



SWINGING ON A STAR: THE MYTHICAL AND RITUAL SCHEMATA OF OSCILLATION*

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ABSTRACT. The article examines some feasible semantic, gestural and ritual links between the Greek notion of *aiora* and the Latin term *oscillatio*. Associations have been drawn between the Greek festival of *Aiora* and the oscillating movement of a swing, but there are also connections to death by hanging and roving. Through the analysis of pagan and Christian sources from Antiquity and Late Antiquity, this paper re-establishes the possible link between the festival of the *Aiora* and a Roman practice known as *oscillatio* with its associated votive images called *oscilla*. There are several contexts where the swinging and oscillating *schemata* that constitute the essentials of dancing feature ritual movements deemed capable of restoring symmetry after a traumatic event.

KEYWORDS: swing rite, *aiora*, *oscilla*, *schemata*

Like any trace of the past, myths and rites are never directly tangible forms. Historians can only make use of written texts, as well as occasionally iconic and material sources. By examining the form

and structure of myths and rites, they also analyse the context and framework of the texts in which they are codified. They therefore contend with the interpretation supplied by the social actors and all those who, as direct witnesses or simple narrators, produced variants with their own relative meanings. In other words, historians cannot overlook the implicit intention

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underlying sources. Indeed, by codifying myths and rites through writing and possibly iconic representation, sources establish and transform meaning in relation to their performative contexts. Nevertheless, beyond the textual level historians should not ignore the persistent presence of gestures and ritual practices, although this phenomenon should never be seen as mechanical transmission: nothing survives in history and tradition never stops recreating its own subject matter¹.

In any case, historians cannot access the presumed intrinsic or primordial meaning of the actions and gestures referenced in texts. This is not only due to the fact that no such ultimate meaning ever existed, but also because the ways of presenting and interpreting 'ritual' content are the result of certain author's propensities or even strategies, and are therefore influenced by readers' expectations. As with any medium, ritual content is overdetermined in historical narrative codification, thereby increasing the ideological effectiveness of the author's exegesis of the rite. The reading or staging of the text can in turn have its own performative effectiveness, which is particularly pertinent in cultures with low literacy rates. Despite the codification of oral and written traditions, no ceremonies or liturgies are mechanically translated into a performance reflecting an absolute meaning that is independent from the interpretation and reception of present and future actors and audiences. The function of ritual performance is not simply to recognise social balances, and it is precisely through this margin of hermeneutic expansion that it always conveys a possible transformative dynamic. While the narration of a rite is flexible enough to be able to incorporate individual stories, it is also sufficiently stable to embody the signifying autonomy of the symbolic universe.

This paper focuses on a tradition that dates back to an unspecifiable time in Hellenic antiquity, although it is mostly documented by late-antique Latin authors. It

requires us to tackle the classic dilemma of comparative history: on one hand, the need to use ideal types or in any case recognisable figures and models, and on the other hand the inevitable questioning of the invariability and apparent objectivity of the topic of comparison, above all in cases that do not feature simple mythological subjects or figures but institutions and practices with systems of relations and meanings. While the meaning of ritual and devotional practices – and indeed the meaning of the texts that depict them – can only be given within the contexts in which they are performed, the weaknesses of the previous historiographical approaches to our subject matter are directly related to underestimating or disregarding this dilemma. The first of these is the prevalent 'vertical' and absolute reading of the *Aiora* (swing rite) as a rite of passage associated with the crisis of female puberty (an approach deriving from the anthropological psychologism of the early twentieth century up to and including De Martino)². The second, with particular reference to Latin authors, is the philological-combinatory use of sources for the illusory objective of accurately reconstructing rites and corresponding aetiological myths. Even in antiquity, these were the result of erudite exegesis characterised by combinatory strategies. In this paper, we have instead attempted to deconstruct and contextualize the sources. Late-antique scholars and mythographers had access to memories of rites and reworkings of myths rather than actual religious practices. These are difficult to date; indeed, it cannot even be stated with any certainty how long the *Aiora* and the Roman *oscilla* rites were practised for, and a variety of interpretations about their origins and meaning are documented throughout the imperial age.

Myths and rites are also devices for deciphering narratives and gestures that are no longer or not immediately understandable. After all, the myth does not 'precede' the rite except in the structural – not chronological – sense of a script that

¹ On this see Canetti 2007: XI-XIV, 71-75, 320-323.

² This weakness is also partly presented in the seminal study by Cantarella 1985: 91-101.

is reperformed on each occasions, rewritten in some way during the direction of the performance of the ritual gesture in a self-justifying process. This mythical script is generally put in writing 'after' and as aetiological justification of the performance of the rite.

According to the reconstructions carried out by eminent scholars of Greek religion (Nilsson, Kerényi, Jeanmaire and Burkert among others), we can assume that a ceremony known as the *Aiora*, generally translated as 'swing festival' took place in Athens and the cities of Ionia during the celebration of the Anthesteria, a festival in honour of Dionysus³. The name Anthesteria was related to the month in which the festival was celebrated, Anthesterion, which fell approximately between February and March and was associated with the arrival of spring (*anthesis* means blooming). In brief, the new wine was presented on the first day of the Anthesteria and the temple of Dionysus was opened to mark the occasion. On the second day, there was free access to the wine, with attendance expanded to include slaves and even children, who were in some way initiated into drinking⁴. For women, however, it remained strictly off-limits, although they seem to have played a leading role in the celebrations on the third day, dedicated to the dead, which featured the *Aiora*. Revenants will reappear as a significant detail throughout our analysis. It should be noted, however, that debauchery was totally forbidden in all wine-related celebrations; in compliance with the symposium rules, complete self-control had to prevail in all rituals⁵. Women were denied access to the wine for this reason, as they were considered weak creatures who could easily fall prey to altered states of consciousness.

The myth that seems to be connected to the *Aiora* rite is directly associated with forms of collective mania. The first useful source for our purposes is an astronomical work by Hyginus (first century CE) that mentions a text by the scientist and poet Eratosthenes (third century BCE). Now surviving only in fragmentary form, the latter features a poem telling the story of a girl named Erigone (Hyg., *Poet. astr.* 2, 2-5; Eratosth., fr. 22; Rosokoki 1995: 41-44)⁶. From the meagre fragments of Eratosthenes's work, we can assume that Hyginus quoted from it faithfully.

The myth recounted by Hyginus in the *Astronomica* is as follows. Erigone's father, Icarius, is given wine, vines and grapes, previously unknown to humankind, to thank him for his hospitality by a god, who for Hyginus is the Roman deity Liber but for Eratosthenes was clearly Dionysus. However, the vineyard planted by Icarius is destroyed by a he-goat, which is duly killed and skinned; it is said that «they danced around the goat for the first time» for Icarius (Hyg., *Poet. astr.* 2, 4). It is at this point in the text that Hyginus includes Eratosthenes's fragments; it is undoubtedly significant to note that the verb used to express the choreutic gesture is *orchesanto*. The dance around the goat is thus not the Platonic *choreia*, but the spectacular *orchesis* typical of the theatrical and Dionysian world⁷. Icarius then has the unfortunate idea of offering his wine to some shepherds. Besides being a previously untried drink, it is pure wine, and as the shepherds are not used to being inebriated, they fear that they have been poisoned and kill Icarius. In this way, the myth essentially served to promote the practice of diluting wine with water. Erigone enters the story at this point and,

3 For a reconstruction of the festival and scrutiny of the written and iconographic sources, see Hamilton 1992; Hani 1978: 107-122; Spineto 2005: 13-123. On the link between the *Aiora* festival, seen as a purification rite, and the Anthesteria, see Dietrich 1961. There is an original political rereading of the ritual in Nencini 2009: 186-196; on myths and rites regarding swinging and hanging female figures in ancient Greece, see also Bettini-Romani 2015: 159-167.

4 On the relationship between Anthesteria and wine, see Noel 1999.

5 On the symposium and the values represented by this community activity, see Musti 2001.

6 On the myth of Icarius and Erigone see Della Bianca-Beta 2015: 14-19.

7 Eratosth., fr. 4: Ἰκαριοῖ, τόθι πρώτᾳ περ εἰς τράγον ὀρχήσαντο. On the specific differences between *choreia* and *orchesis* see Tronca, to be published.

after discovering that her father has been murdered, hangs herself from a branch of the same tree under which the corpse of Icarus was found. «In the meantime», as Hyginus puts it, many young Athenian girls started to hang themselves from trees just like Erigone who, perhaps to avenge her father's murder, had cursed the daughters of the murderous shepherds.

It should be remembered that the notion of suicide did not feature in Greek and Roman antiquity; it is a modern concept first documented in the seventeenth-eighteenth century. This is of particular importance, inasmuch as these forms of collective suicidal mania were always seen as the result of an external factor (Van Hooff 1990: 136-141). In addition, the fact of taking one's life was as significant and serious – because it was considered an affront to the social stability of the *polis* – as the way in which it was done. Hanging was perceived as a typically female method of ending one's life, the preferred method of women in Greek mythology, in contrast to heroes who kill themselves with their swords (Cantarella 2011: 57-64; Andreis 1964: 128).

Returning to the story of the hanged girls, when the Athenians consult the Oracle of Apollo to understand how to end the curse, they are advised to establish an annual festival in honour of Erigone. As this was intended to reproduce the hangings, there is an immediate association with swings. It is important to stress, however, that the reproduction focused on the gestural *schemata* of being suspended and swinging, because the *aiora* is an object that is illusive to define; it comes closest to a swing, but the important thing was for the girls to reproduce a *schema*, a ritual movement⁸. *Aiora* comes from the verb *aioreo*, which means to suspend and consequently to oscillate. It is certainly no coincidence that it is also directly related

to the verb *airo*, which was used to indicate the appearance of the *deus ex machina* on stage: the god that arrives after the tragedy to restore order and the stability of the *schemata* temporarily subverted by the tragic events⁹.

A direct connection between hanging and the concept of *schema* can be found in Pausanias's description of Greece, when he refers to the depiction of the death of Phaedra (Paus., 10, 29, 3)¹⁰. The ill-fated queen of Athens was described by Euripides as blinded by possession, *entheos* (Eur., *Hipp.* 141-147). Being possessed by the god was equated with being *ek-phrones*, out of one's mind, and in Plato the role of bringing these people – the Bacchae in this case – back to being *em-phrones*, returning to oneself, is significantly played by the *choreia*, the right form of dancing which restores a condition of compliance with the *schemata* (Pl., *Leg.* 7, 790e-791b). The typical oscillating movement of the *aiora* seems to have the same function. In Plato, *aiora* is a form of purification, indicating the action of rocking newborns to restore a state of calm; it is used to describe the movement of the bone joints, which must swing rather than be stiff in order to be able to move (Pl., *Leg.* 7, 789d-790d; *Phd.* 98d). *Aiora* also indicates the suspension of the heavenly bodies linked up by a kind of golden noose, and it is well-known that Plato describes celestial bodies using choreutic images, which were heavily reused in Christian contexts¹¹. It is probable that the catasterism of Erigone is an aetiological rereading of this astral metaphor: after her death, the gods are moved by compassion to transform her into the constellation of Virgo, while her father Icarus and their little dog (which is said to have killed itself) become respectively Boötes and Canis Major (Hyg., *Poet. astr.* 2, 4; *Min. Fel.* 22,7). Finally, *aiora* is related to the movement of souls in Hades and their

8 On the numerous implications of the concept of *schema* in ancient Greece see the detailed analysis by Catoni 20082. For an accurate examination of the term *aiora*, see Frisk 1960: 49; Beekes 2010: 47 and Parke-Wormell 1946: 11.

9 See for example Pl., *Cra.* 425d.

10 For in-depth analysis of this passage from Pausanias, see Tosi 2018.

11 On the influences of the Platonic astral *choreia* on the Christian imaginary, see Miller 1986; see also De Vita 2017.

return to the life cycle, an element which brings us back to the connection between this ritual and the commemoration – or rather the return – of the dead¹².

Some authors from the second and third century CE, including Athenaeus and the grammarian and lexicographer Pollux, claim that the girls sang a song known as *aletis* during the *Aiora* celebrations (Athen., *Deipn.*, 14, 10; Poll., 4, 55). This title refers to Erigone, who, according to Hyginus, wandered in search of her father: *alletes* means wanderer or vagabond. With regard to this concept, however, it is important to underline that the act of wandering at the margins of society was clearly the result of an error (*aleteia* in Greek). For Plato, those who took their own lives had to be marginalised in some way after death, excluded from the *polis*: in the *Laws*, he states that they have to be buried without honour in unkempt anonymous places, using unmarked tombs without a stele or any names (Pl., *Leg.* 9, 873cd). Erigone and the girls she cursed disrupted the *schemata* of the *polis* by hanging themselves, and as they had been errant, they needed to be reinstated through the ritual schema of *aiora*.

It appears that Varro was the first in the Latin world to make a more explicit association between rituals featuring oscillatory *schemata* and the funerary purification required after a suicide by hanging, drawing on the most accredited version of the myth of Erigone and Icarius (Serv., *ad Aen.* 12, 603; Serv., *ad Georg.* 2, 389). The other work attributed to Hyginus, the *Myths*, states that according to the oracle of Apollo the epidemic of self-hanging by Athenian girls was the consequence of leaving the deaths of Icarius and Erigone unpunished. For this reason, the Athenians made the shepherds pay for their crime and established a festival of the swing (*festum oscillationis*) in honour of Erigone to stop the contagion from spreading (Hyg., *Fab.* 130, 4). The deverbal noun *oscillatio* and the verb *oscillo* implicitly refer to

the noun *oscillum*, the name of the object whose movement is described. Although the etymology is not clear, the meaning is ‘swing’, and it is equally evident that this implies both association and contamination between the Hellenic world and Latin culture¹³. It should be remembered, however, that Roman opinions about nature and the use of *oscilla* varied significantly. The term had two main meanings, which nevertheless overlap in more than one case: a swing and a mask or anthropomorphic statuette. As these were sometimes hung up, they consequently made swinging movements.

In the second century CE, the grammarian Festus opened an interesting digression by commenting on the noun *oscillum* (swing) and the present participle *oscillantes*. The *lusus* or swing game/rite originated from the death of King Latinus who disappeared following a battle with Mezentius, King of Caere, and was assimilated into the figure of *Iuppiter Latiaris*. Free men and slaves set about seeking him not only on earth but also in the sky by swaying on swings, a custom which was maintained during festivals dedicated to him (*feriae latinae*). According to some, Festus concludes, the Italic peoples did this to imitate the Greeks, who mimicked the movement of Erigone when she hanged herself (Fest. 212, Lindsay). The Italic tradition is also confirmed by a scholium to Cicero’s *Pro Plancio* that, in reference not only to Latinus but also to Aeneas, mentions the use of swinging on *machinae pendulae* in order to find their souls in the sky (*ad Cic. Planc.* 9, 2) (Mazzacane1980: 146-147; Roscini 2013: 239). At the end of the fourth century, when Servius commented on the passage of the *Georgics* that refers to the use of *oscilla* (seen by Virgil as masks or anthropomorphic figurines hung on trees in honour of Bacchus during the *Liber Pater* festivities), he used the aetiological myth of Icarius and Erigone to explain the oscillatory movement as a search for their vanished bodies in the sky

12 On the concept of *aiora* in Plato, see the interesting observations by Funghi 1980.

13 For complete scrutiny of the sources: Forcellini, III, 288; *RE* XVIII/2, 1567-79; *ThLL* IX, 1102-3; Bacchetta 2006: 77-88; Roscini 2013: 233-257.

(«ut quasi et per aerem illorum cadavera quaerere viderentur») (Serv., *ad Georg.* 2, 389). Erigone is *aletis*, a wanderer, and Hyginus also states – citing Eratosthenes by referring to the Athenian myth to explain the origin of the rite of *oscillatio* as an annual sacrifice to imitate the movement of the hanged girl – that she roamed in search of her father, led by her dog (or in the later version of Nonnus of Panopolis by the ghost of her father appearing to her in a dream), and then took her own life in desperation by hanging herself from a tree above the corpse of Icarius (Hyg., *Poet. astr.* 2, 4; Nonnus, *Dion.* 47, 148-186). Regardless of the setting (Roman or Greek) and the different protagonists, both Festus and Servius refer to *oscilla* as instruments of the rite/game of the swing, which was established in order to search for the corpses or spirits of the dead¹⁴. It is highly probable that scholars of the calibre of Festus and Servius were familiar with the aforementioned Platonic meaning of *aiora* as the movement of souls in Hades.

The oldest reference to *oscillum* in the sense of a suspended anthropomorphic object can be found in some verses of the *Georgics* imbued with Dionysism, which follow an allusion to the origins of tragedy in Attica (Verg., *G.* 2, 385-389). Participants in the spring ceremonies in honour of Dionysus-Liber Pater wore masks made of tree bark and improvised verse, abandoning themselves to unrestrained laughter and hanging *oscilla mollia* from the trees to favour the growth of the vines. Given that these were not images of Bacchus but votive images offered to the god, most scholars believe that they were masks or anthropomorphic images made of perishable material (wax or wool). Others, however, not without valid reasons, interpret the adjective *mollia* as referring to the swinging movement of the objects (Roscini 2013: 234-235). Furthermore,

softness is an attribute also used in the Roman world to describe dancers, who were included in the category of *infames* just like those who committed suicide, especially by hanging¹⁵.

When explaining the Virgilian *mollia* in the sense of *pensilia*, Servius uses the myth of Erigone and Icarius to justify the Latin use of *oscilla*. He wrote between the fourth and fifth century, but we do not know whether the rite was still practised in Rome at this time. During the same period, Macrobius spoke of *oscilla* in reference to votive statuettes that replaced human sacrifices when accounting for the origins of the festivities in honour of Saturn (Macrobius, *Sat.* 1, 7, 31; 11, 48) (Roscini 2013: 237-238). At the end of the passage in which Servius repeats the explanation of the swing rite as a search for the missing dead, he introduces an interesting corollary, which seems to provide further evidence of contamination between ritual gestures of different origins sharing the trait of oscillatory movement and suspension. As many of those who practised the swing rite fell to the ground, it was decided to make substitutive anthropomorphic images (*ad oris sui similitudinem*) and hang them up, making them swing instead (Serv., *ad Georg.* 2, 389). These might have been faces, masks or statuettes representing worshippers. In his *Commentary on the Aeneid*, Servius introduces another Italic tradition to explain the definition of *informe letum*, which Virgil refers to the suicide by hanging of Queen Amata; referring to Varro, he states that *oscilla* were anthropomorphic images used to appease the wandering souls of those who had hanged themselves (Serv., *ad Aen.* 12, 603). *Informe* has the same meaning as *aschemon*, and that which is *aschemon* needs a *schema* (in this case the *aiora/oscillatio*) in order to be ‘re-schematised’, namely put back in the right order of things. According to Roman

14 According to Mazzacane, the use the swing to hover in the air in an attempt to seek the missing dead should be seen as a symbolic means to establish a connection between the worlds of men and the gods (Mazzacane 1980: 148). She also makes a suggestive reference to ritual motives in Vedic India, in which the sacrificer facilitated the sun rising in the sky by swinging on a swing.

15 In *Dig.* 3, 2, 11, 3, funeral honours are denied to those who hang themselves in the same section that decrees the infamia of dancers and actors (*Dig.* 3, 2, 2, 5). On the infamy of those working in the performance arts, see Neri 1998: 233-250 and Hugoniot 2004.

law, the stigma of *infamia* deriving from hanging meant that those who committed suicide could not receive funeral honours or the right to burial¹⁶. The effectiveness of these statuettes or masks might have derived from the fact that when they were suspended and swinging, they imitated and reproduced the type of death whose nefarious consequences the rite was supposed to ward off.

This substitutive and expiatory value of anthropomorphic objects (in this case statuettes or dolls) is documented by certain myths still present in the works of Arnobius of Sicca and Macrobius, which credit founding heroes like Hercules and Numa Pompilius with the decision to stop human sacrifices, replacing the victims with anthropomorphic simulacra or animals and plants¹⁷. During the *Compitalia*, the festival dedicated to the Lares (deceased ancestors) celebrated at the beginning of January, Roman families hung anthropomorphic woollen dolls (*maniae*) and balls of wool (*pilae*) at crossroads (*compita*). The former represented the free members of the family, while the latter portrayed their slaves. Festus specified that this occurred so that the deified dead spared the living by settling for the simulacra and balls of wool (Fest. 272 s., Lindsay). According to Albinus Caecina, one of the protagonists of Macrobius's dialogue, the same replacement of human victims with anthropomorphic effigies (*permutatio*) occurred during the *Saturnalia* festival¹⁸. The Pelasgians landed on the island in Lake Cutilia after the oracle had told them to offer their tithe to Phoebus, sacrifice heads to Hades and a man to his father Saturn. After returning to Italy, Hercules advised their descendants

to replace those ill-omened sacrifices with favourable ones, offering to Dis not human heads but statuettes with skilfully fashioned human faces and honouring Saturn's altar not by slaughtering a man but by kindling lights – for *phōta* means not only 'man' but also 'lights'. Hence the custom of exchanging candles during the *Saturnalia* (Macrobi., *Sat.* 1, 7, 28-32)¹⁹.

In this case, however, it was never specified that the objects were suspended or that they swung.

Oscilla are both votive gifts and instruments in a ritual performance, like anatomical *ex-votos* offered on the altars of saints. This association is still clearly made by Rodolphus Glaber in the eleventh century (Radulph. Glab. *Hist.* 4, 3, 6: «Multimode quippe membrorum reformationes ibidem vise sunt exitisse ac insignia pendere oscillorum multiformia»). There is a wide range of intentions of worshippers and meanings that can be reconstructed *ex post facto*. As we have seen and as Frazer hypothesised, these include the propitiation of agrarian fertility, the desire to appease the spirits of those who died a violent or premature death and the underworld deities (generally speaking, funeral purification rituals) (Frazer 19193: 281-285). What has yet to be explained is the idea of swinging in search of the dead in the sky (Festus), unless it is seen as an erudite aetiological explanation that justifies the possible transformation of swing use from *lusus* to *ritus*. However, this idea is difficult to apply to the folkloric systems of beliefs and funeral rituals in the ancient Mediterranean. The connection with the theatrical and Dionysian realm is more evident in the Hellenic version of our mythical framework than in the Latin version. At the same time, however, *oscillatio* is a *lusus*

16 On this see: Hoffmann 2008; Voisin 1979; Cantarella 2011: 199-203; Roscini 2013: 237, nota 21.

17 See the systematic analysis of the literary contexts in Canetti 2017: 374 et seq.

18 *Sat.* 1, 7, 34: the festival in honour of the *Lares* and *Mania* dated back to Tarquin the Proud «in accordance with an oracle of Apollo directing that the gods' favor be sought with heads on behalf of heads» («ex responso Apollinis, quo praeceptum est ut pro capitibus capitibus supplicaretur»). The custom of offering children to the Lares and their mother (Mania) was observed for sometime, but then after removing the Etruscan tyrant, Lucius Junius Brutus decided to replace the victims with heads of garlic and poppy in order to avoid the unfortunate sacrifice. In this way, «it came to be that likenesses of Mania hung before each household's door to avert any danger that might threaten the household's members» (7, 35).

19 The last days of the *Saturnalia* festival (17-23 December) were known as *sigillaria* because of the custom of giving presents of wax or terracotta statuettes depicting human figures or animals (*sigilla*); see Bettini 2018: 141-145. Moreover, pontifical law in Rome allowed the use of wax or clay simulacra as equivalents of the object represented.

or *ludus*, a game that refers to the spectacular meaning of the term (*ludi scaenici* and *ludiones*, dancers). The fanciful etymology of Cornificius cited by Festus reveals that it was easy to contaminate the two meanings of *oscillum* as mask and as swing, because people practising the *lusus* (game) of *oscillatio* were called *oscillantes*, and they used to swing while covering their faces with a mask («Oscillantes [...] ab eo quod os celare sint soliti personis propter verecundiam, qui eo genere lusum utebantur», Fest. 212, Lindsay) (Roscini 2013: 241 and note 29).

In the two centuries between the Republic and the Principate, together with the legislative prohibitions of human sacrifices, Greek-Roman culture developed a philosophical and religious sensibility that deplored the brutal and superstitious nature of the ancient devotional practice. For theological reasons, ancient Christianity intensified the ethical and anthropological condemnation of human sacrifice and suicide as forms of *devotio* (self-devotion). Nevertheless, from the fourth-fifth century onwards, devotional practices featured significant continuity of the ritual device of replacing the victim with a metonymic effigy. A recent analysis of the Greek and Latin lexicon up to the eleventh century shows that despite censorship, destruction and theological-pastoral mediation, the devotional imaginary and the practice of making anthropomorphic votive objects and placing them on the tombs of saints broadly repeats the ancient device of self-devotion. This device also underpins the self-sacrifice of the perfect victim, Christ, which puts an end to the ancient regime of bloody sacrifice²⁰.

The ritual schema of *aiora*-suspension-*oscillatio* is a device aimed at stabilising the disorder caused by a traumatic event, an efficacy that is also documented by Christian authors. Clement of Alexandria underlines the action of *aiora* in its cosmological and Platonic meaning (Clem. Al., *Strom.* 6, 10, 80); John Chrys-

ostom associates it with a movement that can restore peacefulness to the body (Ioh. Chrys., *In acta ap.*, PG 60, 147).

The most interesting source, however, is the *Christus Patiens*, even though its date and authorship are uncertain. This cento of texts was transmitted in manuscripts (none of which predate the thirteenth century) under the name of Gregory of Nazianzus. Although this attribution has always been widely contested in favour of a later ascription to Byzantine authors such as Constantine Manasses (twelfth century), it has recently been reappraised by some authors²¹. In any case, it is undoubtedly the product of a Christian intellectual who reworks the Greek tragic framework, above all Euripides, to recount the passion of Christ. The interesting aspect for our purposes is the use of the verb *aioreo* in the text: it is used in the middle-passive voice, just as it was in the case of Pausania's Phaedra – who hangs herself and swings –, but here the suspended death refers to Christ on the cross (*Christus Patiens* - Χριστός πάσχων 607, SCh 149, 176).

At this point in time, the Eastern and Western Christian imaginary had completely merged the Greek concept of *aiora* and the Latin notion of *infamia* that was associated with the *suspendiosi* (suspended dead). It could therefore be claimed that Christ, who dies *infamis*, is suspended on the cross in the physical sense, and because he cannot be considered dead in the proper sense of the word, as he returns from the dead. Furthermore – and herein lies all the effectiveness of the ritual schema of *aiora* – the purpose of Christ's sacrifice and his suspension between the worlds of the living and the dead is to restore a state of perfect order to the world and to humanity.

Oscillating (*oscillare*) and wandering (*vagare*) are two actions that the myth of Erigone the rover (*aletis*) merges into the same figure of heroine-suicide victim due to excruciating pain in a festive context laden with Dionysian associations of

20 On this see Canetti 2017.

21 See Moreschini 2008: 158-159, who summarizes the attributive hypotheses of André Tuilier (Tuilier 1969: 124-338) and Francesco Trisoglio (Trisoglio 1996).

possession. From the Theodosian era onwards, the time of Servius and Macrobius, *energumens* constituted a ritual social body publicly recognised in places of worship in the same way as the sick waiting to be healed, the poor, catechumens, penitents and virgins. Not everyone travelled to shrines after being seized by a demon; some did so precisely in order to be possessed by one so that they could fit into the recognised group of the possessed, having license to take part in regular rituals of possession and exorcisms (Brown 1982: 111).

Many Christian sources from the fourth and fifth century associate the gestures of the possessed with the ancient choreutic rituals of maenadism and corybantism, which might well be more than a simple metaphor²². Remaining suspended in the air was undoubtedly an illustration of the impotence to which the saint's virtue reduced demons, who were used to moving at great speed to flaunt their apparent divinatory skills; head-down suspension was an image of the diabolical inversion of ethical and anthropological values and rules, as well as a depiction of the human condition after the Fall. The rhythmic movement of the *energumens*, who let out the ancient cry of the Bacchae during the arrival in Nola of the relics of Saint Felix, and the possessed suspended and dangling in the air referenced by Jerome, Sulpicius Severus and Constantius of Lyon also resemble the swinging movement of the *tarantolati* in Salento (*aioresis*), some of whom hung from trees on ropes to imitate the spiders that possessed them (De Martino 2008: 230-240). The retroversion of the head and torso recall not only the gestures of maenadism but also the movements of Afro-American possession rites documented in voodoo ceremonies in honour of the serpent loa, Damballa, whose gestures are imitated by the possessed (Métraux 1971: 103; De Martino 2008: 207). The paroxysmal swinging and turning of the torso and

head – the so-called arch of hysteria – were associated with the movements of the possessed in a state of trance by Jean-Martin Charcot (Charcot-Richer 1887). It would be more appropriate, however, to invert this relationship: rather than considering the possessed as if they were 'hysterical', like Charcot did, the so-called 'hysterics' should be seen as imitating the possessed²³.

In Christian sources, every form of possession and the ancient choreutic rituals that included possession trance are inevitably considered diabolical. Against this backdrop, the erratic are doomed to become errant: they imitate their inner disorder and its associated corporeal trembling, which become the symbol of diabolical seizure. The *energumens* who persevere in pagan error are condemned to find an outlet in an alienating ritual context, which denies them the opportunity to integrate their own frenzy into the new horizon of meaning. The trembling of the erratic thus became a symptom of a lack or obstinate refusal of Truth; being possessed by a spirit meant being condemned to social exclusion or exorcism.

Swinging oscillatory movement is a mythical ritual device that probably has a biological foundation and is suitable for restoring order and meaning. It artificially reproduces a state of suspension and swinging that suggests an ontological and psychological condition of uncertainty and instability: the situations of the souls of the hanged and the *vagi et errantes* spirits of the possessed. The *salos*, the holy Fool-for-Christ, also shakes, sways and rocks in accordance with the Syriac etymology of the Greek term that refocuses on the Pauline *moria*²⁴. This schema makes it possible to dominate and tame the critical and liminal condition by reducing it to a horizon of meaning and order. The dialectic order/disorder creates meanings and the *oscillatio* constitutes a gestural metaphor and a ritual practice

22 On this, see Canetti 2013.

23 This reversed perspective will form the basis of the study by Canetti, to be published.

24 See the entry *σαλός* in Beekes 2010: 1303-1304; see also Canetti 2019.

aimed at resolving a state of tension, a fracture, a breached border²⁵.

Although it is not possible to find historically determinable and unequivocal connections between mythical self-hanging, Dionysian swing rites (*Aiora*) and votive, expiatory and sacrificial practices (*oscilla*), we have reconstructed a range of meanings that are all related to oscillatory movement. The regular and rhythmic nature of the latter forms the basis of choreutic gestures, and at the same time represents the irregular gestures of the inebriated, the *infames*, the possessed and maniacs.

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25 On the dialectic between order and disorder, see Balandier 1991.

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