

# The Lusitanian Episcopate In The 4<sup>th</sup> Century: Priscilian Of Ávila and the Tensions Between Bishops<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper looks at Priscillian of Ávila and the tensions that existed in the 4<sup>th</sup> century between bishops at the heart of the Lusitanian episcopate, which covered part of the southwest of the Iberian Peninsula. It does not attempt to offer an exhaustive analysis of the various aspects of Priscillianism; instead it takes a close look at those which it is possible to single out from what we know of his actual work. Priscillian helps us to achieve a better understanding of the Christianization process and the orthodox/heterodox debate in late antiquity. He also provides insight into the complexity of a period which precludes any arbitrary simplification and which, despite a search for unity, proves to be a time of opposition and confrontation. Against a background of the progressive “Constantinization” of the church, bishops become key figures who centralize the main forces of the day. At the same time, we become aware of the coercive measures that lay authorities introduced as Christianity spread. The confrontation between rival Christian communities – Priscillianist and Nicean Catholicism – reveals an important facet of the position adopted by Christians in their relations with civil authorities, as well as the close ties between Christianity, the top of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the Empire. It also gives a clear picture of the work of the bishop of a city in antiquity, in which the emphasis was on the militant view of the kerigma.

## Keywords

Priscillian; episcopate, orthodoxy/heterodoxy; late antiquity; religious history

## Resumo

*O presente artigo versa sobre Prisciliano de Ávila e as tensões no seio do episcopado da Lusitânia, região situada a sudoeste da Península Ibérica, no século IV. Este trabalho não pretende ser uma análise exaustiva do priscilianismo mas antes um ponto de partida para o conhecimento da acção concreta do bispo de Ávila no processo de cristianização peninsular. A sua acção é, aliás, importante para compreendermos o processo de cristianização e o debate ortodoxialheterodoxia na Antiguidade tardia, bem como a complexidade de um período que contraria toda a simplificação arbitrária e se revela como um tempo de oposições e confrontos, apesar da procura persistente de unidade por parte do episcopado. Num contexto de “constantinização” progressiva da Igreja, no século IV, o bispo torna-se uma figura central cuja acção revela de forma ímpar as medidas de coacção exercidas pelo poder secular durante a difusão do cristianismo. O confronto entre comunidades cristãs rivais – priscilianista e católico niceana – revelam não só uma faceta do discurso cristão na sua relação com o poder civil mas também os laços estreitos que uniam o cristianismo e a alta hierarquia do Império na Cidade antiga, assim como o carácter militante no anúncio do Kerigma.*

## Palavras-chave

*Prisciliano; Episcopado; Ortodoxia/heterodoxia; Antiguidade tardia; História religiosa.*

**Priscillian – a road to asceticism?**

In the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Roman Lusitania witnessed the development of an ascetic movement centered on the person of the Bishop of Ávila – Priscillian. Contemporary literature says little about him, but of the information that does exist, it is Sulpicius Severus who gives us the most complete report.

Let us begin with a portrait: "...Priscillianus (...) familia nobilis, praediues opibus, acer, inquires, facundus, multa lectione eruditus, disserendi ac disputandi promptissimus, felix profecto, si non prauo studio corrupisset optimum ingenium..." (Sulpicius Severus 1866: 99).

This note by the Gallic chronicler tells us that Priscillian was of noble birth – something that did not prevent him from practicing a rigorous form of asceticism. Like other contemporary sources, Sulpicius tells us absolutely nothing about where Priscillian came from. We can only suppose that Priscillianism originated in southern Lusitania, along the border with Baetica (see Cabrera 1983). Perhaps this is why one of the first reactions to the movement came from Higinus, the Bishop of Córdoba, in Baetica? The question remains open. However, other, essentially later, authors said that he was born in Galicia and that at an unknown time he must have left that province to go to Lusitania. These suppositions are probably linked to the fact that Priscillianism also developed quite extensively in Galicia.

Sulpicius Severus's chronicle leads us to believe that Priscillian's effectiveness was due to his exceptional and ascetic personality. This is what gave him such religious authority and secured the support and partnership of some of his colleagues in the episcopate. The chronicler also says that Priscillian drew "multos nobilium pluresque populares" to him. The gradation in this Latin expression covers a real diversity of social groups, and his entourage included women as well as men (Sulpicius Severus 1866: 99).

This is the doctrine that the lay *doctor* preached to his followers: the dominical fast all year round, retreats during Advent and Lent "far from the noise of this world", disdain for worldly goods, and obligatory familiarity with the Holy Scripture. He also demanded that the church hierarchy practice chastity, as laid down by the Council of Elvira.

According to Sulpicius, Priscillian was appointed Bishop of Ávila by Instantius and Salvian – two bishops whose seats are still unknown to us: "...Instantius et Saluianus damnati iudicio sacerdotum Priscillianum etiam laicum, sed principem malorum omnium, una secum Caesaraugustana synodo notatum, ad confirmandas uires suas episcopum in Abilensi oppido constituunt, rati nimirum, si hominem acrem et callidum sacerdotali auctoritate armassent, tutiores fore sese." (Sulpicius Severus 1866: 100).

Were they the Bishops of Lusitania? (see the note by Hydatius 1974: 108; Torres 1954: 81; and Babut 1909: 91). We can certainly suppose this to be the case, given the rules established by

the Council of Nicaea (325), which said that new bishops should be consecrated by the existing ones in the candidate's ecclesiastical province (Alberigo 1973: 7). We have very little data that would tell us whether Ávila was vacant due to the death of the previous incumbent. Who was he? And what were the ties that linked Priscillian to Ávila? All these are questions that are still without answers. In any case, Prosper of Aquitaine (1961: 460) places Priscillian's ordination in the year 379 (also see Escribano Paño 1988: 392).

As to his education and training before his promotion to the episcopate, in *Liber Apologeticus* Priscillian (1960<sup>c</sup>: 1413) himself admits that he had engaged in forbidden studies. Other contemporary accounts confirm this. Sulpicius Severus (1866: 99) says: "...sed idem uanissimus et plus iusto inflator profanarum rerum scientia: quin et magicas artes ab adolescentia eum exercuisse creditum est."

He also adds that Priscillian followed masters who included a certain Agape and someone named Helpidius, both disciples of Mark of Memphis, who lived in a town that was known as a center of magic arts (see Sulpicius Severus 1866: 99). Isidorus of Seville (1964: 135) takes up this information in his *De uiris illustribus*, on the subject of a pamphlet by the Bishop Ithacius, otherwise known as Clarus: "Itacius Hispaniarum episcopus, cognomento et eloquio Clarus, scripsit quemdam librum sub apologetici specie, in quo detestanda Priscilliani dogmata et maleficiorum eius artes libidinumque eius probra demonstrat: ostendens, Marcum quemdam Menpheticum, magiae scientissimum, discipulum fuisse Manis et Priscilliani magistrum."

The pamphlet adds that Priscillian learned magic with Mark of Memphis, who was a direct disciple of Mani. It is probable that Priscillian studied a form of teaching in Egypt, with which the Iberian Peninsula maintained relations, but this could also merely be a supposition on the author's part. We will limit ourselves to the probability that Priscillian received some form of secular cultural education in his youth. He must also have read the Apocrypha, which were circulating at the time.

The sources say nothing else about Priscillian's story or way of life. The few works that are said to have been written by him add nothing concrete. History's silences no doubt partially explain the assumptions made by historiographers – the fact is that until this century ecclesiastical historiography always saw Priscillian as a heretic. It is understandable that over the centuries the issue of orthodoxy and heterodoxy has been the focal point of all the views on the subject. This is made clear by Menéndez Pelayo (1956: 131-247. See also Silva 1999: 87-106), who considers Priscillian to be a heretic and the instigator of a Gnostic sect with Manichean roots.

Can one say that Priscillianism was based on Manichaeism or Gnosticism? This is a difficult question. The research that highlights these issues is generally based on Priscillianist writings – this is the case of the treatises that were compiled as part of the Würzburg corpus, most of which post-dated Priscillian's death (see Schepss 1889: 1-106; Madoz 1957: 72). We must bear the following in mind: while the theses contained in these texts are rooted in the ideas that Priscillian personally developed, they were written in other spatial/temporal contexts – such as Galicia – and concern practices that were observed by other Priscillianists (on the development of Priscillianism in Galicia and the sources that discuss the movement from the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards, see Escribano Paño 1988: 46-52). Perhaps one ought to distinguish between an initial phase of Priscillianism, which was restricted to his lifetime, and a second one following his death – i.e. the period in which his ideas

developed in the neighboring ecclesiastical province. But this would go beyond the scope of our study. Let us simply note that it is during this stage of the story of Priscillianism in Galicia that we also begin to see the outline of the links between this province in the north of the Iberian Peninsula and Aquitaine (see J. Fontaine, above all in *Panorama spiritual* 1981). Nor should we forget that after Priscillian's death the accusations of Manichaeism and Gnosticism even spread beyond the Iberian Peninsula itself. As reported in Augustine and Prosper of Aquitaine, both of whom say more or less the same thing: "Nec illud mouet, quod Priscillianistae Manichaeorum similli ad ieiunandum die dominico solent testimonium de apostolorum actibus adhibere, cum esset Paulus apostolus in Troade." (Augustine 1895: 57); "Ea tempestate Priscillianus (...) Manicheorum et gnosticorum dogmate haresim nominis sui condit." (Prosper of Aquitaine 1961: 460).

We know of the Bishop of Ávila's predilection for the ascetic life, including penitential reclusion; we catch glimpses of his practices, all of which aimed at attaining a state of perfection or election (*electi Deo*), but if we are to interpret them correctly we must also gain an in-depth understanding of where they really came from. It is becoming clearer and clearer that Priscillian represented an adaptation of the monastic type of life – one that developed an ascetic kind of spirituality that could be seen as part of the maintenance and structuring of society in late antiquity. He played the role of a catalyst among Lusitanian Christians and crystallized a variety of ascetic, monastic and intellectual aspirations that were either fairly, or even entirely, incompatible with Christianity as it was lived by the great majority of the bishops of the day. What Priscillian wanted was to reform the church. He thought that the separation of men and women was not inevitable and that the fundamental thing was to seek out the traditional practices of Christian asceticism (Mayeur 1995: 415 et seq.).

It is a fact that the main result of Priscillian's activities was a new concept of Christian life in Lusitania, which was later reinforced by other Priscillianist bishops. The infiltration of these ideas into rural areas allows us to deduce that there was a reunion with a Christianity that was "less closely controlled" by the entrenched bishops.

One of the accusations leveled at Priscillian was that he led the Christians of the towns to go to isolated *villae* in the country. It was even supposed that Priscillian was the owner of these *villae*, or that they were located on land that belonged to his friends. But how many Priscillianist *villae* actually existed? Where were they? The truth is that there is no documentary evidence for them. We do not know of a single *villa* in which excavations have shown traces that might allow us to conclude that Priscillianist practices took place there. However, a few years ago, Huffstot (1995: 443) interpreted paleo-Christian remains discovered in Torre de Palma in this way. In her opinion, scientific analysis of the remains found in this *villa* indicates that livestock breeding was abandoned there – something that might reveal the adoption of a vegetarian-type diet practiced by the members of an ascetic group. The fact that the *villa* had work done to it and was extended over the course of the 4<sup>th</sup> century could imply the presence of a growing number of followers of Priscillianism.

We should note that the confrontation between town and country also became a part of the process by which Priscillian and his entourage made Christianity an established part of culture. The fact is that it seems that thanks to Priscillianist practices, Christianity spread out into the rural areas, which were still within the towns' sphere of influence.

However, it is worth taking a closer look at the move towards asceticism that Priscillian advocated, so as to separate it from both its old and its Christian roots (on Christian asceticism in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, see Fontaine 1968: 665). If we are to do away with all the uncertainty that arises from generalizations, we must situate our study within the broader picture of western monachism and social history – indeed, the research into Priscillianism that has been carried out in the last few years makes this indispensable. While the works on Priscillian have become more numerous over the last century, it is only since 1965 and the efforts of W. Schatz (especially: *Studien zur Geschichte* 1957) and A. Barbero Aguilera (above all: *El priscilianismo: herejía* 1963) that Priscillianism has begun to be analyzed other than against a strictly theological/ecclesiastical background (see also Molé 1975).

Interpreting Priscillian's doctrine continues to pose a great many problems, as do both his criticisms of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and his consecration of bishops and priests to serve small rural communities.

If we are to believe Hydatius's account, the Bishop of Ávila was executed in Treves in 387. However, the date of the execution is hotly disputed. Some say it took place in 385, others in 386: E.-B. Babut (1909: 241-244) opts for 385; after studying the problems posed by Ambrose's journey from Milan to Treves, J. R. Palanque (1933: 518) places the execution at the end of the summer of 386; A. D'Alès (1936: 167-169) concurs with the latter date.

Hydatius reports that after Priscillian was executed, Galicia was invaded by Priscillianist ideas which the author, in his belligerent style, calls "heresy": "Priscillianus, propter supra dictam haerese[m], ab episcopatu depulsus, et cum ipso Latronianus laicus aliquantique sectores sui apud Treuerim sub tyranno Maximo caeduntur. Exim, in Gallaeciam Priscillianistarum [haeresis inuasit]." (Hydatius 1974: 109).

Apart from the dissemination of the Priscillianist doctrine, Sulpicius Severus's account (1866: 104-105) tells us more specifically that, following the events at Treves, it was the cult of Priscillian himself that spread in Hispania: "...ceterum Priscilliano occiso, non solum non repressa est haeresis, quae illo auctore proruperat, sed confirmata latius propagata est. Namque sectores eius, qui eum prius ut sanctum honorauerant, postea ut martyrem colere coeperunt. peremptorum corpora ad Hispanias relata magnisque obsequiis celebrata eorum funera: quin et iurare per Priscillianum summa religio putabatur."

This news may reflect the need on the part of the church in the north of the Iberian Peninsula to "invent" local martyrs in order to spiritually "nourish" the life of its communities, and simultaneously to secure relics with which to consecrate places of worship (see Chadwick 1978: 206). According to the same tradition, Priscillian's remains were placed in Astorga in around 396. The Metropolitan of Galicia, Symphosius, is thought to have become Priscillian's main spiritual heir, and Astorga is said to have drawn pilgrims to pray on the tombs of the Priscillianist "martyrs". However, during his lifetime, Priscillian did not create an organized ascetic movement with communities that lived under the same order (on the historical context and Priscillian monks, see Simões 2002).

Around 530, two letters on Priscillianism by Montanus of Toledo also state that in the churches of Palence, not far from Astorga, it was customary to commemorate Priscillian's name

among those of the martyred saints. The Bishop of Toledo criticized Christians who sought to remember the heretic (Vives, Marín Martínez and Martínez Díez 1963: 46-52).

### **Religious and secular stakes in the Priscillianist affair**

The Priscillianist issue first arose in 378 or 379, when Higinus, Bishop of Córdoba, wrote to Idacius, Bishop of Mérida and Metropolitan of Lusitania to suggest that the latter should take a stance in relation to a movement initiated by a group of laymen (see Sulpicius Severus 1866: 100-105). He said that these laymen, who belonged to his ecclesiastical province, were teaching Gnostic and Manichean-type doctrines and were living in accordance with a severe form of asceticism. We know that Idacius of Mérida took this request seriously, because he led the fight against Priscillian personally.

While we are on this subject, this affair provides evidence of the upper hand the metropolitan bishop enjoyed over the other bishops in his ecclesiastical province – even if it is still premature in the 4<sup>th</sup> century to speak of a real central authority who coordinated relations between all the other bishops.

Another thing worth noting is the importance of the Faro Diocese, which was emphasized during the Priscillianist crisis. Its bishop, Ithacius, became deeply involved in the matter and even demanded that the civil authorities forbid free access to churches by Priscillianists.

In a desire to prevent the “sect” from growing, Idacius of Mérida and Ithacius of Faro denounced the Priscillianist movement to Gratian in 381. The Emperor immediately published an edict ordering them to expel the “heretics” from their churches: “...Ydacius atque Ithacius acrius instare, arbitrantes posse inter initia malum comprimi: sed parum sanis consiliis saeculares iudices adeunt, ut eorum decritis atque executionibus haeretici urbibus pellerentur. Igitur post multa et foeda certamina Ydacio supplicante elicitur a Gratiano tum imperatore rescriptum, quo uniuersi haeretici excedere non ecclesiis tantum aut urbibus, sed extra omnes terras propelli iubebantur. Quo comperto Gnostici diffisi rebus suis, non ausi iudicio certare, sponte cessere, qui episcopi uidebantur: ceteros metus dispersit.” (Sulpicius Severus 1866: 100-101. See also Babut 1909: 149-151).

It is this offensive against Priscillian and the bishops who supported him, which began in 378, that probably led Priscillian’s entourage to consecrate him bishop in an attempt to strengthen their positions. In this way, the Priscillianist conflict shows that a victory over the Hispanian Episcopate faction could only be obtained by incorporating Priscillian into the episcopal hierarchy itself. On this subject, Sotomayor y Muro (García-Villoslada 1979: 236) points out that the “Episcopalian” tendency is one of the characteristics of the Priscillianist movement – a movement based on the conviction that the reform of the church should be led from the “hierarchical top” of the church itself (see Jorge 2001: 63-67).

Questions about the canonical nature of Priscillian’s episcopal appointment have broadened the debate. They show that in the background there were real battles between bishops for control over the episcopal seats, even though at the same time ecumenical councils – like that of Constantinople (381) – were ordering the bishops of a given diocese not to meddle in the affairs of other dioceses, or, for example, to ordain bishops there (see Alberigo 1973, above all canon 2: 22).

In the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the established church hierarchy was worried at the sight of some of its faithful straying away and organizing themselves beyond the pale of episcopal authority. These bishops reacted to a religious experience that was escaping their administrative control (Escribano Paño 1988: 391).

As to the issue of episcopal ordinations, after Priscillian's death, Hydatius of Chaves (1974: 104) tells us that at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century there was a very unusual situation in the neighboring province of Galicia: increasing numbers of bishops without specific seats, and conflict between an established hierarchy and an itinerant one – in other words, a confrontation between two different visions of the episcopate (see Díaz y Díaz 1983: 93).

The doctrinal conflicts only masked the reality. From this perspective, ascetic practices were described as being secret nocturnal meetings and liturgical chants as being the opportunity for endless orgies (see Chadwick 1978: 52 et seq.). However, as we can see from the councils that took place during this period, the challenge that was addressed by this religious dialogue was to get the bishops to become more "theocentric" by rediscovering in Christ the mediator of salvation. We cannot forget that the Christian identity, along with that of Christ himself, was defined in the symbol of Nicaea: "the Son consubstantial in the Father", while safeguarding the faith in the face of heresy (see Alberigo 1973: 1-19).

We can see that this questioning by certain Lusitanian bishops spread to other religious authorities, such as Ambrose of Milan and the Bishop of Rome, Damasus. Both of them were caught up in this debate. In 382, Priscillian did not hesitate to call on Ambrose and Damasus – the two bishops whose personal authority was greatest at that time (as Sulpicius Severus recognizes 1866: 101. On this subject, see also Gryson 1968: 155). The Bishop of Milan always refused to support Priscillian's cause and thought that the man himself was not entirely pure. He went further when he addressed himself to Treves, to the Emperor Maximus, to protest against this "party" (see Ambrose of Milan 1968: 214-215. See also Escribano Paño 1988: 314-315 and 395-399). Later, in 390, he even welcomed a number of Gallic bishops, who had probably come to discuss the tragic aftermath of the Priscillianist quarrel in Gaul, to a synod in Milan (this issue is looked at in more depth by Gryson 1968: 162).

We cannot say how Damasus reacted to Priscillian, Instantius and Salvian. According to Jerome's *De uiris illustribus* (1883: 650), he did not receive the Bishop of Ávila and his colleagues. It seems that he said nothing. Why not? Did he think they were innocent? Or did he just not want to get involved? We don't know. Damasus certainly knew what was happening to Priscillian's entourage, because in his *Tractatus* II (probably written near the end of 381 or at the beginning of 382), Priscillian told the Bishop of Rome about the accusations of "pseudo episcopus et manichae" that were being made against him (see Priscillian 1960<sup>b</sup>: 1439-1440). He also reminded Damasus that the assembly of bishops at Zaragoza (a reference to the council of 380) had not condemned either him or his friends. The message that Priscillian (1960<sup>b</sup>: 1435) sent to Damasus is not without interest: "Denique in couentu episcopali qui Caesaraugustae fuit nemo e nostris reus factus tenetur, nemo accusatus, nemo couictus, nemo damnatus est, nullum nomini nostro uel proposito uel uitae crimen objectum est, nemo ut euocaretur non dicam necessitatem sed nec sollicitudinem habuit."

This "petitio ad Damasum" calls on the apostolic seat's primacy and *auctoritas* in the dual sense of the term: theological and legal. It gives a particularly good picture of the course that Priscillian decided to adopt – to go above the heads of the local ecclesiastical hierarchy by addressing himself directly to Peter's successor (see Escribano Paño 1988: 395). It even seems that Priscillian went to Italy with Instantius and Salvian, after a visit to Bordeaux and other places in Aquitaine, where he was enthusiastically received by the region's landowners (see, above all, Fontaine 1981: 185-209).

This journey to Italy enabled them to obtain a dispensation from the imperial edict (see above) thanks to the influence of a clerk of the imperial court. At the same time, Priscillian and his colleagues denounced their accusers to the imperial authorities. These contacts at court recall how Consentius (1981: 51-70) underlined the aristocratic status of the members of Priscillian's entourage, and talked about how they may have belonged to the Theodosian circle (in this respect, see also Escribano Paño 1988: 391).

As to Rome's intervention in the Priscillianist affair, we only know about the reactions to the phase in which Priscillianism was developing in Galicia, but these exceed the scope of our research. We will limit ourselves to saying that there is a letter from Pope Innocent I (1845: 501-502) addressed to Bishop Exuperius of Toulouse, which is dated 20 February 405 and discusses various disciplinary issues concerning clerics and the faithful; and a second one from Leo I (1881: 688), which is addressed to Bishop Toribius of Astorga and is dated 21 July 447. Both pronounce themselves opposed to the Priscillianists' interpretation of the Apocrypha.

Some time in 382 or 383, following the accusations which Priscillian made against Ithacius of Faro, the dissension took on new political dimensions (see Escribano Paño 1988: 396 et seq.). Gregorius, the Prefect of the Gauls, decided to hear the case himself and summoned Priscillian (see Sulpicius Severus 1866: 102, and Babut 1909: 168-176). In the wake of these events, the Emperor summoned a council in Bordeaux in 384 to consider the Lusitanian episcopate's accusations against Priscillian (see Sulpicius Severus 1866: 102-103, and Étienne 1962: 269).

The chronicler Hydatius (1974: 109) mentions that, after the assembly in Bordeaux, Martin of Tours and other bishops declared Priscillian to be a heretic. If we look at Martin's role in this affair, it seems probable that he and other bishops from Gaul took part in the Council of Bordeaux in 384. However, we know nothing about the Council's composition or the specific part that Martin of Tours played in it.

Following the Council of Bordeaux, Priscillian, Instantius and Salvian decided to appeal to the Emperor and even considered going to him to explain their position (see Sulpicius Severus 1866: 101).

After all this, the "Priscillianist issue" was transferred to the secular court at Treves. Ithacius of Faro and Idacius of Mérida both went there for the trial. Sulpicius Severus (1866: 103) also adds that Martin of Tours protested to the Emperor against the ruling, which said that the accused who went to Treves should be imprisoned. In a way, the Bishop of Tours reacted against the *Iudice publica*. To him, the episcopal sentence at Bordeaux was enough.

Accused in Treves of the crimes of *maleficium* and obscene religious practices, Priscillian and four of his disciples were condemned to death and executed, while a number of others were exiled:

"...Priscillianum gemino iudicio auditum conuictumque maleficii nec diffitentem obscenis se studuisse doctrinis, nocturnos etiam turpium feminarum egisse conuentus nudamque orare solitum, nocentem pronuntiauit redegitque in custodiam, donec ad principem referret. Gesta ad palatium delata censuit imperator, Priscillianum sociosque eius capite damnari oportere. (...) eo insistente Priscillianus capitis damnatus est, unaque cum eo Felicissimus et Armenius, qui nuper a catholicis, cum essent clerici, Priscillianum secuti descuerant. Latronianus quoque et Euchrotia gladio perempti. Instantius, quem superius ab episcopis damnatum diximus, in Sylinancim insulam, quae ultra Britannias sita est, deportatus." (Sulpicius Severus 1866: 103-104).

We should note the speed with which the conflict was resolved once the civil hierarchy became involved. Priscillian's execution is seen as the first example of secular justice intervening in an ecclesiastical matter (see Gaudemet 1958: 233-234). It clearly illustrates both the tension and the ideological union between the church and imperial authority at the end of the Low Empire; or in other words, the way in which "the sword of justice" placed itself at the church's service. But this topic could be the object of a study in its own right.

As soon as Priscillian and his four disciples had been executed orders were given to repress the heresy everywhere. However, in the north of the Iberian Peninsula their death sentence actually injected even more vitality into the group (see Mattoso 1993: 288).

### **The Hispanian Councils – guarantors of orthodoxy**

In around 380, the Council of Zaragoza ordered the repression of the Priscillianist "movement", and around the year 400 the Council of Toledo did the same thing. The signatures are missing from the text of the former Council – they were omitted from the only surviving copies, which were preserved at an unknown time (see Rodríguez 1981: 12). Nevertheless, thanks to the prologue we know the names of the participants. True, their episcopal seats are not mentioned, but we know who came from Lusitania: Ithacius of Faro and Idacius of Mérida, Metropolitan of Lusitania (see Vives, Marín Martínez and Martínez Díez 1963: 16). Both of them must have played an important role in the Council, given their involvement in the Priscillianist affair.

The presence of bishops from Aquitaine (Delphinus, Bishop of Bordeaux, and Phœbadus of Agen) shows that the problem was also of interest there. It also reveals that Priscillian's message had spread not only to northern Hispania, but also to southern Gaul. Zaragoza, which was chosen as the site of a Hispano-Gallic episcopal assembly, benefited from its geographic location, which made it a good place to hold this meeting (see Fatás 1981: 155). Was Baetica not always conscious of the Priscillianist challenge?

These bishops' participation in the Council demonstrates a real search for episcopal *communio* and an effort to take common steps to ensure orthodoxy (see Ramos-Lisson 1981: 207-224). We are thus able to get a better idea of the fact that to these bishops, the diocese was not an isolated territory and that taking part in councils was a source of inspiration for their pastoral work. This is the perspective from which we should look at canon 5 of the Council of Zaragoza (Vives, Marín Martínez and Martínez Díez 1963: 17): "Item lectum est: Ut hii qui per disciplinam aut sententiam episcopi ab ecclesia fuerint separati ab aliis episcopis non sunt recipiendi; quod si scientes episcopi

fecerint, non habeant communionem. Ab universis episcopis dictum est: Qui hoc commiserit episcoporum non habeat communionem."

How should we look upon this hardening of the position? In reality, neither the geographic proximity, nor the organization of the ecclesiastical hierarchy explains this quite heterogeneous gathering of bishops in Zaragoza. The only common purpose can have been to confound the Priscillianists and to put an end to the troubles they were causing among the Christian communities in Galicia and Aquitaine. It is certainly not by chance that Priscillian's name does not appear once in the canons, any more than those of his disciples. Nor is any sect mentioned or even alluded to. As O. Griffe says (1981: 162), it is sure that the sometimes sibylline and always moderate terms of the canons proclaimed by the bishops meeting in Zaragoza gave no hint whatsoever of the dramatic events that were to take place in Treves.

There can be no doubt, however, that the Council of Zaragoza possessed an anti-Priscillianist nature that is manifest in many of the canons. The fact is that the latter are dominated from the start by a clear anti-ascetic/Priscillianist tendency. In our opinion, canon 1 refers to the ascetic Priscillianist practice, which included a significant feminine participation: "Ut mulieris omnes ecclesiae catholicae et fideles a virorum alienorum lectione et coetibus separentur, vel ad ipsas legentes aliae studio vel docenti vel discenti convenient, quoniam hoc Apostolus iubet. Ab universis episcopis dictum est: Anathema futuros qui hanc concilii sententiam non observarint." (Vives, Marín Martínez and Martínez Díez 1963: 16). Probably, in order to fight the teaching of laymen in the Priscillianist movement, canon 7 says that a *doctor's* investiture should be canonical: "Ne quis doctoris sibi nomen inponat praeter has personas quibus concessum est, secundum quod scriptum est. Ab universis episcopis dictum est: Placet." (Vives, Marín Martínez and Martínez Díez 1963: 17-18).

To tell the truth, the norm in the 4<sup>th</sup> century was for a *doctor* to be a bishop and not a cleric, let alone a layman, as had been Priscillian's case before he was ordained bishop (on this subject see González Blanco 1981: 352). What was at stake was in fact ecclesiastical control. This is why the Council was sure to condemn all teaching that took place in parallel to that provided by the episcopal hierarchy – that is to say outside the established framework of the ecclesiastical institutions that ministered teaching and the catechesis. These reactions also address the "private *magisterium*" which the Bishop of Ávila said in his treatises that he ought to exercise – in other words that he should be entitled to interpret the spirit of the Scriptures outside the official framework of the church. We may recall *Canones in Pauli*, which are a true compilation of texts from the Holy Scripture (see Priscillian 1960<sup>a</sup>: 1391-1413).

Canons 2 and 4 forbid liturgical meetings in the *villae* and call on the faithful not to drift away from their episcopal churches – as we can tell from a number of extracts: "Ne quis ieiunet die dominica causa temporis aut persuasionis aut suprestitionis, aut quadragesimarum die ab ecclesiis non desint, nec habitent latibula cubiculorum ac montium qui in his suspicionibus perseverant, sed exemplum et praeceptum custodiant et ad alienas villas agendorum conventum causa non convenient. " (canon 2: Vives, Marín Martínez and Martínez Díez 1963: 16); Viginti et uno die quo a XVI<sup>mo</sup> kalendas ianuarias usque in diem Epifaniae qui est VIII idus kalendas ianuarias continuis diebus nulli licet de ecclesia absentare, nec latere in domibus, nec sedere in villam, nec

montes petere, nec nudis pedibus incedere, sed concurrere ad ecclesiam. Quod qui non observaverit de susceptis, anathema sit in perpetuum." (canon 4: Vives, Marín Martínez and Martínez Díez 1963: 17).

It is clear that the dominical fast, which was anathematized by the participants in the Council of Zaragoza, was really a Priscillianist practice. Augustine (1895: 57) confirms this and criticizes the Priscillianists, whom he said were like the Manicheans in their habit of fasting on Sundays. The condemnations issued in Zaragoza were probably also targeted at the Priscillianist practices in the *villae*. However, here we can see a broader concern on the part of the episcopate – that of the development of Christian life in Hispania.

Finally, while it is absolutely certain that the bishops gathered in Zaragoza condemned the attitude of Christians who stayed away from their local churches and among other things organized assemblies in the *villae*, we have to ask ourselves: did the Council issue any individual condemnations? From the text of the Council it would seem not.

Sulpicius Severus (1866: 100), on the other hand, clearly refers to the Council of Zaragoza as an *iudicium sacerdotale* in order to accentuate the fight that the episcopate was waging against the "heretics (see Escribano Paño 1981: 123-133).

The Council of Toledo, which was held in 400, after Priscillian's execution in Treves, took place from this same perspective and it is certainly not possible to confuse the situations and problems that existed before the executions in Treves with the ones that came afterwards. The Council was chaired by Patruinus, Bishop of Mérida and Metropolitan of Lusitania. It was he himself who, from the opening of the first session, referred to the Priscillianist issue in the following way: "Quoniam singuli coepimus in ecclesiis nostri facere diversa, et inde tanta scandala sunt, quae usque scisma perveniunt, si placet communi consilio decernimus quid ab omnibus episcopis in ordinandis clericis sit sequendum. Mici autem placet et contituta primitus concilii Nicaeni perpetuo esse servanda nec ab his esse recedendum." (Vives, Marín Martínez and Martínez Díez 1963: 19).

An important part of the Council was dedicated to Priscillianism, the leading representative of which in the 5<sup>th</sup> century appears to have been Bishop Symphosius of Astorga, supported by his son Dictinius (see Vives, Marín Martínez and Martínez Díez 1963: 28 et seq.). This means that the later council had more to do with the development of Priscillianism in Galicia (see Babut 1909: 187 and 286).

The Council of Toledo in 400 sufficed in its own right to reveal the problems from which the Hispanian churches were suffering at around the turn of the century. We should recall that in general terms the Council sought to ensure orthodoxy in Hispania by admitting the credo and discipline established by the Council of Nicaea. This is the case of the "regulae fidei catholicae contra omnes haereses et quam maxime contra Priscillianos", which were written by a number of Hispanic bishops who attended the Council (Vives, Marín Martínez and Martínez Díez 1963: 25-28). What was really at stake was the hierarchical model of the church that had been emphasized at Nicaea, which was opposed to any other concept of Christian life, and particularly to any organization of the church by the community (see Escribano Paño 1995: 271).

The decisions taken in Toledo did not succeed in putting an end to the Priscillianist movement, which continued to spread among the people of the north-west (see Tranoy 1981: 428;

Cardelle de Hartmann 1998: 265-286; Escribano Paño 1997: 279-321; and Vilella Masana 1997: 177-185). One would like to see the Council of Braga in 561, during which the Priscillianist issue surfaced once more, as proof of this, but it adds nothing new where Lusitania is concerned.

## Note

1. Extract from a shortened, reworked version of a doctoral dissertation: Jorge, Ana Maria C. M. (2002). *L'èpiscopat de Lusitanie pendant l'Antiquité tardive (IIIe-VIIIe siècles)*, Lisbon: Instituto Português de Arqueologia.

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