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“Those who grovel among tombs.” Julian, Plato, and the Invective against Christian Practices in Cemeteries

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KTÈMA

CIVILISATIONS DE L'ORIENT, DE LA GRÈCE ET DE ROME ANTIQUES

Traitement du passé et construction de la mémoire chez les auteurs de la Seconde Sophistique

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“Those who grovel among tombs.”

Julian, Plato, and the Invective against Christian Practices in Cemeteries

RÉSUMÉ-. Pendant le IV^e siècle, le fanatisme entourant la vénération des reliques suscita des réactions complexes aussi bien de la part des auteurs païens que des apologistes chrétiens. L'empereur Julien s'employa à élever le niveau intellectuel du débat en recourant à la pensée platonicienne comme arme pour délégitimer le culte des reliques et moquer les chrétiens qui faisaient leurs dévotions dans les cimetières. Un usage passé jusqu'ici inaperçu du *Phédon* par Julien permet d'approfondir la manière dont celui-ci a instrumentalisé Platon pour critiquer le christianisme ainsi que ses vues peu connues sur le sort des âmes des martyrs.

MOTS-CLÉS-. Julien, Platon, *Phédon*, martyrs, reliques, cimetières

ABSTRACT-. During the fourth century, the fanaticism surrounding the veneration of relics ignited complex reactions from both pagan authors and Christian apologists. Emperor Julian elevated the intellectual level of the dispute by weaponizing Platonic thought to delegitimize the worship of relics and to scorn the Christians who performed devotional practices in cemeteries. An overlooked use by Julian of the *Phaedo* offers a new insight into the emperor's instrumentalization of Plato to critique Christianity and into his little-known views on the fate of the martyrs' souls.

KEYWORDS-. Julian, Plato, *Phaedo*, martyrs, relics, cemeteries

Throughout the fourth century, the superficial similarities between polytheistic practices and the veneration of relics in cemeteries belied deep anxieties about the martyrs' cults. Christian and pagan intellectuals discovered an unlikely common ground in their criticisms of the fanaticism surrounding the adoration of human remains and of the devotees' practice of wandering in burial grounds, searching for ghosts.¹ While the pagan intellectual elite was troubled by the establishment of new Christian cultic places, Christian apologetics worried that fanatic devotion to the martyrs bore too much similarity to idolatry. Inside these disputes, Emperor Julian, whose ambiguous policy toward Christianity has been much discussed both by ancient authors and by modern scholars,² took a strong stance. His use of Plato as a lens to challenge the authority of the

(1) On Greek and Roman pagan practices of necromancy, magic, witchcraft, as well as on ghosts see the works of OGDEN 2001 and ID. 2002. See also DEPALMA DIGESER 2012, p. 180-184, on Porphyry's criticism of rites and sacrifices in cemeteries: *On Abstinence* II 50, 1; see *ibid.* II, 43, 1, II 46, 2, II, 47, 3.

(2) On this topic there is a large literature, for example: BOWERSOCK 1978, p. 79-93; BRAUN 1978; ATHANASSIADI-FOWDEN 1981, p. 161-191; NERI 1985, p. 117-157; SMITH 1995, p. 179-218; BRINGMANN 2004, p. 129-168; SCHÄFER (ed.) 2008; TORRES 2009; HAHN 2011; TEITLER 2017, a persuasive moderate view; NESSELRATH 2013; WIEMER 2020; GREENWOOD 2021.

Scriptures is well known. This contribution adds a new and unexplored aspect to the discussion by emphasizing Julian's evocation of Plato's *Phaedo* to challenge Christian cultic practices in cemeteries, and by extension the legitimacy of the martyrs' cults. Church fathers like Cyril of Alexandria, who confronted Julian on this point, could not deny the existence of these practices. As we shall demonstrate, Julian's use of the *Phaedo* betrays the emperor's view of the fate of the martyrs' souls, an important aspect about which almost nothing survives.

In the complex reality of a divided Christianity, some fourth-century Church fathers encouraged devotional practices in cemeteries. This was the case especially in Africa, where the adoration of bones was one of the Donatists' strengths. In Numidia, the bishop Optatus of Milevis reported that in 311, a certain Lucilla, an influential woman, was said to kiss the bones of a martyr "before the spiritual food and drink."³ Yet the Synod of Elvira of the year 305 condemned the Christians who burned candles in cemeteries during the day, a practice closely related to paganism, just as they condemned those who destroyed pagan idols.⁴ A century later, debate about the proper veneration of relics was far from over, as it was one of the issues discussed at the synod of Carthage (401 C.E.).⁵

Because of their custom of building altars in cemeteries, and their practice of worshipping and adoring the martyrs' relics, many Christians were blamed for idolatry. Leading Christian intellectuals like Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria, and Gregory of Nyssa, criticized the veneration of human remains.⁶ The Spanish priest Vigilantius—who spent part of his life travelling in the East—attacked those Christians who worshipped saints and venerated relics, practices that to him did not look different from pagan cults. His polemical writing is lost, but we have Jerome's answer to it in the letter *Against Vigilantius*, from which we know that this presbyter had mocked those faithful people who sought the spirits of the dead in nighttime vigils: "Is it the case that the souls of the martyrs love their ashes, and hover round them, and are always present (*et circumvolant eos semperque praesentes sunt*), lest haply anyone come to pray, and were they absent, they could not hear?"⁷ Jerome could not deny the similarities between Christians' veneration of relics and pagans' worshipping of idols. However, instead of condemning the practice, he considered it benign and attributed it to a simple and unlearned piety:

Quod si aliqui per imperitiam et simplicitatem saecularium hominum vel certe religiosarum feminarum... hoc pro honore martyrum faciunt, quid inde perdis?... Non diffiteor omnes nos qui Christo credimus de idolatriae errore venisse. Non enim nascimur, sed renascimur Christiani. Et quia quondam colebamus idola, nunc Deum colere non debemus, ne simili eum videamus cum idolis honore venerari? Illud fiebat idolis et idcirco detestandum est, hoc fit martyribus et ideo recipiendum est.

And if some persons, being ignorant and simple minded laymen, or, at all events, religious women [...] adopt the practice in honour of the martyrs, what harm is thereby done to you? [...] I do not deny, that all of us who believe in Christ have passed from the error of idolatry. For we are not born Christians, but become Christians by being born again. And because we formerly worshipped idols, does it follow that we ought not now to worship God lest we seem to pay like honour to Him and to

(3) Optatus *De schis. Don.* I, 16 (CSEL 26); see GRIG 2004, p. 88 with n. 24. Two recent studies on the origins of the cult of relics among Christians are HARTL 2018, and WIŚNIEWSKI 2018; see also WORTLEY 2006.

(4) See respectively the canons nos. 60 and 34.

(5) *Reg. eccl. Carth.* 83.

(6) Euseb. *Demonstratio Evangelica* III, 2, 10; IV, 12, 4; X, 8, 64; Ath. *Vita Antonii* 91; Greg. *Nys. Ep.* 2; see TORRES 2009, p. 208-210.

(7) Hier. *Adv. Vigil.* 8 (CCSL 79C; trans. FREMANTLE [ed.] 1893): *Ergo cineres suos amant animae martyrum et circumvolant eos semperque praesentes sunt, ne forte, si aliquis precator advenerit, absentes audire non possint?* Cf. Ez. 13.20: *animas volantes*. See also Hier. *Adv. Vigil.* 5 and 9. Cf. GRIG 2004, p. 89-92; TORRES 2009, p. 209-210; OH 2013.

idols? In the one case respect was paid to idols, and therefore the ceremony is to be abhorred; in the other the martyrs are venerated, and the same ceremony is therefore to be allowed.⁸

With his generally optimistic view, Jerome distinguished between the faults of a few ignorant persons and the Christian religion:

Error autem et culpa iuvenum vilissimarumque mulierum, qui per noctem saepe deprehenditur, non est religiosi hominibus imputandus... et tamen paucorum culpa non praeiudicat religioni, qui et absque vigiliis possunt errare vel in suis, vel in alienis domibus... Et nostras ergo vigiliis malae aliorum vigiliae non destruent.

We must not, however, impute to pious men the faults and errors of youths and worthless women, such [faults] as are often detected at night [...] [T]he faults of a few form no argument against religion in general, and such persons, without keeping vigil, can go wrong either in their own houses or in those of other people [...] And if others keep vigil badly, our vigils are not thereby to be stopped.⁹

To Jerome, the value of the veneration of martyrs was sufficient to warrant the continuation of the practice in spite of the ‘faults’ of a few. Augustine, too, ultimately concluded that the practice was permissible, but he approached this question carefully in his works, guarding closely against any hint of idolatry or even polytheism that the martyrs’ cults could evoke. In the *City of God* he clarified the difference between adoring martyrs and worshipping God, who is one, and whose Son is the *caput et princeps martyrum*. Certainly, the sacrifice of the martyrs was the vital energy of the Christian religion. But while their heroism should be always acknowledged, they were not gods. As Augustine explains:

Nec tamen nos eisdem martyribus templa, sacerdotia, sacra et sacrificia constituimus, quoniam non ipsi, sed Deus eorum nobis est Deus. Honoramus sane memorias eorum tamquam sanctorum hominum Dei, qui usque ad mortem corporum suorum pro veritate certarunt, ut innotesceret vera religio falsis fictisque convictis; quod etiam si qui antea sentiebant, timendo reprimebant.

But in fact we do not set up for these same martyrs’ temples, priesthoods, rites and sacrifices, for they themselves are not gods, but their God is our God. We honour *their memorials* (*memorias eorum*), of course, because we regard them as holy men of God who have fought for the truth even to the death of their bodies, in order to win renown for true religion by the defeat of falsehood and fiction.¹⁰

On this very point Jerome had expressed himself just a few years before in *Against Vigilantius*, evoking the prince of the Apostles: “Does the bishop of Rome do wrong when he offers sacrifices to the Lord over the venerable bones of the dead men Peter and Paul, as we should say, but according to you, over a worthless bit of dust, and judges their tombs worthy to be Christ’s altars?”¹¹ His powerful words underscore the point. Even though veneration of relics did not necessarily equal the superstitious practices performed in the cemeteries around the tombs, the dispute about how to honor human remains continued to divide Christian intellectuals for the entirety of the fourth century and still at the beginning of the fifth century.

Within this larger debate, Julian took a clear position. His Hellenic education and his Neoplatonic values strongly shaped his views on the veneration of relics and Christian practices in cemeteries. To Julian, in adoring the martyrs, Christians behaved like polytheists.¹² The emperor

(8) Hier. *Adv. Vigil.* 7 (trans. FREMANTLE [ed.] 1893); see also *Ep.* 109, 1. See below, n. 24, Julian’s reference to women who pray around the tombs.

(9) Hier. *Adv. Vigil.* 9 (trans. FREMANTLE [ed.] 1893).

(10) *Civ. Dei* VIII, 27, 1 (trans. D. WIESEN, Loeb). See *ibid.* VIII, 26, 3; also Aug. *Contra Academicos* III, 17, 38; *Conf.* VI, 2, 2 (the case of a certain Monica in Milan); *Contra Faustum* 20, 4 and 22, 21. On Augustine’s attitude about martyrdom see VAN BAVEL 1995; DUPONT 2012.

(11) Hier. *Adv. Vigil.* 8 (trans. FREMANTLE [ed.] 1893).

(12) *Contra Galilaeos* 201e. An edition of these fragments is MASARACCHIA (ed.) 1990.

diminishes Christian claims for universality by referring to them as ‘Galileans,’ and also as “depraved persons” (πονηροί).¹³ When addressing Arsacius, the high-priest of Galatia, he ridicules the veneration of martyrs’ relics as a practice that served to increase ‘atheism’ (ἀθεότης), by which he meant the Christian religion: “why do we not observe that it is their benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead (ἡ περὶ τὰς ταφὰς τῶν νεκρῶν προμήθεια) and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase atheism?”¹⁴ In the oration *To the Cynic Heracleios* he condemns his Christian relatives for building churches over the tombs of martyrs in places that were originally temples.¹⁵ And although Christian communities considered martyrs to be the ‘heroes’ of their faith and therefore deserving of worship,¹⁶ when travelling through Ilium, Julian found it inappropriate to compare the people’s veneration for Hector, their hero, and their reverence for his monument, to that of the Christians for their martyrs.¹⁷

But it is in *Against the Galileans* that Julian fully develops a theoretical critique, based in Platonic thought, against those who, following the vicissitude of the “first of the deaths” (Christ), visit the tombs to adore the remains.¹⁸ This work, which Julian wrote in Antioch during the winter 362-363, represents the culmination of the emperor’s literary confrontation against the Christians. Originally published in three books, this work was lost, probably banished by the laws of Theodosius II, or by Justinian in 529. However, to the Christian polemicists this work was highly significant, and Cyril of Alexandria made a counterattack in *Against Julian*, a polemical reply written about seventy years after the emperor’s death. Julian’s *Against the Galileans* can be partially reconstructed from Cyril’s methodic and detailed response.

From Cyril we learn that Julian harshly criticized the activities of those who “keep adding many corpses newly dead to the corpse of a long ago (i.e. Christ)” (πολλοὺς ἐπεισάγοντες τῷ πάλαι νεκρῷ τοὺς προσφάτους νεκρούς), and that he stated:

πάντα ἐπληρώσατε τάφων καὶ μνημάτων, καίτοι οὐκ εἴρηται παρ’ ὑμῖν οὐδαμοῦ τοῖς τάφοις προσκαλινδεῖσθαι καὶ περιέπειν αὐτούς.

You have filled the whole world with tombs and sepulchres, and yet in your scriptures it is nowhere said that you must grovel among tombs and pay them honour.¹⁹

To strengthen his point, Julian confronted the Scriptures directly. In another passage we learn that he quoted from the Gospel of Matthew, according to which Jesus himself thought that sepulchres

(13) See for example *Ep.* 19.

(14) *Jul. Ep.* 22, 429d (trans. W.C. WRIGHT, Loeb). However, this letter may be a product of the fifth century and falsely attributed to Julian; see VAN NUFFELEN 2002.

(15) *Or.* 7, 228c (trans. W.C. WRIGHT, Loeb): “And besides demolishing the temples they erected sepulchres both on new sites and on the old sites of the temples (τῶν ἱερῶν ἀνικοδομεῖτο παλαιὰ... μνήματα), as though impelled by fate or by an unconscious presentiment that they would ere long need many such sepulchres, seeing that they so neglected the gods.” The word μνήματα may be also understood as ‘tombs’ or even ‘memorials.’

(16) See SAMELLAS 2002, p. 168-172, including the reference to Thdt. *Curatio Graecorum Affectionum* 7, 29-30. For a discussion of the subject in the long chronology see JONES 2010; BREMMER 2017. On the cult of relics in antiquity is fundamental PFISTER 1909-1912.

(17) *Ep.* 19, 451d (trans. WRIGHT, Loeb), Julian’s on the remarks of the Bishop Pegasius: “Is it not natural that they [i.e. people of Ilium] should worship a brave man who was their own citizen, just as we worship the martyrs? Now the analogy was far from sound...”; *ibid.* on Christian practices: “nor did he [i.e. Pegasius] behave at all as those impious men do usually, I mean when they make the sign on their impious foreheads, nor did he hiss to himself as they do. For these two things are the quintessence of their theology, to hiss at demons and make the sign of the cross on their foreheads.” See also PFISTER 1909-1912, p. 193-194; JONES 2010, p. 88-92.

(18) *Contra Galilaeos* 194d, 201e, 206a, 335c. On this document see for example TAYLOR 1980; SMITH 1995, p. 189-207; HUNT 2012. On Cyril’s work *Contra Julianum* see RUSSELL 2000, p. 190-203; NESSELRATH 2013, p. 50-55; and the excellent edition by RIEDWEG 2016, books I-V, and KINZIG and BRÜGGEMANN (ed.) 2017, which includes an exhaustive bibliography; ARTEMI 2020.

(19) *Contra Galilaeos* 335b-c (trans. W.C. WRIGHT, Loeb).

contain only bones and are full of impurities.²⁰ He also used Isaiah to attribute to the Christians a controversial practice occasionally used by the Jews:

Τούτων οὖν οὕτως ἐχόντων, ὑμεῖς ὑπὲρ τίνος προσκαλινδεῖσθε τοῖς μνήμασι; ἀκούσαι βούλεσθε τὴν αἰτίαν; οὐκ ἐγὼ φαίην ἄν, ἀλλ’ Ἡσαΐας ὁ προφήτης. “Ἐν τοῖς μνήμασι καὶ ἐν τοῖς σπηλαιοῖς κοιμῶνται δι’ ἐνύπνια.” σκοπεῖτε οὖν, ὅπως παλαιὸν ἦν τοῦτο τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις τῆς μαγανείας τὸ ἔργον, ἐγκαθεύδειν τοῖς μνήμασιν ἐνυπνίων χάριν. ὃ δὴ καὶ τοὺς ἀποστόλους ὑμῶν εἰκός ἐστι μετὰ τὴν τοῦ διδασκάλου τελευταίαν ἐπιτηδεύσαντας ὑμῖν τε ἐξ ἀρχῆς παραδοῦναι τοῖς πρώτοις πεπιστευκόσι, καὶ τεχνικώτερον ὑμῶν αὐτοὺς μαγανεύσαι, τοῖς δὲ μεθ’ ἑαυτοὺς ἀποδείξει δημοσίᾳ τῆς μαγανείας ταύτης καὶ βδελυρίας τὰ ἐργαστήρια.

Therefore, since this is so, why do you grovel among tombs? Do you wish to hear the reason? It is not I who will tell you, but the prophet Isaiah: “They lodge among tombs and in caves for the sake of dream visions.”²¹ You observe, then, how ancient among the Jews was this work of witchcraft, namely, sleeping among tombs for the sake of dream vision. And indeed it is likely that your apostles, after their teacher’s death, practiced this and handed it down to you from the beginning, I mean to those who first adopted your faith, and that they themselves performed their spells more skillfully than you do, and displayed openly to those who came after them the places in which they performed this witchcraft and abomination.²²

In his edition of *Against the Galilaeans*, Wright explains: “the literal meaning of the Hebrew is ‘that sit in graves and pass the night in secret places,’ a reference to incubation for the sake of dream oracles, a Hellenic custom. Julian professes to believe that this practice, which Isaiah abhorred, was kept up by the Christians.”²³ I believe that Julian’s accusation is directed against those Christians whose practices in the cemeteries are testified by the above-discussed authors. The emperor takes here a strong position. The reference to Isaiah—whose critical stance on the matter Julian avoids clarifying—, is blended with Plato’s language. The phrase “to grovel among tombs” (τοῖς τάφοις προσκαλινδεῖσθαι) is also found in the *Misopogon*.²⁴ In the three cases the expression is directly borrowed from Plato’s *Phaedo*.²⁵ This work represented a relevant tool for the polemic on martyrdom, also because Plato had addressed in it the question of the voluntary death.²⁶ In the *Phaedo* Plato put these words in the mouth of his master:

Ἐμβριθὲς δὲ γε, ὦ φιλε, τοῦτο οἶσθαι χρὴ εἶναι καὶ βαρὺ καὶ γεῶδες καὶ ὁρατόν· ὃ δὴ καὶ ἔχουσα ἡ τοιαύτη ψυχὴ βαρύνεται τε καὶ ἔλκεται πάλιν εἰς τὸν ὁρατὸν τόπον φόβῳ τοῦ αἰδοῦς τε καὶ Ἄιδου, ὡς περ λέγεται, περὶ τὰ μνήματά τε καὶ τοὺς τάφους κυλινδουμένη, περὶ ἃ δὴ καὶ ὤφθη ἅττα ψυχῶν σκιοειδῆ φαντάσματα, οἷα παρέχονται αἱ τοιαῦται ψυχαὶ εἶδωλα, αἱ μὴ καθαρῶς ἀπολυθεῖσαι ἀλλὰ τοῦ ὁρατοῦ μετέχουσαι, διὸ καὶ ὀρώνται...Εἰκός μέντοι...καὶ οὐ τί γε τὰς τῶν ἀγαθῶν αὐτὰς εἶναι, ἀλλὰ τὰς τῶν φαύλων, αἱ περὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα ἀναγκάζονται πλανᾶσθαι δίκην τίνουσαι τῆς προτέρας τροφῆς κακῆς οὐσης. καὶ μέχρι γε τούτου πλανῶνται, εἴως ἂν τῆ τοῦ συνεπακολουθοῦντος, τοῦ σωματοειδοῦς, ἐπιθυμίᾳ πάλιν ἐνδεθῶσιν εἰς σῶμα· ἐνδοῦνται δέ, ὡς περ εἰκός, εἰς τοιαῦτα ἦθη ὅποι ἅττ’ ἂν καὶ μεμελετηκυῖαι τύχωσιν ἐν τῷ βίῳ.

And you must suppose, my friend, that this corporeal element is weighty and heavy, earthy and visible. Indeed such a soul that has this is weighed down and dragged back to the visible world by

(20) *Contra Galilaeos* 335c-d; cf. Matth. 8, 21-22, and 23, 27 (“Let the dead bury their dead”). Cf. Cyril *Contra Iulianum* X, 19-21 (KINZIG and BRÜGGEMANN [ed.] 2017). On Julian’s use of this Gospel see for example GREENWOOD 2014.

(21) Cf. Cyril *Contra Iulianum* X, 17 (KINZIG and BRÜGGEMANN [ed.] 2017).

(22) *Contra Galilaeos* 339e-340a (trans. WRIGHT).

(23) Isaiah 65.4. WRIGHT 1923, Loeb, p. 417 n. 3.

(24) *Misop.* 344a (see *ibid.* 357c, 361a): “and this we have had to put up with these seven months, so that we have left it to the old crones who grovel among the tombs (τοῖς τάφοις προσκαλινδεῖσθαι) to pray that we may be entirely rid of so great a curse, but we ourselves have accomplished it by our own ingenious insolence, by shooting our satires at you like arrows” (trans. W.C. WRIGHT, Loeb).

(25) See WRIGHT’s edition of *Against the Galileans*, p. 415 n. 6.

(26) See BOWERSOCK 1995, p. 65; GRIG 2004, p. 11, revises his interpretation.

fear of both the invisible and Hades, so it's said, circling aimlessly among the tombstones and graves, among which indeed some shadowy apparitions of souls have actually been seen, the kind of images that such souls produce that have not been released in a pure state, but having a share in the visible can thus be seen [...] Indeed it is likely [...] and in no respect are they the souls of good people, but of inferior ones that are forced to roam about in such places paying the price for their former way of life that was evil. Moreover they roam about to the point when through their desire for their close companion, the corporeal, they are bound again to the body. And as you'd expect they're bound to whatever characters they actually cultivated in their lifetime.²⁷

Through the authority of Socrates, Plato challenged in this section what was a popular belief about the destiny of those who embraced not philosophy but rather a materialistic life. Their souls did not completely detach from their bodies to depart to the other world. Rather they remained close to the buried corpses, semi-visible, and occasionally seen wandering in cemeteries, close to their tombs.²⁸ Only the souls of those who had practiced philosophy were pure enough to detach themselves from the bodies and fly away.²⁹ Julian's separate use of the terms *μνήματα* and *τάφοι* in the above-quoted works may indicate that he used Plato's *Phaedo* in more than one occasion; indeed, another reference to this work is found in the fragment of the *Letter to a Priest* on matters related to sacrifices to the gods, in which the worshipping of martyrs is also criticized.³⁰

While echoes of the *Phaedo* have been noted by philologists,³¹ scholars have not properly decrypted Julian's message which hides behind these references. However, a careful reading reveals that in these passages Julian used Plato's views about the action of impure souls as a derogatory characterization of living Christian worshippers. His critique touched a nerve. Cyril, who was aware of these practices among Christians, answered the emperor with the same wording but accusing him of attributing to the Christians the superstitious practices of the Greeks (the pagans). After emphasizing Christ's triumph over death, he challenges the emperor's above-quoted statement in this way:

Οἱ γε μὴν θεσπέσιοι μαθηταὶ τοῦ ἡμῖν, ἐλεγχέτω παρελθόντων, ὅτι καὶ μνήμασιν ἐγκαλινδεῖσθαι ἤδη τὰς παρὰ τῶν τεθνεώτων ὁράσεις αἰτεῖν ἤγουν τὰ ἐνύπνια. Ἄλλ' οὐκ ἂν ἔχοι— πόθεν; Πεφενάκιεν δὲ κἀν τούτῳ. Πλήν ἠγνόησεν ὁ χρηστός οὐχ ἡμῶν μᾶλλον, ἀλλὰ τῆς Ἑλλήνων δεισιδαιμονίας τὰ ἐπ' αὐτῷ δὴ τούτῳ καταχέων ἐγκλήματα καὶ τὰ αὐτῷ θυμῆρη καὶ ἐν σπουδῇ κατασκώπτειν ἐπιχειρῶν.

Indeed, let him who steps forward show where the divine-speaking disciples transmitted to us that it is necessary "to grovel among tombs" and to ask for visions or rather "dreams" from the dead. If he does not, then where [does it come] from? He has cheated even in this. Unless the good man was ignorant not so much about us, but about the superstition of the Greeks, showering accusations over this very thing and seriously attempting to mock what [actually] pleased him.³²

By wondering where reference to these practices could be found in the writings of the Apostles, Cyril once again challenges Julian. Like the emperor, Cyril knows that there is no place in the New Testament that corroborates Julian's claim. However, he limits his answer to the literary dimension,

(27) Plat. *Phaed.* 81c-d (trans. C. EMLYN-JONES and W. PREDDY, Loeb, in which see n. 62). See for example OGDEN 2002, p. 147-148, and ID. 2001, p. 219-230, on ghosts.

(28) For a commentary on this section see EBERT (ed.) 2004, p. 251-252, 270-271.

(29) *Phaed.* 82b10-c1.

(30) Jul. *Fragment from a Letter to a Priest* 297a, in which the reference to Plato *Phaed.* 62c (see also Julian *Letter to the Athenians* 276), as in Loeb ed. p. 317 n. 2. For an example of critique against the martyrs in this document see the paragraph 288b below, at n. 34.

(31) For example, in the Loeb edition of Julian: see above, n. 24, 25, and 30.

(32) Cyril, *Contra Iulianum* X, 18 (KINZIG and BRÜGGEMANN [ed.] 2017).

the Testament, and he does not directly deny the widespread nature of this ‘pagan’ practice among the Christians.³³

In the *Letter to a Priest*, Julian mocked those ‘atheists’ who believed that their souls would depart to heaven after suffering a violent death.³⁴ Using Plato’s language, he criticized the Christians for groveling among tombs and hoping for visions in dreams, appealing to Plato’s idea that ghostly apparitions of souls in cemeteries could happen only because souls have not departed pure. The idea that souls could linger around graves was not alien to Christian authors such as Vigilantius³⁵ and Gregory of Nyssa. Not coincidentally, Gregory used widely Plato’s *Phaedo* in his *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione qui inscribitur Macrina*, which was written around the year 379. Guided by Platonic thought, he reached a similar conclusion: souls would resurrect only after being completely purified, once the catharsis was achieved.³⁶

The fragments of *Against the Galileans* and Julian’s other surviving works do not reveal the extent to which this theurgist emperor, in the footsteps of Iamblichus and other Middle and Neoplatonic philosophers, contributed to the debate about the immortality of the soul.³⁷ Platonists, Stoics and Epicureans believed in the separation of the soul from the body, and Julian embraced this view that the soul does not perish with the body.³⁸

This evidence, taken together, indicates that Julian, as a Neoplatonic philosopher, criticized the Christians’ practices in cemeteries and the worshipping of martyrs’ relics by using the metric of Platonism. Through the lens of Plato, Julian made the Christian obsession with relics irrational, if not absurd. This hypothesis on Julian’s views is reinforced by his regular appeals to the authority of Plato when—in the footsteps of the Medio-Platonic philosophers—challenging Moses and the Scriptures and the divine nature of Christ.³⁹ Like his predecessors, Julian knew very well the Scriptures, which he constantly confronts in his works (just as in the above-referenced use of Isaiah to critique dreams and visions in cemeteries).⁴⁰ Even Julian’s critics acknowledge his understanding of Plato and his engagement, for the sake of debate, with the Christian Scriptures. This is one of the criticisms of Cyril of Alexandria:

Καὶ μὴν τοῖς διὰ Μωσέως λόγοις ἡ φύσις αὐτῆ τῶν πραγμάτων ὁμολογεῖ· ἀλλ’ οὐδένα μὲν τοῦ εἰκότος ποιεῖται λόγον, ἀπονένευκε δὲ καὶ τοῦτο ἀσχετῶς ἐπὶ τὸ χρῆναι μόναις ταῖς τοῦ Πλάτωνος προσκεῖσθαι φωναῖς. Καὶ δὴ καὶ θαυμάσας ἔχει, καὶ τοῦτο ἀκατασκέπτως, τὴν οὐκ οἶδ’ ὅπως αὐτῷ πεπλασμένην δημηγορίαν, ἣν δὴ πεποιεῖσθαι φησι τὸν τῶν ὄλων Θεὸν πρὸς γενητούς τινας καὶ ψευδωνύμους θεούς.

(33) See for example *Adv. Vigil.* 8.

(34) *Jul. Fragment from a Letter to a Priest* 288b (trans. W.C. WRIGHT, Loeb): “And the tribe of evil demons is appointed to punish those who do not worship the gods, and stung to madness by them many atheists are induced to court death in the belief that they will fly up to heaven when they have brought their lives to a violent end (ὡς ἀναπτησόμενοι πρὸς τὸν οὐρανόν, ὅταν ἀπορρήξωσι τὴν ψυχὴν βιαίως).” See *ibid.* 304d another reference to the ‘atheism’ of the ‘Galileans.’

(35) See above, with n. 7.

(36) See for example PELLEGRINO 1938, p. 467-469; and the lengthy discussion in WALKER BYNUM 1995, p. 21-108. Within the well-explored topic of Gregory of Nyssa’s use of the *Phaedo* see for example APOSTOLOPOULOS 1986.

(37) On the Neoplatonic discussion on the theory of the soul see CHADWICK 1948; BLUMENTHAL 1983; DÖRRIE 1984; SHAW 1995, p. 100-104; KOBUSCH 2008, p. 17-20; DE VITA 2011, p. 202-224, who concludes that Julian’s idea of the soul was influenced by Aristotle and by Medio-Platonic authors (cf. 224); see also GREENWOOD 2018, and *Id.* 2021, p. 58-65.

(38) See for example above, n. 34, and *Jul. Ep.* 20, 452d (trans. WRIGHT, Loeb): “For I certainly am not one of those who believe that the soul perishes before the body or along with it...” At the same time, the idea of the body as a tomb for the soul was spread among Neoplatonists, Stoics, and Hermeneutics, as well as Christians. On this subject in Plato see the detailed discussions of COURCELLE 1958, and 1966.

(39) See the next footnote. During the third century Ammonius Saccas and other Medio-Platonic philosophers had denied the divine nature of Christ; see the discussion in DEPALMA DIGESER 2012, p. 44-71 *passim*.

(40) About hundred and eighty references to the Bible have been identified in Julian’s work; see TEITLER 2017, p. 157-158 n. 3. See also RIEDWEG 1999; GREENWOOD 2017.

Indeed, the very nature of things concurs with the teaching of Moses. But he [Julian] fails to discuss this correlation. He rejects it without argument and simply cleaves to the words of Plato. He expresses his admiration, and in an ill-considered way at that, for the harangue Plato has composed, though on what grounds I do not know, and says that the God of all delivered to the created so-called gods.⁴¹

Julian considered the Scriptures in the same way he did the pagan myths: inventions made up by humans.⁴² Even if he did not seriously enter the Christian theological dispute, in *Against the Galileans* Julian took a strong critical stance on the Scriptures. He used the *Timaeus* to contradict the book of Genesis in a larger invective that includes the veneration by Christians of sepulchers and relics.⁴³ In the above-discussed passage, he evoked Plato's *Phaedo* to challenge the passage from Isaiah in order to condemn Jewish practices and, by extension, the Christian ones. Plato is his unquestionable authority. Just like in the dispute between paganism and Christianity, Julian pretends to be *supra partes*.

While Julian directly critiqued the devotional practices associated with martyrdom, however, his use of Plato implies another—perhaps more severe—attack. By echoing the *Phaedo*, Julian implies that martyrs' souls were impure, which implies an idea of an unfulfilled catharsis similar to that of the above-referenced Gregory of Nyssa. If those who “grovel among tombs” could approach the dead through bones or visions, this was only possible (in Plato's view, therefore also in Julian's) because the souls had not completely detached from their bodies and departed from the graves on account of their evil lives. To use the above-quoted Plato: “and in no respect are they the souls of good people, but of inferior ones that are forced to roam about in such places paying the price for their former way of life that was evil.” This implicit allegation of impurity echoes the views of other pagan intellectuals who, without using Plato, considered the martyrs as impostors. Ammianus Marcellinus used the expression “wretched men” (*miserandi homines*).⁴⁴ In 390, his contemporary living in Africa, the pagan grammarian Maximus of Madaura, tried to aggravate Augustine on this very point in a letter criticizing martyrdom with similar words:

[...] *diis hominibusque odiosa nomina, qui conscientia nefandorum facinorum specie gloriosae mortis scelera sua sceleribus cumulantes dignum moribus factisque suis exitum maculati reppererunt. Horum busta, si memoratu dignum est, relictis templis, neglectis maiorum suorum manibus stulti frequentant...*

[...] names hateful to gods and men, who, villains that they were, and heaping crime on crime, met an end befitting their character and deeds, vaunting of their death as glorious though inwardly well aware of their unspeakable offences. Fools flock to their tombs, I'm ashamed to say, forsaking the temples and abandoning the worship of their ancestors...⁴⁵

(41) *Contra Julianum* II, 34; trans. in RUSSELL 2000, p. 200; see *ibid.* II, 35-36, quotations from Julian and the counterattack by Cyril.

(42) See for example RIEDWEG 1999; THOME 2004, p. 65-72; NESSEL RATH 2008; DE VITA 2012. RIEDWEG 2020 provides us with a good overview.

(43) See SMITH 1995, p. 195-196, 201; DE VITA 2011, p. 98-100, 171-80, including the references to *Contra Galilaeos* 49a-e, 52b-d, 57c-d: Genesis I, 1-6, and Plato *Tim.* 28b, 30c; Genesis I, 26-28, and Plato *Tim.* 41a-d. See also NESSEL RATH 2020.

(44) Amm. XXII, 11, 10. The reference is to George of Alexandria and the few people killed with him (see also the next footnote). Ammianus's definition of martyrs in this passage is interesting: *ut reliquis, qui deviare a religione compulsi, pertulere cruciabiles poenas, ad usque gloriosam mortem intemerata fide progressi, et nunc martyres appellantur* (trans. J.C. ROLFE, Loeb: “as for others who, when urged to abandon their religion, endured terrible tortures, even going so far as to meet a glorious death with unsullied faith; whence they are now called martyrs”). See also Ammianus's incorrect definition in XXVII, 7, 6: *hos enim, quos interfici tamquam noxios iubet, ut martyras (id est divinitati acceptos) colet religio Christiana* (trans. ROLFE, Loeb: “for these men whom you order to be put to death as criminals the Christian religion will honour as martyrs (that is to say, as beloved of God)”). The *Res Gestae* reflects the author's ambiguous position on martyrs.

(45) *Aug. Ep.* 16, 2 (trans. J.H. BAXTER, Loeb). See NERI 1985, p. 144; TORRES 2009, p. 211. On the nexus *intemerata fide* and on *miserandi homines* see the observations by GARCÍA RUIZ 2021, and GIROTTI 2021, p. 145-151.

Another leading philosopher, Eunapius of Sardis, in his invective against monasticism, criticized the way the Christians treat the bones of people he considered criminals. On this same occasion he also expresses his views on the apotheosis and on the cult of the martyrs:

ὄστέα γὰρ καὶ κεφαλὰς τῶν ἐπὶ πολλοῖς ἀμαρτήμασιν ἐαλωκότων συναλιζόντες, οὓς τὸ πολιτικὸν ἐκόλαξε δικαστήριον, θεοὺς τε ἀπεδείκνυσαν καὶ προσεκαλινδοῦντο τοῖς ὄστοις καὶ κρείττους ὑπελάμβανον εἶναι μολυνόμενοι πρὸς τοῖς τάφοις. μάρτυρες γοῦν ἐκαλοῦντο καὶ διάκονοι τινες καὶ πρέσβεις τῶν αἰτήσεων παρὰ τῶν θεῶν, ἀνδράποδα δεδουλευκότα κακῶς καὶ μάλιστα καταδεδαπανημένα καὶ τὰς τῆς μοχθηρίας ὤτειλας ἐν τοῖς εἰδώλοις φέροντα· ἀλλ’ ὅμως ἡ γῆ φέρει τούτους τοὺς θεοὺς. τοῦτο γοῦν εἰς μεγάλην πρόνοιαν καὶ <εὐστοχίαν> Ἀντωνίνου συνετέλεσεν, ὅτι πρὸς ἅπαντας ἔφασκε τὰ ἱερὰ τάφους γενήσεσθαι.

For they collected the bones and skulls of criminals who had been put to death for numerous crimes, men whom the law courts of the city had condemned to punishment, made them out to be gods, haunted their sepulchers, and thought that they became better by defiling themselves at their graves. “Martyrs” the dead men were called, and “ministers” of a sort, and “ambassadors” from the gods to carry men’s prayers, —these slaves in vilest servitude, who had been consumed by stripes and carried on their phantom forms the scars of their villainy. However these are the gods that earth produces! This, then, greatly increased the reputation of Antoninus also for foresight, in that he had foretold to all that the temples would become tombs.⁴⁶

The references above highlight Julian’s literary strategies to express, through Plato’s authority, his own position on the worshippers of relics as well as on the martyrs’ souls. Contact with dead bodies and tombs was considered pollution: this was one of the traditional problems with relics, and it remained a central reason for pagan hostility toward the cult of martyrs.⁴⁷

At the political level, Julian’s attitude towards the cemeteries as places of impurity can be observed in the famous case of Babylas in Daphne. Ammianus Marcellinus reports that the emperor attempted an ancient ritual of purification of the area of Daphne—a ritual that brings us back once again to classical Greece—through the removal of cadavers that were buried there: “Julian, after invoking the god, decided that the bodies which had been buried around the spring, should be moved to another place, under the same ceremonial with which the Athenians had purified the island of Delos.”⁴⁸ Apparently, when the emperor went to consult the oracle of Apollo, he found that his brother Gallus in the year 351 had brought there from Antioch the remains of Babylas, a third century bishop of Antioch who had suffered martyrdom.⁴⁹ According to Sozomen, Gallus did this with the intention to purify Daphne from pagan superstition by erecting a house of prayer in the temple.⁵⁰ It seems likely that Julian’s intention was not simply to have Babylas’s remains removed, but to purify and to preserve this holy place, whose pagan sanctity now competed with the remains of martyrs.⁵¹ Julian’s actions did not prevent the temple of Apollo in Daphne from being burned to the ground, and the emperor saw in this accident a clear connection with

(46) Eunapius, *Lives* 472 (trans. W.C. WRIGHT, Loeb; behind this passage, the editor finds an echo to Plat. *Grg.* 524e; he also references to Jul. *Or.* 7, 228c).

(47) For a detailed discussion see SAMELLAS 2002, p. 146-177.

(48) Amm. XXII, 12, 8 (trans. ROLFE, Loeb): *circumhumata corpora statuit exhinde transferri eo ritu quo Athenienses insulam purgaverunt Delon*; the ritual of Delos is referenced by Hdt. I, 64, and Thuc. III, 104, 1-2. Julian in *Misop.* 361b, refers to only one body: ἀπεπεψάμεθα τὸν νεκρὸν τῆς Δάφνης. See NERI 1985, p. 44-45, 53, 132; DEN BOEFT, DRIVERS, DEN HENGST, TEITLER (ed.), 1995, p. 225-27.

(49) On Babylas see Euseb. *HE* VI, 39, 4.

(50) Soz. *HE* V, 19. Christian authors—probably in the wake of John Chrysostom—report that the remains were those of the bishop of Antioch rather than of a group of nameless martyrs, as Ammianus instead claims. See John Chrysostom *Liber in sanctum Babylam contra Iulianum, et contra gentiles* 80-91; ID. *De sancto hieromartyre Babyla* 5-7; Socr. *HE* III, 18; Soz. *HE* V, 19, 12-19; Thdt. *HE* III, 10.

(51) This point is well illustrated by HAHN 2004, p. 168-173, and SHEPARDSON 2014, p. 58-91. See also BOWERSOCK 1978, p. 93; BRENNECKE 1988, p. 137-141; TORRES 2007, and EAD. 2009, p. 212-213.

the removal of the relics, which had provoked the anger of the Christians.⁵² In the *Misopogon*, the emperor criticizes the people of Antioch for adopting Christ as the guardian of the city instead of Zeus.⁵³

On February 12 of 363, less than a month before leaving Antioch for the Persian campaign, Julian issued a law to prevent violations of tombs. This was an old problem, and Tertullian, at the beginning of the third century, was only one of the many who had complained about this.⁵⁴ Emperors had generally punished robbers and violators through money payments. But Julian's words were unusually mild. The robber was not to be subjected to the usual fines, but rather to the punishment of the spirits of the dead.⁵⁵ On the same occasion the emperor forbade *pompa exsequiarum* and *ostentatio* in funerals, which should be performed at night, as Julian also implies in one of his letters; after all, death belonged to the gods of the *inferi*.⁵⁶ This law especially damaged the Christians who used to crowd around the dead bodies at funerary rites. The seriousness with which the emperor treated the issue is clear from his willingness to assign a heavy penalty to those who violated the law, which he makes clear in a letter.⁵⁷ As in other circumstances, Julian's action was not officially directed against Christians, but it seems clear that they were his intended target, in particular their relationships with cemeteries.

Julian's philosophical views on this matter were clear: human remains are impure and should not be worshipped. At the intellectual level, his use of Plato to confront Christian practices and the Scriptures was compelling, and—as Cyril of Alexandria shows—it must have embarrassed many of his Christian opponents. Nevertheless, as his reign came to an end, Plato's authority paled before the zealous worshipping of bones.

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(52) Amm. XXII, 13, 1-3; Jul. *Misop.* 361 b-c.

(53) Jul. *Misop.* 357c. See Soz. *HE V*, 9, 13, the emperor's threats against the people of Nisibis, who refused to reopen the temples. In *Misop.* 361b-c the emperor remarks (trans. WRIGHT, Loeb): "And when I sent away the body from Daphne, some of you, in expiation of your conduct towards the gods, handed over the shrine of the god of Daphne to those who were aggrieved about the relics of the body..."

(54) Tert. *Scap.* (= *Ad Scapulam*) 3, 1 (CCSL 2, p. 1129): *doleamus necesse est, quod nulla civitas impune laturo sit sanguinis nostri effusionem; sicut et sub Hilariano praeside, cum de areis sepulturarum nostrarum acclamassent: 'Areae non sint!' Areae ipsorum non fuerunt: messes enim suae non egerunt* ("...it cannot but distress us that no state shall bear unpunished the guilt of shedding Christian blood; as you see, indeed, in what took place during the presidency of Hilarian, for when there had been some agitation about places of sepulture for our dead, and the cry arose, No *areae*—no burial-grounds for the Christians, it came that their own *areae*, their threshing-floors, were a-wanting, for they gathered in no harvests." Trans. S. THELWALL in ROBERTS, A. and J. DONALDSON [ed.] 1885); Id. *apol.* (= *Apologeticum*) 37, 2 (CCSL 1, p. 148): *Ipsi Bacchanalium furiis nec mortuis parcunt Christianis, quin illos de requie sepulturae, de asylo quodam mortis, iam alios, iam nec totos avellant, dissecant, distrahant* ("Mad as Bacchanals, they spare not even the Christian dead; no! from the repose of the grave, from what I may call death's asylum, changed as the bodies may be, or mere fragments—they will have them out, rip and rend them." Trans. T.L. GLOVER, Loeb).

(55) *C.Th.* IX, 17, 5pr.: *hoc fieri prohibemus poena manium vindice cohibentes* ("We forbid this from being done under the threat of the avenging punishment of the spirits of the dead"). The emperor's appeal to the *mos maiorum* is in line with his agenda; see TORRES 2009, p. 206.

(56) *C.Th.* IX, 17, 5, 1. See BOWERSOCK 1978, p. 85; SMITH 1995, p. 204-205; TORRES 2009; SCHMIDT-HOFNER 2020.

(57) Jul. *Ep.* 56, 451d, *passim* (trans. WRIGHT, Loeb): "...death is rest; and night harmonises with rest. Therefore I think it is fitting that business connected with the burials of the dead should be performed at night, since for many reasons we ought to forbid anything of the sort to go on by day [...] For thereby men wrongly assign burial to the Olympian gods and wrongly alienate it from the gods of the underworld, or whatever else the guardians and lords of souls prefer to be called [...] But if there be any man of such a character that he needs threat and penalty, let him know that he will incur the severest punishment...". See TORRES 2009, p. 205-207.

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