

VEGETARIANISM AS A POLITICAL RELIGIOUS CONDUCT IN LATE ANTIQUITY: THE CASES OF EMPEROR JULIAN AND OF THE BISHOP OF AVILA¹

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Abstract

The culinary practices of Late antiquity reveal significant aspects of the political, cultural and religious contexts of ancient societies. In this article, we will explore the intersection between Emperor Julian's culinary and philosophical practices and those of Priscillian of Avila. Julian, influenced by Neoplatonism and by the medical diets prescribed by his doctor, Oribasius of Pergamon, adopted a simple life, refraining from the consumption of meat in search for spiritual purification. Priscillian, in turn, inspired by oriental thinking and by an ascetic Christianity, was also adherent to vegetarianism. However, his culinary practices were considered to be heretic by the Nicene *ecclesia*. This article aims to analyse the way nourishment interconnected with these two important Late antiquity figures' philosophical and religious life.

Keywords

Vegetarianism; Julian; Priscillian; Neoplatonism.

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Resumo

As práticas alimentares da Antiguidade Tardia revelam aspectos significativos dos contextos políticos, culturais e religiosos de suas sociedades. Neste artigo, exploraremos a intersecção entre as práticas alimentares e filosóficas atribuídas ao imperador Juliano e a Prisciliano de Ávila. Juliano, influenciado por seu neoplatonismo e pelas dietas médicas prescritas por seu médico, Oribásio de Pérgamo, adotou uma vida simples, abstendo-se do consumo de carne em busca de purificação espiritual. Prisciliano, por sua vez, inspirado por correntes de pensamento orientais e por um cristianismo ascético, também se tornou adepto do vegetarianismo. Entretanto, suas práticas alimentares foram consideradas heréticas pela ecclesia nicena. Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar a forma com que a alimentação se interconectava à vida filosófica e religiosa desses dois importantes personagens da Antiguidade Tardia.

Palavras-Chave

Vegetarianismo; Juliano; Prisciliano; Neoplatonismo.

Introduction

Food has played a fundamental role throughout human history, profoundly shaping economic, social, cultural and political aspects of multiple societies. Thus, as culinary habits and preferences are socially constructed, they can express an individual and/or a group's identity. Such choices can be prescribed within a scientific discourse, within health manuals and in philosophical tradition (Wilkins; Nadeu, 2015: 3).

One of the most significant culinary practices of Late antiquity was vegetarianism, which was adopted in different religious and philosophical contexts. Meat abstinence was widely associated in this period with spiritual and ascetic beliefs. Practicing culinary abstinence, including vegetarianism, was seen as a way to achieve bodily and spiritual purity. This practice reflected the distinction between the material and the spiritual world, the physical and the divine, and was part of an effort to transcend the body's limitations and to move closer to sanctity.

Refraining from meat, thus, surrounds the lives and the political religious practices of Emperor Julian and of the bishop of Avila. Such characters, at first sight, don't seem to have much connection to one another, but as will be seen throughout this article, they have intertwined nuances.

Eating habits in Neoplatonism and in the life of Emperor Julian

Many Ancient History thinkers claimed the main goal in human life to be reaching *eudaimonia*, which can be understood as a state of plenitude of being. An important aspect of this debate informs us much of the ancient ethical thinking and determines the attitudes of its supporters in relation to food intake. It is a discussion of whether the way to happiness involved a life of pleasures or one of virtues. Most of the ancient philosophers, both in numbers and in influence, belongs to the latter, although there were a few important exceptions, such as the epicureans. In this perspective, nourishment had a high level of philosophical importance seeing as the desire for food was presented by many thinkers as having a potential of moral danger. Such potential moral danger refers amply to the desire for the pleasurable experiences of eating and drinking which could corrupt one's actions and take him away from virtue and towards vice (Scade, 2015: 68).

In this context, it can be affirmed that eating habits are directly shaped by culture. In societies with writing systems still under development, as were the ancient Greek and Roman ones, guidelines emerged whose guidance

influenced readers' food choice. In these cultures, some authors assumed the role of medical authorities, becoming capable of giving dietary, health and medical advice. An example of that are the medical manuals of Hippocrates, Galenus and Oribasius. Food selection was profoundly connected to the processes of social representation. Therefore, when a renowned and respected author expressed his opinion, this influence was reflected in the food choices of his readers. One of the oldest and most famous gastronomical guides was Archestratus' *The Life of Luxury*, which offers a view on regional specialties and tips about the best way to prepare certain dishes. His influence in antiquity is evident in Athenaeus' *The Deipnosophistae*. In Latin literature, Pliny the Elder is the author of a wine catalogue which classifies them based on criteria such as region of origin and their health benefits. His ranking of Rome's top vineyards, in Book 14 is obviously influenced by his own beliefs and culture, but it also reflects the desire of Greek and Roman scholars to understand the world through a scientific discourse structured by categories (Nadeu, 2012: 153).

Combining philosophical and cultural issues, we know of many authors that defended the refrain from meat and wine and that advised a moderate diet. Regarding the vegetarian diet, it was largely adopted in the oriental portion of the Roman Empire and, before that, disseminated by Greek philosophers. According to Catherine Osborne there were different levels of vegetarianism. Some people avoided certain types of meat, while others would eat fish, but not red meat. There were also those who cast aside milk and eggs. Osborne considered any theory that defended the refrain from animal products as a form of vegetarianism in antiquity. This would apply, for example, to someone that refused to eat butter but did not mind eating other animal products. Furthermore, the author emphasised the various reasons why people would avoid animal products, such as necessity or limited opportunities, social conventions or pressure, food preferences, health, economy and convenience (Osborne, 1995: 214-215).

Aristophanes attributed to the orphics and their mysterious rites an opposition to the slaughter of animals. The hypothesis that the orphics were the first cult known for adopting a non-carnivorous diet seems to be reinforced by Euripides, who connects orphism to a diet which contemplated only by "soulless" food. According to Pausanias and Iamblichus, Pythagoreans and followers of orphism were also strictly prohibited from eating beans, as these grains symbolised the cycle of rebirth and the passage between life and death (Paus. 1.37.4; Iambl. VT. 109). Diogenes Laërtius relates that Pythagoras not only prohibited the consumption of animal meat but also defended the idea that animals should not be sacrificed, as he believed they had a soul just as human

beings. He promoted an ascetic diet, free of living beings, aiming to achieve physical health and mental clarity. Pythagoras worshipped only at the altar of Apollo in Delphi, where no animal sacrifices were performed. However, demonstrating the divergences regarding the mythology that was later reconstructed around his life, Diogenes Laërtius himself recognises that other sources confirmed that Pythagoras permitted the consumption of all animals, except for working cattle and sheep (Serrano Madroñal, 2021: 588-589; Nadeau, 2012: 155).

In his treaty *On Abstinence from Eating Animals*, Porphyry offers an overview on vegetarian beliefs in ancient literature seeing as, just like his master Plotinus, who was a Neoplatonist, he was a vegetarian. This author also points out that Pythagoras felt an aversion to sacrifices and those who practiced them, severing relations with butchers or hunters. It seems evident that although there were many Pythagoreans at various times and in many different places, they did not always share the same principles. The core of his doctrine lay in the firm belief in the immortality of souls in pilgrimage. This philosophy's more or less rigorous vegetarianism principle can be understood in a context of asceticism and of nutritional frugality based on religious roots. The idea previously mentioned immediately converted all living beings into similar entities (Serrano Madroñal, 2021: 590).

Given the range of philosophical schools involved, it is not surprising that the considerations that led to a vegetarian diet should vary, although it can be affirmed that the predominant argument for the abstention of meat was that it was beneficial for the soul. Within the reasons mentioned by Porphyry, there is the idea that adopting a diet that included meat would be an unnecessary luxury. A lot of what Porphyry has to say in his treaty corresponds to a defence for a life with minimal necessities, free from the attachment to mundane pleasures and worries. There are, however, various sections in this philosopher's treaty focused on his particular reasons why it may be just or unjust to kill animals, whether for sacrifice or food. Thus, the theme of the general exhortation to vegetarianism in Book 1 is the idea that abstaining from a meat diet is in keeping with the intellectual goals of the ascetic (Osborne, 1995: 218). This line of thought can also be seen in the writings of the Neoplatonist Iamblichus, who taught his disciples to refrain from all living beings and from certain foods that prevented lucidity and mental clarity. Iamblichus notes that the more strictly vegetarian proscriptions could only be destined for the most theoretical philosophers. The more or less rigorous vegetarian principle of this philosophical current can be understood in a context of asceticism and of nutritional frugality (Serrano Madroñal, 2021: 589 – 590).

In all societies there is a common understanding between individuals about what types of food are appropriate for consumption and the specific contexts in which these foods can be consumed so that no social and cultural norms are violated. As previously mentioned, the conceptions of what is considered to be adequate or inadequate to eat involve not only health reasons but also cultural, social, religious and symbolic factors. Although nature offers a great variety of food, human beings tend to consume only a small part of these resources. Indeed, what is potentially edible is not always appropriate for thinking, as Lévi-Strauss puts it. Human food choices are shaped by cultural beliefs or implicit systems of taxonomic classification which distinguish that which is edible from what is not. As has been inferred, culinary decisions are influenced by what is socially and symbolically accepted. A classic example of that is the prohibition of pork consumption in Judaism (*Lev.* 11; *Deut.* 14). Animals considered inadequate for sacrifice and consumption are frequently described as having abnormal anatomies or of being part of a species that does not fit into cognitive or social paradigms (Nadeau, 2012: 155 – 156).

Some philosophical and mystical communities chose to live an ascetic lifestyle and even adopted a vegetarian diet. In their vision, such a diet purified the body and allowed individuals to conduct a spiritual quest, free from physical needs. In ancient societies, eating meat had a symbolical and ideological role (Nadeau, 2012: 155; 159). It can be mentioned, therefore, that this is the case of Neoplatonism and of Julian. Julian was born in Constantinople in 331 and governed the Roman Empire first as Caesar, from 355 to 361, and then as Augustus from the years of 361 to 363. His rule was quite turbulent and deeply marked by his philosophical thought. Such thought can be defined as a conglomeration of many different currents of Neoplatonism. The basis of this emperor's Neoplatonism were Plotinus' principles and, mainly, those of Iamblichus. Theurgic rites are also included. For example, from the writing of Eunapius from Sardis' *The Lives of Philosophers and Sophists*, we know that Porphyry's belief of oracles was of great importance to Julian in his youth (Nattania, 1996: 40)

Regarding food specifically, Julian did not believe that plants or animal had souls. He makes a distinction between those that have a soul and those that do not in his hymn dedicated to the god Helios:

I regard this god, if we may believe the wise, as the common father of all mankind. I consider him to be of the greatest importance to all things that breathe and move upon the earth, and to those that have a share in existence and a soul and intelligence that are rational (Julian. *Or.* IV. 131c).

It is worth remembering that Iamblichus, Julian and Salustius did not believe that plants or animals had any kind of soul, which was in opposition to the belief of Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus and Porphyry (Nattania, 1995: 81). It is also worth noting that many of the aforementioned characters joined Julian at his court and were involved in some of the emperor's decisions to a certain degree, thanks to the tradition of political-philosophical support that existed between the representatives of *paideia* and of power. Among them were Maximus of Ephesus, Priscus of Epirus and the doctor Oribasius of Pergamon (Sanz Serrano; Díaz Bourgeal, 2021: 447).

Some authors were responsible for crystallising Julian's image as a governor who was not only wise but also someone who sought a certain degree of detachment from worldly pleasures. In his work *Res Gestae*, Ammianus Marcellinus highlights Julian's sobriety and his chastity, as well as his disdain for physical grooming and his tendency to assume the customs of field soldiers (Amm. Marc. 25.4.4-6; 25.4.2; 25.4.7; 25.4.4-5). There are similar assessments in Claudius Mamertinus' panegyric, which also emphasised the Neoplatonist emperor's sobriety and self-control (Mamert. *Pan. Lat.* 11.3-4). These positive assessments or even recommendations of ascetic practices can be perfectly fit into various Hellenic philosophical traditions, such as Stoicism, Cynicism or Pythagoreanism. In fact, we can find them in Neoplatonist thinkers' works whose influence can be tracked down in Julian's writings, as in those of Porphyry and Iamblichus (Sanz Serrano; Díaz Bourgeal, 2021: 448).

Libanius offers a valuable account of this when he comments on Julian's personality in his *Funeral Oration for Julian*:

For this prince alone had brought about the union of three different occupations, namely, of hearing, of speaking, and of writing: for to the reader he lent his ear, to the writer his voice, and to such as required his signature his right hand, and he had the gift never to make mistakes in anything. *Rest* was for his ministers; for himself it was to skip from one kind of work to another, for whenever a cessation of business occurred, after breakfasting just sufficient to support life [...] throwing himself upon piles of books he sung away, until at eventide the cares of the empire again called for him; and the supper was yet more frugal than the first meal, and his sleep just so much as was consistent with such a moderation in food. (Lib. *Or.* 18).

Other information directly related to Julian's diet can be found in the Medical Collections of Oribasius of Pergamon. Oribasius wrote such a food manual at the request of Julian himself. His *Medical Collections* are composed of 70 books, of which only some part was preserved, and aimed at offering the reader a broad and in-depth medical education, based on a

compilation of works by various doctors, complemented by Oribasius' own contributions, as a result of his experience as a doctor (Asade, 2020: 228). Julian's interest towards Oribasius' writings is explained by the doctor's affinity for Hellenic medicine, a tradition of knowledge admired by the emperor. In this context, Oribasius highlights, in the same manner, Galenus' works which were influenced by Stoicism. This allowed Julian to take pride in a medicine connected to philosophy, as was that of Oribasius, which was bound to Neoplatonism (De Lucia, 1999: 474).

Thus, in Oribasius' manual, we can find instructions advising against the excessive consumption of red meat, with the justification that this aliment could bring harm to the body, whether related to digestion or the production of intrabiliary humours (Orib. *Coll.Med.* 3. 9.1). It becomes clear that ancient medicine, particularly Greco-Roman medicine, developed around several theories about the functioning of the body and the origin of diseases. One of the most influential theories was that of the four humours, which had its creation in the ideas of Hippocrates and was later expanded by Galenus. According to this theory, the human body was composed of four vital liquids, or humours. These were: blood, choler (yellow bile), melancholy (black bile), and phlegm. A person's health depended on the adequate balancing of these four humours, and an unbalancing would result in sickness. Therefore, the doctor also informs the precautions in relation to the rational consumption of meat based on the humoral theory:

You must know that animals which must graze on tall grass, such as oxen, become lean and ill-tempered in winter and early spring, while they obviously appear fatter and more in good spirits in a later season, when the grass grows large and thick and bears seed. Those, on the contrary, that can feed on short grass, such as sheep, are best in early and mid-spring. Goats, finally, are preferable in early and mid-summer, when the shoots of shrubs are most abundant, because this is their usual food (Orib. *Coll.Med.* 2. 28.16).

Given this, it can be seen how food was linked to Neoplatonic precepts and, consequently, to the characters who had contact with this current.

Priscillian of Avila's eating habits

Priscillian was an ascetic Christian who had an extremely rigorous religious and moral conduct. He was most likely native to the Galicia region, in the north of the Iberian Peninsula, and it is estimated that he was born between 345 and 350. He was considered a heretic by those who professed the Nicene faith, and because of that, he was the first Christian leader and the first bishop to be persecuted and executed by his fellow

coreligionists. The secular authority, which was also involved in the Nicene-Priscillianist conflicts, condemned him to death and to a beheading in the ancient city of Trier in 385, by order of the emperor Magnus Maximus, usurper of the throne of Gratian between 383 and 388.

Despite his ending, it is difficult to specify the theological bases of Priscillianism and if Priscillian of Avila was the leader of a gnostic and/or a Manichean sect in Hispania, as he was accused by Nicene leaders. However, the image of Priscillian as a heterodox man remained in the popular imagery and in historiography over the years. Thus, the difficulties in understanding the historical reality of this character are accentuated by the scarcity of sources and by the challenge of dealing with textual documentation which reflects a completely anti-Priscillianist tradition, whose main objective was to accuse and combat him, aiming to eliminate all dissensions contrary to Nicene Christianity (Pérez Prieto, 2012: 12).

At the same time, Priscillian conquered many followers and was considered by them as both a saint and a martyr. His supporters believed that his doctrines and his lifestyle represented the purest form of Christianity, valuing sanctity and an ascetic life. They sought a salvation that, in their view, could not be achieved through the worldly path of power, which was followed by many bishops of the time, and whose authorities became increasingly indisputable (Díez de Velasco, 2017: 223). As for the Priscillianist doctrine, it can be said that, in essence, it sought spiritual development through ascetic practices. The Priscillian religious conduct can be summarised in the following aspects: renouncing from material objects and abstaining from meat and alcohol. In addition, Priscillianists were instructed to avoid attending places of worship during the Lenten and Christmas periods. This group would also dedicate time to the comprehensive study of religious scriptures, including the apocryphal texts, which were prohibited to the Nicene (Jorge, 2006: 4; 10).

As for the bishop of Avila's diet, there is a certain historiographical consensus when it comes to attributing the adoption of a vegetarian diet to Priscillianists. However, there are only exogenous sources from after this character's execution that support this claim. The main account comes from Augustine of Hippo's *De Haeresibus*, which affirms that:

Priscillianists, who were instituted in Hispania by Priscillian, follow for the most part a mixture of Gnostic and Manichaean doctrine, although the filth of other heresies flowed in horrible confusion into their teachings as into a sort of septic tank [...] This heresy, likewise, avoids meat as an unclean food. They separate the spouses whom they have succeeded in convincing of this evil, husbands from wives who refuse to accept it, wives from husbands who likewise refuse to accept

it. They attribute the creation of all flesh, not to the good and true God, but to evil angels (Augustine of Hippo, *De Haeresibus*, 70).

In his *Theological Treaties*, Priscillian makes no comment of his diet. In fact, when citing the Manichaeans, who are known to be vegetarians, he states that he condemns such doctrine and its followers, seeing as “they are not heretics, but idolaters and wicked servants of the Sun and the Moon, invincible demons, together with all their authors, sects, customs, institutions, books, doctors and disciples” (Priscillian, *Treaty to Damasus*). It is believed that he distinguishes in this passage his own beliefs from those of the Manichaeans, since he was accused of sharing this doctrine and of being part of the same set of heresies as this group. Despite this, in his *Canons*, he indirectly defends those who choose to abstain from meat and wine. Let us look at canon number 35: “Some abstain from meat and wine and should not be judged by others, nor should they judge others, because to the clean all things are clean, and because food and drink are not commendable to anyone. Well, as it is said, God destroys this kind of man and his meals.”

Regarding Priscillian of Avila’s eating habits, they are thought to be related to the educational environments in which he was trained and the consequent Eastern influence, as well as of Neoplatonism. It was not uncommon for Christian bishops to be trained in prestigious schools, which were possibly also Neoplatonist, and to be converted into Christianity in some moment of his life. In the case of Priscillian, Nicene authors such as Sulpicius Severus, made severe criticisms of the errors he allegedly committed due to his studies of secular sciences and magical arts as a young man. These criticisms also extended to his connection with philosophical-religious schools, such as the Gnostic one, which emerged from the Neoplatonic tradition, especially through Marcus of Memphis, whose followers Agape and the rhetor Elpidius were his direct teachers. This information also refers us to the teachings of the great Egyptian philosophers, followers of the Hellenistic wisdom of the school of Plotinus, which enjoyed great fame throughout the Roman Empire. Furthermore, in his *Epistles 126 and 113*, Jerome highlights Priscillian's relationship with Pythagoreanism, Platonism and Origenism, including also the bishop’s interest in the studies on Zoroaster (Sanz Serrano; Díaz Bourgeal, 2021: 451-452).

The close link between Priscillian and Neoplatonist gnostic and Manichaean learning environments can be attested in his own treatises. In his *Apologetic Book*, he defends the reading both of the apocryphal gospels and of hidden pagan texts, as well as of the Old Testament and the remainder of the canonical compositions. Moreover, his profession of faith

against the theories of the Arians, Novatians, Manichaeans, Gnostics, among others, demonstrates that he was, at least, aware of his writings. But it is above all in *The Book about Faith and the Apocryphal*, where there is the greatest demand for freedom of study and reflection as a means of defeating lies and reinforcing the foundations of faith through criticism and analysis of texts, in clear defence of a hermeneutics which was learned and practiced in his years of study (Sanz Serrano; Díaz Bourgeal, 2021: 461).

We highlight that this does not necessarily mean that Priscillian professed the Manichaean and/or the gnostic doctrines, but that he was greatly influenced by these philosophical currents in his studies. We also add that the refrain from meat was not exclusively done by Manichaeans. Christian priests also dedicated many writings to the abstinence from meat and to vegetarianism, addressing their role both in Christian life in general and in monastic asceticism in particular. It should be noted that the Christian ascetic movement was still in its initial phase in all regions, especially in the fourth century in the West, which is the same period as Priscillian emerges (Ferrero, 2008: 466).

The question that arises, therefore, is the following: did Priscillian abstain from meat under the influence of Manichaeism, or did he practice Nicene asceticism, aligning himself with figures such as Anthony, Martin de Tours and other Iberian priests? We shall explore this question in light of the textual documentation that deals with our character and his followers. We start this investigation with what some scholars consider to be the first intervention to address the supposedly heretical teachings of Priscillianism: The Council of Saragossa of 380. The minutes of this council, as they have come down to us, do not mention Priscillian by name, nor do they contain any reference to a list of questionable teachings attributed to his doctrine; there is, for example, no explicit accusation of Manichaeism, nor of abstinence from meat. In fact, the canons that would have censured Priscillian are ambiguous, and most scholars believe that if the bishops had Priscillian in mind, they accused him very broadly (Ferrero, 2008: 470).

There is also another source that promotes the Manichaean connection with Priscillian, the letter of Magnus Maximus to Pope Siricius written in 386, a few years after the Council of Saragossa. Addressing Priscillian and his followers, he wrote: “furthermore, what is still more closely betrayed is the admission of the Manichaeans’ crime, not on evidence, nor on doubtful or uncertain suspicions, but out of his own confession presented at the trials; for we cannot speak of such not only shameful but also disgusting actions without turning scarlet. Magnus Maximus informed the pope that Priscillian’s sentence was not based on circumstantial evidence or doubts; rather, it was based on the confessions of the accused” (Ferrero, 2008: 470).

For his part, Sulpicius Severus, who devoted several sections of his *Chronica* to Priscillianists, had absolutely nothing to report about their Manichaean vegetarianism. Raymond Van Dam believes that Sulpicius deliberately avoided mentioning Manichaeism in order to preserve the reputation of Martin de Tours, who, as we know, was accused of the same heresy and was even more of a suspect for having defended Priscillian (Ferrero, 2008: 471). Outside the Iberian Peninsula, Augustine and Philastrius of Brescia, in their respective heresiologies, spoke confidently about the alleged Manichaean vegetarianism of Priscillianists. Philastrius, for his share, anonymously condemned Priscillianists, calling them “abstinent” and commenting that their faith promised abstinence from meat (Ferrero, 2008: 472).

Our most extensive and detailed refutation of Priscillian was written by Pope Leo I in response to a request from Turibius, Bishop of Astorga, and is reflected in the acts of the First Council of Toledo, held in the year 400. The First Council of Toledo has a section exclusively to clarify questions related to the Priscillianist doctrine. In it, canon 17 warns: “If anyone says or believes that one ought to abstain from the flesh of birds or animals, which are given to us for food, not for the mortification of the body, but because they are execrable, let him be anathema.” Although there is no explicit reference to Manichaeism, it is clear that it was in the minds of the bishops who drafted the Council (Ferrero, 2008: 473).

In the sixth century, this issue is addressed in an indisputably direct way by a pontiff in Pope Vigilius' letter, in response to a request from Profuturo of Braga. The letter was titled *De Priscillianistis qui se ab esu carnum subtrahunt* and it puts abstention from meat first among five issues commented on by the pope at Profuturo's request. Vigilius summarizes the common opinion of the time which based on Manichaeism considered the teaching that meat should be avoided because it came from an inherently evil to be heretical. It should be noted that Pope Vigilius was based on the information provided by Profuturo of Braga, and not on direct knowledge of Priscillianism. In the tradition of the sixth century's heresiography, Priscillianism had already been amply associated to Manichaeism, which explains Vigilius' answer, reflecting the suspicions and accusations prevalent in that context (Ferrero, 2008: 475).

The First and the Second Council of Braga, in 561 and 572 respectively, renew this theme a few decades after Pope Vigilius' letter. There are two references to meat in the First Council of Braga. Canon 14 of the article against Priscillian is an explicit accusation against Manichaeism: “If anyone judges the meat that God has given to men for their consumption to be impure, and not because of the mortification of the body, but because

it is considered impure, to the point of not even tasting vegetables cooked with meat, as Mani and Priscillian say, let him be anathema.” The bishops worried that heretics might hide their Manichaean beliefs by pretending to be Orthodox ascetics. To differentiate them, they devised a test to identify the Orthodox among the heretics. All those who claimed to be non-Manichaean ascetics were invited to eat a vegetable soup prepared with meat. After consuming the dish, they could resume their ascetic practice without meat, thus demonstrating that they did not follow Manichaeism or Priscillianism. We have no evidence that Priscillian submitted to such a test or that any of his followers were subjected to this. The canon identified anyone who refused the test as a follower of Mani and Priscillian. The second condemnation is a recapitulation of the previous one, where it is established that the clergy must not abstain from eating meat (Ferrero, 2008: 475).

The final source that addresses abstinence from meat is Canon 58 of the Second Council of Braga. In it, the bishops stated, “It is recommended that the same vegetable/meat soup be used to eliminate clergy who may have heretical ideas about abstinence from meat.” The bishops recommended that those found guilty be removed from ministry. Again, we do not know of any cleric who was excommunicated for refusing to submit to this canon (Ferrero, 2008: 476).

Although traditional historiography generally accepts the accusations of heresy against Priscillian, it is believed that it is difficult to establish precisely the foundations of his doctrine. It cannot be completely ruled out that the alleged doctrinal deviations attributed to Priscillian may have some basis, but in the specific case of the accusation of Manichaeism, there seems to be no solid basis. This ambiguity was even greater, as seen earlier, by the fact that a Nicene ascetic, at first glance, was almost indistinguishable from an *electus* Manichaean. The bishops who led the campaign against Priscillian were apparently convinced of his heresy and succeeded in irreparably tarnishing the image of Priscillian and his followers. Any practices that, under other circumstances, were seen as admirable and orthodox were now interpreted as heretic. This is the case of abstention from meat, which detractors attributed to Manichaean motivations, despite Priscillian's clear denial of these accusations in his *Treaties* and *Canons*. Priscillian's contact with Manichaean and Gnostic currents is suggested, integrating elements of these traditions in a syncretic way into his Christian faith. However, in the analysis here proposed, more than representing a rupture with the Nicene faith, the Priscillianist movement seemed to have challenged the Nicene *ecclesia* on a political-administrative level.

Therefore, given the above, we can infer that the bishop of Avila crystallized a variety of ascetic, monastic and intellectual aspirations that were considerably, or even completely, incompatible with the Christianity lived by the vast majority of Nicene bishops of the time (Jorge, 2006: 4; 10).

Final considerations

As was seen, dietary practices in Late Antiquity were able to reveal information about different societies and their characters. Additionally, they can connect seemingly unconnected figures, such as Julian and Priscillian of Avila. Despite evident differences, such as their differing religion, both Julian and Priscillian valued an ascetic life and a diet with little to no meat. The influence of Neoplatonism currents on the lifestyles of these two characters is also noteworthy.

Furthermore, the similarities in their diets reveal another fundamental characteristic of Late Antiquity: the cultural confluences between the Western and Eastern portions of the Roman Empire. The administrative division, which was initiated by Diocletian and consolidated by Constantine, by establishing Constantinople as the eastern capital, aimed at more efficient governance while maintaining the idea of a unified empire. This imperial policy promoted an image of unity, as seen in attempts to promote imperial concord with sister churches in Constantinople, Rome and Ravenna. Furthermore, trade between the two regions continued and the armies of both sides often coordinated efforts against barbarian invasions and migrations, as seen in the combative participation of Julian Caesar in Gaul between 355 and 361. We reinforce that the interlacing between these regions reached the cultural sphere, as is attested by the great Hellenistic influence on the upbringing of Western priests, as well as Augustine of Hippo and, of course, the Bishop of Avila himself.

Thus, the Roman Empire, which was formed by an amalgam of cultures, provided diverse political, philosophical and religious conducts that can be detected by the food customs and beliefs intertwined in its political-cultural formation.

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