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The Experience of the Body: Forms of "Radical" Asceticism in Late Antique Christianity

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1. The Study of Late Antique Christian Asceticism: Some Preliminary Remarks

The present paper seeks to examine the interplay between corporeal containment and religious agency in late antique Christian asceticism. Particular attention will be devoted to the constraints imposed by certain ascetic practices, which at times involved confinement within spaces so restrictive as to preclude bodily movement, thereby rendering the body itself entirely imperceptible. Moreover, specific cases of bodily mortification will be analyzed to identify consistent features that reveal a perception of asceticism as a practice of domination. Against the broader backdrop of Christian ascetic experience, bodies can be controlled both by limiting their movement in space and by imposing a general state of immobility. The relationship between voluntary enclosure and self-mortification — here

understood, as we shall see later, as the use of specific techniques or objects to inflict intentional pain on the entire body or specific body parts — as well as the correlation between physical constraints and cognitive dimensions, will be explored as interpretative frameworks through which to contextualize the ascetic discipline in its performative, and thus visually constructed, effects. The effectiveness of performativity — which does not always require the public display of the ascetic's body, as some examples of immuration clearly demonstrate — will be linked to the concepts of domination, violence, and power conveyed by asceticism itself.

I will investigate the interconnection between the aforementioned theoretical issues by focusing on a hagiographical account that appears highly significant in this regard. I refer to Theodoret of Cyrrhus' *History of the Monks of Syria*, primarily for obvious reasons. This work was conceived and planned as an anthology of ascetic stories and characters[1] from what might be rightfully defined as the flourishing period of Christian asceticism.[2] Moreover, Theodoret includes relevant and

1 See on this the introductions in the Italian translation: Teodoreto di Cirro, *Storia di monaci siri*, ed. A. Gallico (Roma: Città Nuova, 1995), in the French critical edition: Théodoret de Cyr, *Histoire des moines de Syrie, «Histoire Philothée»* I–XIII, ed. P. Canivet et A. Leroy-Molinghen, Tome I (Paris: Éditions du cerf, 1977), and also in the English translation: Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, ed. R. M. Price (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1985).

2 On early Christian asceticism see J. D. M. Derrett, "Primitive Christianity as an Ascetic Movement," in *Asceticism*, ed. W. L. Wimbush and R. Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 88–107), and R. Krawiec, "Asceticism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. S. Ashbrook Harvey and D. G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 764–785), while on the relation between asceticism and monasticism as its later "institutionalized" form see S. Rubenson, "Christian Asceticism and the Emergence of the Monastic Tradition," in Wimbush – Valantasis, *Asceticism*, 49–57. For an overarching and exhaustive overview see also *The Oxford Handbook of Christian Monasticism*, ed. B. M. Kaczynski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). For a focus on the literary representation of Christian monasticism see W. Harmless, *Desert Christians. An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), A. Monaci Castagno, *L'agiografia cristiana antica.*

highly telling references to specific forms of ascetic practices that require a radical experience of the body, aimed at enhancing its physical potential and straining it heavily. Asceticism here is conceived, described, and performed as a religious activity designed to push human bodies to their limits. This purpose can only be achieved through the infliction of severe techniques of sensory deprivation and corporeal mortification.[3]

Research on Christian asceticism has a long-standing tradition, and more recently, it has reached its peak with the publication of many contributions addressing relevant theoretical questions. These works aim to situate ascetic religious experiences within a wider range of methodological approaches. One such approach is the attempt to interpret asceticism primarily as a corporeal experience, exploiting the psycho-physiological mechanisms regulating the body.[4] This approach does not seek to completely disentangle ascetic practices from the religious message

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Testi, contesti, pubblico (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2010), and C. Rapp, "The origins of hagiography and the literature of early monasticism: purpose and genre between tradition and innovation," in *Unclassical Traditions. Volume 1: Alternatives to the Classical Past in Late Antiquity*, ed. C. Kelly et. al. (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 2010, 119–130).

3 On the centrality of bodily suffering for the construction of Christian identity see J. Perkins, *The Suffering Self. Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 1995).

4 On this, see for instance R. Alciati, "The Ascetic Knowledge: The Importance of Sense-Perception in Ancient Christian Asceticism," *Religion in the Roman Empire* 4/1 (2018, 45–62), and R. Alciati, *Gli esercizi di Evagrio. Un prontuario cristiano per vedere Dio* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2023). Within the same series, see M. Dell'Isola, *Gli esercizi delle madri del deserto. Utilità della tristezza per la perfezione* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2026, forthcoming). See also N. M. Farré-i-Barril, "Sleep Deprivation: Asceticism, Religious Experience and Neurological Quanderies," in *Religion and the Body. Modern Science and the Construction of Religious Meaning*, ed. D. Cave – R. Sachs Norris (Leiden: Brill, 2012, 217–234), and I. Graiver, *Asceticism of the Mind. Forms of Attention and Self-Transformation in Late Antique Monasticism* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2018).

they convey: a set of corporeal exercises — the primary meaning of the Greek term ἄσκησις is precisely "exercise" — is conceived and performed as a symbolic act of humiliation. In this perspective, sensory deprivation serves to "humiliate" the body by diminishing its full competency, thereby manifesting total devotion to God.[5] However, this does not preclude identifying a corporeal basis upon which the religious act is built.[6] One factor does not exclude the other, nor does the action of the latter weaken the function of the former. They simply intertwine, as any religious act, even in its symbolic dimension, requires a material support to be expressed and communicated.[7]

Nonetheless, attention to the role of the body in ascetic practices is crucial. It illuminates efforts to appropriate and renegotiate predefined forms of religious experience on an individual level. While asceticism is normatively and theologically defined, as previously outlined as a symbolic act of humiliation – or, more generally as a withdrawal from the inhabited world – it can be reconceptualised as a complex, multifaceted practice when the centrality of the body in its enactment is acknowledged. The capacities of the body are variable, and differing

5 This is, for instance, the interpretation given by Arbesmann concerning fasting as an ascetic practice in early Christianity: R. Arbesmann, "Fasting and Prophecy in Pagan and Christian Antiquity," *Traditio* 7 (1949–1951, 1–71).

6 In M. Dell'Isola, "«Fasts will merit from God the recognition of mysteries» (Tert. *ieiun.* 7,6): on the relationship between fasting and prophecy in early Christianity," *Adamantius* 25 (2019, 436–444), and in a more extensive way in Tertulliano, *Il digiuno*, ed. M. Dell'Isola (Milano: Paoline, 2022), I contend that fasting – here conceived as a form of sensory deprivation – should be analyzed not only as a purely religious act of humiliation in order to prove a total devotion to God but also, and especially, as a technique aimed at eliciting specific physiological faculties in order to benefit from them.

7 For the notion of religious experience as a physiological phenomenon, which can acquire additional cultural meanings when a religious interpretation is assigned to the physiological event see A. Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered. A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009).

degrees of corporeal engagement may be undertaken. Such practices give rise to non-ordinary experiences, shaped by the practitioner's faculties, intentions, and embodied agency. This can be further explained and conceptualised by framing the analysis within the theoretical framework provided by the concept of lived ancient religion at the core of the thematic issue which includes the present article. As elaborated by Jörg Rüpke, lived religion focuses on individual experiences and practices, not as mere repetitions of established traditions, but as distinct acts that defy rigid classification. Yet, enduring forms are typically institutionalised to ensure their preservation. However, attempts at standardisation – through texts and rituals, for instance – constitute only one aspect of a wider cultural landscape, shaped equally by biographical and situational influences. Structures and individual actions co-constitute each other, and individual expressions are best understood within their historical, social, and material contexts, reflecting selective adaptation of culturally available terms.[8]

Given the aforementioned premises, the study of Christian asceticism in late antiquity has consistently oscillated between interpreting this phenomenon as a religious act of self-mortification, sometimes even in a masochistic fashion, and, on the other hand, as the exploitation of physical resistance to gain benefit from it.[9] Along these lines, I am interested in analysing the account of – deemed "radical" – ascetic experiences and practices to identify consistent features in their performative dimension. More specifically, I will select a set of examples from Theodoret of Cyrrhus' *History of the Monks of Syria* that show evidence of severe forms of bodily containment, both in terms of material isolation from the surrounding physical and social world and the infliction of immobility within extremely restricted spaces, using instruments specifically designed to fasten the

8 J. Rüpke, "Lived Ancient Religion: A Change of Perspective," *AJBI* XLIX (2024, 30–52).

9 For a discussion of this contrast, see G. A. Gilli, "What are Renouncers Renouncing? Asceticism and Body Map," in *Norm and Exercise*, ed. R. Alciati (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2018, 27–52).

body to the ground, thus hindering any movement. The analysis of the language used to describe such practices will aim to reveal the underlying assumption that asceticism involves individual exercises of power and domination over the self and others, as a religious experience that influences public perception through its performativity and public display.

2. Asceticism as Internal and External Battle: The Use of "Military" Vocabulary

Chris L. de Wet focused on Theodoret of Cyrrhus' *History of the Monks of Syria* as a representative case study to emphasize the concept of asceticism as the expression of acts of violence and domination, primarily directed both against oneself and others. Asceticism is for him "[…] an act of coercion, an act of psychic violence against the physical body and its limbs. But the nature of this psychic violence is very specific: asceticism becomes an act of dominance."[10] De Wet explains that Theodoret's asceticism frames the body as a territory to be controlled, with the soul as its ruler, responsible for its security and governance. Through ascetic practices, dominance is asserted, depicting the body as both the battlefield and the adversary in a spiritual struggle against demonic forces. This perspective suggests that the soul must gradually subdue the body, mastering it limb by limb through disciplined practice. Together, this implies the underlying contention that "[…] ascetic discourse becomes a discourse of territory, colonisation and security […]."[11] Theodoret portrays asceticism as a struggle for control over the body, using imagery of slavery and conquest. Thus, ascetic practices (de Wet refers to fasting, vigils, immuration, as well as their radicalized forms

10 C. L. de Wet, "The Discipline of Domination: Asceticism, Violence and Monastic Curses in Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa*," in *Religious Violence in the Ancient World. From Classical Athens to Late Antiquity*, ed. J. H. F. Dijkstra and C. R. Raschle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, 323–344), 328.

11 de Wet, "The Discipline of Domination," 329.

of starvation, sleep deprivation, and confinement), though spiritually motivated, resemble acts of punishment. When the soul asserts dominance, the body's limbs no longer serve demonic forces but become instruments of spiritual discipline. This idea, central to Theodoret's argument, emphasizes how asceticism weakens demonic influence by fortifying the senses, like a guarded stronghold. Furthermore, asceticism can be punitive: if the body resists the soul's authority, its defiant parts may be deliberately weakened or even removed.[12] In the following, I intend to deepen the theoretical foundation at the core of de Wet's contribution by focusing on additional case studies from Theodoret's *History of the Monks of Syria* that were not addressed in the aforementioned essay but still require further investigation.

One example of a punitive tactic is the use of tools specifically designed to inflict voluntary pain on the body, so that it may be punished, subjugated, and ultimately purified. One of the most recurring punitive tactics in this regard is the use of heavy chains to anchor the body to the ground: the weight of this "torture instrument" is so unbearable that it inevitably induces bodily deflection. This is exemplified by the case of a woman named Cyra, who chose to live with another woman, Marana, in a very restricted space. The only opening in the structure is a small window—there was a door, but it had been sealed with mud and stones—through which they could receive food from women living in the surrounding area and, at specific times, converse with them. During the rest of the time, they remained silent. In fact, Theodoret notes that, of the two, it was Marana alone who spoke; nobody ever heard Cyra utter a word.[13] Within such an extremely restricted structure, both Marana and Cyra:

12 de Wet, "The Discipline of Domination," 329–330.

13 Theod. *h. rel.* XXIX, 2–3. For the critical edition, I refer here to Théodoret de Cyr, *Histoire des moines de Syrie,* and Théodoret de Cyr, *Histoire des moines de Syrie, «Histoire Philothée»* XIV–XXX, ed. P. Canivet and A. Leroy-Molinghen, Tome II (Paris: Éditions du cerf, 1979). For the English translation, see Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria* (based on the edition by Canivet and Leroy-Molinghen).

> […] wear iron, and carry such a weight that Cyra, with her weaker body, is bent down to the ground and is quite unable to straighten her body. They wear mantles so big as to trail along behind and literally cover their feet and in front to fall down right to the belt, literally hiding at the same time face, neck, chest, and hands. I have often been inside the door in order to see them; for out of respect for the episcopal office they have bidden me dig through the door. And so I have seen that weight of iron which even a well-built man could not carry. After long entreaty I succeeded in getting it off them for the nonce, but after our departure they again put it on their limbs — round the neck the collar, round the waist the belt, and on hands and feet the chains assigned to them. In this mode of life they have completed not merely five or ten or fifteen years, but forty-two; and despite having contended for so long a time, they love their exertion as if they had only just entered on the contests. For contemplating the beauty of the Bridegroom, they bear the labor of the course with ease and facility, and press on to reach the goal of the contests, where they see the Beloved standing and pointing to the crown of victory. Because of this, in suffering the assaults of rain and snow and sun they feel neither pain nor distress but from apparent afflictions reap joy of heart.[14]

What is apparent here is not so much a language of violence and domination. The strength of the women's bodies is certainly evoked by the unequivocal reference to the use of heavy instruments that force them to yield under their great weight, as well as by their ability to endure such pain despite the physical "weakness"

14 Theod. *h. rel.* XXIX, 4–6. From this point forward, Greek terms will be cited in the nominative case (in the case of nouns and adjectives) and in the first person singular of the present indicative (in the case of verbs), irrespective of the inflected or conjugated forms in which they occur in the original text.

culturally ascribed to female bodies.[15] However, rather than an imagery of slavery and colonizing conquest there is here the appeal to a traditional definition of asceticism as "contest." As in other similar literary traditions, likewise Theodoret's *History of the Monks of Syria* conceives ascetic experiences and practices as ἀγών.[16] Asceticism is a competition against physical and – consequently – spiritual temptations; the body, therefore, is the primary instrument to train in order to win the "war." The vocabulary used here is highly representative of this tendency. Theodoret speaks of "contending" (ἀγωνίζομαι), "contest" (ἀγών), "labor of the course (δρόμος)," "the crown (στέφανος) of victory (νίκη)." The same allusion to the "crown" appears also in the story of Theodosius, who likewise practiced asceticism by adding "[…] a load of iron on his neck, his loins, and both his hands."[17] When he died, "his sacred body was carried through the middle of the city, adorned with that famous iron as if with gold chaplets (στέφανος) […]."[18]

Besides Acepsimas,[19] other relevant examples of the infliction of pain on the body using heavy chains are provided by the reports on Eusebius and James, which are briefly mentioned by de Wet in his article. More specifically, he emphasizes that Eusebius, after observing farmers at work, chose to reshape his own body through self-imposed suffering. He forged chains that forced him into a permanent bowing position, restricting his gaze to the ground. This extreme self-punishment

15 On the *topos* of the "masculinization" of women during radical religious experiences like, for instance, martyrdom – and asceticism has been traditionally considered a "new" form of martyrdom given the hardship of its practices – see L. S. Cobb, *Dying to Be Men. Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

16 On asceticism as ἀγών see R. Alciati, "Asceticism Between Agon and Agency," in *„Zu Tisch bei den Heiligen…". Askese, Nahrung und Individualisierung im spätantiken Mönchstum. Gedenkkolloquium für Prof. Dr. Veit Rosenberger (7. April 1963 – 1. September 2016)*, ed. D. Albrecht and K. Waldner (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2019, 43–53).

17 Theod. *h. rel.* X,2.

18 Theod. *h. rel.* X,8.

19 Theod. *h. rel.* XV.

mirrored the condition of a slave or war captive, reflecting a form of severe asceticism.[20] However, it is important to note that the description of Eusebius' ascetic practices includes a broader range of lexical choices that explicitly recall military vocabulary, both in terms of direct references to a warlike dimension and by evoking a general sense of physical coercion and constraint. This tendency is not only apparent in the paragraph describing the use of chains, but it permeates the entire account. For example, when introducing Eusebius himself, Theodoret writes that:

> He was twenty-five stades distant, immured in a tiny dwelling that did not even have windows. He was guided into this form of virtue by his uncle Marianus, a faithful servant of God — to say so much is sufficient, since the Master honored the great Moses with this title. This Marianus, having tasted divine love, was not willing to luxuriate in good things on his own, but made many others his fellow-lovers. He captured (θηρεύω) the great Eusebius and also his brother, who was his brother too in his mode of life, for he did not think it sensible to capture (ἀγρεύω) for virtue those who were quite unrelated to him while leaving his nephews uncaught (ἀναγρευτός). Immuring (κατείργω) them both in a small cell, he taught them the evangelical way of life. The brother, however, caught a disease that cut short his course (δρόμος). Death followed on the disease, for he survived his departure from there only a few days before coming to the end of his life.[21]

The verb θηρεύω means "to hunt" and/or "to capture." The other verb ἀγρεύω has a similar meaning, also with a further sense of "to trap." On the contrary, the related ἀναγρευτός means "not captured," "set free." The same semantic field is further reinforced by using the verb κατείργω, whose broader meaning is "to lock up" or "to confine," but also, more specifically, "to besiege." When referring to

20 de Wet, "The Discipline of Domination," 330.

21 Theod. *h. rel.* IV,3.

an act of total reclusion, such as the one described in the aforementioned passage – specifically, the reference to immuration – the dimension of violence and punishment becomes more evident. Again, the same reference to confinement and constriction immediately follows:

> During the entire life of his uncle the great Eusebius continued neither speaking to anyone nor seeing the light but uninterruptedly immured (καθειργμένος) […]. With these and like words he charmed the divine man; digging through his voluntary prison (εἰρκτή), he led him out and away, and entrusted to him care of the brethren.[22]

Here the vocabulary becomes even more explicit through the use of the noun εἰρκτή, which means "prison." Once again, as also in *h. rel.* IV,3, the allusion to a material condition of reclusion (here, more specifically, in the sense of "immuration") is expressed by recurring to the verb κατείργω.[23]

A particularly significant narrative in this regard is presented in the section where Theodoret describes the relationship between the monk, as a religious guide, and the community that regards him as a charismatic leader and teacher:

> I myself do not know which to admire the more, the modesty of the one or the amenability of the other; for the one[24] fled being superior (ἡγεμονία) and preferred to be one of the subjects (ὑπήκοος), fearing the danger of leadership (προστασία); and the great Eusebius, despite his aversion to life with

22 Theod. *h. rel.* IV,4.

23 Note that if the verb κατείργω has several meaning nuances, varying from "to shut in" (therefore, "to confine") to "to repress" and "to subjugate," the related noun καθειργμός means specifically "reclusion."

24 Here Theodoret refers to Ammianus, another monk and spiritual teacher already introduced in paragraph 4.

> others, yielded none the less and, caught in the nets of charity, accepted care of the flock and led the choir. He did not need many words to teach them, since his mere appearance was sufficient to make the most slothful eager in the race (δρόμος) for virtue. Those who have seen him say that his face was always grave and was enough to instil awe into those who saw him. He took food every three or four days, but ordered his companions to partake every day. He charged them to have intercourse with God continually and leave no opportunity free from this activity, but to perform the appointed offices in common and in the intermediate portions of the day entreat God and beg for salvation each one on his own, whether in the shade of a tree or - by some rock or wherever he might enjoy solitude, either standing or lying on the ground. He had so taught (ἐκπαιδεύω) virtue to each of the parts (μόριον) of his body that they performed what reason (λογισμός) alone enjoined.[25]

Although the terms referring here to the semantic field of "authority," "supremacy," "power" (ἡγεμονία and προστασία) and also to the opposite, but related, condition of "being subject to" or "under the control of someone/something" (ὑπήκοος) are all used within the specific context of the relationship between a guide and his followers – thus, not in relation to the traditional "internal" battle of the ascetic against a series of physical temptations – the language of domination and hierarchy emerges as well. However, at the end of the passage, the ascetic process of corporeal subjugation is unequivocally stressed when Theodoret writes that Eusebius "[…] taught (ἐκπαιδεύω) virtue to each of the parts (μόριον) of his body that they performed what reason (λογισμός) alone enjoined." The body is here colonized by the training action performed by ascetic practices aimed at "educating" (ἐκπαιδεύω) the body itself. This "education" involves the suppression of the

25 Theod. *h. rel.* IV,5.

physical impulses imposed by the guiding principle of the mind (λογισμός). This is exactly what de Wet describes as:

> […] the primary distribution of the body in terms of territory and the activity of the soul in terms of security, colonisation and governance. When ascetic discourse becomes a discourse of territory, colonisation and security, ascetic practices operate as the mechanisms by which dominance is enforced. Bodies and limbs can be both the enemy and the battleground in the war between the soul and demonic forces. This gives rise to a discourse in which the soul must practically colonise the body limb by limb through ascetic discipline.[26]

Not coincidentally, in the abovementioned passage Theodoret speaks of "each of the parts of his body." Gian Antonio Gilli has carefully investigated asceticism as a phenomenon in which individuals who practice specific forms of sensory deprivation train themselves as "body specialists." He argues that ascetic practices focus on particular body parts rather than the entire body, noting that while ascetics may refer generally to the "body," their actual practices selectively engage certain areas. Furthermore, these choices are not random but align with personal dispositions and provide a form of gratification. These practices also deviate from cultural norms, often being perceived as improper, extreme, or even unnatural.[27]

One of the most extreme and "unnatural" practices, as seen in the case of Eusebius, is the use of heavy chains and collars:

> He and the wonderful Ammianus were sitting on a rock. One of them read aloud the history of the divine Gospels, while the other explained the meaning of the more obscure passages. Some farmworkers were ploughing

26 de Wet, "The Discipline of Domination," 329.

27 See Gilli, "What Are Renouncers Renouncing?" 29.

> up the land in the plain below, and the great Eusebius was attracted to this sight. When the inspired Ammianus had read out the Gospel passage and was seeking its interpretation, the great Eusebius told him to repeat the reading. When the other replied, "In your delight over the ploughmen you were doubtless not listening," he made a rule (νομοθετέω) that his eyes were never to look at that plain nor feast upon the beauty of the heavens or the choir of the stars; but using a very narrow path, whose breadth is said to have been a span, to get to the house of prayer, he did not thereafter allow himself to step outside it. They say that he lived on for more than forty years after making this rule (νόμος). In order that, in addition to this resolve, some duress (ἀνάγκη) should compel (καθέλκω) him to this, he bound his waist with an iron belt and attached a very heavy collar to his neck and then used a further chain to connect the belt to the collar, so that bent down (κατακάμπτω) in this way he would be forced (ἀναγκάζω) uninterruptedly to stoop (κατακύπτω) to the ground. Such was the penalty (δίκη) he imposed (εἰσπράσσω) on himself for looking at those farm-workers.[28]

The pain that Eusebius inflicted on his own body is distinctly evident here. The description of self-punishment leaves little room for doubt. Furthermore, the details of the body bending to the ground are emphatically emphasized, especially when framed within the context of coercion, further underscored by the appeal to a physical condition enforced as a "law." Eusebius "ordered" himself not to look at what he had previously been gazing at, establishing this rule by literally "prescribing a law" (νομοθετέω). The "rule" (νόμος) imposed on his body – i.e. using a narrow path to reach the house of prayer and live there without never leaving it – was then made even harsher by recurring to an instrument of constraint which forced it into a very uncomfortable posture. The violence of this process

28 Theod. *h. rel.* IV,6.

is defined by an act of forcing (ἀνάγκη/ἀναγκάζω) and compulsion (καθέλκω). Therefore, the body bends down with bowed head. This posture is described by a verb, κατακύπτω, which adds to the literal meaning of "looking down" also the more nuanced sense of "bowing the head in shame." The appeal to shame plays a pivotal role within the whole dynamic of the psycho-physical process described so far. The punishment chosen by Eusebius represents a sort of "law of retaliation:" in order to "never to look at that plain nor feast upon the beauty of the heavens or the choir of the star," Eusebius denied his head and eyes the possibility of looking up. The previous act of holding his head up caused distraction and sin; therefore, sin itself is punished and eliminated by recurring to the opposite action of keeping the head down. Not coincidentally, in reference to this, Theodoret uses the term δίκη, which means "sentence," "punishment," "condemnation:" by forcing his body into an unnatural posture, Eusebius imposes a sentence on himself. This means that ascetic practice is equated with a legal condemnation.

More predictable, given the traditional imagery of asceticism as a "contest," as mentioned above, but still significant in terms of ascetic bodies as territories of violence, conquest, and domination, is the representation of the battle against temptations.[29] When asked again about the benefit gained from forcing the body into an unnatural posture:

> […] The other answered that he contrived this against the devices (μηχάνημα) of the evil demon. "To prevent him," he said, "making war (πολεμέω) on me in things of importance – attempting to steal my self-control and righteousness, arming (ὁπλίζω) anger and kindling desire, making me swollen and puffed up with vanity, and contriving all the other things of this kind against my soul – I try to transfer the war (πόλεμος) to these unimportant things, where even if he wins (νικάω) he works no great injury, while if he

29 On this see D. Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk. Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

> loses (ἡσσάω) he becomes all the more ridiculous, as unable to overcome even in little things. So because I know that this war (πόλεμος) is less dangerous – for a man smitten (βάλλω) here suffers no great penalty (ζημιόω), for what harm is there in seeing the plain or raising one's eyes to the sky? –, I make him adopt this form of opposition (παράταξις). For here he can neither smite nor kill, for these darts (βέλος) are not mortal, since they lack those points of iron." The great Acacius said it was this he had heard, and that he admired his wisdom and marveled at his courage and experience in war (πολεμικός) […].[30]

The term μηχάνημα has the general meaning of "device," or "artifice," but it can be used also in the sense of "war machine" if the wider context is defined by a warlike dimension. The terms used in the following sentences (i.e. πολεμέω, ὁπλίζω, πόλεμος, νικάω, ἡσσάω, βέλος, πολεμικός) unequivocally refer to a language of war. The verb ζημιόω, in the passive form, has the more general meaning of "to be damaged" or "to experience a loss," but also "to be fined," or "to be sentenced to pay restitution." This clearly creates a sense of mutual relationship between sin and punishment, or fault and penance which is, however, defined not exclusively in religious terms but also – given the wider semantic context described so far – as an action framed within the abovementioned equation between ascetic practices and legal condemnation. The term παράταξις refers to "battle," and also "opposition," "resistance," "rivalry." However, its primary meaning of "troop deployment," "to arrange the army into line of battle," confirms the language of war which permeates the entire passage.

30 Theod. *h. rel.* IV,7.

3. "Deactivating" the Body: Motionlessness as Ascetic Practice

If military vocabulary serves as an apparent marker, in terms of representation, of the perception of asceticism as a battle against the body – conceived here as a site of resistance to the assaults of temptation – the ascetic practice of motionlessness shifts the focus toward a more subtle and specific aspect of the "unnatural" postures inflicted on the body, as described in the previous paragraph. Johannes Bronkhorst has defined these specific ascetic activities as "counter-reproductive," thus "behaviours that reduce or even annul reproductive success."[31] The immediate reference here is to celibacy, conceived as the primary structural component of asceticism. Related to the dimension of non-production is the practice of motionlessness. Since its main aim is to reduce or suppress bodily action,[32] the immediate effects consist in a tendency to cease all activity. To cease all activity, in turn, means to embrace the practice of inaction.[33] As Bronkhorst emphasizes, practices such as the restraint of movement or abstaining from food and drink are clear examples of what he defines as a "termination of bodily activities."[34] Among other examples of motionlessness – an ascetic practice also widespread in religious traditions beyond Christianity – Bronkhorst briefly mentions that Theodoret of Cyrrhus describes various forms of physical immobility practiced by monks in Syria.[35]

A deeper reading of *The History of the Monks of Syria* reveals a few, yet very eloquent, examples of the practice of immobility. The most significant example in

31 J. Bronkhorst, "Asceticism, Religion and Biological Evolution," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 13 (2001, 374–418), 375.

32 Bronkhorst, "Asceticism," 378.

33 Bronkhorst, "Asceticism," 381.

34 Bronkhorst, "Asceticism," 382.

35 Bronkhorst, "Asceticism," 388.

this regard is certainly Abraham, "who brought with him the hardships (κακοπάθεια) of asceticism:"[36]

> This man too was a fruit of the region of Cyrrhus, for it was born and reared there that he gathered the wealth of ascetic virtue. Those who were with him say that he tamed (καταδαμάζω) his body with such vigils, standing, and fasting that for a long time he remained without movement (ἀκίνητος), quite unable to walk. Freed of this weakness (ἀσθένεια) by divine providence, he resolved to run the risks of piety as the price of divine favor, and repaired to the Lebanon […].[37]

What is here described is a clear act of mortification and submission of the body. Asceticism is not a neutral technical term here but is further defined in its general meaning by the association with κακοπάθεια. Used within a typically Christian context, κακοπάθεια explicitly refers to the ascetic act of mortification of the body, but its primary meaning – aside from a Christian perspective – is that of "affliction," "suffering" or even "abuse." Καταδαμάζω, here directly referred to the body, explicitly means "to submit" and, as a derivative of δαμάζω, also "to tame," "to subjugate," "to demolish." The act of subjugation and domination, as Theodoret writes, is carried out through specific practices, such as vigils, standing, and fasting. Moreover, these practices were followed so rigorously by Abraham that he ultimately lost the ability to walk. This precisely aligns with Bronkhorst's description of the termination of bodily activities, resulting from the interruption of action in favor of the practice of inaction. The reference to motionlessness is unequivocally emphasized here: ἀκίνητος has precisely the meaning of "static," "non active," "paralyzed."

This is not entirely equivalent to amputating a limb: Abraham still retains

36 Theod. *h. rel.* XVII,1.

37 Theod. *h. rel.* XVII,2.

his legs and, thus, his body in its entirety. However, if the cessation of movement causes the muscles in the legs and arms to waste away, this form of atrophy closely resembles the amputation of limbs. When a bodily organ or limb loses its primary ability to function, it becomes as though it no longer exists, as if it were entirely removed. A tamed body – through deliberate immobility, achieved by perpetual standing and bending under the weight of heavy instruments of constriction – becomes a functionless body, its natural activity suppressed. The apparent paradox here lies in the fact that asceticism affirms the centrality of the body within the broader scope of religious experience by pushing its physical faculties into total inactivity and unproductivity.

4. Concluding Remarks

In the prologue of his work, Theodoret articulates a clear and unequivocal assertion: his aim is to demonstrate how the monks, while inhabiting a mortal body, attained a state of impassibility, thereby emulating the incorporeal nature:

> […] how would it not be absurd if we let be consigned to oblivion men who in a mortal and passible body have displayed impassibility and emulated the bodiless beings?[38]

In the prologue as well, however, Theodoret offers a detailed examination of the physical capacities and faculties of the body that enable the practice of asceticism:

> […] since the devil uses our own limbs as weapons against us; for if the eyes are not enticed nor the hearing bewitched nor touch titillated nor the mind receptive of evil intentions, the zeal of those plotting harm is in vain. […] The men we are extolling had been taught this plainly by divine Scripture.

38 Theod. *h. rel.* Prologue, 2.

> Hearing God saying through the prophet that 'death has come up through the windows', they barred up the senses with God's laws as if with bolts and bars and entrusted their keys to the mind. The tongue did not open the lips except at the command of the mind, nor was the pupil allowed to peep out from the eyelids without permission; the hearing, though unable to wall up the entrance with eyelids or lips, rejected words that were senseless and admitted only those that the mind took pleasure in; so they taught the sense of smell not to hanker after fragrant odors, since by nature they produce flaccidity and limpness. So too they expelled the satiety of the belly and taught it to accept what satisfied, not pleasure, but need, and indeed just so much as could prevent death from hunger. So too they deposed the sweet tyranny of sleep, and freeing the eyelids from slavery to it taught them to be masters not slaves, and to accept its services not when it assailed but when they themselves invited it to assist nature briefly. […] Although the enemies have an invisible nature, they could not master a visible body subject to the necessities of nature […].[39]

This clearly illustrates that the very foundation of asceticism – namely, the mortification and denial of the body – can be pursued only by acknowledging the profound corporality inherent in the practice. The negation of the flesh necessitates the full operation of its faculties to be effectively realized. In this context, the reflections of De Wet and Bronkhorst converge, as the achievement of non-productivity and inefficacy becomes possible only through the colonization and domination of the body's constituent parts. At the same time, the detailed description of the "radical" practices enacted by the ascetics listed by Theodoret stresses the inevitability of the double layer structure of any religious prescription. Traditionally and theologically described as the ascetic's withdrawal from urban society and worldly pleasures

39 Theod. *h. rel.* Prologue, 6.

in order to devote him/herself to contemplation – thus as a symbolic act of isolation – asceticism here becomes primarily the outcome of corporeal experiences. While not negating normative institutionalization, these experiences on the other hand emerge as personal reclamation of the norm itself, within a dynamic where structures and individual actions co-constitute each other. The radicalisation of the ascetic experience, pursued through the use of instruments that subject the body to unnatural exertions and outcomes, inevitably results in a non-ordinary individual reappropriation of the ascetic exercise itself. Moreover, in certain instances archaeological findings corroborate the historiographical and literary evidence of radical asceticism, as shown by the recent discovery of a tomb containing a woman who had subjected her body to mortifications akin to those described by Theodoret.[40] In this respect, the material traces bear direct witness to the process through which lived religious experience is self-appropriated, culminating in its non-ordinary expression.

40 P. Kotli - D. Morgenstern – Y. Nagar – C. Katina – Z. 'Adawi – K. Arbiv – E. Boaretto, "Sexing remains of a Byzantine ascetic burial using enamel proteomics," *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 62 (2025, 1–7).