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## THE MONASTIC DIET IN THE LIGHT OF MEDICAL SCIENCE THEODORET OF CYRUS AND MEDICS ON DATES AND FIGS

Theodoret (c. 393 – c. 466), a clergyman, theologian and Christian writer, is one of the most prominent figures of late Antiquity<sup>1</sup>. In 423, he was appointed the Bishop of Cyrus, a small town near his hometown of Antioch. While holding his office, he made himself known as a pastor devoted to the members of the Christian community, offering them both spiritual and material support. However, he was involved not only in the affairs of the local Church. His participation

<sup>1</sup> Details on the life, theological views and literary heritage of the Bishop of Cyrus are included, e.g. in: P. CANIVET, *Introduction. Première partie*, [in:] THÉODORET DE CYR, *L'histoire des moines de Syrie*, vol. I, ed. P. CANIVET, A. LEROY-MOLINGHEN, Paris 1977 [= SC, 234], p. 9–55; A. LEROY-MOLINGHEN, *Introduction. Deuxième partie*, [in:] THÉODORET DE CYR, *L'histoire des moines de Syrie*, vol. I..., p. 57–113; O. JUREWICZ, *Historia literatury bizantyńskiej*. Zarys, Wrocław 1984, p. 49–50; R.M. PRICE, *Introduction*, [in:] THEODORET OF CYRRHUS, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, trans. et comm. R.M. PRICE, Kalamazoo 1985 [= CSSe, 88], p. IX–XXXVII; B. ALTANER, A. STUIBER, *Patrologia. Życie, pisma i nauka Ojców Kościoła*, trans. P. PACHCIAREK, Warszawa 1990, p. 454–457; M. KARAS, *Apologetyka Teodoreta z Cyru wobec filozofii Platona*, VP 21, 2001, p. 317–335; T. URBAINCZYK, *Theodoret of Cyrrhus. The Bishop and the Holy Man*, Ann Arbor 2002; S. LONGOSZ, *Szkoła antiocheńska*, [in:] *Literatura Grecji starożytnej*, vol. II, *Proza historyczna, krasomówstwo, filozofia i nauka, literatura chrześcijańska*, ed. H. PODBIELSKI, Lublin 2005, p. 1061–1067; M. KIELING, *Kościół jako wspólnota miłości w świetle Komentarza do 1 Listu św. Pawła do Koryntian Teodoreta z Cyru*, KSTe 5, 2006, p. 191–206; I. PASZTORI-KUPAN, *Theodoret of Cyrus*, London–New York 2006, p. 3–80; P.B. CLAYTON, *The Christology of Theodoret of Cyrus. Antiochene Christology from the Council of Ephesus (431) to the Council of Chalcedon (451)*, Oxford 2007 [= OECS]; K. AUGUSTYNIAK, *Wstęp. Historia mnichów syryjskich*, [in:] THEODORET BISKUP CYRU, *Dzieje miłości Bożej. Historia mnichów syryjskich*, trans. K. AUGUSTYNIAK, praef. E. WIPSYCKA, K. AUGUSTYNIAK, Kraków 2011, p. 37–50; A.M. SCHOR, *Theodoret's People. Social Networks and Religious Conflict in Late Roman Syria*, Berkeley–London 2011 [= TCH, 48].

in doctrinal disputes and combat against heretics resulted in his temporary removal from office and being sentenced to exile. Theodoret also benefited subsequent generations by leaving behind numerous works, including exegetical, apologetic, dogmatic and historical writings as well as speeches and letters. For historians, these are an extremely rich source of information about the Eastern Roman Empire of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The bishop's writings of an historical nature include the work entitled in the Greek original Φιλόθεος ιστορία (also appearing under the Latin title *Historia religiosa*), today most commonly known as *A History of the Monks of Syria*<sup>2</sup>. This is the only source that familiarizes us with the history of ascetics living in Syria in the period from the early 4<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>. In his work, Theodoret presented the lives of thirty Syrian monks who devoted themselves to the pursuit of spiritual perfection in the name of God. For them, the obstacle in achieving this goal was the outside world and its temptations as well as their own physicality. Viewing their bodies as the enemy, they tried to defeat them on the path of fighting with all their needs<sup>4</sup>. One of several fields where the monks conducted these battles was their daily eating habits<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> THÉODORET DE CYR, *L'histoire des moines de Syrie*, vol. I–II, ed. P. CANIVET, A. LEROY-MOLINGHEN, Paris 1977–1979 [= SC, 234, 257] (cetera: THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*). English translation: THEODORET OF CYRRHUS, *A History of the Monks...*

<sup>3</sup> Studies dealing with Syrian monasticism include primarily: A. VÖÖBUS, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient. A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East*, vol. II–III, *Early Monasticism in Mesopotamia and Syria*, Louvain 1960–1988 [= CSCO, 197, 500]; P. CANIVET, *Le monachisme syrien selon Théodoret de Cyr*, Paris 1977; P. ESCOLAN, *Monachisme et église. Le monachisme syrien du IV<sup>e</sup> au VII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Un monachisme charismatique*, Paris 1999 [= TH, 109]; E. WIPSYZKA, *Wstęp. Charakter i formy ascetyzmu syryjskiego*, [in:] THEODORET BISKUP CYRU, *Dzieje miłości Bożej...*, p. 9–36; L. MISIARCZYK, *Antyczny monastycyzm syryjski*, SPI 40, 2012, p. 83–96.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, Prologos, 5, vol. I, p. 132; E. WIPSYZKA, *Wstęp. Charakter i formy...*, p. 18–19.

<sup>5</sup> The subject of Syrian monks' diet has not yet been comprehensively developed. In several of our articles, based on the data from Theodoret of Cyrus, we have presented some of its issues, see: M. KOKOSZKO, K. GIBEL, *Dieta mnichów syryjskich. Komentarz do terminu autofya lachana (αὐτοφνᾶ λάχανα) w Historia religiosa Teodoreta z Cyru*, [in:] *Omnia tempus habent. Miscellanea theologica Vincentio Myszor quadragesimum annum laboris scientifici celebranti ab amicis, sodalibus discipulisque oblata*, ed. A. REGINEK, G. STRZELCZYK, A. ŻĄDŁO, Katowice 2009, p. 145–156; M. KOKOSZKO, J. DYBAŁA, K. JAGUSIAK, Z. RZEŹNICKA, *Dieta mnichów syryjskich. Komentarz do terminu ospria (ὄσπρια) w Historia religiosa Teodoreta z Cyru*, BPT 7.1, 2014, p. 115–143; IDEM, *Dieta monastyczna w świetle nauki medycznej. Teodoret z Cyru i medycy o soczewicy*, VP 34, 2014, p. 297–329; IDEM, *Dieta mnichów syryjskich. Komentarz do terminu artos kachrydias (ἄρτος καχυρδίας) w Historia religiosa Teodoreta z Cyru*, BPT 8.3, 2015, p. 123–156. The studies related to this subject in general, treating monasticism as a whole, include: M. DEMBIŃSKA, *Diet: A Comparison of Food Consumption between Some Eastern and Western Monasteries in the 4<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, B 55, 1985, p. 431–462; E. KISLINGER, *Christians of the East. Rules and Realities of the Byzantine Diet*, [in:] *Food. A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. J.-L. FLANDRIN, M. MONTANARI, Eng. ed. A. SONNENFELD, New York–Chichester 1999, p. 194–206; M. HARLOW, W. SMITH, *Between Fasting and Feasting. The Literary and Archaeobol-*

In the narrative of the Bishop of Cyrus, the issues of food consumed by the monks are of secondary, if not tertiary, importance. Ultimately, as he writes, ascetics found the greatest pleasure not in alimentation but prayer and the singing of psalms<sup>6</sup>. Nonetheless, *Historia religiosa*, offers us a glimpse into the daily life of the desert fathers while providing some detail about the type and amount of food they ate and how it was produced. This article aims to introduce one of the issues related to the diet of Syrian monks. We will examine the species of fruits that were in the menu of Theodoret's protagonists, namely, dates and figs. We will also try to determine why they selected these fruits and how their consumption could have affected the body. To this end, we will go beyond early Christian literature and reach for medical treatises created in late Antiquity and the early Byzantine era, i.e. in the period from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. The selection of these sources is motivated by the fact that they are the compendium of Antiquity's and Byzantium's knowledge on edible plants<sup>7</sup>.

It is important and noteworthy that Theodoret, a man who was thoroughly educated<sup>8</sup> and could boast his knowledge about medicine-related subjects<sup>9</sup>, was well aware of the fact that doctors at the time regarded food as medicine. He expressed this in *Historia religiosa* by presenting the figure of the monk Macedonius:

As food he used neither bread nor pulses, but ground barley, merely soaked in water; it was this food that my mother, who became his friend, supplied him with for a very long time. On one occasion, visiting her when she was unwell and learning that she refused to take the food appropriate for her illness – for she herself already embraced the ascetic life – he urged her

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*tanical Evidence for Monastic Diet in Late Antique Egypt*, An 75, 2001, p. 758–768; A. DALBY, *Flavours of Byzantium*, Totnes 2003, p. 93–97; A.-M. TALBOT, *Mealtime in Monasteries. The Culture of the Byzantine Refectory*, [in:] *Eat, Drink, and Be Merry (Luke 12:19). Food and Wine in Byzantium. Papers of the 37<sup>th</sup> Annual Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, in Honour of Professor A.A.M. Bryer*, ed. L. BRUBAKER, K. LINARDOU, Aldershot 2007, p. 109–125; L.A. GREGORICKA, S.G. SHERIDAN, *Ascetic or Affluent? Byzantine Diet at the Monastic Community of St. Stephen's, Jerusalem from Stable Carbon and Nitrogen Isotopes*, JAA 32.1, 2013, p. 63–73.

<sup>6</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, Prologos, 7, vol. I, p. 136.

<sup>7</sup> Antiquity's dietary literature is discussed by M. KOKOSZKO in: *Ryby i ich znaczenie w życiu codziennym ludzi późnego antyku i wczesnego Bizancjum (III–VII w.)*, Łódź 2005 [= BL, 9], p. 9–23. For ancient opinions on the relationship between diet and human health, see: L. EDELSTEIN, *The Dietetics of Antiquity*, [in:] IDEM, *Ancient Medicine. Selected Papers of Ludwig Edelstein*, ed. O. TEMKIN, C.L. TEMKIN, trans. C.L. TEMKIN, Baltimore 1967, p. 303–316 (esp. 311–312); I. MAZZINI, *Diet and Medicine in the Ancient World*, [in:] *Food. A Culinary History...*, p. 141–152; M. KOKOSZKO, Z. RZEŹNICKA, *Dietetyka w De re coquinaria*, PNH 10.2, 2011, p. 5–8. We base our reflections on a chronological framework broader than that set out by *Historia religiosa* due to the continuity of the toposes recurring in the treatises to which we refer. On these toposes, among others: A. DALBY, *Flavours of Byzantium...*, p. 127–169.

<sup>8</sup> I. PASZTORI-KUPAN, *Theodoret of Cyrus...*, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> About the medical knowledge of the Bishop of Cyrus: V. NUTTON, *Ancient Medicine*, New York–London 2004, p. 302.

to yield to her doctors and consider such food a medicine, since it was being offered her not for the sake of luxury but because of need<sup>10</sup>.

In another of his works, entitled *Oratio de divina et sancta charitate* in Latin, the Bishop of Cyrus demonstrates his knowledge of what we now call the energy value (calorific content) of food. He writes that it is not fire or clothing but food that provides the human body with heat. Given this, he doubts the value of the heat and blood generated in the monks' bodies considering that they ate grass (ποηφαγέω) or legumes soaked in water (ῥσπρα)<sup>11</sup>. The two above-mentioned quotes from Theodoret's work provoke a question whether it was only personal experience or perhaps a certain extent of medical knowledge (even if minimal) that justified the daily diet choices made by monks.

In *Historia religiosa*, Theodoret treated the eating habits of the ascetics, similarly to any other element of their temporal life, as a harbinger of their future holiness<sup>12</sup>. In the prologue to his work, he summarized them as follows:

...they expelled the satiety of the belly and taught it to accept what satisfied, not pleasure, but need, and indeed just so much as could prevent death from hunger.<sup>13</sup>

When humble portions proved to be too small of austerity to serve God, the monks resorted to strict fasting<sup>14</sup>. Some ate once a day, in the evening<sup>15</sup>, others every few days<sup>16</sup> or once a week<sup>17</sup>. Fasting, however, could last for several weeks<sup>18</sup>,

<sup>10</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XIII, 3, vol. I, p. 476–478 (trans. R.M. PRICE, p. 101).

<sup>11</sup> THEODORETUS, *Oratio de divina et sancta charitate*, 2, [in:] PG, vol. LXXXIII, col. 1497–1500.

<sup>12</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, II, 2, vol. I, p. 196; II, 4, vol. I, p. 200; III, 3, vol. I, p. 250; IX, 3, vol. I, p. 410–412; X, 5, vol. I, p. 444 etc.

<sup>13</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, Prologos, 6, vol. I, p. 134–136 (trans. R.M. PRICE, p. 6). Cf. THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, Prologos, 7, vol. I, p. 136; I, 3, vol. I, p. 164; III, 3, vol. I, p. 250; V, 3, vol. I, p. 332; XI, 3, vol. I, p. 456–458; V. GRIMM, *From Feasting to Fasting. The Evolution of a Sin. Attitudes to Food in Late Antiquity*, London 1996, p. 95–96; E. KISLINGER, *Christians of the East...*, p. 199–201.

<sup>14</sup> For the role of fasting in the lives of Christians of this period, see: R. ARBESMANN, *Fasting and Prophecy in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*, T 7, 1951, p. 1–71; H. MUSURILLO, *The Problem of Ascetical Fasting in the Greek Patristic Writers*, T 12, 1956, p. 1–64; A.-M. TALBOT, *An Introduction to Byzantine Monasticism*, ICS 12.2, 1987, p. 233; K.M. DUGAN, *Fasting for Life. The Place of Fasting in the Christian Tradition*, JAAR 63.3, 1995, p. 539–548; T.M. SHAW, *The Burden of the Flesh. Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, Minneapolis 1998; A. JOTISCHKY, *A Hermit's Cookbook. Monks, Food and Fasting in the Middle Ages*, London–New York 2011, p. 31–60; S. BRALEWSKI, *Praktykowanie postu w świetle historiografii kościelnej V wieku*, VP 33, 2013, p. 359–378.

<sup>15</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, III, 3, vol. I, p. 250; III, 12, vol. I, p. 270; VIII, 3, vol. I, p. 378; XVII, 6, vol. II, p. 44.

<sup>16</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, III, 12, vol. I, p. 270; IV, 5, vol. I, p. 300; IX, 3, vol. I, p. 412; XXVI, 5, vol. II, p. 166.

<sup>17</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, II, 2, vol. I, p. 196; XXI, 11, vol. II, p. 86; XXVI, 5, vol. II, p. 166–168; XXVI, 22, vol. II, p. 206.

<sup>18</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XXIX, 7, vol. II, p. 238. Cf. THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XVIII, 4, vol. II, p. 56.

or, to follow Moses' example, for forty days<sup>19</sup>. There were also those who avoided water<sup>20</sup>. However, exhaustion of the body as a result of extreme fasting had its limits – the monks were warned by their superiors to not perceive suicide as a virtue because it was something contrary to it: the greatest crime<sup>21</sup>.

The main merits that should characterize the food consumed by ascetics were its simplicity and low price<sup>22</sup>.

Reading *Historia religiosa* leads to the conclusion that the basis of the Syrian monks' diet was bread, which is most often referred to in this work by the general term *artos* (ἄρτος)<sup>23</sup>. As in any other case, the desert fathers avoided all luxury in relation to bread as well. They shunned sophisticated types and ate bread from crude grain (πιτυρίας)<sup>24</sup>. Good quality white bread, *artos lampros* (ἄρτος λαμπρός), was served only to guests<sup>25</sup>. In a few cases, we learn that the brothers consumed *artos kachrydias* (ἄρτος καχυρδίας), i.e. barley bread prepared from roasted grains<sup>26</sup>. Salt, *hales* (ἅλεις), was added to bread<sup>27</sup>.

Products that did not undergo any heat treatment were also valued<sup>28</sup>. In one of our previous texts<sup>29</sup>, we investigated the reasons for this depreciation of the

<sup>19</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XXVI, 7, vol. II, p. 172; XXVI, 9, vol. II, p. 176; XXIX, 7, vol. II, p. 238.

<sup>20</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, III, 3, vol. I, p. 250; IV, 12, vol. I, p. 322; XVII, 6, vol. II, p. 44; XXVI, 7, vol. II, p. 174.

<sup>21</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XXVI, 7, vol. II, p. 172. The asceticism, including fasting, that led to extreme exhaustion of the body was condemned by the Church, cf. K. WARE, *The Way of the Ascetics. Negative or Affirmative?*, [in:] *Asceticism*, ed. V.L. WIMBUSH, R. VALANTASIS, New York–Oxford 1995, p. 8–12.

<sup>22</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, X, 3, vol. I, p. 442.

<sup>23</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, II, 13, vol. I, p. 222; III, 3, vol. I, p. 250; III, 12, vol. I, p. 270; V, 3, vol. I, p. 332; VIII, 3, vol. I, p. 378; IX, 3, vol. I, p. 412; XI, 1, vol. I, p. 454; XII, 3, vol. I, p. 462; XIII, 3, vol. I, p. 478; XX, 3, vol. II, p. 66. The most zealous monks could even forego that – e.g.: THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, III, 21, vol. I, p. 286; XIII, 3, vol. I, p. 476; XXVI, 7, vol. II, p. 174. For more on the role of bread in ascetic diet, see: M. DEMBIŃSKA, *Diet: A Comparison of Food...*, p. 438–439; A.-M. TALBOT, *Mealtime in Monasteries...*, p. 114; A. JOTISCHKY, *A Hermit's Cookbook...*, p. 53–58; L.A. GREGORICKA, S.G. SHERIDAN, *Ascetic or Affluent?...*, p. 65. The issue of bread as an element of the monastic diet was comprehensively covered by Y. HIRSCHFELD (*The Importance of Bread in the Diet of Monks in the Judean Desert*, B 66, 1996, p. 143–155). It shows that the ascetics living in the Judean Desert in the early Byzantine period ate wheat bread, which they baked themselves. They bought grain partly thanks to donations from pilgrims, stored it in granaries and ground it into flour. In large monasteries, this production took place on a large scale.

<sup>24</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, II, 2, vol. I, p. 196; II, 4, vol. I, p. 200.

<sup>25</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XVII, 7, vol. II, p. 44.

<sup>26</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, II, 2, vol. I, p. 196; II, 4, vol. I, p. 200. For more on this type of bread, see: M. KOKOSZKO, J. DYBAŁA, K. JAGUSIAK, Z. RZEŃNICKA, *Dieta mnichów syryjskich. Komentarz do terminu artos kachrydias...*

<sup>27</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, II, 2, vol. I, p. 196; II, 4, vol. I, p. 200; II, 13, vol. I, p. 222; XI, 1, vol. I, p. 454; XX, 3, vol. II, p. 66.

<sup>28</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, III, 21, vol. I, p. 286; XVII, 6, vol. II, p. 44; XXI, 11, vol. II, p. 84.

<sup>29</sup> M. KOKOSZKO, J. DYBAŁA, K. JAGUSIAK, Z. RZEŃNICKA, *Dieta monastyczna...*, p. 302–304.



art of cooking or baking, which, as in the case of lentils<sup>30</sup>, was often replaced by soaking alone<sup>31</sup>. There could be three reasons for this. First, as we have already mentioned, the well-educated Theodoret, and perhaps also some of the monks he described, might have been familiar with the medical theories at the time that food undergoes a process similar to cooking in the stomach<sup>32</sup>. Unwilling to facilitate or accelerate digestion occurring in their bodies, they may have deliberately opted for raw products. In this way, they made their asceticism even more stringent<sup>33</sup>. Secondly, by avoiding cooking, they may have saved time that they could devote to prayer. And finally, the monks might have identified cooked food with everything else related to culture and civilization, and raw foodstuffs with their opposites, thus, they found another way to show their separateness from the world whose temptations distanced them from God<sup>34</sup>.

An important component of the ascetics' diet were undoubtedly vegetables; wild ones that the earth itself (αὐτοφύωζ) produced<sup>35</sup> as well as cultivated ones<sup>36</sup>, fresh and dried ones<sup>37</sup> were all consumed. Dietary restrictions resulting from the practice of asceticism also applied to them. The monk Afraates did not eat vegetables until he reached a very old age, and even then, he waited until sunset before having them<sup>38</sup>. Although cooking vegetables was practiced<sup>39</sup>, there were also monks who forewent it<sup>40</sup> or replaced it with soaking<sup>41</sup>. Without going into

<sup>30</sup> In the case of lentils, soaking instead of cooking was a normal practice – THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XV, 1, vol. II, p. 18; XXI, 12, vol. II, p. 88; XXIV, 5, vol. II, p. 146; XXX, 2–3, vol. II, p. 242–244.

<sup>31</sup> Monks also soaked chickpeas and broad beans – THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XVIII, 1, vol. II, p. 52. They did the same with flour (THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, III, 21, vol. I, p. 286) and barley (THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XIII, 3, vol. I, p. 476).

<sup>32</sup> This theory was formulated by Galen, the greatest doctor of Antiquity, see: GALENUS, *De naturalibus facultatibus*, 160, 17 – 168, 5, [in:] *Claudii Galeni Opera omnia*, vol. II, ed. D.C.G. KÜHN, Lipsiae 1821; GALENUS, *De usu partium*, 275, 3 – 281, 19, [in:] *Claudii Galeni Opera omnia*, vol. III–IV, ed. D.C.G. KÜHN, Lipsiae 1822.

<sup>33</sup> Ancient doctors were of the opinion that cooked food is not only easier for the body to digest but it is also healthier for humans, cf. I. MAZZINI, *Diet and Medicine...*, p. 145, 148–149.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. M. MONTANARI, *Food Is Culture*, trans. A. SONNENFELD, New York–Chichester 2006, p. 43–44. Ancient medical treatises provide evidence that this is how the medics of that time viewed this issue, see: C. SEGAL, *The Raw and the Cooked in Greek Literature. Structure, Values, Metaphor*, CJ 69, 1974, p. 289–308 (esp. 298–301). Nowadays, this issue is examined by cultural anthropology, see: C. LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Trójkąt kulinarny*, trans. S. CIECHOWICZ, Tw 2, 1972, p. 73. Cf. IDEM, *Surowe i gotowane*, trans. M. FALSKI, Warszawa 2010; E. LEACH, *Levi-Strauss*, trans. P. NIKLEWICZ, Warszawa 1973, p. 22–39.

<sup>35</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, I, 2, vol. I, p. 162.

<sup>36</sup> The monks Theodosius (THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, X, 2, vol. I, p. 440) and Salamanes (THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XIX, 1, vol. II, p. 58) did gardening for their own consumption.

<sup>37</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, III, 12, vol. I, p. 270.

<sup>38</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, VIII, 3, vol. I, p. 378.

<sup>39</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, III, 12, vol. I, p. 270.

<sup>40</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XVII, 6, vol. II, p. 44.

<sup>41</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, III, 21, vol. I, p. 286; XIII, 3, vol. I, p. 476; XVIII, 1, vol. II, p. 52 etc.

detail, the bishop notes that ascetics ate lettuce, *thridakine* (θριδακίνη)<sup>42</sup>, chicory, *seris* (σέρις)<sup>43</sup>, and celery, *selinon* (σέλινον)<sup>44</sup>. One biography makes a reference to wild vegetables, *autophya lachana* (αὐτοφυᾶ λάχανα)<sup>45</sup>, and how to preserve them<sup>46</sup>. This term refers to the shoots of some trees and shrubs, i.e. *blasta* (βλάστα), plants called prickly (ἀκάνθα or ἀκανθώδη [φυτά]), and vegetables which at that time had already been domesticated, but could still be found in their wild form, harvested and consumed. Legumes, *ospria* (ὄσπρια)<sup>47</sup>, must have played a crucial role in the diet of Syrian monks. In *Historia religiosa*, Theodoret mentions lentils, *fakos* (φακός)<sup>48</sup>, several times while chickpeas, *erebinthos* (ἐρέβινθος), and broad beans, *kyamos* (κύαμος), appear once<sup>49</sup>.

Finally, a separate group that is of interest to us were the fruits that the bishop calls by the general name of *oporai* (ὀπωραι)<sup>50</sup>. Of these, he specifically mentions three species: apples, *mela* (μήλα)<sup>51</sup>, dates, *foinikes* (φοίνικες)<sup>52</sup>, and figs, *ischades* (ισχάδες)<sup>53</sup>.

In the case of dates, mentioned only in one biography, Simeon the Elder's, Theodoret cites an extraordinary story of how a lion delivered these fruits to the old man:

...there appeared at a distance a lion. Those with the old man were filled with alarm; but when the man sitting on the den saw it, he stood up and gestured to the lion to go across to the other side. It immediately obeyed and came up carrying the bunch of dates. It then turned and went back again and at a distance from the men lay down and went to sleep. So he distributed the dates among all of them, and joined with them in prayer and psalmody; at the end of the liturgy at break of day he took leave of them, and sent them on their way awe-struck at this novel spectacle<sup>54</sup>.

<sup>42</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XVII, 6, vol. II, p. 44; XXVI, 7, vol. II, p. 174.

<sup>43</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XVII, 6, vol. II, p. 44; XXVI, 7, vol. II, p. 174.

<sup>44</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XVII, 6, vol. II, p. 44.

<sup>45</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, II, 4, vol. I, p. 200.

<sup>46</sup> For more on this subject, see: M. KOKOSZKO, K. GIBEL, *Dieta mnichów syryjskich...*

<sup>47</sup> Cf. THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XIII, 3, vol. I, p. 476. For more on this subject, see: M. KOKOSZKO, J. DYBAŁA, K. JAGUSIAK, Z. RZEŹNICKA, *Dieta mnichów syryjskich. Komentarz do terminu ospria...*; IDEM, *Dieta monastyczna w świetle...*

<sup>48</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, V, 8, vol. I, p. 342; XV, 1, vol. II, p. 18; XXI, 12, vol. II, p. 88; XXIV, 5, vol. II, p. 146. Lentils was also consumed by the female ascetic Domnina: THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XXX, 2–3, vol. II, p. 242–244.

<sup>49</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XVIII, 1, vol. II, p. 52.

<sup>50</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XVII, 6, vol. II, p. 44; XXX, 3, vol. II, p. 244.

<sup>51</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, VI, 12, vol. I, p. 362.

<sup>52</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, VI, 9–10, vol. I, p. 358–360.

<sup>53</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, II, 10, vol. I, p. 218; XVIII, 1, vol. II, p. 52; XVIII, 4, vol. II, p. 56; XXIV, 9, vol. II, p. 152.

<sup>54</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, VI, 10, vol. I, p. 360 (trans. R.M. PRICE, p. 66).

Evidently, Theodoret devoted little space to dates. All his account suggests, if we omit the question of how credible the lion's behavior was, is that the monks did not hesitate to eat the miraculous gift in the form of fresh date palm fruit. Based on this short fragment only, it would be difficult to conclude whether such a meal was something natural for them or if they usually tried to avoid it because of the possible pleasure of it, and this time made an exception considering it as a wonderful gift from God which ought to be embraced.

However, what we know is that dates were very important in the restrictive diet of monks and could be eaten by Christian hermits even far from their harvest places, e.g. in Gaul<sup>55</sup>. In Syria itself, or more broadly, in the Middle East, where date palms have been a native crop for about 5,000 years, occurring in many varieties, and their fruit was an important element of the diet<sup>56</sup>, monks often included them in their menu<sup>57</sup>.

Today, it is known that dates are rich in many components needed by the human body, including simple sugars, dietary fiber, selenium, iron, potassium, manganese, magnesium, vitamin C and B vitamins as well as antioxidants, including carotenoids (such as lutein and  $\beta$ -carotene)<sup>58</sup>. Their very high energy value (comparable to the meat of some farm animals) is worth emphasizing. From this point of view, the presence of dates in the menu of recluses, who avoided the pleasures

<sup>55</sup> GREGORIUS TURONENSIS, *Historiae – Gregorii episcopi Turonensis libri historiarum* X, VI, 6, ed. B. KRUSCH, W. LEVISON, Hannover 1951.

<sup>56</sup> It is not our intention to present here the natural history of dates (and later, figs) and discuss their meanings in the Mediterranean world more widely, because it could disturb the proportions and disrupt the framework of this article. We refer interested readers to the following papers: A. STEIER, *Phoenix* (1), [in:] *RE*, vol. XX.1, Stuttgart 1941, col. 386–403; D. ZOHARY, M. HOPE, *Domestication of Plants in the Old World*, Oxford 1993, p. 157; A. DALBY, *Food in the Ancient World from A to Z*, London–New York 2003, p. 113–114; J.P. ALCOCK, *Food in the Ancient World*, Westport–London 2006, p. 41–42; M. TOUSSAINT-SAMAT, *Historia naturalna i moralna jedzenia*, trans. A.B. MATUSIAK, M. OCHAB, Warszawa 2008, p. 610–611; N. NASRALLAH, *Dates. A Global History*, London 2011, p. 92–93. On the benefits that the monks could derive from the date palm, in addition to eating its fruit, in: M. DEMBIŃSKA, *Diet: A Comparison of Food...*, p. 435–436. The following sources also contain information about the consumption of dates, cf. e.g. *Athenaei Naucratis Dipnosophistarum libri* XV, 651 b, vol. I–III, rec. G. KAIBEL, Lipsiae–Berolini 1887–1890 (cetera: ATHENAEUS NAUCRATITA); APICIUS, *A Critical Edition with an Introduction and an English Translation of the Latin Recipe Text Apicius*, VIII, 6, 7; VIII, 8, 2–3; VIII, 8, 12; IX, 10, 6–7, ed. C. GROCOCK, S. GRAINGER, Blackawton–Totnes 2006 (cetera: APICIUS). Date wine is a separate issue: cf. *Herodoti Historiae*, I, 193, 22–25, vol. I–II, ed. N.G. WILSON, Oxford 2015 [= SCBO]; XENOPHON, *Anabasis*, II, 3, 14, [in:] *Xenophontis opera omnia*, vol. III, ed. E.C. MARCHANT, Oxford 1904; *Pedanii Dioscuridis Anazarbei De materia medica libri quinque*, V, 31, 1, 1 – 2, 7, vol. I–III, ed. M. WELLMANN, Berlin 1907–1914 (cetera: DIOSCORIDES); ATHENAEUS NAUCRATITA, 29 d; APICIUS, I, 1, 1.

<sup>57</sup> M. DEMBIŃSKA, *Diet: A Comparison of Food...*, p. 434–437, 441–442.

<sup>58</sup> W. AL-SHAHIB, R.J. MARSHALL, *The Fruit of the Date Palm: its Possible Use as the Best Food for the Future?*, *IJFSN* 54.4, 2003, p. 247–259; M.A. AL-FARSI, C.Y. LEE, *The Functional Values of Dates*, [in:] *Dates. Production, Processing, Food, and Medicinal Values*, ed. A. MANICKAVASAGAN, M. MOHAMED ESSA, E. SUKUMAR, Boca Raton 2012, p. 351–358.



of the palate, appears to be justified, because it provided them with a relatively high nutritional value with a small amount of eaten food, which was almost exclusively plant-based, and this, in turn was consistent with the tenets of ascetic life.

It is, however, worth looking at this food choice through the prism of the findings of late Antiquity/early Byzantine medicine, whose representatives (existing in a similar reality to the monks' described by Theodoret) discussed the impact of eating dates on the human body in their treatises. As for the dietary and medical properties of the fruits in question, the most important medic of this era, Galen (around 129–216 AD), stated that Syrian dates were soft, moist and sweet. He further gave a number of their negative properties and effects of consumption. According to him, they were difficult to digest and caused headaches if eaten in excess. In his opinion, when consumed, the juice of the dates, which was thick and sticky, could lead to a severe blockage of the liver and cause damage to this organ through inflammation and complete hardening. As a consequence, it could also damage the spleen<sup>59</sup>. In addition, Galen believed that sweet date varieties had hotter juices while the more tart ones had cooler juices. He also warned against eating unripe fruit, as it may lead to liver problems<sup>60</sup>. What he did recommend was cooking ripe dates with fenugreek and eating them to alleviate chronic chest pain<sup>61</sup>. Oribasius (around 330–400) assessed dates as nutritious, and their juice as mostly good for the stomach, but he maintained Galen's negative opinion on the effect of the sticky juice on the liver as well as the pancreas. He also added that dates could hinder the work of the intestines and confirmed their bad influence on the head if eaten in excess<sup>62</sup>. Later, Paul of Aegina (about 625–690)<sup>63</sup> assessed them similarly. Antimus (*fl.* first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century) also believed that they offered health benefits but should not be eaten too often. In addition, he claimed that their consumption caused the formation of gas in the body<sup>64</sup>. Quite the opposite information can be found in the anonymous work *De re coquinaria* (about the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century), where juicy dates were described as one of the components of a digestive and anti-flatulence agent<sup>65</sup>.

<sup>59</sup> GALENUS, *De alimentorum facultatibus libri III*, 607, 1 – 608, 5, [in:] *Claudii Galeni Opera omnia*, vol. VI, ed. C.G. KÜHN, Lipsiae 1823 (cetera: GALENUS, *De alimentorum facultatibus*).

<sup>60</sup> GALENUS, *De alimentorum facultatibus*, 608, 10–13.

<sup>61</sup> GALENUS, *De alimentorum facultatibus*, 538, 9–15.

<sup>62</sup> *Oribasii Collectionum medicarum reliquiae*, I, 53, 1–4, vol. I–IV, ed. I. RAEDER, Lipsiae–Berolini 1928–1933 [= CMG, 6.1–4] (cetera: ORIBASIIUS).

<sup>63</sup> *Paulus Aegineta*, I, 81, 2, 14–3, 1, vol. I–II, ed. I.L. HEIBERG, Lipsiae–Berolini 1921–1924 [= CMG, 9.1] (cetera: PAULUS AEGINETA).

<sup>64</sup> ANTHIMUS, *On the Observance of Foods. De observatione ciborum*, 92, ed. M. GRANT, Totnes–Blackawton 2007 (cetera: ANTHIMUS, *De observatione ciborum*).

<sup>65</sup> APICIUS, III, 18, 3. It is difficult to say what can explain this contradiction. *De re coquinaria* is not a medical treatise but a collection of recipes. Its author may not have known the findings of the medical art of his time, ignored them based on his own practical experience, or he might have been influenced by another medical tradition. However, the source of that tradition, unlike the dominant school in medicine at that time, which was derived from Galen, is untraceable from today's perspective.

Hence, ancient authors emphasized the nutritious quality of dates but also noted the possible side effects of their consumption, which occurred, according to them, especially when these fruits were eaten in excess.

Theodoret of Cyrus' references to figs, though multiple, are definitely more prosaic and, thus, more credible to us. In each case, we find out that they were eaten in the dried form<sup>66</sup>. They undoubtedly must have been regarded as a highly nutritious food, because, according to our author, Eusebius ate them very infrequently to support his weakened body<sup>67</sup>, and survived the entire seven-week fast, eating only fifteen pieces of them<sup>68</sup>. They also must have been one of the most important components of the diet, because Asterius, who visited Julian (Saba) as often as three times a year, usually brought dried figs, loaded on two or three mules, to his confreres<sup>69</sup>.

The practices described above show that the diet of Syrian monks, although different from the diet of the general population of this area due to severe restrictions on the amount and variety of food consumed, was still based on local, common and easily available ingredients. The fruit of the common fig tree, known and cultivated in this area even earlier than dates (as early as 8–7,000 BC), in late Antiquity, grown in many varieties and eaten in a number of ways<sup>70</sup>, is a perfect example.

As in the case of dates, laboratory tests have shown that figs are fruits containing many elements needed for the proper functioning of the body and that dried figs are two, three or even four times more valuable than fresh ones (depending on the particular component). These elements include simple sugars, dietary fiber,

<sup>66</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, II, 10, vol. I, p. 218; XVIII, 1, vol. II, p. 52; XVIII, 4, vol. II, p. 56; XXIV, 9, vol. II, p. 152.

<sup>67</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XVIII, 1, vol. II, p. 52–54.

<sup>68</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, XVIII, 4, vol. II, p. 56.

<sup>69</sup> THEODORETUS, *Historia religiosa*, II, 10, vol. I, p. 218.

<sup>70</sup> The detailed history of the cultivation and significance of figs in the ancient Mediterranean world is not the subject of our research in this text. To inquisitive readers, we would like to suggest the following works: D. ZOHARY, M. HOPE, *Domestication of Plants...*, p. 150–156; D.J. BREWER, D.B. REDFORD, S. REDFORD, *Domestic Plants and Animals. The Egyptians Origins*, Warminster 1995, p. 51–52; M. GRANT, *Roman Cookery. Ancient Recipes for Modern Kitchens*, London 2002, p. 92–95; A. DALBY, *Food in the Ancient World...*, p. 143–144; J.P. ALCOCK, *Food in the Ancient World...*, p. 42–44; M. RAUTMAN, *Daily Life in the Byzantine Empire*, Westport–Oxford 2006, p. 96; E. STOVER, M. ARADHYA, L. FERGUSON, C.H. CRISOSTO, *The Fig: Overview of an Ancient Fruit*, HSC 42.5, 2007, p. 1083; M. TOUSSAINT-SAMAT, *Historia naturalna...*, p. 605–609; M. KOKOSZKO, *Smaki Konstantynopola*, [in:] *Konstantynopol – Nowy Rzym. Miasto i ludzie w okresie wczesnobizantyńskim*, ed. M.J. LESZKA, T. WOLIŃSKA, Warszawa 2011, p. 531–532. A lot of information on the consumption of figs was provided by antique treatises, cf. DIOSCORIDES, V, 32; PLINY, *Natural History*, XIV, 19, 102, vol. I–X, trans. H. RACKHAM, W.H.S. JONES, D.E. EICHHOLZ, Cambridge Mass. 1938–1963 [= LCL]; ATHENAEUS NAUCRATITA, 74 c – 80 e; 652 b – 653 b; *Palladii Rutilii Tauri Aemiliani viri inlustris opus agriculturae. De veterinaria medicina. De insitione*, IV, 10, 33, ed. R.H. RODGERS, Leipzig 1975 [= BSGR]; APICIUS, I, 20; VII, 9, 2–3; ORIBASIIUS, I, 39, 6; *Geoponica sive Cassiani Bassi Scholastici de re rustica eclogae*, X, 54, 1–2; 56, 3; 56, 5, rec. H. BECKH, Lipsiae 1895.

B vitamins, vitamin K, calcium, manganese, potassium, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, and zinc<sup>71</sup>. Based on the findings of the researchers, it should be stated that, as in the case of dates, the presence of figs in Syrian monks' diet was very beneficial for their health. Furthermore, it is worth emphasizing that due to the high sugar content, closely arranged dried figs can be stored for up to several years<sup>72</sup>, which could have been significant in the climate of Syria, and also for ascetics.

As far as we know from the preserved sources, late Antiquity/early Byzantine medicine took a position similar to the modern one, although it was, naturally, developed on a completely different basis. Therefore, the dietary assessment of figs that can be found in the works of Antiquity and Byzantine specialists was rather good. Oribasius wrote that they passed quickly through the stomach and the whole body, and had cleansing properties, which he considered as beneficial. In addition, he noted that, although they generated flatulence, it was of a short duration. He found fully ripe and dried figs the most beneficial to health, e.g. for the stomach and kidneys. However, he noticed some of their drawbacks: according to him, they produced bad blood in the body and had an adverse effect on a previously irritated liver and pancreas. In addition, according to Oribasius, you should not eat figs with fattening foods<sup>73</sup>, and their sustenance was so great that the Greeks and Romans recommended eating them to athletes training intensively<sup>74</sup>. This characteristic coincides with the earlier findings of Galen, who elaborates on Oribasius' remark about the harmfulness of figs on an irritated liver and pancreas. According to his account, doctors, aware of this property of figs, mixed them with thyme, pepper, ginger, pennyroyal, chowder, calamint, oregano or hyssop, thus, obtaining a medicine with the opposite effect, i.e. beneficial for the irritated liver and pancreas<sup>75</sup>. According to Paul of Aegina, the consumption of figs did not lead to a serious disturbance of the balance of basic elements in the consumer's organism, i.e. humoral imbalance. In addition, eating these fruits led to the cleansing of the digestive tract, promoted the production of urine and purified the kidneys. However, since they caused flatulence and rather bad blood, one should not eat too much of them<sup>76</sup>. Similar formulations can be found in Aëtius of Amida<sup>77</sup> (6<sup>th</sup> century),

<sup>71</sup> N. SONI, S. MEHTA, G. SATPATHY, R.K. GUPTA, *Estimation of Nutritional, Phytochemical, Antioxidant and Antibacterial Activity of Dried Fig (Ficus carica)*, JPhPh 3.2, 2014, p. 158–165; S. MAHMOUDI, M. KHALI, A. BENKHALED, I. BOUCETTA, Y. DAHMANI, Z. ATTALLAH, S. BELBRAOUE, *Fresh Figs (Ficus carica L.): Pomological Characteristics, Nutritional Value, and Phytochemical Properties*, EJHS 83.2, 2018, p. 104–113.

<sup>72</sup> L. FOXHALL, *Fig*, [in:] *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. S. HORNBLLOWER, A. SPAWFORTH, E. EIDINOW, Oxford 2012, p. 575.

<sup>73</sup> ORIBASIUS, I, 39, 1–6.

<sup>74</sup> ORIBASIUS, I, 40, 2–3.

<sup>75</sup> GALENUS, *De alimentorum facultatibus*, 571, 1 – 573, 8.

<sup>76</sup> PAULUS AEGINETA, I, 81, 1, 1–6.

<sup>77</sup> *Aetii Amideni Libri medicinales I–VIII*, I, 380, 1–32, ed. A. OLIVIERI, Lipsiae–Berolini 1935–1950 [= CMG, 8].

and all of them can be traced to Galen. Citing other authors, Athenaeus of Naucratis (2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century) reported that figs were believed to facilitate digestion and bowel movement. He also included the view that fig juice was excellent for infant development, and fresh fruit was rubbed on children's eyes as the best medicine<sup>78</sup>. Antimus expressed an interesting opinion, recommending chewing dried figs to prevent a runny nose. He also advised their consumption by people suffering from sore throats and hoarseness<sup>79</sup>.

The dietetic characteristic of figs in the writings of the authors related to medicine is overwhelmingly positive. They emphasized the nutritiousness of these fruits in particular, the fact that they stimulated digestion, which was beneficial to health, and their overall good effect on the body. At the same time, certain circumstances were noted, such as the pre-existing irritation of some internal organs, in which case, figs should be avoided.

Theodoret of Cyrus' account contained in his *Historia religiosa* shows that the fruits consumed by Syrian monks were dates and, above all, figs. The reason for that must have been the especially easy access to them since they had been known and cultivated in Syria for a long time. They found their way to the desert, directly to ascetics, through visitors. Another crucial advantage of these fruits was the fact that they could be eaten without being processed or wasting time, which allowed for the maintenance of the rigor of asceticism. In desert conditions, they were also the food which kept well in a dried form for long periods.

Dates and figs, due to their high sugar content, supplied monks with a lot of calories. In the case of dried figs, this is confirmed by Theodoret himself. He wrote, for example, that they were the food that the desert fathers reached for when their bodies were weakened, and in very small quantities, during the periods of long, restrictive fasting. This was particularly important if we consider the overall nature of the ascetic diet, which excluded particularly nutritious meat but also other animal products. In terms of energy, both fruits ranked very high in this diet.

Modern research proves that dates and figs, especially in the dried form, are the food that is extremely valuable for the human body. The aforementioned medical characteristics of these fruits, created by the late Antiquity and early Byzantine authors, are ambiguous, especially when it comes to dates. According to the cited medics, their consumption could have had both a positive and a negative impact on the human body. Compared to dates, figs appear to be particularly valuable for health.

To recapitulate, in the context of the consumption by Syrian monks, we believe that the main advantage of the fruits discussed in this article was their high energy value.

<sup>78</sup> ATHENAEUS NAUCRATITA, 78 d; 79 a–e.

<sup>79</sup> ANTHIMUS, *De observatione ciborum*, 93. Cf. A. DALBY, *Flavours of Byzantium*..., p. 136–137.

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**Abstract.** The aim of this article is to present the menu of early Christian monks in the context of the findings of Greek and Roman medicine in the field of dietetics. It draws from the passages of *Historia religiosa* by Theodoret of Cyrus about the consumption of dates and figs by Syrian ascetics.

Both species of fruit did not comprise the basis of the monks' limited diet. Figs and dates were treated as additional food by them, which they ate rarely and in small quantities. According to Theodoret, they did so especially when their bodies were weakened, during long and exhausting fasts.

According to modern dietetics, this was justified as both figs and dates are calorie- and nutrient-rich foods, which consumed even in small amounts can significantly supplement an adult's daily balance in this regard.

The authors of ancient and medical texts stemming from the tradition of Antiquity (Galen, Orbasius, Antimus, Aëtius of Amida, Paul of Aegina and others) also drew attention to the nutritious quality of dates and figs, in addition to numerous others health-promoting properties (especially in the context of the latter species). However, they further noted that excessive consumption of both fruits could lead to some health problems.

In the context of these findings, occasional consumption of dates and figs by Syrian ascetics appears justified, as they could provide their weakened bodies with food of high energy value and nutritious content, whose small amount – and, therefore, fitting in the ideal of mortification – would suffice to improve their health condition.

**Keywords:** Theodoret of Cyrus, Syrian ascetics, diet, dates, figs, Greek and Roman medicine

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