

The *Collatio Alexandri et Dindimi*: the “Natural” Space of the Brahmans

A Collatio Alexandri et Dindimi: o Espaço “Natural” dos Brâmanes

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This work focuses on the *Collatio Alexandri et Dindimi*, a fictional correspondence made up of five letters between Alexander the Great and Dindimus, the king of the Brahmans. The short text is a part of the minor writings of the *Corpus* known as *Alexander Romance* (Steinmann, 2012, p. 3). The first redaction, the *Collatio I*, dates back to the V century A. D.¹ and according to M. Steinmann its dating can be restricted to the years from 410 to 420 (Steinmann, 2012, p. 79). The story of the text transmission itself is rather complicated, since there exist three different versions. *Collatio I* is the oldest, *Collatio II* is in a Bamberg manuscript², and *Collatio III* was interpolated in Archpriest Leo’s compilation *Historia de preliis*, which dates back to the X century.

The *Collatio*, according to G. Cary’s definition (Cary, 1956, pp. 12-16) is part of the so-called “Indian treatises” along with the *Commonitorium Palladii*³, the *Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem* and the brief writing about Brahmans’ life *Dindimus de Bragmanibus*.

¹ E. Liénard proposed to place the text slightly further than 400 A. D. (Liénard, 1936, p. 832). According to G. Cary, the *Collatio I* dates back to the fourth century (Cary, 1956, p. 14). Telfryn Pritchard dated the text between the end of fourth and the beginning of the fifth century (Pritchard, 1995, p. 256).

² The oldest edition of the manuscript E. III. 14 (now Hist. 3) is the one that dating back to 1891, by B. Kübler. It was then republished by F. Pfister in 1910.

³ Actually the question is much more complex because the *De moribus Brachmanorum* attributed to St. Ambrose and the *Περὶ τῶν τῆς Ἰνδίας Ἐθνῶν καὶ τῶν Βραχμάνων* attributed to Palladius are related to the tradition of the *Commonitorium Palladii*.

If we follow a perspective closely linked to the interpretation and the decipherment of this epistolary exchange, we face numerous issues involving different levels of conceptual stratification, related both to the history of ideas on ancient paganism, formulated by the Christian thought of the first centuries, and to the cultural contrast between Christianity and the classical world.

In the apocryphal letters of Alexander and Dindimus, the author outlines two conflicting standpoints mainly related to Brahmins' lifestyle. In fact – as it might emerge from a longer-term analysis – their contrast is rather apparent and mostly outward: it might have been construed as a conceptual instrument, consistent with a standpoint from which the Western world is defining its identity-related, ideological and cultural co-ordinates with respect to an *otherness* that is described as the exact denial of itself.

Here, it is only possible to briefly notice that, at a speculative level, there are at least two orders of problems connected to the drawing-up of this text, that must be taken in consideration if a convincing decoding is sought for. First of all, the representation of the Indian wise men is a projection of the way of thinking about the *other* by Western thought, and especially by the classical world, identified with Alexander. At the same time, on the other hand, the description of the Brahmins is also one of the ways Christianity itself took to dissociate from the Greek-Roman civilization, and from its conception of man and his relationship with the deity⁴.

By examining the text content, we can summarize the nodal points on which the five discourses contained in the correspondence between Alexander and Dindimus are based. In the first letter, the Macedonian asks the king of the Brahmins to explain to him, since he has heard of it, whether they really exploit neither the resources of land nor of the sea and whether this is their philosophy of life.

In the second letter Dindimus responds by explaining in a detailed way what their habits are. Firstly, he emphasizes that they lead “a simple and pure life” (*Collatio* 2, 2). He then affirms that they feed on what the earth produces, they have no illnesses, they are all equal in poverty, they have no processes, no laws, they do not work but avoid idleness, they have no plow and do not go hunting or fishing (2, 3-4). They do not know the use of thermal buildings, but they warm up in the sun and bathe with dew, they drip into the rivers (2, 5), they make no constructions but live in caves (2, 6). They do not wear precious clothes but cover themselves with papyrus leaves or live naked; women do not adorn, there is no incest or adultery, they only copulate for procreation and do not practice abortions (2, 7). They have no weapons and wage no wars, they do not fear death, and they do not build sepulchers or burn the dead (2, 8). In this regard, Dindimus harshly reproaches the Macedonians because they do not allow the burial of bodies in the earth (2, 9). He continues by enumerating the customs of the Brahmins, where it is said that they do not have to endure epidemics and among

⁴ The whole question of the Brahmins as an ideal representation of its own Christian identity formulated by Europe can be seen in a work of R. Gelders (2009, pp. 563-589). On the image of Dindimus and the Brahmins as proto-Christians in the sources of the Western Middle Ages, it is possible to consult T. Hahn (1978, pp. 213-234).

them nature is aligned with seasons (2, 11). They do not attend theatrical performances or horse races, but they enjoy nature-based performances (2, 12-13), they do not do maritime trade, and do not go looking for new lands to subdue, nor are they slaves of wealth (2, 14), they do not know the art of rhetoric and do not attend philosophical schools (2, 15). Finally, in his exposition, Dindimus points out that they do not immolate victims for sacrifices, they have neither temples nor altars, but they practice bloodless worship toward a God-maker who rules the world and is propitiated through the word. According to their philosophy, God is word, but he is also spirit and mind, and therefore they acquire his favour with religiousness and thanksgiving (2, 16). Macedonians, on the contrary, have the greatest enjoyment in the flesh and devote their cult to it. In this regard, their religion is also harshly criticized, because they worship many gods, instead of a single god, and thus they are slaves of their whims (2, 17).

It thus emerges unequivocally how the Brahmins lead an existence absolutely deprived of all the features which are the characteristics of Western civilization and that appear in the text as redundant and annoying. So, the Brahmins' space is a utopian land. The Brahmins' lifestyle is not real as it seems, but their strange customs emphasize the superiority of the Greek civilization. This was an old *topos* of ancient Greek literature on India and its inhabitants⁵.

In particular, the text focuses on the religious question which becomes one of the main reasons of contrast between the two characters. The Brahmins' religion is opposed to the Macedonians' because it is addressed to a single God, creator and ruler of the world, and above all does not envisage the practice of cruel sacrifices of animals. These last considerations of Dindimus particularly allow us to reflect on the fact that he opposes the polytheistic system of Macedonians to a mode of worship that clearly has the features of Christian monotheism⁶. It is very likely that the author of the *Collatio* was influenced by Christianity⁷.

In the third letter Alexander, in turn accuses the Brahmins of considering themselves gods, or of being envious of God. The fourth epistle contains the arguments of Dindimus' defense. He argues that the Brahmins are not inhabitants of this world, but foreigners, because they are destined to go further: they do not accomplish untrue or unchaste acts, but have a free conscience. And then he overturns Alexander's criticisms by addressing it to the Macedonians, who are superb, despise God, build altars for themselves, and are pleased to immolate victims.

The last letter, which concludes the dispute on the two different lifestyles, is ascribed to Alexander. The tone of the answer is very tough and the king rea-

⁵ L. Cracco Ruggini highlighted in a study which common features have the Brahmins of the *Collatio* with *topoi* of the stoic-cynical literature and that the text takes inspiration from the motifs of Onesikritos (Cracco Ruggini, 1965, pp. 47-48).

⁶ E. Liénard noted that Dindimus' discourse clearly shows a patina of Christianity and there are many the influences that the text received from the *Apologist* of Tertullian (Liénard, 1936, p. 822^a).

⁷ Many years ago J. Makowsky said that the author was a Christian rethorician (Makowsky, 1919, p. 36). Then C. Morelli thought that Dindimus' philosophy was Christianity and that he was a supporter of Christian asceticism (Morelli, 1920, pp. 71-75).

ffirms the superiority of his people. He emphasizes that the Brahmans are forced to live in an inaccessible territory, but they praise their homeland and boast of their continence. For them the use of wealth is forbidden and *natural law* (*Collatio* 5, 1) requires torture; their precepts have been provided by necessity. They do not have the opportunity to live free, but they bear the same poverty of the dead (5, 2). Moreover, they do not know the use of iron and therefore cannot sow fields, or cultivate vineyards, or erect buildings; they feed on herbs and therefore live as flocks (5, 3). Their women do not wear ornaments because they do not have the opportunity, and if they do not live illicit passions it would be admirable that they would do it because of their will and not because of necessity. Later on, Alexander points out that they have several things in common with beasts: the lack of laws and processes, and the fact that they do not study the letters (5, 4). On the contrary, the Macedonians live as rational beings, they have no rules demanding abstinence, but they are driven to live well. Nature has given them many joys, and virtue lives along with them. The conclusion of this reasoning is that the will of man, as well as his mind, in many occasions appears differently and adapts to change (5, 5). The condition of the senses is also unstable and multifaceted. The sensations are exactly what mitigate the harshness of the suffering caused by work. So the Macedonians are delighted by their senses, and these are the basic principles of their lives. Finally, to seal what he had already expressed, the king concludes that it is impossible refrain from using the products offered by land, sea and air (5, 6).

Through a brief investigation of the terms contained in *Collatio*, we can quickly trace the path of the opposing arguments of the two sovereigns, on at least two fundamental concepts in the text. We can proceed analyzing the terms that are used in the text.

First of all, it is necessary to consider the idea of nature, which emerges over and over from the correspondence.

The connotation of Brahmans' life is predominantly linked to a principle of *lex naturalis*, which imposes them many deprivations, and forces them to an almost absolute poverty regime⁸. Indeed, the whole Dindimus' first letter is based on a series of persistent and continuous denials of habits, which are typical of the Greek-Roman world, represented by Alexander. At first, with a reassuring tone, the king of the Brahmans claims to lead a *pura et simplex* life (*Collatio* 2, 2) and exalts the *aequalitas paupertatis* which makes everyone wealthy⁹, or rather he adds that they are not slaves of wealth, but that total poverty makes them free¹⁰. On the other hand, the sovereign of the Macedonians points out that some god determined that they would endure the *inopia mortuorum* alive¹¹.

⁸ The term *paupertas* appears in *Collatio* 2, 2 and *pauperies* is used in *Collatio* 2, 14.

⁹ "Omnes divites facit paupertatis aequalitas" (*Collatio* 2, 2).

¹⁰ "Nec famulos nos sibi faciet multis casibus opum devincta materies, quos liberos edidit absoluta pauperies" (*Collatio* 2, 14).

¹¹ "Quicquid de vestris moribus deus auctor praesenserit, quos noluit Tartareis post obitum reservare suppliciis, sed vivos perferre statuit inopiam mortuorum, quam vos philosophiae falso vocabulo concinnatis" (*Collatio* 5, 2).

The people of the Brahmins conform to what the *ratio naturae* (*Collatio* 2, 2) requires and respect the law dictated by *ius naturae* (2, 3). According to Dindimus, the *opus naturae* (2, 7) cannot be amended and around them nature is in harmony with seasons (2, 11). Moreover, nature itself offers them wonderful shows (2, 13). It is evident that the wise Brahmin presents an idea of nature as something inviolable. In fact, he states that they do not contaminate the *temperies caeli* (2, 11) and accuse the Macedonians of having wanted to close Asia and Libya in confined areas, of having shaken the course of the sun, of having discolored the waters of two rivers, the Pactolus and the Hermus, of having built a bridge of ships, of having made the Ocean navigable¹². On the other hand, Alexander presents a very different vision of nature, and of the relationship the Brahmins have with it. He argues that such people do not enjoy the pleasures offered by it (3, 1). Later, he states that the same nature has established for them a place where there is neither access nor exit (5, 1) and that *lex naturalis* has prepared for them torture (5, 1), while nature has given to the Macedonians many pleasures (5, 5). Finally, in his last replica, the sovereign states that if Dindimus wanted to give up using the fruits of the earth, or the supply of sea and air, he would be accused either of pride or envy (5, 6).

Other considerations can be made on the second notion found at the root of the *Collatio*'s structure: the type of philosophy followed by the Brahmins.

The words of the Macedonian despise towards the habits of life and the *sapientia Bragmanorum* (*Collatio* 2, 10). In the first reply Dindimus says he wants to praise him for his desire to know the perfect wisdom and to let him know how they are considered in order to live well (2, 1). Their philosophy is easy – according to the Brahmins – because it takes advantage of justice and believes that others should not suffer pain (2, 15). But Alexander, in his first reply, says that their actions can be seen as insanity rather than philosophy¹³. Even further, he explains that they boast of having merit for their zeal to the *continentia*¹⁴, but they think that men who live in sufferings are blessed instead and this is their philosophy¹⁵. Their precepts provided by *necessitas continentiae* are the same that imprisonment has set for the criminals¹⁶, and therefore those who are called *philosophi*, by the Macedonians are called *rei*¹⁷. To reinforce the message, Alexander adds that they are denied the possibility to live free¹⁸ and that they, in fact, call

¹² “Vos Asiam et Libyam brevibus concludi finibus affirmastis. Vos solis meatum trepidare facitis, dum cursus sui terminus armis disquirat Alexander. Vos Pactoli atque Hermi rutilos auro meatus decoloros reddidistis. Vos Nilum videndum monuistis. Vos pontem navalem moliri docuistis. Vos horribilem Oceanum navigabilem demonstrastis” (*Collatio* 2, 9).

¹³ “Haec iudicio meo dementiae potius quam philosophiae numeranda sunt” (*Collatio* 3, 1).

¹⁴ “Continentiae studio meruisse iactatis” (*Collatio* 5, 1).

¹⁵ “Itaque secundum vestram sententiam et illi beati dicendi sunt, qui perpetuis innexi vinculis et diuturno squalore marcentes vitam poenalem sibi consenescentem producunt” (*Collatio* 5, 1).

¹⁶ “Et praecepta, quae vobis continentiae vestrae necessitas dedit, illis carcer instituit” (*Collatio* 5, 1).

¹⁷ “Ita fit, ut, qui a vobis philosophi vocantur, rei pronuntientur a nobis” (*Collatio* 5, 1).

¹⁸ “Quid enim afflictius, quid calamitosius homine, cui libere vivendi negata potestas est interim” (*Collatio* 5, 2).

with the false term of *philosophia* what instead is the *inopia mortuorum* (5, 2). Therefore, the life they live is not blessed, but it is a punishment¹⁹. Continuing his discourse, the king shows that in the lands of the Macedonians the Brahmins' *philosophia penuriae* would not be required, and on the contrary in the seats of these, the former would be transformed into *inopes* wise men²⁰. Continenence would be a virtue if chosen, but a penitence if imposed²¹. He then invites the Brahmins to live according to their own criterion, not to necessity²². At the end of his arguments against Dindimus, the king praises the way of living of the Macedonians: they are rational men, not subject to any *lex inediae*, but driven by the free will to live well, so that a worthy reward follows a voluntary continence²³. In short, it is the possibility of choosing that characterizes the Macedonians, and not the necessity of constriction.

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Resumo

Este estudo centra-se na *Collatio Alexandri et Dindimi*, uma troca ficcional de cinco cartas entre Alexandre o Grande e Dindimus, o rei dos Brâmanes. É um trabalho que atesta um debate cul-

¹⁹ "Verius ergo non beatitudinis, sed castigationis esse confirmo, quod vivitis" (*Collatio* 5, 2).

²⁰ "Quod si liceret vos in nostras migrare terras, profecto philosophia vestrae penuriae nullatenus requireretur [...] Aut si nos in vestras sedes transire possemus, sapientes inopes redderemur" (*Collatio* 5, 3).

²¹ "Quae, si venit ex arbitrio, virtus est, si ex imperio, poena" (*Collatio* 5, 3).

²² "Miranda res esset, si proprio, non necessitatis iudicio viveretis" (*Collatio* 5, 4).

²³ "Nobis, id est rationabilibus hominibus, qui nullius inediae lege perstringimur, qui ad bene vivendum libero incitamus arbitrio, ut voluntariam continentiam digna remuneratio consequatur, dedit multas natura blanditias, quibus plerumque virtus sopita conivet" (*Collatio* 5, 5).

tural entre o mundo clássico e um ponto de vista diferente, representado pelo povo mítico dos Brâmanes. A presente pesquisa examina a dinâmica subjacente ao texto, a partir da análise do estilo de vida particular dos Brâmanes, fundada no *ius naturae*, e depois se deslocando para o conteúdo das cartas de Alexandre, que se opõe a uma maneira diferente de pensar, com base em *lex civilis*. Se olharmos o texto cuidadosamente, o raciocínio de Dindimus está de acordo com um ideal ascético moldado nos princípios da doutrina cristã. Pelo contrário, os argumentos de Alexandre baseiam-se em critérios típicos de racionalidade e moderação na medida em que são características distintivas do pensamento clássico. Esta perspectiva destaca como o espaço “natural” dos Brâmanes se opõe àquela da cultura greco-romana, num contexto de negação total da civilização, e depois demonstra como a *Collatio* ilustra os mecanismos pelos quais o pensamento cristão se identificou com um mundo “outro”, em contraste com a sociedade clássica anterior.

Abstract

This study focuses on the *Collatio Alexandri et Dindimi*, a fictional exchange of five letters between Alexander the Great and Dindimus, the king of the Brahmans. It is a work that attests to a cultural debate between the classical world and a different point of view, represented by the Brahmans’ people. The present research examines the dynamics underlying the text, beginning from the analysis of the particular Brahman’s lifestyle, founded on the *ius naturae*, and then shifting to the contents of the Alexander’s letters, which opposes a different way of thinking, based on *lex civilis*. If we look at the text carefully, Dindimus’ reasoning turns out to be in agreement with an ascetic ideal shaped on the principles of Christian doctrine. On the contrary, Alexander’s arguments rest upon typical criteria reasons of rationality and moderation insofar as they are distinctive features of the classical thought. This perspective highlights how the “natural” space of the Brahmans is opposed to that of the Greek-Roman culture, in a context of total denial of civilization, and then demonstrates how the *Collatio* illustrates the mechanisms whereby Christian thought, identifying itself with a world “other”, contrasts with the earlier classical society.