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# STUDIA PATRISTICA

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M. VINZENT and A. BRENT



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## Paganism and Traditional Practices in the Sermons of Caesarius of Arles

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### ABSTRACT

From the beginning of conversion to Christian religion in various regions of Europe, preachers and bishops claim to face the persistence and resistance of pagan and traditional cults and practices in urban and rural communities. The conversion process differed in every part of the Empire and outside it, which resulted in a different modality of Christianisation in each region. It is well known that in Africa and in the Greek Orient the new religion found more fertile land and was absorbed more easily by the community, whereas the situation was different in the Western provinces where, in some regions, the weak Romanisation represented an obstacle to the spread of Christianity. Caesarius of Arles (\*469/70 – †542) often reprimanded his audience in his sermons by their weak faith in God's word and vicious practices, considered by him, as well as all Christian Fathers, an obstacle to the victory of the new religion. This article intends to draw attention to some references to pagan and traditional practices in Caesarius' sermons to shed light in what he believed to be pagans' persistence and how he interpreted it.

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Following the conversion of Constantine and the following anti-pagan legislation decreed by his successors, the prestige of paganism as the official religion began a dramatic decline.

The practices and places of worship fell into oblivion and it would seem that the Christian religion began to establish its roots throughout all the territory that was once the Roman Empire. Between the fourth and seventh centuries, the process of Christianization was particularly penetrating, and the increasingly dense network of parishes and cathedrals was a witness to the success of the new religion as the dominant belief. However, this victory does not seem to have been entirely complete. Across various locations, one can still see proof of continuity of practices and signs of tradition and pagan religions. Some Christian sources testify to the tenacity of these practices, and the Bishop Caesarius of Arles provides, through his sermons, a valuable resource for the study of those practices that were probably still in use by the people of Arles in the sixth century.

Of the more than 230 sermons known,<sup>1</sup> about 13 refer directly and specifically to the practices that Bishop Caesarius believed to be pagan and an indeterminate number refer to them in passing. This preacher refers to these practices in several ways, some examples being: *Sacrilegas superstitiones*,<sup>2</sup> *temptationes Diaboli*,<sup>3</sup> *Iugenda persuasio*,<sup>4</sup> *paganorum sacrilegas consuetudines*.<sup>5</sup> For this study, I have used the critical edition of *Sources Chrétienne*s<sup>6</sup> and the *Corpus Christianorum*.<sup>7</sup> For the English translation, I have used the edition of *The Fathers of the Church*, volumes 31 and 66.

In each of these 13 sermons, Caesarius addresses numerous topics, which means that many sermons often repeat the reprimands already present in previous ones. The majority, however, relate to the seeking of advice from magicians, fortune-tellers and the use of amulets and potions used for healing. In fact, 7 sermons (13, 14, 50, 51, 52, 54, and 184) mention their use. Temple attendance, sacred trees and fountains, and idolatry are mentioned in five sermons (13, 14, 19, 53 and 54); the same number of sermons deal with the observance of certain days of the week (13, 19, 52, 54 and 193), with special reference to Thursday. The practice of sacrifices and feasts is mentioned in three sermons (13, 19 and 54), and the use of abortive remedies is attested in two (19 and 52). The rebuke regarding superstitions about eclipses of the moon is found in two sermons (13 and 52), and the same number covers the celebration of the Calends of January (192 and 193).

Only one covers the habit of bathing in the fountains in commemoration of St. John's day (33), the habit of naming saints and angels when toasting (43), dancing in front of the church (13) and the observation of bird flight for reasons of divination (54).

Some elements of the list of bad habits considered to be a pagan and of traditional heritage, seem to belong to popular customs, without necessarily being connected to religion. Such is the case of dances, toasts and eclipses of the

<sup>1</sup> Other than those that are part of the *Corpus Christianorum* collection, some were discovered later: R. Etaix, 'Nouveau sermon pascal de Saint Césaire d'Arles', *RBén* 75 (1965), 201-11 and 'Sermon pour la fête des apôtres Jacques et Jean attribuable à Saint Césaire', *RBén* 67 (1957), 3-9; R. Grégoire, 'Les homéliaires mérovingiens du VII<sup>e</sup> - VIII<sup>e</sup> siècle', *Studi medievali*, ser. 3, 13 (1972), 901-17; A. Hofer, 'Zwei unbekanntes Sermones des Caesarius von Arles', *Rbén* 74 (1964), 44-53; J. Lemarié, 'Trois sermons fragmentaires inédits de saint Césaire d'Arles conservés à l'"Arxiu Capitular" de Vich', *RBén* 88 (1978), 92-110 and A.M.G. Vichi, 'Un'omelia della perduta "Collectio Tripartita Longipontana" ritrovata in un codice vallicelliano', *Accademie e Biblioteche d'Italia* 21 (1953), 33-42.

<sup>2</sup> *Serm.* 52.1.

<sup>3</sup> *Serm.* 52.2.

<sup>4</sup> *Serm.* 52.4.

<sup>5</sup> *Serm.* 193.2.

<sup>6</sup> *Sermons au Peuple I, II, III*, ed. Marie-José Delage, SC 175, 243, 330 (Paris, 1971, 1978, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Caesarius Arelatensis, *Sermones II*, CChr.SL 104 (Turnhout, 1993).

moon. Other practices, such as the use of amulets and magical remedies, the observation of bird flight or certain days of the week, although originating in pagan beliefs and practices, in the contexts specified by Caesarius appear to have been devoid of religious value, being simply superstitious habits belonging to popular wisdom. However, we should pay attention to those practices that are most frequently mentioned by the Bishop and those and that are of a purely pagan nature.

### Fortune-tellers and Magical Remedies

Most of the sermons that mention magicians and fortune-tellers are linked to magical cures. Generally, in Caesarius' sermons we can see the constant presence of the following: *praecantatores*, *caraios*, *aruspices*, *sortilegos* and *divinos*.

Some of these names can be found in Isidoro's *Etymologiae*, written in the late sixth century by the Bishop of Seville, which contains a classification of those whom he considered experts in performing rituals and whom he generically calls *magi*.<sup>8</sup> Despite the vast differentiation between practices, Isidoro's list seems a theoretical construct based on other works, which also contain idealistic descriptions. It is a known fact that he based his work mostly on the writings of Pliny and Lactantius.

We can therefore ask whether Isidoro's taxonomy and Caesarius' list were based on the knowledge of the practices present in their region during their time, or if they consist of lists of past *magi*, which no longer correspond to reality. Is it believable that charmers, sorcerers, soothsayers, seers or oracles (*praecantatores*, *caraios*, *aruspices*, *sortilegos* and *divinos*) were active again in Arles? Is it possible to believe that the population in Gaul still resorted to fortune-tellers and sorcerers, as witnessed not only in the sermons of Caesarius, but many other sources<sup>9</sup>? The terms used by the Bishop arouse curiosity and make us wonder whether they belonged to the pagan vocabulary of Arles or if they were simply handed down by tradition. However, it is interesting to see that the insistence with which the Bishop returns to this topic in his sermons could indicate that for the people, *de facto* these practices were still very much alive.

According to Caesarius, in case a person was ill, they had to immediately rush to the church, in fact, the Bishop says in the Sermon 13:

See to it, brethren, that a man hastens to the church in infirmity, and he will merit to receive both bodily health and the remission of his sins. Since we can find a double

<sup>8</sup> William E. Klingshirn, 'Isidore of Seville's taxonomy of magicians and diviners', *Traditio* 58 (2003), 59-90.

<sup>9</sup> For numerous references see Aline Rousselle, 'Du sanctuaire au thaumaturge: la guérison en Gaule au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle', In *Annales. Economie, Sociétés, Civilisations* 31 (1976), 1085-1107.



good in church, why do miserable men try to bring numerous evils upon themselves through charmers, fountains, trees, diabolical phylacteries, sorcerers, soothsayers, seers or oracles<sup>10</sup>?

The act of prescribing treatments that consisted of prayer, found in the sermons, is confirmed in the *Vita Cesarii*. The Christian prognosis however, was always the same: prayer, an anointment with holy oil, consecration with holy water, the laying on of hands or making the sign of the cross.<sup>11</sup> This standardized care went against the antique traditional medical pluralism, which provided different methods depending on the illness.<sup>12</sup> In reality, Christian cures were often sought as a last resort when all traditional remedies and amulets had failed.<sup>13</sup>

### Temples, Trees, Fountains, Idols

Sermon 53, called *An admonition to destroy the shrines of idols (Ammonitio ut fana destruantur*<sup>14</sup>), begins with the Bishop's saddened observation that of those present, some still followed pagan cults,

(...) we are sad and we grieve because we know that some of you rather frequently go over to the ancient worship of idols like the pagans who have no God or grace of baptism.<sup>15</sup>

Caesarius hears (*audivimus*) that some of the faithful worship trees, springs and (practice diabolical augury) *auguria diabolica observare*.<sup>16</sup> The faithful do not just refuse to destroy the temples, but they insist in attending them and even rebuild those that have been damaged. The Bishop continues:

Moreover, if anyone with a thought of God wants to burn the wood of those shrines or to tear to pieces and destroy the diabolical altars, they become angry, rave with fury, and are excited with excessive frenzy. They even go so far to dare to strike those who out of love for God are trying to overthrow the wicked idols; perhaps they do not even hesitate to plan their death.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Serm.* 13,3: 'Videte, fratres, quia qui in infirmitate ad ecclesiam currit, et corporis sanitatem recipere, et peccatorum indulgentiam merebitur oblitere. Cum ergo duplicia bona possimus in ecclesia invenire, quare per praecantatores, per fontes et arbores et diabolica fylacteria, per caraios aut aruspices et divinos vel sortilogos multiplicia sibi mala miseri homines conantur inferre?'

<sup>11</sup> William Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles: The Making of a Christian Community* (Cambridge, 1994), 164.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 222.

<sup>13</sup> Aline Rouselle, 'Du sanctuaire au thaumaturge: la guérison en Gaule au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle' (1976).

<sup>14</sup> *Serm.* 53.

<sup>15</sup> *Serm.* 53.1: '(...) *contristamur dolemus et tamen, quia ex vobis aliquos cognoscimus ad antiquam idolorum culturam frequentius ambulare, quomodo panani sine Deo baptismi sine gratia faciunt*'.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Serm.* 53.1: '*Et si aliquis Deum cogitans aut arbores fanaticos incendere aut aras diabolicas voluerit dissipare atque destruere, irascunt et insaniunt, et furore nimio succenduntur; ita ut*

St. Martin and Saint Germain d'Auxere came across ancestral beliefs dedicated to springs and fountains, as well as finding themselves in situations of direct confrontation against the pagans, while engaged in the destruction of temples. In their writings, Martin of Braga and Massimo of Turin, warned against attending these places, and the canon of the Second Council of Arles XXIII, which took place between 442 and 506, ordered the deprivation of baptism for those who were caught worshiping fountains.<sup>18</sup> The fact is, that until the seventh century, council stipulations continued to reaffirm the ban on the worship of water sources and rituals associated with them.<sup>19</sup>

Gaul was particularly famous for the shrines built near fountains and springs; In fact, in this region hundreds of these sacred and healing places have been identified, and until recently about 20% of them still have a sacred value. The fountains and springs were equally associated with stones and trees, and, in different regions of France, Christianized cults and beliefs pertaining to rocks or associated with fountains, forests and sacred trees were still present until a few decades ago. Additionally, until the second World War, it was not uncommon to find large centenarian trees near churches and springs.<sup>20</sup> The Edict of 435, as found in the *Theodosian Code*,<sup>21</sup> ordered the destruction of those temples that were still intact and that had not been converted or reused by Christians. The issue is that the more humble cults were often the most difficult to identify and destroy.

## Thursday and Days of the Week

Taking an example from Sermon 13:

Since we have heard that some men and women are so much deceived by the Devil that they do no work or weaving on Thursday, we assert before God and His angels that anyone who wants to do this will be condemned to the place where the Devil will burn him, unless he corrects his grave sin by prolonged hard penance.<sup>22</sup>

*etiam illos, qui pro Dei amore sacrilega idola conantur evertere, aut caedere praesumant, aut forsitan de illorum morte cogitare non dubitent*'.

<sup>18</sup> *Concilium Arelatense secundum in Concilia Gallia*, CChr.SL 118 (Turnhout, 1963), 119.

<sup>19</sup> Pier Giorgio Spanu, *Fons vivus. Culti delle acque e santuari cristiani tra tarda antichità e alto medioevo* (Spoleto, 2007), 1036.

<sup>20</sup> Pierre Audin, *Un exemple de survivance païenne à l'époque contemporaine: le culte des fontaines dans la France de l'Ouest et du Centre-Ouest* (Rennes, 1979), 94.

<sup>21</sup> *CTh*. 16.10.25.

<sup>22</sup> *Serm.* 13.5: '*Et quia audivimus quod aliquos viros vel mulieres ita diabolus circumveniat, ut quinta feria nec viri opera faciant, nec mulieres laneficium, coram Deo et anglis eius contestamur, quia quicumque hoc observare voluerint, nisi per prolixam et duram paenitentiam tam grave sacrilegium emendaverint, ubi arsurus est diabolus, ibi et ipsi dammandi sunt*'.

The battle against the names of the days of the week was not won in the majority of Latin languages and the Roman calendar was still in use. It included a number of weekdays and used Thursday, rather than Sunday, as the rest day, in honour of Jupiter. This is the criticism that Caesarius makes in this passage, and, as a result, also suggests the names of the days be changed, which as we know will only have an effect in the Portuguese language.<sup>23</sup>

### Banquets and Sacrifices

In his Sermon 19, we find the following reference:

Let no one under any persuasion worship before an idol or drink to those things which are sacrificed to idols. A man who is baptized ought to avoid what is profane.<sup>24</sup>

The Bishop informs us about the persistence of idol worship and the practice of sacrifices. In 407, the imperial legislation had ordered the removal of statues from places of worship, removing from these any artistic value and making them illegal.<sup>25</sup> Even earlier, in 391-392, Theodosius forbade the bloody sacrifices and domestic cults with a law that followed a long history of persecution against sacrifices and divination.<sup>26</sup> Despite all the repression, almost two centuries later, these practices were still very much alive, some temples still stood in the countryside with their usual function and Caesarius' audience not only attended these, but were making sacrifices, an even more wicked and dangerous act.

### The January Calends

Although only discussed in two sermons of Caesarius' extensive work, we can realize the importance of this practice thanks to the accuracy with which it is described by the Bishop and the presence of other sources that testify the strength of these events.<sup>27</sup> The Christian preachers are the main source for the study of the January Calends, and we can find warnings against these celebrations in Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, Augustine, Asterius of Amasea, Peter Chrysologus, Isidore of Seville, Maximus of Turin and of course in Caesarius of Arles. Each of these religious figures speak differently of the feast, but they are

<sup>23</sup> See Walter Von Wartburg, 'Les noms des jours de la semaine dans les langues romanes', in *Von Sprache und Mensch: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Bern, 1956), 45-60.

<sup>24</sup> *Serm.* 19.4: 'Nullus ad idolum vel ad ea quae idolis immolantur colat suadente bibat. Qui baptizatus est, debet profana vitare'.

<sup>25</sup> *CTh.* 16, 10, 19.

<sup>26</sup> *CTh.* 16, 10, 12.

<sup>27</sup> Michel Meslin, *La fête des kalendes de janvier dans l'empire romain. Études d'un rituel de Nouvel an* (Bruxelles, 1970), 95.

unanimous in considering it foolish and a scandalous in an area now officially Christianized, where paganism had already been made illegal. The danger of this persistence and the horror of the clergy were in the fact that such celebrations were not observed by pagans, but baptized Christians who insisted on resorting to pagan practices.

Caesarius' Sermon 192, *De Kalendis Ianuariis (On the Calends of January)*, begins by explaining to the community that the origin of the name of this festival dates back to the celebration of a man named *Iano*. The Bishop then explains that Janus, just like all other gods of the Pantheon, according to Christian apologetics, was a man who for some reason became the object of worship after his death. He also says that this deity has the role of ending and starting the years and was thus often depicted with a double face looking in opposite directions. The Bishop of Arles provides a description of how the celebration took place, but what struck him was the fact that those who engaged in these atrocities included Christians:

For in these days miserable men and, what is worse, even some who are baptized, assume false forms and unnatural appearances, and certain features in them are especially worthy of laughter or rather of sorrow.<sup>28</sup>

Towards the middle of the sixth century, it seems that the Church had established the practice of fasting between Christmas and Epiphany, precisely during those days in which the Calends of January would be celebrated, and even Caesarius urges his followers to fast during these days. The best way to fight the persistence of these celebrations was the use of substitution: initially, there was a liturgical service on those days, but it was possibly not enough to compete with this prestigious festivity, leading to the establishment of the Feast of the Circumcision of Jesus. Despite the exhortations of the Bishops and the conciliar canons that from the sixth to the eighth century condemned the observance of the feast of Calends, history shows us that some of the ritual gestures (exchange of gifts, the decorating of homes with tree branches, New Year's greetings) are present right up to our days, during the celebrations that take place at the end of the calendar year.

## Conclusion

The testimony of Caesarius indicates evidence of a certain peculiarity in the religion professed in his diocese. The censuring imposed by the Bishop hints at a kind of 'impurity' of the Christian religion, in the community of Arles, which was contaminated by pagan and traditional elements.

<sup>28</sup> *Serm. 192. 2: 'In istis enim diebus miseri homines et, quod peius est, etiam aliqui baptizati sumunt formas adulteras, species monstruosas, in quibus quidem quae primum ridenda aut potius dolenda sint, nescio'.*

The rural population and the colonists, reduced to a state that bordered on slavery, had no alternative but that of working the land in conditions that, at best, barely allowed survival. Because they had to deal with these difficulties and the frequent climate changes, men held strong to a set of beliefs and traditions that had always accompanied them and served both in times of trouble and joy. So-called traditional culture consisted in the conjunction of these practices, handed down orally. It was against these practices that Caesarius had to fight to impose Christianization and, in fact, it was precisely these practices that contributed to the formation of that particular religiosity that could be found in Arles and, albeit with different features, also in every region that inherited this syncretism.