεῖοι ἄνδρες (such as Pythagoras), defined by his prerogative to impart his own doctrine to disciples (often in a religious nuance) and by the possession of a σοφία, seen both as wisdom and as the ability to perform extraordinary acts. In the light of this, we might suggest that when Lucian uses the term σοφία to define the Christian religion (intended here, we recall it, as a doctrine to be learned), it is not the value of philosophy he attributes to it, but rather the more specific meaning of set of knowledge and norms that characterizes the doctrine transmitted to Christians by the σοφιστής Jesus.³⁷

4.2. Christianity as τελετή: a mysteric reading?

As for σοφία there was a strong risk of a hasty conclusion (in that case, affirming that Lucian considered Christianity as a philosophical movement), for τελετή there is a similar danger as well: in fact, given the analysis of the history of the term and of the ways Lucian uses it, it is tempting to conclude that Lucian considered Christianity as a new mysteric religion. Many scholars have come to this conclusion, underlining, besides τελετή, the presence of other words (especially προφητής and θιασάρχη) which are connected to the mysteric (and above all Bacchic) terminology.³⁸ Of course, the relevance of these terms in





relation to the world of pagan initiatic cults is undeniable, and in a context as uncertain and slippery as that of the interpretation of the religious lexicon of a satirical author such as Lucian – who often and willingly uses *pastiches* and verbal accumulations for comic and desecrating purposes – an absolute certainty is unattainable; it is also true, however, that each of these terms is susceptible to alternative explanations,³⁹ and that the juxtaposition of the Christian religion with the mystery cults is typical practice more for modern scholars than for ancient intellectuals.⁴⁰ In addition, also in this case, it would be better not to forget some clarifications previously seen, in particular the fact that, by itself, *τελετή* does not indicate in any case a religious phenomenon (mysteric, initiatory or of any other kind) as a whole, but only a single moment of it, whether it is a rite, a sacrament or another cultic practice;⁴¹ here the context (verbal and narrative) requires a value that may evoke a religious phenomenon globally understood, but it is hard to believe that Lucian defines Christianity as a *τελετή* meaning a ‘mysteric religion’, since this value in no case belongs to the semantic field of the term.

This time, a solution is less easy than before, as there are no clues (unlike the previous case of *σοφία*) inside the *Peregr.* or other lucianic works, to explain what here is meant.⁴² Therefore, for this point, it is necessary to resort to a different order of explanations, which transcends the individual lexical questions and embraces the entire ancient religious problem.⁴³ In fact, the only way to explain the difficulty that the use of this term represents for us is to recognize how this difficulty was also Lucian’s own, since it derives from a structural problem proper to the Greek religion and to ancient polytheisms in general; it consists in the absence of the concept of ‘religion’ as an abstract and comprehensive category, which gathers under a single definition all the cultic practices and theological doctrines of a specific social group; from the absence of this concept, in addition, derives by necessity also the absolute and congenital lack of a word equivalent to ‘religion’ in the sense known to us, deriving from the Western and Christian tradition. In other words: the unsuitability that we perceive in Lucian’s use of the term *τελετή* to designate the Christian religion does not derive from Lucian’s lack of precision, but reflects the unsuitability of the Greek religious lexicon (and, upstream, of the Greek religious thought) itself to express





(and, upstream, to understand) new concepts and phenomena such as Christianity, completely alien to the traditional Greek world. For this reason, it is wrong to insist on the unsuitability of the term, but it is instead necessary to understand what this unsuitability reveals to us about the point of view of the traditional Greek mentality – embodied in this case by Lucian – towards the Christian phenomenon.

It must be assumed that, for the Greek man, the problem of defining religion had never arisen; the polytheistic and inclusive nature of it, combined with its deep rooting in civil life (given by an endless number and variety of rites, practices and acts of devotion, and by the pervasiveness of the mythical narrative that permeated the daily discourse) made it possible to perceive a single comprehensive order in which the divine sphere was complementary to the human one, and meant that this divine sphere was by its nature composite, similar to a weft with several threads forming a single fabric: as Burkert says, 'Polytheismus bedeutet, dass nicht nur am selben Ort zur selben Zeit, sondern von derselben Gemeinschaft, demselben Individuum viele Götter verehrt werden; erst ihre Gesamtheit macht die göttliche Welt aus'.⁴⁴ This peculiarity also meant that the birth of a new cult did not imply the recognition of a new 'religion': rather, the new cult enriched an already variegated but nevertheless unquestionably unitary religious panorama.⁴⁵ Therefore, if the definition of an identity always arises as a reaction to diversity, in a scenario like this, with a single multiform reality that absorbed each diversity, the identity of the Greek religion never had the possibility (nor the need) to define itself. A clear example of this situation comes right from the world of mystery cults, to which the noun *τελετή* pertains: the presence of particular devotional cults, of individualistic nature, dedicated to single divinities (the Goddesses of Eleusis, Dionysus, Mithras, etc.) did not affect in any way the traditional religious panorama, nor represented an alternative to it; indeed, it would be deeply wrong, from the methodological point of view, to talk of 'mystery religions'. On the contrary, as Burkert again clearly explains:

initiation at Eleusis or worship of Isis or Mithras does not constitute adherence to a religion in the sense we are familiar with, being confronted with mutually exclusive religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and





Islam. Whereas in these religions there has been much conscious emphasis on self-definition and on demarcating one religion as against the other, in the pre-Christian epoch the various forms of worship, including new and foreign gods in general and the institution of mysteries in particular, are never exclusive; they appear as varying forms, trends, or options within the one disparate yet continuous conglomerate of ancient religion.⁴⁶

Not religions, therefore, but worship options within a unitary scenario, which is never called into question; this situation, then, explains also the lexical peculiarities partly emerged during the analysis of the meanings of *τελετή*, namely the reason why all the terms referring to mysteries (*ἄργεια*, *μυστήριον*, etc.) never indicate the overall nature of the cults, but always and only single cultic practices, single feasts or celebrations, single rites: because they existed precisely in their practical actualization, in the concreteness of the celebratory act, which was just one of the many devotional possibilities within the vast and unique panorama of Greek polytheism.

If we bear in mind this fundamental aspect of Greek religion, it will finally be possible to understand the meaning of the definition of Christianity as a *καινή τελετή*: the use of this word, namely, doesn't show that Lucian perceived Christianity as a 'mystery religion' (a concept that already in itself, as we have just explained, is improper), but rather that he considered the one introduced by Jesus as a new 'option' of worship which flanked the many others that, all together, made up the ancient religious landscape. Then, the fact that the term he employs to designate it seems unsuitable as it indicates, technically, a single cultic practice (and more properly, a mysteric one), may well depend on Lucian's ignorance of Christianity or on his misunderstanding of it, but it certainly corresponds first and foremost to the absence of a better alternative in the Greek religious and linguistic panorama. After all, even Celsus, who was the most important and aggressive anti-Christian polemicist of the time, and who was the first to really understand the novelty of (and the danger represented by) Christianity in relation to classical polytheism, in two passages of his *True Doctrine* (3,59 and 6,24) associated Christianity with other *τελεταί* (such as the Mithraic one), showing that he did not distinguish, at least in its external





form and at a lexical level, Christianity from the other forms of devotional worship widespread at the time in the Greek religion, exactly like Lucian.⁴⁷

5. Christianity as personal cult of a θεῖος ἀνὴρ: Lucian's judgment

After having analyzed separately the two expressions adopted by Lucian in chapt. 11 of his *Peregr.*, it is now possible to put together the results achieved, and to draw the image of Christianity that lies behind its definition as σοφία and as τελετή. As far as σοφία is concerned, it was possible to conclude that it reveals a conception of Christianity as a set of knowledge and norms that make up the doctrine transmitted by Jesus to his disciples; the designation of Christianity as τελετή, instead, shows that Lucian perceived Christianity as one of the many options of cult that made up the panorama of Greek polytheism. These two meanings, although they appear distant from each other, are actually – if we consider their different context of reference – strictly complementary: τελετή refers in fact to the external form of Christianity, to its cultic nature, of which σοφία represents the doctrinal content. Lucian's perception of Christianity appears in this way indissolubly anchored to the interpretative parameters of the Greek tradition: more than a real religion, it is for him a new form of devotional religiosity, made up of a series of doctrines and norms, just like many others that were already born in the past. As a confirmation of this interpretation (namely, the fact that Christianity is not recognized as a new religion), let us consider how, significantly, throughout the Christian parenthesis of the work, no mention is ever made of any god worshipped by Christians: it is only said that they reject the traditional gods (which, as it is now clear, clashes in the most absolute way with the nature of true mystery cults), but there is no mention of a new deity who replaced them; Lucian, on the contrary, informs the reader that Christians worship Jesus (who, let us not forget, for Lucian is unequivocally a man) and live following his laws and doctrines – that is, following the σοφία transmitted by him.

This last detail perfectly fits with the idea, already mentioned before, that Lucian conceived Jesus as one of the many θεῖοι ἄνδρες who at the time were founding new





personal cults – profiting from their influence on the popular masses – and helps us to find out the last piece we need to complete the mosaic of the conception of Christianity emerging from the lexicon of *Peregr.*: that is, what kind of opinion Lucian had on this new phenomenon. In fact, one of the greatest problems in the interpretation of the Christian parenthesis of the *Peregr.* – which is the main cause of the vastness of the relative debate – depends on the fact that Lucian never expresses an explicit judgment on Christianity, neither of praise, nor of contempt. Although it is not possible to deal with the whole issue here, I believe that the analysis conducted to this point allows us to already glimpse a plausible response to the problem.⁴⁸

A first help comes from the adjective associated with σοφία, i.e. θαυμαστή, whose main meaning is ‘admirable’: at first sight, it would seem that Lucian expresses admiration for the Christian doctrine, but we should ask ourselves whether this adjective is not used, instead, in an ironic way. A glance at its uses in the lucianic corpus is of little help, since it recurs more than 70 times, both in the proper and in an ironic sense, and also the opinions of scholars on the subject greatly vary;⁴⁹ nevertheless, I agree with those who stress the sarcastic connotation of this attribute;⁵⁰ in fact, it is suggested both by the general narrative context (i.e. the speech that the anonymous speaker makes to unmask Peregrinus through a hyperbolic list of his misdeeds, in which it is unlikely that any positive detail is associated to him), and by the comparison with the other uses of it within the *Peregr.*, which we can briefly examine:

- Chapt. 5 ἐπήκουον οὖν τὰ λοιπὰ ἐπαντλοῦντος αὐτοῦ καὶ θαυμαστάς τινας ὑπερβολὰς διεξιόντος κατὰ τοῦ Πρωτέως: τὸν μὲν γὰρ Σινωπέα ἢ τὸν διδάσκαλον αὐτοῦ Ἀντισθένη οὐδὲ παραβάλλειν ἤξιου αὐτῶ, ἀλλ’ οὐδὲ τὸν Σωκράτη αὐτόν. Lucian is speaking here, commenting on Theagen’s speech; the value of θαυμαστάς is here clearly sarcastic: what is ‘admirable’ are Theagen’s ‘hyperboles’, improbable stories such as the fact that neither Diogenes nor Antisthenes – nor Socrates himself – would be worthy of being compared with Peregrinus.

- Chapt. 17 τρίτη ἐπὶ τούτοις ἀποδημία εἰς Αἴγυπτον παρὰ τὸν Ἀγαθόβουλον, ἵνα περὶ τὴν θαυμαστὴν ἄσκησιν διησκείτο, ξυρόμενος μὲν τῆς κεφαλῆς τὸ ἥμισυ, χριόμενος δὲ πηλῶ τὸ πρόσωπον, ἐν πολλῶ δὲ τῶν περιεστώτων δῆμῳ ἀναφλῶν τὸ αἰδοῖον καὶ τὸ ἀδιάφορον δὴ τοῦτο καλούμενον





ἐπιδεικνύμενος, εἶτα παίων καὶ παιόμενος νάρθηκι εἰς τὰς πυγὰς καὶ ἄλλα πολλὰ νεανικώτερα θαυματοποιῶν. Also this passage is part of Peregrinus' 'biography' and comes shortly after his Christian parenthesis: the protagonist was abandoned by Christians and had to flee a second time from Parium, going this time to Egypt; here – continues the speaker, with a formula very close to that of chap. 11 – he approached the Cynic lifestyle, which is sarcastically labelled as ἄσκησις and, even more sarcastically, as θαυμαστή. As a proof of this, let us see the cited examples of this 'asceticism': all 'childish pranks' typical of – and let us note the insistence on this semantic area – θαυματοποιοί.⁵¹

- Chapt. 30 ὥστε ὥρα τοῖς θαυμαστοῖς τούτοις ὁμιληταῖς τοῦ Πρωτέως περισκοπεῖν ἔνθα ἑαυτοῦς ἐξαερώσουσιν· τοῦτο γὰρ τὴν καῦσιν καλοῦσιν. This is the conclusion of the anonymous speech against Peregrinus, and here irony and sarcasm lose much of their allusiveness and are transformed into a direct invective against Proteus' companions, who cannot really be considered 'admirable'.

- Chapt. 43 ἐπεὶ ταραχθεῖημεν τῆς νυκτὸς ἐν μέσῳ τῷ Αἰγαίῳ γνόφου καταβάντος καὶ κῦμα παμμέγεθες ἐγείραντος ἐκώκυε μετὰ τῶν γυναικῶν ὁ θαυμαστὸς καὶ θανάτου κρείττων εἶναι δοκῶν. This time the adjective is assigned directly to Peregrinus, and the episode described makes it quite easy to understand that Lucian gives this adjective a clearly mocking value.

Similarly, a general sarcastic tone is also confirmed by the expressions with which Lucian addresses Christians; besides the beginning of chapt. 11 – where the narrator states that Peregrinus easily managed to make a career with them 'making them look like little boys' – one can take chapt. 13 as a further example, in which Christians are defined as κακοδαίμονες and ἰδιῶται, that is, 'miserable' and 'foolish'; probably the tone is less aggressive than it seems, but reveals anyway a sort of sly commiseration from Lucian, who considers Christians to be poor naive people who have been deceived by Peregrinus. This last detail, finally, perfectly agrees with the definition of Jesus as σοφιστής (and therefore – according to the conclusions reached above – as θεῖος ἀνήρ), which is the last clue for us to understand Lucian's position; in fact, one of the key elements of such figures is the strong power of attraction they exerted on crowds – especially on the most ignorant ones – and this is exactly one of Lucian's favorite themes, which finds in



Peregr. and *Alexander* (whose homonymous protagonist, in turn, is one of the most typical θεῖοι ἄνδρες of the time)⁵² its most visible expression: the exposing of impostors who take advantage of people's ignorance. Usually these figures are referred to by Lucian with the terms ἀλαζόνες and γόητες, but it is worth remembering the example mentioned above (*Gall.* 4) in relation to the value of σοφιστής in Lucian's works: here, in fact, the noun was attributed to Pythagoras (another character worshipped by his disciples – to whom he transmitted his own σοφία) and used just as a synonym of ἀλαζών and γόης.⁵³ Finally, we should also consider that this appellative is attributed even to Peregrinus himself: in chap. 32 Lucian recounts that he had abandoned the crowd of people who were listening to the last speech of the false philosopher about to die, saying: ἀπῆλθον μακρὰ χάρειν φράσας θανατιῶντι σοφιστῆ τὸν ἐπιτάφιον ἑαυτοῦ πρὸ τελευτῆς διεξιόντι. In this case, 'sophist' is adopted, without any doubt, in a strongly sarcastic tone and, moreover, is referred to a real θεῖος ἀνὴρ. It is probably in this sense, then, that the epithet σοφιστής attributed to Jesus in the *Peregr.* should be read: it implicitly describes Jesus as a charlatan, just like the many other 'divine men' of the Greek world, such as Peregrinus or Alexander of Abonoteichus, that is, a character who is of course special, but also suspect, basing his success on the fascination he exerts, through his miracles and his doctrines, on the weakest minds. This implies, then, that also the σοφία he transmitted (i.e. the doctrinal content of Christianity) and the τελετή to which he gave birth (i.e. the new form of worship practiced by Christians) end up being invested with the same distrust he felt for such characters: in other words, Lucian does not say that he despises Christianity, nor that Christians are dangerous people, but on the other hand he reveals, through the particular lexicon he employs, a sense of detachment and mockery for a phenomenon so common and so typical for gullible people, and which can never ever be taken seriously – let alone as a new and revolutionary form of 'religion'.

In sharing such a point of view, Lucian proves to be the perfect representative of the cultured class of Greek society of the second century, which filtered the world through its intellectual, religious and linguistic schemes, and which was impermeable and disinterested towards a phenomenon like Christianity, which, at the time, was first of all a popular phenomenon, harbinger of new and bizarre pseudo-



philosophical doctrines, a subject for fanatical gurus and fools who followed them. As proof of this, it is possible to find echoes of this attitude – also on the lexical level – in other exponents of the Greek *intelligentsija* of the time. It has already been mentioned how Celsus, whose attitude of contempt and ridicule towards Christians is well known, adopted in two cases the term *τελετή* to define Christianity; another similar example can be found in an ambiguous passage of the *Deipnosophistae* of Athenaeus of Naucratis (IV 156a-b), in which a character (more precisely a Cynic philosopher) recalls a particular type of fasting observed by οἱ τὴν χρηστὴν ταύτην φιλοσοφίαν εὐρόντες: although it is not certain, all the clues seem to suggest that a veiled allusion to Christians should be recognized here, and if so (and this seems plausible),⁵⁴ we would have an important parallel in which Christianity is again ironically associated with a form of philosophy: the adjective *χρηστός* appears in fact clearly sarcastic (it closely resembles Lucian's use of *θαυμαστός*), and the whole context is strongly parodic – being the joke of a Cynic who speaks of people who practice an unusual fasting based on the stars – and so the use of the term 'philosophy' turns out to be clearly derisory; even Athenaeus, therefore, shows not to recognize Christianity as a new religion, and, at the same time, seems to consider it a phenomenon worthy of irony. The examples of such attitudes could be endlessly multiplied, but the result would not change:⁵⁵ the cultural élites of the second century Greek world showed that they do not understand the novelty of the Christian phenomenon compared to other pagan devotional cults and, when they do not openly despise it (as in the case of Celsus), it clearly appears that they do not take it seriously anyway, since they consider it something that does not concern them, and at most questionable for its means and its plebeian membership (generally made up of poor *ιδιώται*). Lucian's position in this panorama, as it emerges from his definitions of Christianity as *θαυμαστὴ σοφία* and *καινὴ τελετή*, appears in conclusion perfectly aligned on the ideological level – and therefore also on the lexical one, its direct consequence.

Conclusions

In this article, an attempt was made to draw a general





picture of the conception of the Christian phenomenon emerging from Lucian's works, taking as reference and object of specific analysis the lexicon used in chapt. 11 of his *Peregr.* to allude to the new religion, indicated as a θαυμαστή σοφία and a καινή τελετή. After having placed these references in the context of the lucianic corpus and of the *Peregr.*, the different meanings of σοφία and τελετή were analyzed, first in the general panorama of the history of the Greek language, and then in their specific uses by Lucian. With regards to σοφία, in addition to its prevailing generic meaning as 'wisdom', in the works of the Samosatenses it has been possible to identify a more specific meaning as 'doctrine', 'system of thought', i.e. as set of norms and theories that make up a philosophy. For τελετή, instead, Lucian seems more anchored to its traditional uses as 'ritual', 'ceremony', both in a properly mysteric/bacchic sense, and in a wider one. Both terms, however, appeared at the same time scarcely pertinent to Christian terminology and unsuitable to express the concept of 'religion'. Nevertheless, a more careful analysis of the context (both narrative and strictly lexical) in which the two expressions are used has made it possible to recognize a precise value for both: σοφία, which at first sight might suggest an interpretation of Christianity from a philosophical point of view, turned out to indicate the specific set of knowledge and norms that characterized the doctrine transmitted to Christians by Jesus (who, in turn, is shortly afterwards defined as a σοφιστής, that is, in this specific case, as a θεῖος ἀνὴρ: an ambiguous and charismatic character who attracts the masses through his σοφία, a mixture of wisdom and miraculous acts); the proper meaning of τελετή, instead, which seems to allude to a mysteric reading of the Christian phenomenon by Lucian, has been reconstructed starting from the general observation of the absence in the Greek religious panorama of the concept of 'religion' as a whole: this implies that Lucian is forced to use an 'inexact' (i.e. too specific) term to express what is indeed a new form of religion, but which in his eyes appears only as one of the many options of worship that formed Greek polytheism. These two meanings – doctrinal content on the one hand, new form of worship on the other – have proved to be complementary to each other, and demonstrate the difficulty (and also, perhaps, the lack of interest) of a Greek intellectual like Lucian to understand and define Christianity.





Finally, a reading of them in the light of the conception of Jesus as θεῖος ἀνὴρ – together with other clues coming from the tone and language used by Lucian in that passage – made it possible to identify the author's general attitude towards Christianity: he considers it another of the many personalistic cults founded *ex novo* by charismatic and popular personalities among the uncultivated masses, and such movements were obviously viewed with suspicion and derision by the cultural élite of the time, which included many other intellectuals – such as Celsus and Athenaeus, who have proven to share a similar attitude – and undoubtedly finds in Lucian a highly outstanding exponent.

Notes

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1. λ 683 A.: Λουκιανός· Σαμοσατεύς, ὁ ἐπικληθεὶς βλάσφημος ἢ δύσφημος, ἢ ἄθεος εἰπεῖν μᾶλλον, ὅτι ἐν τοῖς διαλόγοις αὐτοῦ γελοῖα εἶναι καὶ τὰ περὶ τῶν θείων εἰρημένα παρατίθεται ... τελευτῆσαι δὲ αὐτὸν λόγος ὑπὸ κυνῶν, ἐπεὶ κατὰ τῆς ἀληθείας ἐλύττησεν· εἰς γὰρ τὸν Περεγρίνου βίον καθάπτεται τοῦ Χριστιανισμοῦ, καὶ αὐτὸν βλασφημεῖ τὸν Χριστὸν ὁ παμμίαρος· διὸ καὶ τῆς λύττης ποινὰς ἀρκούσας ἐν τῷ παρόντι δέδωκεν, ἐν δὲ τῷ μέλλοντι κληρονόμος τοῦ αἰωνίου πυρὸς μετὰ τοῦ Σατανᾶ γενήσεται.

2. A useful summary of the positions held by scholars between '700 and '800 – with an obvious emphasis on *De morte Peregrini* – has been drawn, for instance, by Baumbach, Manuel. 'Phönix aus lukianischer Asche: Peregrinos Proteus im Spiegel seiner Rezeption'. In Peter Pilhofer et al. (eds.), *Lukian. Der Tod des Peregrinos: Ein Scharlatan auf dem Scheiterhaufen*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005. On the other side, the last work to include a complete analysis on the subject has remained until recent times that of Betz (Betz, Hans Dieter. 'Lukian von Samosata und das Christentum'. *Novum Testamentum: an international quarterly for New Testament and related studies*, vol. 3, 1959, pp. 226-237). I have recently worked on the whole topic of the relationship between Lucian and Christians in Beltramini, Luca. *Ricerche sul rapporto tra Luciano e i Cristiani*. MA diss., Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna, 2018-2019, where the whole matter is re-examined from scratch, starting from all the





testimonies traceable in Lucian and in the light of all the recent acquisitions on the subject. In particular, at pp. 7-11, it is possible to find an overview of the *status quaestionis*, with the relative bibliographical references.

3. Strong doubts remain, instead, about their presence in other works, in particular in *Philops.* 16 and *Trag.* 172; Karavas (Karavas, Orestis. 'Luciano, los cristianos y Jesucristo'. In Francesca Mestre and Pilar Gómez (eds.), *Lucian of Samosata, Greek Writer and Roman Citizen*. Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona, 2010, pp. 118-120) gives for certain the Christian reference there contained, but see, on the opposite front, what has been stated in Betz, Hans Dieter. *Lukian von Samosata und das Neue Testament. Religionsgeschichtliche und paränetische Parallelen. Ein Beitrag zum Corpus Hellenisticum Novi Testamenti*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1961, pp. 11-13. On the low likelihood of such references, as well as on the general problem of the Christian quotations in Lucian's corpus, see also Beltramini, 2018-2019: 103-121.

4. Throughout the article bibliographical references on the single aspects of this writing will be gradually provided. For a general introduction to *Peregr.* and its related problems (dating, composition, structure, content, textual transmission, etc.), one can refer to the recent critical edition with translation, introduction and commentary by Marquis (Marquis, Émeline. *Lucien. Œuvres. Tome XII: Opuscles 55-57*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2017, pp. 3-67).

5. On the historical plausibility and on the meaning of Peregrinus' surname, as well as on its metaphorical implications, see Heusch, Christine. 'Proteische Verwandlung. Die Figur des Peregrinos Proteus im Spiegel der zeitgenössischen Literatur'. *Gymnasium*, vol. 114, 2005, pp. 435-459; Floridi, Lucia. 'Proteo tra esegesi razionalistiche, paradossografia e credulità popolare. A proposito di Luc. «DMar.» 4'. *ACME*, vol. 70 no. 2, 2017, pp. 139-141; Stella, Massimo. *Luciano di Samosata. Vite dei filosofi all'asta. La morte di Peregrino*. Roma: Carocci, 2007, pp. 213-214.

6. On the role of the narrating voice and on the use of the first person in Lucian's satirical works (especially in *Peregr.* and *Alexander*), see Camerotto, Alberto. *Gli occhi e la lingua della satira. Studi sull'eroe satirico in Luciano di Samosata*. Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2014, pp. 15-35. The peculiar overlapping of the narrating voices in the *Peregr.* is analyzed also in Stella, 2007: 62-66.

7. In fact, the *Peregr.* appears in its external form as a letter addressed to this unspecified Cronius; on his identity three main hypotheses have been suggested: the most trusted one (cf. Jones, Christofer P., *Culture and Society in Lucian*. Cambridge [Mass.]-London: Harvard University Press, 1986, pp. 20 and 26; Macleod,





Matthew Donald. *Lucian: a Selection. Edited with an Introduction, Translation and Commentary*. Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1991, pp. 270-271) sees in Cronius a Medioplatoonic philosopher close to Numenius, while another (originally proposed by Caster, Marcel. *Lucien et la pensée religieuse de son temps*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1937, 246-248) considers him an Epicurean; a third way, more recently outlined, suggests to shift the emphasis from the identification of Cronius with a specific historical character in favor of his understanding in his role as *persona ficta*, who responds to Lucian's literary needs (cf. Clay, Diskin, 'Lucian of Samosata: four philosophical lives (Nigrinus, Demonax, Peregrinus, Alexander Pseudomantis)'. In *ANRWII*, vol. 36 no. 5, 1992, p. 3441; Stella, 2007: 209-212). In any case, the content and extent of this writing make its epistolary nature at least suspect; for example, Macleod, 1991: 270 says that it is 'probably only ostensibly a letter'; see also the next note.

8. For this reason, the biographical (and also autobiographical) genre is generally acknowledged for the *Peregr.* beside the epistolary one (see the previous note) and the pure satirical *psogos* (as Bompaigne defines it in Bompaigne, Jacques. *Lucien écrivain. Imitation et création*. Paris: E. de Boccard, 1958, pp. 471-472); on this aspect, see Stella, 2007: 62-65. However, in the *Peregr.* (as well as in the *Alexander*, a work close to it under many points of view) it has been recognized a process of literary parody applied to the genre of the encomiastic biography of heroes and philosophers: in this regard see Bompaigne, 1958: 614-616; Branham, Bracht. 'The comic as critic: revenging Epicurus. A study of Lucian's art of comic narrative'. *Classical Antiquity*, vol. 3 no. 2, 1984, pp. 152-153; Stella, 2007: 33-55.

9. The reason why he was expelled by the Christians resided, according to Lucian, in Peregrinus' violation of an alimentary taboo. The question is controversial but, in my opinion, behind this infraction we should just glimpse an early 'conversion' of Peregrinus to Cynicism; for an argumentation of this thesis, with the related literature, see Beltramini, 2018-2019: 73-75.

10. In this sense is still relevant the thesis proposed by Bompaigne, according to which Lucian is constantly anchored to tradition and literary models, and this not only in the strictly rhetorical or fictional works, but also in the so-called 'topical' works, among which *Peregr.* itself stands; this means that, even when dealing with real subjects, Lucian always puts into action a constant deformation of reality, which is filtered through the most varied *topoi* of tradition, and this subsequently means also that 'le pamphlet de Lucien, dès le moment où il use et abuse de ces procédés, est donc le contraire





d'une œuvre d'actualité' (*idem*: 477). After Bompaire's study, many other scholars have dealt with the problem of Lucian's historical reliability and of his peculiar recourse to parodic distortions made on the basis of canonic literary models (on this theme, see, for instance, Camerotto, Alberto. *Le metamorfosi della parola. Studi sulla parodia in Luciano di Samosata*. Pisa-Roma: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 1998, pp. 15-198); in particular, on the issue of the verisimilitude of the Christian parenthesis of the *Peregr.*, see: Anderson, Graham. *Lucian. Theme and Variation in the Second Sophistic*. Leiden: Brill, 1976, pp. 52-56; Branham, 1984; Edwards, Mark J., 'Satire and verisimilitude. Christianity in Lucian's *Peregrinus*'. *Historia*, vol. 38, 1989, pp. 89-98; Goulet-Cazé, Marie-Odile. 'Le cynisme à l'époque impériale'. In *ANRWII*, vol. 36 no. 4, 1990, pp. 2763-2768.

11. I follow the text established by Macleod (Macleod, Matthew Donald. *Luciani opera. Tomus III (Books XLIV-LXVIII)*. Oxford: OUP, 1980, p. 191). The final section of this passage (starting with ἐπεγράφοντο) has caused serious textual problems: for a summary of the proposals given, see Lacombrade, Christian. 'Locus difficilior Luciani (*De Morte Peregrini*, §11)'. *Revue des Études Grecques*, vol. 71, 1958, pp. 51-54.

12. In this single point I differ from Macleod (*ibidem*), who writes εἰσῆγεν ἐπὶ τὸν βίον, since I find the variant ἐς (reported by some *codices recentiores*, and preferred, for instance, by Harmon, Austin Morris. *Lucian. Vol. V*. Cambridge [Mass.]: Harvard University Press, 1955² [London: Heinemann, 1936¹], p. 12) more suitable; while the syntagm εἰσάγειν εἰς/ἐς τὸν βίον (meaning 'giving life to', 'bringing into the world') is well testified (cf. e.g. Dion. Hal. XIX 17, Strab. I 2, Orig. *C.Cels.* I 32, etc.), the form εἰσάγειν ἐπὶ τὸν βίον is nowhere to be found (and even without the verb, the syntagm ἐπὶ τὸν βίον is pretty uncommon, and almost only used with the meaning of '[turning] to a certain way of life', such as Heracles within the famous episode reported in Xen. *Mem.* II 1,21), and would seem to suggest, moreover, a strongly biased reading, not justified by the context (something like 'he introduced a new τελετή against life', with a certain Nietzschean echo).

13. Lucian's adoption of the verb ἀνασκολοπιζω has caused a great debate, since it would properly indicate impalement and not crucifixion. Many have seen in it a deliberate choice by Lucian to offend or belittle the death of Jesus, but a careful analysis of the meanings and uses of this verb (and those of the analogous σταυρόω), both in Lucian's corpus and in contemporary authors (including the Christian ones), allows us to conclude with some





certainly that, for Lucian, the two verbs are interchangeable, and both are used to indicate any capital punishment that involves the lifting or hanging of the executed, without any specific distinction. I have examined the question in detail in Beltramini, 2018-2019: 52-54, and a similar proposal has been suggested also in Karavas, Orestis. *Lucien et la tragédie*. Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 2005, p. 189 n. 37. In the light of all this, I decided to translate this verb with a form as neutral as possible ('hung to a pole'), instead of 'impaled' or 'crucified'.

14. See, for instance, some of the main commentaries on this passage: Jebb, Richard Claverhouse. 'Lucian'. In (*Id.*), *Essays and Addresses*. Cambridge: CUP, 1907, p. 186; Schwartz, Jacques. *Lucien de Samosate. Philopseudès et De Morte Peregrini*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1951, pp. 93-95; Betz, 1959: 229-230; Macleod 1991, 272; Pilhofer, Peter. 'Anmerkungen'. In Pilhofer et al., 2005: 58-62; Stella, 2007: 222-223. In Beltramini, 2018-2019: 32-56 I have analyzed separately all the wording used in this chapter of the *Peregr.* and there I have concluded that Lucian deliberately creates an accumulation of terms coming from different backgrounds, in order to create a *pastiche* for comic-parodic purposes against Peregrinus (rather than against Christians themselves), while it seems inappropriate to emphasize the Bacchic, Jewish or Egyptian relevance of the single terms, since they are altogether functional to create an alienating and unrealistic context for the career of Peregrinus.

15. This view will later confirmed by their definition, in chapt. 13, as ἰδιῶται and κακοδαίμονες. For a further discussion about this topic, see §5.

16. On the boundaries within which the understanding of Lucian's attitude must be delimited, see *infra*, n. 53.

17. For a complete overview of the etymology and the meanings of σοφία, see *ThGL* VII 521-523, *LSJ*⁹ 1621-1622, *GEW* 754, *DELG* 1030-1031, *EDG* 1373-1374.

18. *LSJ*⁹, 1621.

19. For a complete overview of the etymology and the meanings of τελετή, see *ThGL* VII 1974-1975, *LSJ*⁹ 1771-1772, *GEW* 871, *DELG* 1101-1102, *EDG* 1462-1463.

20. More precisely: *O.* III 41, X 51, *P.* IX 97, *N.* X 34. It is still uncertain whether it has been used or not by Alcman (7 *PMGF*).

21. See, for instance: Mt 12,42 (wisdom of Solomon); Mt 13,54, Mk 6,2, Lk 2,40 (wisdom of Jesus); Lk 11,49, Rm 11,33, Eph 3,10 (wisdom of God); Acts 6,3 (paired with the concept of the Holy Spirit); Eph 1,17, Col 1,9, Col 4,5 (charisma of the Apostles and common discernment of the good Christian). For a wider range of





the Christian meanings of σοφία – with further references – see PGL 1244-1246.

22. It is also worth mentioning the value it assumes in the context of the Gnostic doctrines, where Σοφία represents one of the main aeons at the origin of the creation of the Demiurge (cf. PGL 1244). The literature on Gnosticism and doctrines of aeons is very wide and goes beyond the theme of the present article; on the specific problem of Σοφία in that context see for instance: Good, Deirdre Joy. *Reconstructing the Traditions of Sophia in Gnostic Literature*. Atlanta (Ga.): Scholars Press, 1987; Campra, Angeleen. *Sophia, Divine Generative Force: a Gnostic Representation of Divine Image*. Ph.D. diss., California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, 2001. It is almost unnecessary to observe, however, how even this meaning is far from the context we are dealing with.

23. The relative entry of the PGL (pp. 1385-1386) gives also notice of the use of this word in the sense of ‘mystery’ (obviously not in the pagan sense, but in the Christian one, as ‘dogma’, that is a concept that cannot be grasped by human intellect), but also this is too far from the concept of ‘religion’ here needed.

24. The TLG-online database actually gives a result of 52 occurrences, but it should be considered that this calculation is based on the edition of Harmon-Kilburn-Macleod (1913-1967), which excludes the lucianic authorship of some writings that have been later accepted in the reference edition of Macleod (1972-1987); among these are the *Demosthenis Encomium* and the *Amores*, in which there are 4 other occurrences of the term.

25. See, for instance, the list of virtues exposed by Crates to Diogenes in *DMort.* 21,3: K.: ἃ γὰρ ἐχρῆν, σὺ τε Ἀντισθένου ἐκληρονόμησας καὶ ἐγὼ σοῦ, πολλῶ μείζω καὶ σεμνότερα τῆς Περσῶν ἀρχῆς. Δ.: τίνα ταῦτα φῆς; K.: σοφίαν, αὐτάρκειαν, ἀλήθειαν, παρρησίαν, ἐλευθερίαν.

26. This interpretation is then confirmed by Socrates’ answer to the client’s question, which is nothing more than a (parodic) compendium of the Socratic (or rather, Platonic) philosophical system: αἱ ἰδέαι καὶ τὰ τῶν ὄντων παραδείγματα (*ibidem*).

27. Also in this case, two more occurrences coming from the *Amores* should be added to the 14 results of the TLG-online: see *supra*, n. 23.

28. On this topic, see, for instance, Ramelli, Ilaria. “‘Ethos’ and ‘Logos’: A Second-Century Debate Between ‘Pagan’ and Christian Philosophers”. *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 69, no. 2, 2015, pp. 145-152.

29. See the commentaries already mentioned before (*supra*, n. 13). I focused on the lexical and thematic analysis of chapt. 13 in Beltrami, 2018-2019: 62-73.





30. In particular, on the definition of ‘Second Sophistic’ – deriving from Flavius Philostratus (*Vit. Soph.* I 1) – and the figure of the ‘Sophist’ within that context, see Bowersock, Glen Warren. *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire*. Oxford: OUP, 1969 (more precisely, on Lucian, see pp. 114-117). For an essential overview of this noun, see *ThGL* 528-531; *LSJ*⁹ 1622; *DELG* 1031.

31. In Rabe’s edition of the Scholia (Rabe, Hugo. *Scholia in Lucianum*. Lipsiae: Teubner, 1906), the bitter comment to this single sentence occupies more than two pages, out of the seven pages dedicated to the whole work (cf. *schol. Luc. Peregr.* 13 [pp. 218-220 R.]). A negative value was also recognized, for example, by Caster, 1937: 350-351; Betz, 1961: 10-11; Norelli, Enrico. ‘La presenza di Gesù nella letteratura gentile dei primi due secoli’, *Ricerche Storico Bibliche*, vol. 17 no. 2, 2005, p. 208. A particularly detailed analysis of this definition was carried out by Pernot (Pernot, Laurent. ‘Christianisme et sophistique’. In L. Calboli Montefusco (ed.), *Papers on Rhetoric. IV*. Roma: Herder, 2002, pp. 246-250), who shares the same idea that the value of this epithet is negative and polemical towards Jesus, but identifies in addition four different characteristics, all coexisting, enclosed in the term adopted by Lucian: ‘le talent rhétorique’, ‘la subtilité d’une pensée philosophique’, ‘la volonté de tromper’ and ‘le succès remporté par un personnage charismatique’.

32. See: Curti, Carmelo. ‘Luciano e i cristiani’. *Miscellanea di studi di letteratura cristiana antica*, vol. 4, 1954, p. 100; Macleod, 1991: 272; Karavas, 2010:118.

33. A different analysis of this term can be found in Gomez Cardó, Pilar. ‘Sofistas, según Luciano’. In N. Ibáñez (ed.), *Lógos hellenikós. Homenaje al profesor Gaspar Morocho Gayo. I*. León: Universidad de León, 2003, p. 279.

34. Much has been written about this peculiar figure, with its characteristic features and its cultural implications; one of the first and most important studies on the subject is that of Bieler, Ludwig. *Θεῖος ἀνὴρ. Das Bild des “Göttlichen Menschen” in Spätantike und Frühchristentum. I-II*. Wien: O. Hofels, 1935-1936; it can also be flanked by the more recent Anderson, Graham. *Sage, Saint and Sophist. Holy Men and Their Associates in the Early Roman Empire*. London-New York: Routledge, 1994, which, beside taking the Peregrinus described by Lucian as one of the canonical examples of this category, has carefully investigated the connections between θεῖος ἀνὴρ and σοφιστής.

35. Cf. Bieler, 1935: 119: ‘der θεῖος ἀνὴρ oft Religionsstifter, fast immer Kultstifter und Kulturneuerer ist’.

36. Bieler, 1935: 76.





37. A similar interpretation is proposed in Schwartz, 1951: 93, and Van Voorst, Robert E., *Jesus Outside the New Testament. An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence*. Cambridge: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000, p. 62; there, σοφιστής is understood as ‘the one who introduced a σοφία’. The fundamental points of this ‘σοφία of Christians’, according to Lucian, will then be summarized in chapt. 13; they – introduced by the sarcastic statement πεπείκασι γὰρ αὐτοὺς οἱ κακοδαίμονες – are: faith in immortality and eternal life (from which their courage in front of death and their inclination to martyrdom derives), mutual brotherhood, rejection of the Greek deities, worship of Jesus (i.e. respect for his ‘laws’), contempt and communion of material goods.

38. Cf. Caster, 1937: 351-352; Betz, 1959: 233; Stella, 2007: 51.

39. See the references and the explanations mentioned before: *supra*, n. 13.

40. I refer in particular to the great influence exerted by the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* of Göttingen (whose main promoters were R. Reitzenstein and F. Cumont) in the first half of the 20th century; this current was characterized by a very marked syncretism, which led it to place Christianity among the so-called ‘mystery religions’, but it has been refuted several times and very clearly in the last decades: in this regard, see Burkert, Walter. *Klassisches Altertum und antikes Christentum*. Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 1996, pp. 22-27 and 42-44; regardless of the validity or otherwise of this theory, the fact remains that it has prompted many scholars to look for traces of this confluence between Christianity and mysteric/Bacchic cults already in the opinion of ancient authors, even in cases (such as this one of Lucian) where such traces cannot be identified with certainty.

41. This fact has led Schirren (Schirren, Thomas. ‘Lukian über die kaine telete der Christen (De Morte Peregrini 11)’. *Philologus*, vol. 149, 2005, pp. 355-357) to interpret this passage in a rather singular way, meaning with τελετή the practice itself of the crucifixion, which Christians would have elevated to a cultic rite, and thus attributing to Lucian an anti-Christian polemic against the crucifixion. On the difficulties posed by such proposal, I have already expressed myself in Beltramini, 2018-2019: 48-49.

42. Actually, inside the *Peregr.* (chapt. 28) there is a second occurrence of τελετή, but there it carries the generic meaning of ‘rite’ and is used to indicate a hypothetical nocturnal celebration that will be tributed to Peregrinus after his death.

43. Obviously it is not possible here to deal with the enormous problem of the concept of religion in antiquity; in this regard, I will limit myself to referring to the rapid summary of Greek





religious terminology (with the related bibliography) sketched in Burkert, Walter. *Griechische Religion der archaischen und klassischen Epoche*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2011² (1977¹), pp. 402-416. I have decided to take this fundamental work (among many others) as a reference for all the reflections on Greek religion in general that will be made in these pages, both for its undeniable quality and for the breadth of further bibliographical references on the single issues there contained, which allow further researches when necessary.

44. Burkert, 2011: 301.

45. This, after all, is a feature of the Greek religion which Lucian was well aware of, and which is comically testified in some of his writings, first of all the *Deorum concilium*, where he describes a special assembly of the gods discussing the problem of the exaggerated number of new and foreign deities present on Olympus.

46. Burkert, Walter. *Ancient Mystery Cults*. Cambridge (Mass.)-London: Harvard University Press, 1987. pp. 3-4.

47. On this aspect, see Sfameni Gasparro, Giulia. 'Cristianesimo ed ellenismo: terminologia e schemi misterici nel linguaggio gnostico'. *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni*, vol. 66, 2000, pp. 33-39, that investigates the relationships between the mysteric and the gnostic language – to which Celsus probably alludes – starting from his definition of Christianity as *τελετή*, shared with Lucian.

48. For the bibliographical references, see *supra*, n. 2. It is worth emphasizing a fundamental aspect of the question of the relationship between Lucian and Christians, held up to now at an implicit but essential level, that is, the need never to transcend the textual and literary dimension of the problem; by this I mean that, given the distance that separates us from the author, and considering Lucian's peculiar attitude as a writer (continuous satirical distortion on the one hand, and constant recourse to themes and *topoi* deriving from tradition on the other), we must limit ourselves to analyzing the pure textual fact, and understanding the kind of conception of Christianity that emerges from it, without claiming of being able to deduce, from it, what Lucian really thought and how much he really knew the Christians and their texts. In this regard it is worth remembering the precious words written by Baldwin (Baldwin, Barry. *Studies in Lucian*. Toronto: Hakkert, 1973, p. 117: 'it is dangerous to infer the beliefs of a satirist from his writings') and Dickie (Dickie, Matthew W., 'Lucian's Gods: Lucian's understanding of the divine'. In N. Bremmer and A. Erskine (eds.), *The Gods of Ancient Greece. Identities and Transformation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, 350: 'he [*scil.* Lucian] keeps his feelings very much to





himself [...], or he may not in fact have had a fully thought-out position on the subject. He was not after all a philosopher, let alone a systematic theologian'). On this topic, see also Betz, 1961: 5-6; I addressed this problem in a more articulate form in Beltramini, 2018-2019: 11-13 and 19 n. 22.

49. See, for instance, the opinion of Betz, 1959: 229 ('das Christentum nennt Lukian eine "θαυμαστή σοφία", sicher in abfälligem Sinne') and the opposite one expressed by Macleod, 1991: 271 ('I take Lucian to be expressing surprise rather than contempt here'), passing through other scholars (Schwartz, 1951: 93 and Van Voorst, 2000: 62s.) who conceive it as simply ironic. It is self-evident that the scholiasts took such adjective as an insult, to which they responded in this way: θαυμαστή μὲν οὖν, ὦ μισαρέ, καὶ παντὸς ἐπέκεινα θαύματος, εἰ καὶ σοὶ τυφλῷ ὄν τι καὶ ἀλαζόνι τὸ κάλλος αὐτῆς ἀνεπίσκεπτον καὶ ἀθέατον (*schol. Luc. Peregr.* 11 [p. 216,5-7 R.]).

50. So did, for example, Betz (see the previous note).

51. Of course, the concept of *ascesis* was not unrelated to Cynicism, and indeed it was a fundamental component of it (see, for example, Goulet-Cazé, Marie-Odile. *L'ascèse cynique. Un commentaire de Diogène Laërce VI 70-71*. Paris: Vrin, 1986); nevertheless, in this case, the use of this term to refer to the Cynical philosophical school has an unmistakably parodic value, as the examples reported immediately afterwards demonstrate. Furthermore, Lucian's bitter satire of the type of the Cynic philosopher is well known, and in general the importance of Cynicism in Lucian's works is enormous, and has been much studied, starting from the fundamental monography of Bernays, Jacob. *Lukian und die Kyniker*. Berlin: Hertz, 1879 and from the section dedicated to the topic within Caster, 1937: 65-84; more recently, some of those who have dealt with this theme are Goulet-Cazé, 1990: 2673-2768 and Nesselrath, Heinz-Günther. 'Lucien et le Cynisme'. *L'Antiquité Classique*, vol. 67, 1998, pp. 121-135. A general overview on Lucian's attitude towards the philosophers – which is one of the central topics in his writings – can be found in Caster, 1937: 9-122; Hall Jennifer. *Lucian's Satire*. New York: Arno Press, 1981, pp. 151-193; Mestre, Francesca. 'Lucien, les philosophes et les philosophies'. *Ítaca. Quaderns Catalans de Cultura Clàssica*, vol. 28-29, 2012-2013, pp. 63-82.

52. The two characters have remarkable points of contact, and the juxtaposition between their figures finds its most recent discussion in Clay, 1992: 3409-3410, 3416-3417, 3430-3439. About the inclusion of Alexander in the category of θεῖοι ἄνδρες, see Sfameni Gasparro, Giulia, 'Alessandro di Abonutico, lo "pseudo-profeta" ovvero come costruirsi un'identità religiosa. I. Il profeta,





“eroe” e “uomo divino”. *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni*, vol. 62, 1996, pp. 565-590 and Sfameni Gasparro, Giulia, ‘Alessandro di Abonutico, lo “pseudo-profeta” ovvero come costruirsi un’identità religiosa. II. L’oracolo e i misteri’. In C. Bonnet and A. Motte (eds.), *Les syncrétismes religieux dans le monde méditerranéen antique. «Actes du colloque international en l’honneur de Franz Cumont. Rome, Academia Belgica, 25-27 septembre 1997»*. Bruxelles-Rome: Institut historique belge de Rome, 1999, pp. 275-305. The analogies between the descriptions of Peregrinus and Alexander, from this point of view, have been analyzed by Anderson, 1976: 72-77; some of them are: a shady past (Peregrinus was an adulterous and a pederast, Alexander a prostitute), the apprenticeship under a charismatic guide coming from an exotic world (for Peregrinus it was Agatobulus in Egypt, for Alexander a sorcerer from Tyana – pupil of the legendary Apollonius), the presence of a disciple (Theagenes for Peregrinus, Coconnas for Alexander), the success on groups of gullible and poorly educated people (the Christians for Peregrinus, the Paphlagonians for Alexander), etc.

53. A singular clue, which suggests a similar consideration of the sophists by Lucian, comes from another passage, which does not derive from his works, but contains a surprising anecdote that concerns him personally. It is a fascinating episode recounted by Galen in his commentary on the *Epidemica* of Hippocrates, which survived only in an Arabic translation of the 9th century (for the transliteration and translation of the passage in question, see Strohmaier, G., ‘Übersehenes zur Biographie Lukians’. *Philologus*, vol. 120, 1976, pp. 118-121). The renowned doctor from Pergamon believed that Hippocrates’ text had undergone an interpolation that intentionally made a passage obscure, and mentioned as a parallel case the episode of a contemporary of his, named Lucian, who had circulated a book written in an incomprehensible way, passing it off as a work by Heraclitus, and submitting it to those who boasted of being wise, in order to make fun of them, who tried to invent non-existent meanings, ‘damit jene elenden Sophisten [in the Arabic text: *s-sūfistā’iyīna*] entlarven und bloßzustellen und ihre Unwissenheit ins Licht zu rücken’. With all the prudence required by such a case, it is however a singular coincidence that also this Lucian, coeval with Galen, had a reputation for making fun of the ‘sophists’, portrayed here as false and vain wise men, who also relied on lies when necessary. For a comment on this passage, in addition to the already mentioned Strohmaier, see also Clay, 1992: 3406-3408. On the topic of the ἀντισοφιστής in Lucian, finally, consider also the self-description made by Parrhesiades (a well-known *alter ego* of





Lucian) in *Pisc.* 20 (μισαλαζών εἰμι καὶ μισογότης καὶ μισοψευδῆς καὶ μισότυφος), which was analyzed, under this respect, by Macleod (Macleod, Matthew Donald, 'Lucian's activities as μισαλαζών'. *Philologus*, vol. 123 no. 2, 1979, pp. 326-328).

54. Doubts remain whether here Christians or Jews are mentioned; Kaibel (Kaibel, Georg. *Athenaei Naucraticae Dipnosophistarum libri XV. Vol. I.* Lipsiae: Teubner, 1887, p. 352), was more inclined towards the first interpretation, noting a possible hidden wordplay between *χρηστός* and *Χριστός* (as a possible parallel to this, one could mention the well-known passage of Suet. *Claud.* 25,4, where some *Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantes* are referred to); of the same advice is also Zecchini (Zecchini, Giuseppe. *La cultura storica di Ateneo.* Milano: Vita e pensiero, 1989, pp. 18-19), who cites, among the various arguments put forward (not all of which are equally convincing) also the significant fact that the verb form *εὐρόντες* implies a recent phenomenon, which would hardly fit for Judaism.

55. I refer, in particular, to the rich line of research that, starting from Labriolle's essay (Labriolle, Pierre de. *La réaction païenne. Étude sur la polémique antichrétienne du Ier au VI^e siècle.* Paris: L'artisan du livre, 1934), has studied under various perspectives the so-called 'pagan reaction', that is the set of the different positions assumed by Greek-Roman intellectuals (among whom Lucian himself is) toward the emerging Christian phenomenon; between the numerous studies about this topic we can mention: Benko, Stephen. 'Pagan criticism of Christianity during the first two centuries A.D.'. In *ANRW II*, vol. 23 no. 2, 1980, pp. 1054-1118; Carrara, Paolo. *I pagani di fronte al cristianesimo. Testimonianze dei secoli I e II.* Firenze: Nardini, 1984; Ruggiero, Fabio. *La follia dei cristiani. Su un aspetto della reazione pagana tra I e V secolo.* Milano: Il saggiatore, 1992; Norelli, 2005. In addition to these, some of the numerous studies on the historical figure of Jesus can also prove valuable; in particular: Vermès, Géza. *Jesus the Jew. A Historian's Reading of the Gospels.* London: Fontana-Collins, 1976; Smith, Morton. *Jesus the Magician.* San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978; Van Voorst, 2000; Meier, John Paul. *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Vol. I: The Roots of the Problem and the Person.* New York: Doubleday, 1991.

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