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UTOPIAN ELEMENTS IN PORPHYRY'S *DE ABSTINENTIA* *

In a long passage from Book IV of his treatise *De abstinentia* (2–18)¹ Porphyry mentions as a positive model a series of “groups” (ἔθνη)² who practice abstinence from animal food, a rule that he, together with the Neoplatonists, strongly supports. The main features of all these communities are typical of utopian societies, who live in an out-of-history dimension. This element stands out strongly in the text, especially for the reason that Porphyry’s narration begins with the Greeks of the mythical era.

The mythical time

At first Porphyry refers to primordial men and quotes a long fragment attributed to the work of the Peripatetic Dicaearchus³, according to whom the ancient Greeks, who were closer to the gods and belonged to a “golden race”, did not kill any living beings⁴. Referring to some lines from Hesiod’s *Opera et Dies*⁵, they are

* I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this article for their suggestions and their comments.

¹ See the edition of *Porphyrii philosophi Platonici Opuscula selecta*, rec. A. NAUCK, Hildesheim 1963 [= BSGR] (cetera: PORPHYRIUS).

² The best translation of ἔθνη in this case would not be “peoples”, but “communities, groups”, because Porphyry writes mainly about small congregations, whose members live apart from the rest of their people and adopt peculiar habits. On the way Porphyry uses the term ἔθνη, see A.P. JOHNSON, *Religion and Identity in Porphyry of Tyre. The Limits of Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge 2013 [= GCRW], p. 197–201.

³ Dicaearchus’ fragment is number 49 in the edition *Die Schule des Aristoteles. Texte und Kommentar*, vol. I, *Dikaiarchos*, ed. F. WEHRLI, Basel–Stuttgart 1967. Translated and commented texts in DICAERARCHUS OF MESSANA, *Text, Translation and Discussion*, ed. W. FORTENBAUGH, E. SCHÜTRUMPF, New Brunswick N.J.–London 2001 [= RUSCH, 10].

⁴ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 2, 1.

⁵ See HESIODUS, *Opera et Dies*, 116–119, [in:] *Hesiodi Theogonia, Opera et Dies, Scutum*, ed. F. SOL-MSEN, ³Oxonii 1990 [= SCBO].

described as extraordinary people who lived in abundance and happiness, while the rich soil produced spontaneous fruits. According to Dicaearchus' narration⁶ this was the lifestyle of the people at the time of Kronos. Besides, they had no knowledge of agriculture, nor of any other art; they were free from diseases, had a very simple diet that excluded meat, there were no wars among them and they lived without worries, in peace and harmony⁷.

This well-known passage can be interpreted as one of the representations in the Greek thought⁸ of what was imagined as the "time of origins"⁹, the mythical time dominated by Kronos, when mankind lived in a "primitive" condition ahead of historical time and before gradually becoming civilized according to the criteria established by Greek society itself. It is essentially one of the many reworkings of the Hesiodic myth of the "origins" and of the stages of mankind¹⁰, that followed the scheme of a gradual degeneration from an initially ideal condition¹¹.

Porphry's "narrative discourse" is constructed on the exaltation of a cultural model that shows the typical features of a lifestyle that goes back to a "state of nature". Such conceptual substratum is common to the descriptions of mankind in mythical times and emerges here too in the enumeration of the *ἔθνη* that the author offers as positive examples of contemplative life.

According to this ideological scheme, nature is opposed to culture, or *physis* to *nomos*¹², where the former is exalted as the basis for the Neoplatonic ethical ideal celebrated by Porphyry. Basically, the distance from civilization becomes the model for a good philosophical education that implies a pure existence devoted to ascesis, to the preservation of truth and the custody of divine cults¹³.

⁶ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 2, 3.

⁷ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 2, 4–5.

⁸ Porphyry's text directly refers to the first part of Hesiod's narration in *Works and Days* (vv. 106–126). A well-known analysis of the Hesiodic myth is by J.P. VERNANT, *Le mythe hésiodique des races. Essai d'analyse structurale*, RHR 157, 1960, p. 21–54. Cf. A.S. BROWN, *From the Golden Age to the Isles of the Blest*, Mn 51, 1998, p. 385–410.

⁹ On the concept of "time of origins" as preceding historical time, see A. BRELICH, *Introduzione alla storia delle religioni*, Roma 1966, p. 7–12 and IDEM, *Mitologia. Contributo a un problema di fenomenologia religiosa*, [in:] *Liber Amicorum. Studies in Honour of Professor Dr. C.J. Bleeker*, Leiden 1969, p. 55–68.

¹⁰ P. VIDAL-NAQUET, *Le mythe platonicien du Politique, les ambiguïtés de l'âge d'or et de l'histoire*, [in:] *Le chasseur noir. Formes de pensée et formes de société dans le monde grec*, Paris 1981, p. 361–380, specifically on the golden age, p. 361–366. On Porphyry's passage, see the observations of G. Girgent in PORFIRIO, *Astinenza dagli animali*, ed. G. GIRGENTI, A.R. SODANO, Milano 2005, p. 502–503, n. 3. On the characterization of Kronos' age as preceding the age of the *kosmos* ordered and ruled by Zeus, see G. GUASTELLA, *Saturno, signore dell'età dell'oro*, Lar 58, 1992, p. 163–182.

¹¹ A.O. LOVEJOY, G. BOAS, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*, Baltimore–London 1935, p. 93–95.

¹² On the opposition *physis/nomos* in the "invention" of the Barbarians, see F. HARTOG, *Mémoire d'Ulysse. Récits sur la frontière en Grèce ancienne*, Paris 1996, p. 139–147.

¹³ On the ascetic ideal of Neoplatonic philosophers, R. FINN, *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World*, Cambridge 2009 [= KTAH], p. 9–14. On the close connection between philosophy and the ideal of an

Porphyry's text continues with a digression about the frugality of the lifestyle introduced by Lycurgus into Sparta¹⁴. Here too, as in the following examples, the author's words highlight the line of continuity with the Greeks of ancient times. The inhabitants of Sparta are thought to have lived under a similar regime: abstaining from meat, without luxury, without greed for wealth, and without injustice¹⁵. The structure of the discourse is intentionally built on an assimilation between the mythical time and the historical era.

The Egyptian priests

What appears here worth examining is the reason why Porphyry's text continues to use the same conceptual model, when he describes other communities that, besides abstaining from meat, practiced a lifestyle comparable to that of the primordial human beings.

Later, the author states that abstinence from animal food was common to those groups (ἔθνη) who cared about equity, sobriety and devotion¹⁶ and then specifies that this was a rule not only among the Greeks but also among the barbarians¹⁷.

In order to support his thesis, Porphyry refers to Chaeremon¹⁸ the Stoic and mentions first of all the Egyptian priests¹⁹, who are also considered philosophers, choose temples as their homes and are honoured as sacred beings²⁰. Besides, they forfeit any human activity and are devoted to contemplation and to the cult of divine things²¹; they have scarce contacts with other people and live isolated especially during their time of purification²²; they abstain from many things,

ascetic life, see G. Clark in the Introduction to PORPHYRY, *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, trans. G. CLARK, London–New York 2000, p. 15–19. On the education of ascetic philosophers, who ought to practice a simple lifestyle, without passions and luxury, see I. GAMLATH, *The Training of Porphyry's 'Athlete': the Ascetic Philosopher in On the Abstinence from Eating Flesh*, SPP 28, 2018, p. 49–66.

¹⁴ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 3–5, 2. Porphyry's text derives from Plutarch, *Lycurgus* 8–10 and 12: see *Plutarch's Lives*, vol. I, trans. B. PERRIN, Cambridge–London 1967 [= LCL, 46], p. 227–235, 237–241.

¹⁵ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 2, 9; IV, 3, 1–6. On Lycurgus' abolition of luxury in Sparta see P. CHRISTENSEN, *Luxury, Lost in Translation: τρυφή in Plutarch's Sparta*, [in:] *Luxury and Wealth in the Archaic to Hellenistic Peloponnese*, ed. C. GALLOU, S. HODKINSON, Swansea 2020 (forthcoming).

¹⁶ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 5, 3.

¹⁷ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 5, 5. This passage demonstrates Porphyry's interest for universal ethics according to J.M. SCHOTT, *Porphyry on Christians and Others 'Barbarian Wisdom'. Identity Politics and Anti-Christian Polemics on the Eve of the Great Persecution*, JECS 13, 2005, p. 290. However, one must consider that the equivalence between barbarians and Greeks occurs only on the level of marginal communities, or through a symbolic shift onto the mythical level of primordial mankind.

¹⁸ P.W. VAN DER HORST, *Chaeremon, Egyptian Priest and Stoic Philosopher. The Fragments Collected and Translated with Explanatory Notes*, fr. 10, Leiden 1987 [= EPROLR, 101].

¹⁹ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 6–10.

²⁰ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 6, 2.

²¹ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 6, 3.

²² PORPHYRIUS, IV, 6, 5.

including wine and meat²³; they avoid intercourse with women²⁴; their beds are made of palm branches²⁵; they are immune from diseases; they observe the stars and study arithmetic and geometry²⁶.

Such a description of the Egyptian priests-philosophers contains several features that associate them to primordial men: notably, the fact that they do not work, are free from diseases and have a frugal diet. The description of the rules they respect shows a contemplative dimension in terms of a significant symbolic shifting on a level of timelessness²⁷.

The Egyptian clergy is marked by a sharp separation from the customs of their own people. Porphyry's text explicitly states: *They practised simplicity, restraint, self-control, perseverance and in every thing justice and absence of greed*²⁸. Such qualities show a life made of hardships and abstinence that determine their distance from the world.

It must be noted that Herodotus attributed to the Egyptian priests other specific prescriptions that define their peculiar lifestyle: they always wear a clean linen garment, shave their heads and do not consume their own things²⁹. Herodotus, too, emphasises their peculiar diet: they eat from the oxen and geese meat that is offered to them but avoid fish and beans. In this context, it is worth observing that this is not the first time that the author of the *Histories* has used the motif of the diet³⁰ to define and criticize the otherness of barbaric customs³¹.

Porphyry's *De abstinence*, too, makes use of this ethnographic model that is based on the same perspective as Herodotus. The difference lies in the fact that the intention of the Neoplatonic philosopher is to exalt, rather than to criticize, the choice of a life based on the rules of self-discipline³².

²³ The section of the text devoted to the description of dietary prescriptions is very detailed: PORPHYRIUS, IV, 6, 8 – 8, 4.

²⁴ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 7, 6.

²⁵ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 8, 1.

²⁶ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 8, 2.

²⁷ See the observations by F. HARTOG, *Mémoire d'Ulysse...*, p. 105–106.

²⁸ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 6, 4. English translation by G. CLARK.

²⁹ *Herodoti Historiae. Libri I–IV*, II, 37, rec. N.G. WILSON, Oxonii 2015 [= SCBO] (cetera: HERODOTUS).

³⁰ On dietary prescriptions as a motif to define Barbarians, see A. DE JONG, *Traditions of the Magi. Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature*, Leiden 1997 [= RGRW, 133], p. 24. Also, P. GARNSEY, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity*, Cambridge 1999 [= KTAH], p. 65–73.

³¹ To give some examples, Herodotus reports that the Indians eat grass (HERODOTUS, III, 100), the Androphagi eat humans (HERODOTUS, IV, 106), the Budini eat pinenuts (HERODOTUS, IV, 109), the Lotophagi eat lotus blossoms (HERODOTUS, IV, 177), the Ethiopian Troglodytes live on snakes, lizards and other reptilians (HERODOTUS, IV, 183), and the Gyzantians even eat monkeys (HERODOTUS, IV, 194). On the theme of alterity as developed in Herodotus' work, see F. HARTOG, *Le mirior d'Hérodote. Essai sur la représentation de l'autre*, Paris 1980 and E.S. GRUEN, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity*, Princeton N.J.–Oxford 2011 [= MCL]. Very useful is also R.V. MUNSON, *Telling Wonders. Ethnographic and Political Discourse in the Work of Herodotus*, Ann Arbor Mich. 2001.

³² See A. SMITH, *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition. A Study in Post-Plotinian Neoplatonism*, The Hague 1974, p. 20–39, who explains that the separation of the soul from the body is

The Essenes

In the same section of Porphyry's *De abstinentia* very similar features to those of the Egyptian priests are attributed to other communities. The list goes on with the Essenes³³, for whom pleasures are comparable to vices, while continence and control of their passions to virtues³⁴; they despise wedlock³⁵ and wealth, and share their properties³⁶. They never change their garments, nor their shoes until they are torn, they don't buy nor sell³⁷, do not eat pork, nor fish without scales and animals with solid hoofs³⁸. The narration underlines their strong devotion towards the divine (πρός τὸν θεῖον εὐσεβεῖς)³⁹, thus showing the author's interest in this aspect of life.

Some elements of this description, such as the control of passions and the contempt for possessions, as well as the simplicity of the way of life, are the recurring aspects – as we have seen – in the representation of the men of mythical time.

In addition, it is worth noting that Porphyry's source for the description of the customs of the Essenes is Flavius Josephus' *The Jewish War*⁴⁰. The Jewish historian provides further interesting elements regarding their lifestyle: they obey their elders⁴¹, they ban from their community those that commit serious crimes⁴², they are accurate in their judgments⁴³, they rest on the seventh day⁴⁴, they are long-lived

at the basis of Porphyry's philosophy and his work *De Abstinentia* goes in this direction. According to D.A. DOMBROWSKY, *Porphyry and the Vegetarianism: A Contemporary Philosophical Approach*, [in:] ANRW, vol. II.36.2, ed. H. TEMPORINI, W. HAASE, Berlin–New York 1987, p. 790–791, the vegetarian Greek philosophers like Porphyry were mostly concerned in pursuing moral goodness (*arete*). On this description by Porphyry, who indicate the Egyptian priests as the model of the philosopher-priest, see F. HARTOG, *Les Grecs égyptologues*, A.H 41, 1986, p. 953–967, in particular p. 964.

³³ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 11–14.

³⁴ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 11, 3.

³⁵ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 11, 4.

³⁶ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 11, 5.

³⁷ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 11, 8.

³⁸ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 14, 1.

³⁹ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 12, 1–4. The information provided by Porphyry coincide with what is reported by FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, *De Bello Judaico. Der Jüdische Krieg*, II, 8, 5, vol. I, ed. O. MICHEL, O. BAUERNEFEIND, Darmstadt–München 1959 (cetera: FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS). Before daylight they pray the Sun, they perform purification rites before eating, they consume their meals in a room especially provided for the people who share their faith, before and after meals their priests pronounce prayers.

⁴⁰ FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, II, 8, 2–13. See the observations in G. Clark's commentary in PORPHYRY, *On Abstinence...*, p. 185–186. On the fact that Porphyry followed the story of *The Jewish War* see G. VERMES, M. GOODMAN, *The Essenes according to the Classical Sources*, Sheffield 1989, p. 37–47. The commentary on the passages of Flavius Josephus can be found in T.S. BEALL, *Josephus' Description of the Essenes Illustrated by the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Cambridge 1988, p. 35–112.

⁴¹ FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, II, 8, 6.

⁴² FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, II, 8, 8.

⁴³ FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, II, 8, 9.

⁴⁴ FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, II, 8, 9.

(many of them live longer than 100 years), they are indifferent to dangers and pain, they prefer death to immortality⁴⁵, some are able to see into the future⁴⁶.

The constitutive traits in the life of the Essenes – as reported by Porphyry and, to a greater extent, by Flavius Josephus – are perfectly in line with the typical motifs of Greek ethnography⁴⁷ which are used to mark the border between one's own culture and the *other* world of the barbarians. We find here the typical features of a utopian society, where every aspect of life is perfectly ordered and organized according to rules of sobriety and obedience to civil and religious prescriptions.

The Magi

Further in his narration – after a brief mention of the Syrians⁴⁸ – Porphyry describes another class of priests, the Magi⁴⁹. They are wise in divine concerns, worship divinity and the Persians venerate them, like the Egyptians do with their priests. They are classified in three groups⁵⁰: the first do not eat or kill living beings, the second use some animals but do not feed on tame ones, the third class does not eat their meat. They believe in metempsychosis, because they assume that humans are strictly connected to animals, so much so that the former are given the names of the latter⁵¹.

Porphyry's information on the Magi can be compared to what is reported by Diogenes Laertius⁵², who highlights their connection with the divine world: they live honouring their gods, performing sacrifices, praying and practicing divination and formulating predictions. Besides, they do not wear golden ornaments and jewels, they wear a white garment, sleep on a bed of leaves and their diet is made of vegetables, cheese and wholemeal bread.

Diogenes Laertius's text provides a far larger amount of information compared to Porphyry's one, but in both cases the Magi appear as an ascetic community marked by rigid rules of abstinence.

⁴⁵ FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, II, 8, 10.

⁴⁶ FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, II, 8, 12.

⁴⁷ The theme of Flavius Josephus' debt to Greek ethnography was analysed by T. RAJAK, *Ciò che Giuseppe vide: Josephus and the Essenes*, [in:] *Josephus and the History of the Greco-Roman Period. Essays in Memory of Morton Smith*, ed. F. PARENTE, J. SIEVERS, Leiden 1994, p. 141–160.

⁴⁸ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 15. In this chapter, though, Porphyry does not describe the customs of the Syrians.

⁴⁹ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 16.

⁵⁰ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 16, 2.

⁵¹ The documents from classical sources on the Magi are analysed by A. DE JONG, *Traditions of the Magi...*, p. 387–403.

⁵² *Diogenis Laertii Vitae Philosophorum*, I, 6–8, vol. I, ed. M. MARCOVICH, Stuttgart–Leipzig 1999 [= BSGR] (cetera: DIOGENES LAERTIUS). See the analysis of this passage in A. DE JONG, *Traditions of the Magi...*, p. 205–228.

The gymnosophists

Porphyry's list of communities who practice abstinence from meat ends up with the gymnosophists⁵³. The author quotes Bardaisan⁵⁴ and explains that they are divided into two groups: the Brahmins and the Samanaeans. The Brahmins⁵⁵ are like a class of priests⁵⁶, they are not subject to any ruler and do not pay tributes⁵⁷. Those who live in the mountains eat fruit and drink cowmilk, those who are by the Ganges feed on fruit and rice that grow spontaneously⁵⁸; they venerate their divinities by singing hymns day and night, and live isolated each in his own hut⁵⁹. As to the Samanaeans, those who choose to belong to their group often give up any property, shave their bodies and abandon wife and children⁶⁰; they live out of the city and spend their time debating theology; they have houses and temples built by the king, eat rice, bread, fruit and beans⁶¹. Common people venerate them, and the kings visit them to request to pray against calamities⁶².

Considering a wider context, there are several Greek sources – starting from the Hellenistic age up to the late Christian antiquity – that deal with the gymnosophists/Brahmins⁶³.

First of all, it must be remembered that even in the *Indika* of Megasthenes⁶⁴, mentioned by Strabo, there was a description similar to that of Porphyry concerning the two groups of Indian philosophers: the Brahmins and the Garmanes⁶⁵.

⁵³ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 17–18.

⁵⁴ *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*, 719 F 2, ed. F. JACOBX, Berlin–Leiden 1923–1958. On Bardaisan, see J.W. DRIJVERS, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, trans. G.E. VAN BAAREN-PAPE, Groningen 1966; I.L.E. RAMELLI, *Bardaisan of Edessa. A Reassessment of the Evidence and a New Interpretation*, Piscataway N.J. 2009 [= GECS].

⁵⁵ On the Brahmins in classical sources, see R. STONEMAN, *Who Are the Brahmins? Indian Lore and Cynic Doctrine in Palladius' De Bragmanibus and its Models*, CQ 44, 1994, p. 500–510 and *idem*, *Naked Philosophers: The Brahmins in the Alexander Historians and the Alexander Romance*, JHS 115, 1995, p. 99–114.

⁵⁶ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 17, 1.

⁵⁷ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 17, 4.

⁵⁸ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 17, 4.

⁵⁹ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 17, 5–6.

⁶⁰ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 17, 7.

⁶¹ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 17, 8.

⁶² PORPHYRIUS, IV, 17, 8.

⁶³ The complete collection of the Greek and Latin sources concerning the Brahmins and the gymnosophists is in *Fontes historiae religionum Indicarum*, coll. B. BRELOER, F. BÖMER, Bonnae 1939 [= FHR, 7].

⁶⁴ *FGrHist* 715 F 33.

⁶⁵ See the edition of STRABO, *Geography. Books 15–16*, vol. VII, trans. H.L. JONES, Cambridge Mass. 1930 [= LCL], p. 98: here we can find the words Βραχμᾶναι and Γαρμᾶναι. The same tradition of the two groups that form the gymnosophists can also be found in Clement of Alexandria, where Βραχμᾶναι and Σαρμᾶναι are mentioned. See CLEMENS ALEXANDRINUS, *Stromata. Buch I–VI*, XV, 71,

The first ones live in a forest outside the city for 37 years, lying on blankets of rags and skins, abstaining from meat and sexual practices, and discussing serious matters. Among the Garmanes, the most respected ones are dressed in tree barks (*Hylobioi*), live in the forests feeding on leaves and wild fruits, abstaining from sexual intercourse and wine. Others, among them, are healers, soothsayers, enchanters.

Megasthenes' story contains a series of data – again recurring in Porphyry's passage – on which the Brahman's image is constructed as an *ideal alterity*⁶⁶ compared to Greek culture. The way of life of the Indian sages, as presented by the Greek authors⁶⁷, has left traces in Porphyry's treatise, which uses elements that contribute to their assimilation with the men of the mythical time. They then became emblems of Christian asceticism, starting with the writers of the 2nd and 3rd centuries⁶⁸.

In Porphyry's text, several elements of the life of the "naked philosophers" are very similar to the ones that characterize both the Egyptian priests and the Magi. Porphyry's information belongs to that largely documented tradition that considers all these groups as the initiators of philosophy⁶⁹ and the teachers of well-

5, vol. I–II, ed. O. STÄHLIN, Leipzig 1906 [= GCS, 15] (cetera: CLEMENS ALEXANDRINUS). On the identification of the two groups see K. KARTTUNEN, *India and the Hellenistic World*, Helsinki 1997, p. 56–58.

⁶⁶ On the idealization of India see A. ZAMBRINI, *Gli Indiká di Megastene*, ASNP.LF S. III, 12, 1982, p. 71–149 and IDEM, *Gli Indiká di Megastene. II*, ASNP.LF S. III, 15, 1985, p. 781–853.

⁶⁷ See also *Diodori Bibliotheca Historica*, II, 40, vol. I, rec. L. DINDORF, F. VOGEL, ³Stuttgartiae 1964 (cetera: DIODORUS), and especially *Flavii Arriani quae exstant omnia*, vol. II, *Scripta minora et addenda*, XI, 1–8, ed. A.G. ROOS, Lipsiae 1928 [= BSGR], where the description of the Indian philosophers focuses on their frugality: they live naked, in winter they are exposed to the open air and sun, while in summer they shelter under the shade of large trees, and eat seasonal fruits and tree bark. Plutarch too describes similar traits for the Indian gymnosophists. See *Plutarchi Moralia*, 332 B, vol. II, rec. W. NACHSTÄDT, W. SIEVEKING, J.B. TITCHENER, Lipsiae 1935 [= BSGR], where it is said that they dedicate their time to the divinity, they are more frugal than Diogenes, because they do not even need a pouch, they obtain their food from the earth, they drink water from the rivers, and they have the leaves of the trees and the grass as their bed.

⁶⁸ See *Refutation of All Heresies*, I, 24, trans. et praef. D.M. LITWA, Atlanta 2016, and CLEMENS ALEXANDRINUS, III, 7, 60. See also the passage in *Eusebius Werke*, vol. VIII, *Die Praeparatio Evangelica*, VI, 10, 14, p. 1, ed. K. MRAS, Berlin 1982 [= GCS, 43.1], where Bardaisan is quoted (*FGrHist* 719 F 3b): [The Brahman] *never kill anybody, do not adore statues, never get drunk, do not drink wine or other fermented substances and never commit evil deeds, as they are devoted to the divine cult* (trans. by the author). The tradition of the Brahman seen as Christian ascetics continues in the so-called "Indian treatises" see: G. CARY, *The Medieval Alexander*, Cambridge 1956, p. 12–13, where the anonymous *Collatio Alexandri et Dindimi* and Palladius' *De gentibus Indiae et Bragmanibus* are mentioned. Cf. *Alexander der Grosse und die "nackten Weisen" Indiens*, praef. et trans. M. STEINMANN, Berlin 2012, and PALLADIUS, *De gentibus Indiae et Bragmanibus*, ed. W. BERGHOF, Meisenheim am Glan 1967 [= BKP, 24].

⁶⁹ DIOGENES LAERTIUS, I, 1 mentions the Magi as the initiators of philosophy among the Persians, the Chaldeans among the Babylonians and the Assyrians, the gymnosophists among the Indians, the Druids among the Celts and the Gauls. On the contrary, according to CLEMENS ALEXANDRINUS,

-known Greek philosophers⁷⁰. This type of evidence is the basis of the Greek construction of "Oriental wisdom"⁷¹, a form of *exoticism* that idealizes a distant, but at the same time attractive and significant, *otherness*, such as to be presented as the origin of the same Greek cultural values.

In addition to that, in the structure of Porphyry's discourse, it is precisely the exemplification of the customs of these "barbaric" communities⁷² that constitutes the ideological foundation of his defence of an ascetic lifestyle, far from the way of life of contemporary society⁷³.

The utopian perspective

We have seen that a large part of Book IV of Porphyry's *De abstinentia* is devoted to the description of the customs of some ancient communities who are associated by their shared meat-free diet. This aspect is the focal point of the author's main purpose in his narration, that is to defend the actual model of life of Neoplatonic philosophers⁷⁴.

However, if we examine the whole section of this Book, we can observe a network of multiple connections among these communities, whose importance is visibly

I, 15, 71, 3–4, the first philosophers were the prophets among the Egyptians, the Chaldeans among the Assyrians, the Druids among the Gauls, the Samanaeans in Bactriana, some wisemen among the Celts, the Magi among the Persians, and the gymnosophists among the Indians.

⁷⁰ In DIODORUS, I, 96, we find a catalogue of famous mythical and historical figures who visited the Egyptian priests in order to learn their doctrine: Orpheus, Museus, Melampus, Dedalus, and Homer, Lycurgus, Solon, Plato, Pythagoras, Eudoxus, Democritus and Oinopidos. DIOGENES LAERTIUS, IX, 35, narrates that Democritus visited first the Egyptian priests, later the Chaldeans in Persia and then the gymnosophists in India. DIOGENES LAERTIUS, IX, 61, reports that the philosopher Pyrrhus, following Anaxarchus in his travels, was able to have contacts with the gymnosophists and the Magi. The classical tradition offers a large amount of further information on this topic.

⁷¹ On the theme of the Egyptians' wisdom that was admired by several Greek authors, see F. HARTOG, *Mémoire d'Ulysse...*, p. 74–106. On "Oriental wisdom" considered by the Greeks as the basis of their philosophy and attributed not only to the Indians, but also to the Egyptians and to the populations of the Near East, see K. KARTTUNEN, *Greeks and Indian Wisdom*, [in:] *Beyond Orientalism. The Work of Wilhelm Halbfass and its Impact on Indian and Cross-Cultural Studies*, ed. E. FRANCO, K. PEISENDANZ, Amsterdam–Atlanta 1997, p. 117–122, in particular p. 117. W. HALBFASS, *Indien und Europa. Perspektiven ihrer geistigen Begegnung*, Basel 1981, p. 3–4, remarks that Greek idea contributed to the foundation of the European view of Indian and "Eastern" thought.

⁷² Regarding the question that Porphyry uses ethnographic material as an argument for his theoretical speculations, see A.P. JOHNSON, *Religion and Identity...*, p. 189–191, and in particular on this section of ethnographic dossography p. 215–220.

⁷³ In fact in the passage of *De abstinentia*, IV 18, 4 Porphyry criticizes the Greeks in comparison with the lifestyle of the groups he has mentioned.

⁷⁴ On the separation of the philosopher from the daily life of non-philosophers and the peculiar lifestyles of philosophical schools, see P. HADOT, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, Paris 1987, p. 12–16.

aimed at describing a utopian lifestyle. Therefore, it is important to analyse the reasons and the underlying meaning of the construction of this close correlation.

The first element that all these “groups” (ἔθνη) have in common is their strong devotion⁷⁵. As a matter of fact, the author lists a series of communities with a specific religious status, as they all belong to priesthood: the Egyptian priests, the Magi, the Brahmins. Their descriptions show how the prescriptions that regulate their existence are totally different from the normal habits of their own people.

The familiarity with the divine is also common to the Essenes, who do not belong to priesthood but devote a large part of their life to prayers and purification⁷⁶. Moreover, some of them can predict the future, a skill that they share with the Magi.

It must be remarked that Porphyry’s text repeatedly mentions a term referred to the lifestyle of the Egyptian priests and of the Essenes: *enkrateia*⁷⁷. This word defines the hardships that the members of these two groups voluntarily undergo. Another recurring term is *askesis*⁷⁸, which very clearly states the condition of “alienation” of these two groups from the rest of the world.

There are further similarities in the customs of the ἔθνη that Porphyry presents, for instance their simple clothes, their peculiar diet, their sexual abstinence⁷⁹, the lack of diseases and wars, their having common properties, the lack of any productive activity and their isolation from civil life. The special emphasis on their lifestyle is the core of the Porphyry’s discourse: all these elements illustrate unmistakably a utopian life.

In these terms, the representation of all these groups – the Egyptian priests, the Essenes, the Magi and the gymnosophists – place them in an inactual, timeless dimension. The fact that Porphyry decided to associate these communities together in his text does not appear at all accidental, as his information goes back to previous traditions or are documented by other authors. This means that some

⁷⁵ PORPHYRIUS, IV, 5, 3.

⁷⁶ This is one of the features that the Essenes share with the Pythagoreans, with whom they also shared other habits: I. LÉVY, *La légende de Pythagore de Grèce en Palestine*, Paris 1927, p. 270–288; A. CATASTINI, *Flavio Giuseppe e la filosofia degli Esseni*, [in:] *Flores Florentino. Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Early Jewish Studies in Honour of Florentino García Martínez*, ed. A. HILHORST, É. PUECH, E. TIGCHELAAR, Leiden–Boston 2007 [= JSJ.S, 122], p. 53–62.

⁷⁷ With reference to the Egyptian priests, the term appears in PORPHYRIUS, IV, 6, 4; 8, 1; 8, 5, to the Essenes in PORPHYRIUS, IV, 11, 3; 12, 7.

⁷⁸ The term appears with reference to the Egyptian priests, and to the Essenes respectively in PORPHYRIUS, IV, 9, 1; IV, 13, 6.

⁷⁹ On sexual abstinence as one of the options in the lifestyle of Neoplatonic philosophers, see D.M. COSI, *Astensione alimentare e astinenza sessuale nel De abstinencia di Porfirio*, [in:] *La tradizione dell’Enkrateia. Motivazioni ontologiche e protologiche. Atti del colloquio internazionale, Milano, 20–23 aprile 1982*, ed. U. BIANCHI, Roma 1985, p. 698–701.

recurring motifs were already quite popular in the Greek literary production, especially in ethnographic works⁸⁰.

Moreover we may add that Porphyry employs a typically Greek ideological-cultural system, which makes reference to a model of primordial mankind, and implements a symbolic shift onto the ideal level of *illud tempus*⁸¹, within which the customs of some specific communities become meaningful.

It is notable, and should be adequately remarked, that the mechanism of assimilation of these groups refers mainly to the Greeks of the mythical times. The defence of a lifestyle based on rigid prescriptions and prohibitions is acceptable only in a *qualitatively* different, "out-of-history" dimension.

A further confirmation of the "de-historicization" of the models that Porphyry presents as positive can come from the following two considerations: a) these communities are small, marginal groups within the peoples they belong to; b) these peoples live in territories that are far away from the Greek world and therefore represent the barbaric *otherness*⁸². This last point allows us to say that the ideological mechanism underlying Porphyry's narration about the ἔθνη also implies a projection of the "right" lifestyle for philosophers onto the symbolic level of the *ille locus*.

In short, the ethics that Porphyry proposes for the ascetic philosopher is grounded on what is distant both from history and civilization.

In this regard, it is worth recalling a passage from Thucydides, where he states that *the ancient Greeks used to live in a way comparable to that of today's barbarians*⁸³. This is a synthesis of a conceptual structure that allowed the Greeks to believe in their own superiority. Thucydides' words show how this equivalence was made possible:

ancient Greeks = contemporary Barbarians.

Such a comparison occurred on two intersecting levels, the vertical axis of time and the horizontal axis of space. The Greek thought produced a "device" of marginalization in the dimension of *remoteness*, i.e. a distance both chronological and geographical as a powerful cultural pattern to criticize and control everything that appeared as *other*.

Consequently, it is easy to recognize in the work *De abstinentia*, despite the different narrative patterns, the same conceptual scheme which is used exhortatively to present a utopian and timeless existence as a high ethical and philosophical value.

⁸⁰ On the ethnographic aspects of Porphyry's work, see A.P. JOHNSON, *Religion and Identity...*, p. 189–257. Specifically, on the Hellenocentric view of the world, p. 222–243.

⁸¹ On the concept of mythical time defined as *illud tempus* see M. ELIADE, *Traité d'histoire des religions*, Paris 1949, p. 390–393.

⁸² F. HARTOG, *Le mirior d'Hérodote...*, p. 61–62.

⁸³ THUCYDIDES, *Historiae*, I, 6, 6, vol. I, ed. H. STUART JONES, J.E. POWELL, Oxonii 1963 [= SCBO].

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Abstract. In the long passage of *De abstinence*, IV, 2–18, Porphyry mentions a series of “groups” (ἔθνη) as examples of abstinence from animal food: the ancient Greeks of the “golden age”, the Lacedaemonians of Lycurgus’ era, the Egyptian priests, the Essenes among the Jews, the Magi among the Persians and the gymnosophists among the Indians. Such an association does not seem at all accidental, since Porphyry refers to a tradition in which these communities have similar habits of life, including the prohibition of eating meat and drinking wine, sexual abstinence, absence of diseases and wars, separation from the civil sphere, devotion to the sacred. All these elements constitute the specific connotation of a human existence that evokes the “time of the origins”, substantially a paradisiac dimension, far from history. It is a deliberate symbolic shift. This brief research will investigate the reasons and the deep meaning of the connection based on utopian life traits.

Keywords: golden age, abstinence from meat, sexual abstinence, remoteness from civilization, familiarity with the sacred, utopian lifestyle

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