

## THE LIFESTYLE OF THE BRAHMANS IN THE *REFUTATIO OMNIUM HAERESIUM*

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### **Abstract**

This research focuses on the analysis of Chapter 1.24 of the *Refutatio omnium haeresium*. Here the author presents the lifestyle of the Brahmins. Their habits are very peculiar: for instance, it is their custom to be naked, to eat the fruits of the earth and to avoid meat. There are no women nor children with them. They despise death, always celebrate God and raise hymns in his honour. Moreover, they also believe that God is Logos. The text raises several questions: first of all, the reason why the Brahmins are presented in a positive light. The information reported by the author is, partly, confirmed by a long tradition in classical antiquity that reconstructs their image, attributing to them the stereotypes of a barbaric people. Therefore, the aim of this study is to verify from which perspectives these characters are presented, first by Graeco-Roman authors, and, secondly, in the literature of the Church Fathers, in order to identify the specific connections and the possible divergences.

**Keywords:** Brahmins, naked philosophers, Encratites, abstinence from meat, sexual abstinence.

## 1. Introduction

Book 1 of the work commonly known as *Refutatio omnium haeresium*<sup>1</sup> – whose authorship is still uncertain<sup>2</sup> –, presents in a diachronic line the doctrines of the main Greek philosophers. According to the author's thesis, they laid the foundations of Christian heresies. However, what is particularly striking is the fact that soon after the philosophers the catalogue continues with two sections dedicated to the Brahmins (1.24) and the Druids (1.25)<sup>3</sup>.

This particular choice of the author of the *Refutatio* is extremely interesting because the overview of his exposition also implies a spatial dimension, extending horizontally: from Greece to India towards East, and from Greece to the Celts towards West<sup>4</sup>.

Such an association does not seem accidental, but clearly shows how, even in a text like the *Refutatio*, Greek culture is considered the central point of reference. This consideration will be taken as a useful working hypothesis: the aim of this investigation will be to verify the presence of an ideological-cultural scheme – of Greek origin – based on the element of geographical distance. The analysis will take into account Chapter 1.24 of the *Refutatio*, which is entirely focused on the Brahmins.

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<sup>1</sup> The original title of the work was Κατὰ πασῶν αἱρέσεων ἔλεγχος, but it is commonly known as *Refutatio omnium haeresium*. See Litwa 2016 edition: xxviii-xxi.

<sup>2</sup> On the identity of the author of the *Refutatio* the debate is still open. The *status quaestionis* is presented in the volume of Arangione & Norelli 2011. In this regard, see the extensive introduction of Castelli to Magris 2012: 21-56. Litwa 2016: xxii-xl also expresses doubts about the authorship of *Refutatio*. See also the article by Cosentino 2018, where the hypothesis that the author of the *Refutatio* could be a certain Gaius, mentioned by Photius as the author of *On the Universe* and *The Labirinth*, i. e. the *Refutatio*, and also of *Against Proclus* and *Against Artemon* (Bibl. 48). Finally, the summary of the problem by Moreschini & Norelli 2019: 432-448 is very useful. However, the problem of the authorship will not be addressed here, as it is beyond the scope of this paper. The generic expression “author” of the *Refutatio* will be used here.

<sup>3</sup> The juxtaposition of the Brahmins and the Druids is nothing new. It is already found in Dio Chrysostom (49.7-8), who explains how the philosophers were appointed ministers of kings among some peoples: among the Persians the Magi, among the Egyptians the priests, among the Indians the Brahmins, among the Celts the Druids. Such an association also appears in the tradition on the origin of philosophy among the barbarian peoples. See below.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hartog 1996: 104-111.

Preliminarily, it must be said that, apart from the possible interpretations that have been formulated on this document – starting from the work of J. Filliozat – as a clear testimony of the Brahmanic doctrine and the Indian thought<sup>5</sup>, this study intends here to identify the traces of the Greek cultural tradition<sup>6</sup> in the *Refutatio*'s text, as well as its developments in the writings of the Church Fathers.

Given its length, Chapter 1.24 offers a privileged vantage point for those who want to conduct an investigation into what – and by which way – had come down to a Christian author of the third century, who lived in Rome and wrote in Greek<sup>7</sup>, about Indian sages and their way of life.

## 2. Analysis of Chapter 1.24

At the beginning of this Chapter the Brahmins are defined as a “sect of philosophers” (αἵρεσις φιλοσοφουμένων). The words of the text make it unequivocally clear that the author's conception is to equate the wise Indians with heretics. But it is interesting to note that the same expression (αἵρεσις φιλοσόφων) is first used to indicate the Academics<sup>8</sup>. In the author's idea there is no difference in cataloguing the Brahmins within the schools of Greek philosophers.

To fully understand the scope of this definition, two facts must be considered. First, the thesis on which *Refutatio* is built, expressed in the proem, is that heretics have reworked “Greek wisdom, the doctrines of philosophers, as well as the artificial mysteries and ramblings of astrologers”<sup>9</sup>. Second, among both Christian and non-Christian Greek authors there was a widespread tradition that the initiators of philosophy were some barbarian peoples: Diogenes Laertius enumerates the Magi, the Chaldeans, the gymnosophists, the Druids and the Semnotheoi (1.1) and Clement of Alexandria

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<sup>5</sup> Filliozat's 1945 article was the starting point for the work of other scholars: Magris 1990; Vofchuk 1993; Ducoeur 2001.

<sup>6</sup> The most important study on the Brahmins in the Hellenistic sources and in the *Alexander Romance* is that of Stoneman 1995. Cf. Stoneman 2019: 290-300. See also the well-known essay by Karttunen 1997: 55-64, which attempted to identify naked Indian sages. Cf. Karttunen 1987.

<sup>7</sup> A clear reconstruction of the life and work of the author of the *Refutatio* is in Castelli's introduction to Magris 2012: 46-56.

<sup>8</sup> *Haer.* 1.23.1.

<sup>9</sup> *Haer. Proem.* 8. Above translation by the author.

(*Strom.* 1.15.71) mentions the Egyptian priests, the Chaldeans, the Druids, the Samaneans, the Celtic philosophers, the Magi, the gymnosophists.

Putting all these elements together, the terms of the classification of the Brahmins in the *Refutatio* appear clear: they constitute a heresy, whose doctrine is rightly exposed soon after those of the Greek philosophers.

If we continue to read the passage, the first characteristic of the Brahmins that emerges is that they have a special diet: they do not eat living beings or cooked food<sup>10</sup>.

Abstinence from meat – also ascribed to them in the Classical tradition<sup>11</sup> – was already practiced and preached in the Greek world by the Orphics, a small group of mystics who opposed the custom of sacrifice<sup>12</sup>. This is an interesting piece of information, as the Greek religious practice, mythically founded<sup>13</sup> and regularly carried forth in the ritual praxis, was instead characterized by the consumption of the meat of animals sacrificed to the supernatural beings<sup>14</sup>. Meat abstinence was also attributed to Pythagoras and his disciples<sup>15</sup> as a distinguishing mark for a philosophical sect that followed the precepts of a spiritual leader, whose teachings of virtuous practices was aimed at reaching hidden truths and was only shared by a close community of adepts<sup>16</sup>. This belonged to a tradition that distinguished such doctrines from the “canonical” ones of the major philosophers whose systems laid the ideological basis of Greek culture<sup>17</sup>.

Moreover, the fact that Brahmins eat raw food places them immediately in an uncultured world; for the importance of this information it is sufficient

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<sup>10</sup> *Haer.* 1.24.1: οἱ βίον μὲν αὐτάρκη προβάλλονται, ἐμψύχων δὲ καὶ τῶν διὰ βρωμάτων πάντων ἀπέχονται. “They propose a self-sufficient life and abstain from all food of ensouled creatures and that which is cooked by fire” (transl. by Litwa 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Str. 15.1.59 (who quotes Megasthenes *FGrH* 715 F 33). In Str. 15.1.65 (= Onesikritos *FGrH* 134 F 17a) we read that this type of deprivation is analogous to what Pythagoras prescribed among the Greeks. See also Porph. *Abst.* 4.17.5 (= Bardesanes *FGrH* 719 F 2).

<sup>12</sup> See Sabbatucci 1979:73-84. Cf. Detienne 1977.

<sup>13</sup> See the episode of Mekone, as told by Hes. *Th.* 535-558, where the *thysia* rite is once and for all founded, during which humans sacrifice animals to the gods. The meat of the victims is chiefly for the benefit of the mortals, while the deities only enjoy the act of homage. On this regard see Sabbatucci 1979: 74-76; Detienne & Vernant 1979; Prescendi 2008: 31-52.

<sup>14</sup> See the observations in Sabbatucci 1979: 74-77.

<sup>15</sup> See Chapters 107-108 in Iamb. *VP*.

<sup>16</sup> On the secrecy of Pythagoras’ doctrines see D. L. 8.15.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, the anecdotes about Thales’ life narrated by Diogenes Laertius and other authors: cf. D. L. 1.26; 33; 34; 39.

to quote C. Levi-Strauss' well-known work *Le Cru et le Cuit* (1964). However, we must specify here that in Greece the use of fire had a sacred meaning within the sacrificial rituals, as the flesh of the victims had to be burnt. Consequently – if we refer to the Greek cultural background that the author of the *Refutatio* certainly knew well, if only for the literary tradition he follows – the prohibition of eating meat and cooked food represents a double contrast both to common life habits, but also to a ritual use that guarantees their consumption.

Later in this Chapter we read more observations that place the Brahmins in an uncultured dimension: they feed on the fruits that fall on the ground, drink water from the river Tagabena<sup>18</sup> and go around naked<sup>19</sup>.

These data coincide with further evidence from other classical authors about the image they had shaped of Indian culture<sup>20</sup>. In several texts the marginality of the Brahmins' lifestyle is underlined. They are described as showing a number of rather bizarre customs and attitudes that place them in a dimension of *Otherness*, together with a long list of mythical or mythicized peoples living at the borders of oecumene, that is of the then known world<sup>21</sup>.

First of all, in the available sources – up to the late antiquity and beyond – they are defined as γυμνοσοφισταί<sup>22</sup>, that is naked philosophers<sup>23</sup>;

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<sup>18</sup> Palladius' *De gentibus Indiae et Bragmanibus* 2.4 (see the edition by Berghoff 1967) mentions the *Tiberoboam* river. The French translation of Palladius' treatise is provided by Maraval 2016.

<sup>19</sup> *Haer.* 1.24.1: ἀκροδρύοις ἀρκοῦμενοι – μηδὲ αὐτὰ ταῦτα τρυγῶντες, ἀλλὰ τὰ πίπτοντα εἰς τὴν γῆν βαστάζοντες ζῶσιν –, ὕδωρ <τε> ποταμοῦ Ταγαβενά πίνοντες. “They are content with fruit from trees (they do not even harvest them but live by picking up the fruits that fall on the ground) and drink water from the river Tagabena” (transl. by Litwa 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Filliozat 1945; Vofchuk 1993. Cf. Magris 1990: 127-129. See also the essay by Dognini & Ramelli 2001 in which the presence of Christians in India is historically reconstructed.

<sup>21</sup> On the Greek vision of the otherness of the barbarian peoples, see Hartog 1980 and 1996. For the Greek ethnography about India, see Zambrini 1982 and 1985. See also Piccaluga 1982.

<sup>22</sup> The gymnosophists are identified with the Brahmins as early as Ps.-Callisth. 3.5-6: see the recension α edition by Kroll 1926, the recension β edition by Bergson 1965, and the edition of the manuscript L by Van Thiel 1974.

<sup>23</sup> Plu. *Alex.* 64; Lucianus *Fug.* 7; D. L. 1.6; Porph. *Abst.* 4.17. Among the Latins: Plin. *HN* 7.2.22; Apul. *Flor.* 6 and 15; Sol. 52.25; Iul. Val. 3.5-6 (ed. Rosellini 2004). Among the Christian authors who speak of the nudity of the Brahmins: Clem. Al. *Strom.* 4.7.50; Aug. *De civ. D.* 14.17; 15.20; Isid. *Etym.* 8.6.17. In general the sources on the gymnosophists/Brahmins are collected in Breloer & Bömer 1939.

ancient authors provide further information according to which they lack even the key elements of civilization: they live in huts or caves<sup>24</sup>, they spend their time in forests<sup>25</sup>, they eat what the earth spontaneously gives and drink from rivers<sup>26</sup>, just as the *Refutatio* author writes.

As an example, we may mention the account attributed to Megasthenes by Strabo (15.1.59 = *FGrH* 715 F 33) that perfectly illustrates the Greek image of the wise Brahmins. Here the cultural “indicators” – place, diet, sexual practice, activities –, aimed at defining the *Otherness*, are quite evident:

διατρίβειν δὲ τοὺς φιλοσόφους ἐν ἄλσει πρὸ τῆς πόλεως ὑπὸ περιβόλῳ συμμέτρῳ, λιτῶς ζῶντας ἐν στιβάσι καὶ δοραῖς, ἀπεχομένους ἐμψύχων καὶ ἀφροδισίων, ἀκροωμένων λόγων σπουδαίων, μεταδιδόντας καὶ τοῖς ἐθέλουσι: τὸν δ’ ἀκροώμενον οὔτε λαλῆσαι θέμις οὔτε χρέμψασθαι ἀλλ’ οὐδὲ πτύσαι, ἢ ἐκβάλλεσθαι τῆς συνουσίας τὴν ἡμέραν ἐκείνην ὥς ἀκολασταίνοντα.

and that the philosophers tarry in a grove in front of the city in an enclosure merely commensurate with their needs, leading a frugal life, lying on straw mattresses and skins, abstaining from animal food and the delights of love, and hearkening only to earnest words, and communicating also with anyone who wishes to hear them; and that the hearer is forbidden either to talk or to cough or even to spit; and if he does, he is banished from association with them for that day as a man who has no control over himself<sup>27</sup>.

The same Greek perspective, which underlines the distance of other peoples from its culture, is also offered in an interesting passage from Arrian’s *Indike* (11.1-2; 7-8), whose sources are Megasthenes (*FGrH* 715 F 19a) and Nearchos (*FGrH* 133 F 6):

[1] νενέμηνται δὲ οἱ πάντες Ἰνδοὶ ἐς ἐπτὰ μάλιστα γένεα. ἐν μὲν αὐτοῖσιν οἱ σοφισταὶ εἰσι, πλήθει μὲν μείους τῶν [2] ἄλλων, δόξῃ δὲ καὶ τιμῇ γεραρότατοι·

<sup>24</sup> Ps.-Callisth. 3.5; Porph. *Abst.* 4.17.6 (= Bardesanes *FGrH* 719 F 2); see also *Collatio Alexandri et Dindimi* 2.6 in Steinmann 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Str. 15.1.59 (= Megasthenes *FGrH* 715 F 33); Arr. *Ind.* 11.7; Ps.-Callisth. 3.5; Amm. 23.6.33.

<sup>26</sup> Plu. *De Alex. Fort.* 332 B; Arr. *Ind.* 11.8; cf. Arr. *An.* 7.2.4; Ps.-Callisth. 3.6; Porph. *Abst.* 4.17.4-5 (= Bardesane *FGrH* 719 F 2). Palladius’ *De gentibus Indiae et Bragmanibus* often refers to the Brahmins who eat fruits of the earth and drink water from rivers: 2.16; 2.24; 2.38; 2.47-48 (ed. Berghoff 1967).

<sup>27</sup> Translation by Jones 1930.

οὔτε γάρ τι τῷ σώματι ἐργάζεσθαι ἀναγκαίη σφιν προσκέαται οὔτε τι ἀποφέρειν ἀφ' ὅτων πονέουσιν ἐς τὸ κοινόν. [...] [7] οὔτοι γυμνοὶ διαιτῶνται οἱ σοφισταί, τοῦ μὲν χειμῶνος ὑπαίθριοι ἐν τῷ ἡλίῳ, τοῦ δὲ θέρος, ἐπὴν ὁ ἥλιος κατέχη, ἐν τοῖς λειμῶσι καὶ τοῖσιν ἔλεσιν ὑπὸ δένδροις μεγάλοισιν, ὧν τὴν σκὴν Νέαρχος λέγει ἐς πέντε πλέθρα ἐν κύκλῳ ἐξικνέεσθαι, καὶ ἂν καὶ μυρίους ἀνθρώπους ὑπὸ ἐνὶ δένδρεϊ σκιάζεσθαι· τηλικαῦτα εἶναι ταῦτα [8] τὰ δένδρεα. σιτέονται δὲ «τὰ» ὥραϊα καὶ τὸν φλοιὸν τῶν δένδρων, γλυκύν τε ὄντα τὸν φλοιὸν καὶ τρόφιμον οὐ μείον ἢ περ αἱ βάλανοι τῶν φοινίκων.

The Indians generally are divided into seven castes. Those called the wise men are less in number than the rest, but chiefest in honour and regard. For they are under no necessity to do any bodily labour; nor to contribute from the results of their work to the common store [...] These wise men spend their time naked, during the winter in the open air and sunshine, but in summer, when the sun is strong, in the meadows and the marsh lands under great trees; their shade Nearchus computes to reach five plethra all round, and ten thousand men could take shade under one tree; they eat fruits in their season, and the bark of the trees; this is sweet and nutritious, as much as are the dates of the palm<sup>28</sup>.

Regarding the diet of the Brahmins, we have to observe that the process of marginalization of *Others*, from whom Greek culture liked to distinguish itself, occurred also through the use of general markers of characterization: one of these was the description of bizarre dietary practices. Beginning with Homer, for instance, they are attributed to the well-known Lotophagoi (lotus eaters)<sup>29</sup>, and in Herodotus we find the famous Ichthyophagoi (fish eaters)<sup>30</sup>. The same author, furthermore, dwells on the Indians who eat grass (3.100), on the Androphagoi who devour men (4.106), on the Budini who eat pine nuts (4.109), on the Ethiopian troglodytes who eat snakes, lizards and other reptiles (4.183), and even on the Gyzantes who devour monkeys (4.194). Similarly, in Diodorus Siculus, the Chelonophagoi (eaters of turtles)<sup>31</sup>, the Rhizophagoi (root eaters), the Hylophagoi (wood eaters), the Spermatophagoi (seed eaters) are mentioned<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Translation by Iliff Robson 1933.

<sup>29</sup> Hom. *Od.* 11.84-105; Hdt. 4.177; Str. 3.4.3.

<sup>30</sup> Hdt. 3.20. 23.25; D. S. 3.15-21; Arr. *Ind.* 26-31; Str. 16.4.4; Phot. *Bibl.* 250.30-49.

<sup>31</sup> D. S. 3.21.1.

<sup>32</sup> All of them are described in D. S. 3.23-24. Cf. Piccaluga 1985: 489.

To this connotation the Greek perspective added the utopic custom of abstinence from sexual intercourse. In this regard, we may mention a tradition based on some Homeric verses (*Il.* 13.4-6), according to which the Thracians, the Mysians, the Hippemolgoi and the Abioi refuse to eat living beings<sup>33</sup> – feeding only on milk<sup>34</sup> – and live apart from women<sup>35</sup>. Also, the Scythians are said to abstain from meat and to practice sexual continence<sup>36</sup>.

Therefore, following this model of representation, the *Refutatio* author reports that the Brahmans have neither women nor children, but adds that some of their own group living in another territory accept women because of the necessity of reproduction<sup>37</sup>.

The whole question concerning a hypothetical, although highly improbable, lack of births is further explained in the above quoted passage by Strabo<sup>38</sup> where we read that they follow a very sober life style for thirty-seven years, but afterwards they have fewer impediments and can marry several times in order to have a large progeny. Differently, the tradition of the *Alexander Romance* reports that the Brahmans only have one woman and lie with her until she bears two children<sup>39</sup>. But the motif of intercourse with women is even more complex, because according to the so-called “Indian tractates”<sup>40</sup>, such as the *Commonitorium Palladii* and the *De gentibus Indiae et Bragmanibus*, the Brahmans live in monogender groups: sexual practice, aimed exclusively at procreation, is programmed

<sup>33</sup> Schol. Hom *Il.* XIII 6; Eusth. Hom. *Il.* XIII 6. Data and observations in Piccaluga 1985: 489.

<sup>34</sup> Str. 7.3.3; Schol. Hom *Il.* 13.6; Eusth. Hom. *Il.* 13.6.

<sup>35</sup> Str. 7.3.3; Eusth. Hom. *Il.* XIII 6.

<sup>36</sup> The Abioi are identified with a group of Scythians and both are attributed the same costumes: Str. 7.3.3; Schol. Hom *Il.* 13.6; Eusth. Hom. *Il.* 13.6. Cf. Iust. *Epit.* 2.2.8: *Lacte et melle vescuntur*; *Epit.* 2.2.10: *Haec continentia*.

<sup>37</sup> *Haer.* 1.24.3-4: οὔτε δὲ γυναῖκες παρ’ αὐτοῖς οὔτε τεκνοῦσιν. 4. Οἱ δὲ τοῦ ὁμοίου αὐτοῖς βίου ὀρεχθέντες, ἐκ τῆς ἀντιπέραν χώρας τοῦ ποταμοῦ διαπεράσαντες ἐκεῖσε ἐναπομένουσιν, ἀναστρέφοντες μηκέτι. καὶ αὐτοὶ δὲ Βραχμᾶνες καλοῦνται, βίον δὲ οὐχ ὁμοίως διάγουσιν· εἰσὶ γάρ καὶ γυναῖκες ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ, ἐξ ὧν περ οἱ ἐκεῖ κατοικοῦντες γεννῶνται καὶ γεννῶσιν. “They have no wives and do not father children. Those who aspire to their form of life cross from the regions on the other side of the river and remain in that place, never to return. They too are called “Brahmans” but do not live the same form of life. For their wives reside in that place as well. From them, the inhabitants are born and beget children” (transl. by Litwa 2016).

<sup>38</sup> 15.1.59 = Megasthenes *FGrH* 715 F 33.

<sup>39</sup> Ps.-Callisth. 3.6. See the recension β in Bergson 1965.

<sup>40</sup> This definition was formulated by G. Cary 1956: 12-16.



during the summer months and after the birth of two children men stop meeting women<sup>41</sup>. In the image of this atypical community, reproduction is possible only under strictly controlled conditions.

Christian authors, such as Clement of Alexandria and Augustine, go even further: the Indian gymnosophists shun intercourse with women because it is unnatural and unlawful and prefer to stay chaste<sup>42</sup>. From the comment included by Palladius in his work on the Brahmins it clearly appears that this is an aberration: their people are not numerous because of physical continence (ἐγκράτεια) and their unfavourable geographical position<sup>43</sup>.

The reconstruction of the anomalous image of this community – even though in a positive light, but surely in excessive tones – provided by classical sources can be integrated by adding some more details on the peculiarity of their lifestyle.

According to a significant bulk of documents, they never contract an illness<sup>44</sup> and even freely choose to die if they get sick or when they reach old age, so much so that they throw themselves into fire<sup>45</sup>. This *topos* is also echoed in the *Refutatio* words (1.24.3), when it is reported that they

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<sup>41</sup> See the *Commonitorium Palladii*, in Pfister 1910: 4. And also Palladius *De gent. Ind.* 1.13 (ed. Berghoff); Pseudo-Ambrosius *De moribus Brachmanorum* 1.13 (ed. Pritchard 1993). See the Italian translation of this work by Santomanco 2004.

<sup>42</sup> Clem. Al. *Strom.* 3.7.60.4: οὔτε δὲ οἱ γυμνοσοφισταὶ οὔθ' οἱ λεγόμενοι Σεμνοὶ γυναῖξιν χρόνται· παρὰ φύσιν γὰρ τοῦτο καὶ παράνομον δοκοῦσι, δι' ἣν αἰτίαν σφᾶς αὐτοὺς ἀγνοὺς τηροῦσι, παρθενεύουσι δὲ καὶ αἱ Σεμναί. “Neither the Gymnosophists nor the so-called Holy Men have wives. They think sexual relations are unnatural and contrary to law. For this cause they keep themselves chaste” (transl. by Chadwick 1954). See also Aug. *De civ. D.* 15.20 quoted below.

<sup>43</sup> Palladius *De gent. Ind.* 1.13 (ed. Berghoff 1967): διό οὐδὲ εἰς πλῆθος πολυάνθρωπον ἐκτέταται αὐτῶν τὸ ἔθνος, διὰ τε τὴν δυσζωίαν τοῦ τόπου, καὶ διὰ τὴν φυσικὴν ἐγκράτειαν τῆς γεννήσεως. “Therefore their people did not develop into a large population, either because of their unhappy geographical position or because of their natural continence in reproduction” (transl. by the author). Compare Pseudo-Ambrosius *De mor. Brachm.* 1.13 (ed. Pritchard 1993): *Ob quod non in magnos populos hominum eorundem diffunditur genus propter vivendi in memoratis locis difficultatem consuetudinemque pariendi.*

<sup>44</sup> In particular this information is in *Collatio Alexandri et Dindimi* 2.2 (ed. Steinmann 2012): *Hinc est, quod nulla genera morborum numeramus et nomina, sed diuturnis gaudiis salutis intemeratae defruimur.* “It follows from this that we do not enumerate any kind of diseases or their names, but experience the most lasting joys of uncontaminated health” (transl. by the author).

<sup>45</sup> Onesikritos in Str. 15.1.65 (=FGrH 134 F 17a); Lucianus *Peregr.* 25 and 39; Porph. *Abst.* 4.18.1-3; Cic. *Tusc.* 5.77; Val. Max. 3.3.6 (ext.); Curt. 8.9.31-32.

“scorn death” (θανάτου καταφρονοῦσιν), using an expression that appears also in Clement of Alexandria and Diogenes Laertius which can hardly be an accidental coincidence<sup>46</sup>.

It is obvious here that the observations of the author of the *Refutatio* concerning the Brahmins’ lifestyle reproduce the same stereotypes previously used by classical authors.

As we read on in the *Refutatio* passage, we find the image of the Brahmins who celebrate God and sing hymns in his honour<sup>47</sup>. Although this is perfectly in line with man’s correct behaviour according to the Church Fathers, we must observe that this too belongs to an image that Greek culture had already codified. As an example, we may mention a passage by Plutarch (*Moralia, De Alex. Fort.* 332 B), where their spiritual attitude is clearly shaped:

Κάκεϊ τινες εἶναι λέγονται στερρᾶς καὶ γυμνήτιδος σοφίας ἐθάδες ἄνδρες ἱεροὶ καὶ αὐτόνομοι, θεῷ σχολάζοντες, εὐτελέστεροι Διογένηος, οὐδὲν πῆρας δεόμενοι.

Even there it is said that there are certain holy men, a law unto themselves, who follow a rigid gymnosophy and give all their time to god; they are more frugal than Diogenes since they have no need of a wallet<sup>48</sup>.

Likewise, it is significant what we read in Dio Chrysostom (*Or.* 49.7-8):

Καὶ κοινῇ δὲ τὰ ἰσχυρότατα τῶν ἐθνῶν, ἐπειδὴ οὐ δύνανται αἰεὶ βασιλεύεσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν φιλοσόφων, ἐπιστάτας τοῖς βασιλεῦσι καὶ ἄρχοντας τούτους ἀπέδειξαν· Πέρσαι μὲν, οἶμαι, τοὺς καλουμένους παρ’ αὐτοῖς μάγους, ὅτι τῆς φύσεως ἦσαν ἔμπειροι καὶ τοὺς θεοὺς ἤδεσαν ὥς δεῖ θεραπεύειν· Αἰγύπτιοι δὲ τοὺς ἱερέας, οἱ τὴν αὐτὴν ἐπιστήμην εἶχον τοῖς μάγοις, τῶν θεῶν ἐπιμελούμενοι καὶ τὰ ξύμπαντα γινώσκοντες ὅπῃ τε καὶ ὅπως ἔχοι· Ἰνδοὶ δὲ Βραχμᾶνας, ἐγκρατεῖα καὶ δικαιοσύνη διαφέροντας καὶ τῇ πρὸς τὸ θεῖον φιλίᾳ, ὅθεν μᾶλλον ἴσασι τὰ μέλλοντα ἢ οἱ ἄλλοι ἄνθρωποι τὰ παρόντα αὐτοῖς· 8 Κελτοὶ δὲ οὓς ὀνομάζουσι Δρυῖδας, καὶ τούτους περὶ μαντικὴν ὄντας καὶ τὴν ἄλλην σοφίαν·

<sup>46</sup> Clem. Al. *Strom.* 3.7.60.2; D. L. 1.6. It could be the sign of a common source or a pre-existing cultural model on which the three authors draw, regardless of their being Christians or not.

<sup>47</sup> *Haer.* 1.24.3: αἰεὶ δὲ ἰδίᾳ φωνῇ <φῶς τὸν> θεὸν ὀνομάζουσιν, καθὼς προείπομεν, ὕμνους τε ἀναπέμπουσιν. “They always call God “light” in their own language, as I said, and offer up hymns” (transl. by Litwa 2016).

<sup>48</sup> Translation by Cole Babbitt 1936.

Furthermore, since they cannot always be ruled by kings who are philosophers, the most powerful nations have publicly appointed philosophers as superintendents and officers for their kings. Thus the Persians, me thinks, appointed those whom they call Magi, because they were acquainted with Nature and understood how the gods should be worshipped; the Egyptians appointed the priests who had the same knowledge as the Magi, devoting themselves to the service of the gods and knowing the how and the wherefore of everything; the Indians appointed Brachmans, because they excel in self-control and righteousness and in their devotion to the divine, as a result of which they know the future better than all other men know their immediate present; 8 the Celts appointed those whom they call Druids, these also being devoted to the prophetic art and to wisdom in general<sup>49</sup>.

Thus, there was already a recurring image of the Brahmins' familiarity with the sacred. They were said to be "very close to the gods"<sup>50</sup>, to worship the gods<sup>51</sup>, to celebrate public sacrifices<sup>52</sup> and participate in private ones on particular occasions<sup>53</sup>, and in relation to the cult of the dead, as they are expert in matters of Afterlife<sup>54</sup>. This framework also includes the information by Dio Chrysostom and several other sources on their ability to make predictions on the future, starting from the first testimonies attributed to Megasthenes<sup>55</sup>.

In his work *De abstinentia* Porphyry says that they were competent in *theosophia*<sup>56</sup>, and then he adds, referring to Bardesanes, that they were devoted to the divine<sup>57</sup> and used to spend long hours – at day- and night-

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<sup>49</sup> Translation by Lamar Crosby 1946.

<sup>50</sup> D. S. 2.40.2: θεοῖς γεγονότες προσφιλέστατοι.

<sup>51</sup> D. L. 1.6: σέβειν θεοῦς.

<sup>52</sup> Arr. Ind. 11.2 (= Megasthenes *FGrH* 715 F 19a).

<sup>53</sup> D. S. 2.40.2; Str. 15.1.39 (= Megasthenes *FGrH* 715 F 19b); Arr. Ind. 11.3 (= Megasthenes *FGrH* 715 F 19a).

<sup>54</sup> D. S. 2.40.2.

<sup>55</sup> Str. 15.1.39 (= Megasthenes *FGrH* 715 F 19b); Arr. Ind. 11.4-6 (= Megasthenes *FGrH* 715 F 19a). See also D. S. 2.40.2-3; D. Chrys. 49.7; Curt. 8.9.33. This information reaches the Christian tradition reported by Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* 3.7. 60.4.).

<sup>56</sup> Porph. *Abst.* 4.17.1: Ἀλλ' οἱ μὲν Βραχμᾶνες ἐκ γένους διαδέχονται ὥσπερ ἱερατεῖαν τὴν τοιαύτην θεοσοφίαν, Σαμαναῖοι δὲ λογάδες εἰσὶν καὶ τῶν βουλευθέντων θεοσοφεῖν συμπληρούμενοι. "The Brahmins inherit this wisdom about the gods by descent, as it were a priesthood, whereas the Samaneans are selected and their number is made up from those who have chosen to be wise about the gods" (transl. by Clark 2000).

<sup>57</sup> Porph. *Abst.* 4.17.5 (= Bardesanes *FGrH* 719 F 2): θρησκευοῦσι τε τὸ θεῖον καὶ εὐσεβοῦσι.

time – singing hymns to the gods and praying<sup>58</sup>. This shows how the motif of their devotion to the divinity was common both in Greek and Christian circles; obviously Christian literature will reinforce it and make it even more popular. In his *Praeparatio evangelica* (6.10.14) Eusebius, who also quotes Bardesanes (*FGrHist* 719 F 3b), writes:

οὔτε φονεύουσιν, οὔτε ξόανα σέβονται, οὐκ ἐμψύχου γεύονται, οὐ μεθύσκονται ποτε, οἴνου καὶ σίκερος μὴ γευόμενοι, οὐ κακίαι τινὶ κοινωνοῦσι προσέχοντες τῷ θεῷ.

[The Brahmins] never kill anybody, do not adore statues, never get drunk, do not drink wine or other fermented substances and never commit evil deeds, as they are devoted to the divine cult<sup>59</sup>.

In this same perspective we can read the words of Cesarius of Nazianzus (*Dial.* 2 PG 38, col. 980), who acts out an undue identification between “his” and the Brahmins’ God:

Νόμος δὲ καὶ παρὰ Βακτριανοῖς, ἤτοι Βραγμανοῖς, ἢ ἐκ προγόνων παιδεία, μὴ μεθύειν, μεδὲ ἀνύχων ἀπογεύεσθαι, οὐκ οἴνου ἀπλοῦ ἢ νόθου μετέχειν, Θεὸν τὸν ἐμὸν δεδοικότας.

According to their fathers’ teachings, among the Bactrians and the Brahmins it is customary not to make sacrifices, not to eat living beings, non to drink wine, either pure or spurious, and they are devoted to my own God<sup>60</sup>.

And Palladius, in his treatise *De Gentibus Indiae et Bragmanibus* (1.11, ed. Berghoff 1967), will even go as far as to say that:

σεβόμενοι τὸν θεὸν καὶ γινῶσιν ἔχοντες οὐχ οὕτως δὲ λεπτήν δὲ διευκρίνειν οὕτως τοὺς τῆς προνοίας λόγους δυνάμενοι, ὅμως εὐχονται ἀδιαλείπτως. εὐχόμενοι δὲ ἀντὶ τῆς ἀνατολῆς τῷ οὐρανῷ ἀτενίζουσι, τῇ τροπῇ τῆς ἀνατολῆς οὐ προσέχοντες.

<sup>58</sup> Porph. *Abst.* 4.17.6 (= Bardesanes *FGrH* 719 F 2): Τὸν τοίνυν χρόνον τῆς ἡμέρας καὶ τῆς νυκτὸς τὸν πλεῖστον εἰς ὕμνους τῶν θεῶν ἀπένειμαν καὶ εὐχάς. “They have allocated the daytime and the most of night to hymns to the gods and prayers, each man having his own hut and living, so far as possible, by himself” (transl. by Clark 2000).

<sup>59</sup> Translation by the author.

<sup>60</sup> Translation by the author.

[The Brahmins] honour God, and though their «gnosis» is not so deep and they are not very able to understand the schemes of Providence, they prey continuously. When they prey, they look at the sky and not to the East, because they do not take into account the place where the sun rises<sup>61</sup>.

The last three documents, in particular, highlight the ways in which this community was related to the Christian models of life and behaviour<sup>62</sup>.

Coming back to Chapter 1.24 of the *Refutatio*, the author's point of view on the contents of the Brahmins' doctrine emerges very clearly. It is focused on God's idea that for the Brahmins corresponds to the light (φῶς) and the word (λόγος)<sup>63</sup>, with a clear symbolic value. The knowledge obtained through Light/Word allow them to penetrate the mysteries of nature and to possess an exclusive wisdom, far from common opinions<sup>64</sup>.

It is easy to see that the terms used to define the nature of God are of Christian origins and may be connected to Gnostic thought<sup>65</sup>. However, here too we must note that the Brahmanic knowledge of the secret laws of nature is nothing new, as it is known to us from previous classical sources<sup>66</sup>.

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<sup>61</sup> Translation by the author.

<sup>62</sup> According to Berg 1970: 269-305, Palladius in his treatise *De Gentibus Indiae et Bragmanibus* presents the Brahmins in a positive light. They would be an imperfect model of asceticism for the monks (278).

<sup>63</sup> *Haer.* 1.24.2: Οὗτοι τὸν θεὸν φῶς εἶναι λέγουσιν, οὐχ ὁποῖόν τις ὀρᾷ οὐδ' οἶον ἥλιος ἢ πῦρ, ἀλλ' ἔστιν αὐτοῖς ὁ θεὸς λόγος, οὐχ ὁ ἑναρθρος, ἀλλ' ὁ τῆς γνώσεως, δι' οὗ τὰ κρυπτὰ τῆς φύσεως μυστήρια ὀράται σοφοῖς. "The Brahmins say that God is light. He is not the sort of light that one sees nor light like the sun or fire. Rather God is for them the Word, not articulated, but the Word of knowledge through which the hidden mysteries of nature are seen by sages" (transl. by Litwa 2016).

<sup>64</sup> *Haer.* 1.24.2: τοῦτο δὲ τὸ φῶς, ὃ φασὶ λόγον καὶ θεόν, αὐτοὺς μόνους εἰδέναι Βραχμῶνες λέγουσιν διὰ τὸ ἀπορρῖναι μόνους τὴν κενοδοξίαν, ὅς<ς> ἐστὶ χιτῶν τῆς ψυχῆς ἔσχατος. "This light, which they call "Word" and "God," the Brahmins say that they alone know because they alone have thrown aside empty opinion, which is the last garment of the soul" (transl. by Litwa 2016).

<sup>65</sup> In Pseudo-Hippolytus 2017: 165, n. 165, Cosentino advances hypotheses on the presence of Gnostic elements in the *Refutatio*. In any case, also Berg 1970: 278, dealing with the chapter in question, stated that the doctrine of the ornaments of the soul belongs to the Gnostics. Oliver Segura 1991: 59 thought that the Brahmins' ideas presented here are Gnostic and Encratite. Filliozat 1945 identified precise correspondences between some affirmations in this Chapter, such as the one on light/word, and passages from *Upaniṣad* or other Vedic texts. Magris 1990: 127-128 notes that the god *Refutatio* speaks of is no other than the Vedic Brahman.

<sup>66</sup> Arr. *Ind.* 11.4 reports that they are the only ones to possess mantic powers among the Indians. According to Str.15.1.59 (= Megasthenes *FGrH* 715 F 33) the Brahmins discuss "things

The *Refutatio*'s exposition moves on to analyse the Brahmins' idea of *logos/theos*, using the image of the body as a garment. This metaphor was already employed to justify their nakedness<sup>67</sup>, which can be interpreted as a symbol of the failure of the bodily dimension. According to this perspective, the passage on the doctrine of the Brahmins further specifies that the body is equalled to an outer covering that one must get rid of in order to gain access to the divine word<sup>68</sup>; moreover, a war is fought inside the body against inborn enemies<sup>69</sup>: they are identifiable with some limbs, the stomach, the genitals, and some passions, gluttony, wrath, joy, pain and greed<sup>70</sup>. "Only he who has raised a trophy over these goes to God"<sup>71</sup> we read in the *Refutatio* passage, but this kind of statements sound like they belong to the author himself rather than to the hypothetical Brahmanic doctrine.

It is worth observing that if the refusal of the bodily dimension was the way by which primitive Christianity asserted most of its values<sup>72</sup>, it is

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of nature" (τὰ δὲ περὶ φύσιν). Moreover, they are experts in astrology, and closely related to the Magi (Str. 15.1.68; App. B. Civ. 2.154; D. L. 1.9). Also in Clem. Al. *Strom.* 1.72.4 (who quotes Megasthenes *FGrH* 715 F 3) we read that the Brahmins address the subject of nature. Philo reports that the Brahmins are concerned with physics and ethics (*Quod omnis probus liber sit* 74). In Sol. 52.25 the gymnosophists stare all day at the solar disc to investigate *secreta quaedam*.

<sup>67</sup> *Haer.* 1.24.1: διαβιοῦσι δὲ γυμνοί, τὸ σῶμα ἔνδυμα τῇ ψυχῇ ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγονέναι λέγοντες. "They live their whole lives naked, saying that the body is made by God as a covering for the soul" (transl. by Litwa 2016).

<sup>68</sup> *Haer.* 1.24.5: Τοῦτον δὲ τὸν λόγον, ὃν θεὸν ὀνομάζουσιν, σωματικὸν εἶναι περικείμενόν τε σῶμα ἔξωθεν ἑαυτοῦ—καθάπερ εἴ τις τὸ ἐκ προβάτων ἔνδυμα—φορεῖ· ἀπεκδυσάμενον δὲ τὸ σῶμα, ὃ περικείται, ὀφθαλμοφανῶς φαίνεσθαι. "Now this Word, whom they call "God," is embodied and is robed with a body external to himself. He wears it just as one wears a sheepskin. When he takes off the body that he wore, he shines visibly to the eye" (transl. by Litwa 2016).

<sup>69</sup> *Haer.* 1.24.5: Πόλεμον δὲ εἶναι ἐν τῷ περικειμένῳ αὐτῶν σώματι οἱ Βραχμῖνες λέγουσι καὶ πλήρες εἶναι πολεμ<ί>ων αὐτοῖς τὸ σῶμα νευομίκασιν, πρὸς ὃ ὡς πρὸς πολεμίους παρατεταγμένοι μάχονται, καθὼς προδεηλώκαμεν. "The Brahmins say that there is a war in their surrounding body. They suppose that the body is full of enemies opposed to them. They array themselves against the body and fight against it as though against enemies (as I have already showed)" (transl. by Litwa 2016).

<sup>70</sup> *Haer.* 1.24.6: πάντας δὲ ἀνθρώπους λέγουσιν αἰχμαλώτους εἶναι τῶν ἰδίων συγγενῶν πολεμίων, γαστρὸς καὶ αἰδοίων, λαιμοῦ, ὀργῆς, χαρᾶς, λύπης, ἐπιθυμίας καὶ τῶν ὁμοίων.

<sup>71</sup> *Haer.* 1.24.6: μόνος δὲ πρὸς τὸν θεὸν χωρεῖ ὁ κατὰ τούτων ἐγείρας τρόπιον. Above translation by Litwa 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Beginning with the First Letter to the Corinthians of Paul, who maintains that the body belongs to God (6.13-20), and then distinguishes between "heavenly bodies" and "earthly bodies" (15.40). On the Pauline conception of the body see Brown 1998: 33-64.

necessary to point out that renunciation to some aspects of earthly life (such as a varied and complete nutrition and procreation) not only had already been considered as a major aberration in the classical world – as we have seen – but was also later debated by some exponents of Christian thought<sup>73</sup>. Since the spread of early Christianity, the extremist positions of those who supported the call to continence provoked opposite reactions<sup>74</sup>.

Going back to the *Refutatio* passage, the text underlines that the inner battle is won by Dandamis, that the Brahmins considered a god, to whom also Alexander the Great had paid a visit<sup>75</sup>. Such observation is the most meaningful clue that the author of the *Refutatio* here follows a Hellenic cultural model: this episode of the meeting between the king and the gymnosophists/Brahmins is largely present in the work of Greek authors<sup>76</sup>. If we briefly consider the importance of this narration, we understand that its function is mainly to establish Alexander's status as conqueror of the *kosmos*, but also to assert his unavoidable mortality<sup>77</sup>.

The issue of the Brahmins' contempt for corporeity and passions also rises to a high level of spiritualization in other Christian authors. Among these, the testimony of Clement of Alexandria is emblematic, who, in reporting Alexander's encounter with the Indian wise men, attributes these

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<sup>73</sup> See for instance the *Adversus Iovinianum*, where the rigorous Jerome reproaches the monk Jovinianus that believed that fasting was as much appreciated by God as eating and saying grace and that virgin, married and widowed women had the same merits if they lived in a state of grace. Cf. Brown 1998: 359-361. See also in this regard the extensive essay by Hunter 2007. Cf. Barata Dias 2008; Alciati 2011.

<sup>74</sup> Hunter 2007: 90-105 clearly points out that a resistance to the ideals of ascetic life which proposed abstention from marriage and strict dietary regimes was already present between the 1st and 2nd centuries. In this regard, Hunter refers to a letter from the presbyter Clement, and one from Ignatius of Antioch, and demonstrates that traces of this controversy are already in the so-called "Pastoral Epistles" (the First and the Second Letter to Timothy and the Letter to Titus).

<sup>75</sup> *Haer.* 1.24.7: διὸ Δάνδαμιν μὲν, πρὸς ὃν Ἀλέξανδρος ὁ Μακεδὼν εἰσῆλθεν, ὡς νενικηκότα τὸν πόλεμον τὸν ἐν τῷ σώματι Βραχμᾶνες θεολογοῦσιν. "Thus the Brahmins speak of Dandamis as a god, since he won the battle in the body. He it was whom Alexander of Macedon consulted" (transl. by Litwa 2016). See the analytical studies of Stoneman 1994, 1995, 2019, which reconstruct the historical context of Alexander's encounter with the Brahmins.

<sup>76</sup> Str. 15.1.61-66 (= Onesikritos *FGrH* 134 F 17a); Plu. *Alex.* 64; Arr. *An.* 7.1.5-6; Ps.-Callisth. 3.5-6; Philostr. *VA* 2.33.

<sup>77</sup> See, for instance, Ps.-Callisth. 3.6, where the gymnosophists/Brahmins ask Alexander for immortality and he replies he cannot bestow it. The same idea appears in Arr. *An.* 7.1.5-6, where the Brahmins stamp their feet on the ground when they see the king.



words to them: “You will deport our bodies, but you will not force our souls to do what we do not want”<sup>78</sup>.

As to the supposed divinity of the Brahman Dandamis, we must consider that the attribution of a godlike condition was another stereotype used by Greek authors to stigmatize distant and foreign peoples<sup>79</sup>. For instance, the Persian *hybris* was exemplified by their ritual of *proskynesis*, an act of veneration that can be assimilated to what in the Greek world was exclusively destined to extrahuman beings<sup>80</sup>. Moreover, in the Greek tradition Alexander was similarly accused of attempting to be a god<sup>81</sup>. And it is worth noting that we have traces of the same accusation against the Brahmins<sup>82</sup>.

Finally, the analogy between the Brahmins, free from their body, and the fish that jumped out of the water to contemplate the sun<sup>83</sup> represents, beyond the poetic image, an explicit approval of their behaviour and of the renunciation to earthly life, as a way to overcome the natural limitation and reach the divinity.

### 3. The cultural context

In view of such and other already mentioned clues of a benevolent opinion of the author towards the Brahmins’ community, we cannot but wonder what the Christian world really thought about them.

First of all, it is important to understand in which cultural framework the observations of the author of the *Refutatio* are set.

Some forms of deprivation, for instance, that the Classical world had already appropriated as signs of *Otherness*, could appear at first sight as

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<sup>78</sup> Clem. Al. *Strom.* 4.7.50: σώματα μὲν μετάξεις ἐκ τόπου εἰς τόπον, ψυχὰς δ’ ἡμετέρας οὐκ ἀναγκάσεις ποιεῖν ἢ μὴ βουλόμεθα. Above translation by the author. This theme re-emerges in similar terms in *De Gent. Ind.* 2.17 (ed. Berghoff 1967).

<sup>79</sup> For instance, Herodotus reports that the Getae pretended to be immortal (4.93).

<sup>80</sup> Hdt. 1.134; 7.136; Arr. *An.* 4.11.

<sup>81</sup> For instance, Arr. *An.* 3.3.2; Ael. *VH* 2.19; 5.2; Curt. 4.7, 25-28 and Iust. *Epit.* 11.11.7-8.

<sup>82</sup> See Chapters 3.1 and 4.2 of the *Collatio Alexandri et Dindimi* (ed. Steinmann 2012). On the interpretation of this text see my doctoral thesis *La corrispondenza di Alesandro e Dindimo: la costruzione dell’immagine dei Bramani*, defended on 24<sup>th</sup> February, 2020 at the University of Rome *La Sapienza*.

<sup>83</sup> *Haer.* 1.24.7: ἀποθέμενοι δὲ Βραχμᾶνες τὸ σῶμα, ὥσπερ ἐξ ὕδατος ἰχθύες ἀνακύψαντες εἰς ἀέρα καθαρὸν ὁρῶσι τὸν ἥλιον. “Brahmins leave behind the body just as fish popping their heads up out of water into the air see the sun in its purity” (Litwa 2016).



oddities, but they are actually close to the values that some Christian doctrines, such as that of the Encratites<sup>84</sup>, between the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries, felt as their own.

In these groups some radical stances, such as the abstention from meat and the refusal of sexuality, as well as a complete continence and total devotion to God, were determined by the common idea that the time destined to the mortals was about to end. From here came the necessity of abandoning the world and any material goods in view of a new time and dimension, that of the eternal kingdom of God<sup>85</sup>. Among the other reasons given in support of the practice of renouncing marriage, we can mention the evangelical call to the *eunouchia* for the heavenly kingdom in *Mt* 19.12 and the doctrines of the virgin Adam or of the uncorrupted soul, both of which presuppose the exclusion of sexuality<sup>86</sup>.

Such ideas outline a cultural and ideological background – especially of the Encratite communities – where the practice of continence was largely common and felt as the right behaviour.

B. Berg had already observed how the rejection of marriage and of procreation allowed a comparison between the asceticism of the Brahmins and the Encratites<sup>87</sup>. The scholar had rightly noted a passage by Clement of Alexandria<sup>88</sup> in which the latter are assimilated to the Sarmans, who are

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<sup>84</sup> See Bianchi 1985; Sfameni Gasparro 1995; Guffey 2014.

<sup>85</sup> This conception goes under the name of “millenarianism”: see Nardi 1995; Simonetti 1998.

<sup>86</sup> All the relevant information and observations are in the long essays by Sfameni Gasparro 1985 and 1995. It should be noted that the rejection of sexuality in Christian culture was also influenced by Hellenistic popular philosophies, especially Cynicism. Christianity absorbed a Hellenistic context inclined to this negativity on body issues: see, for instance, Gerald Downing 1993.

<sup>87</sup> Berg 1970: 295-296 underlined the connection between Palladius’ treatise *De gentibus Indiae* and the teachings of the Encratite sect. Of the same opinion is Oliver Segura 1990, who also identifies a link between the ideas of the Encratites and this Chapter of the *Refutatio*. The entire essay by Ducoeur 2001 is also based on this connection.

<sup>88</sup> Berg 1970: 298. Clem. Al. *Strom.* 1.15.71.5-6: διττὸν δὲ τούτων τὸ γένος, οἱ μὲν Σαρμαῖαν αὐτῶν, οἱ δὲ Βραχμαῖαν καλοῦμενοι. καὶ τῶν Σαρμανῶν οἱ ὑλόβιοι προσαγορευόμενοι οὔτε πόλεις οἰκοῦσιν οὔτε στέγας ἔχουσιν, δένδρων δὲ ἀμφιέννυνται φλοιοῖς καὶ ἀκρόδρυα σιτοῦνται καὶ ὕδωρ ταῖς χερσὶ πίνουσιν, οὐ γάμον, οὐ παιδοποιίαν ἴσασιν, ὥσπερ οἱ νῦν Ἐγκρατῆται καλοῦμενοι. “There are two classes of these, called Sarmans and Brahmins. Among the Sarmans, the so-called forest dwellers do not occupy cities or have roofs over their heads. They wear tree bark, take their food from berries and drink water from their

indicated, together with the Brahmins, as one of the two groups belonging to the gymnosophists.

The level of barbarism of the Sarmans is well underlined by Clement's observations, through a list of their terrible customs: the lack of towns and houses, the fact that their garments are made of bark, that they eat acorns and drink water with their hands. At the end of this review it is quite clear that Clement wants to convey the idea of a human group that still lives in a state of nature.

Furthermore, Berg had noticed that the author of the *Refutatio* himself reports that the Encratites drew inspiration for their doctrines from the gymnosophists<sup>89</sup>. In addition, we can observe that the presentation of the Encratites provided by the *Refutatio* share some significant features with the description of the Brahmins: in particular, the abstinence from eating meat and drinking wine, and the rejection of marriage<sup>90</sup>.

The above mentioned passages from Clement and the *Refutatio* are the expressions of a process of comparison, at the level of cultural marginalization, between the practice of continence – meant as renunciation and scorn of a common earthly existence, in the Christian *milieu* of the Encratites – and the negative connotation of the lifestyle of barbarian peoples, stigmatized in the Greek culture for their altherity. This assimilation would apply to the Brahmins as well.

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hands. They do not recognize marriage or the procreation of children, like our present day so-called Encratites" (transl. by J. Ferguson 1991). See Piccaluga 1985: 485-486.

<sup>89</sup> Paragraph 7 of the Index to Book 8: Τίς ἡ τῶν Ἐγκρατιτῶν κενοδοξία, καὶ ὅτι οὐκ ἐξ ἁγίων γραφῶν τὰ δόγματα αὐτῶν συνέστηκεν, ἀλλ' ἐξ αὐτῶν καὶ ἐκ τῶν παρ' Ἰνδοῖς γυμνοσοφιστῶν. "The empty conceit of the Enkratites, who compose their doctrines not from the holy scriptures but from their own resources and from the naked philosophers of India" (transl. by Litwa 2016). In reading *Haer.* 8.7., Stoneman 1994: 504 supposed that there was an influence of Indian asceticism on Christian asceticism in Palladius' *De gentibus Indiae et Bragmanibus*. The scholar also assumed that the author of the *Refutatio* had looked to the Cynics – as well as naked philosophers – for a non-Christian origin of Encratism.

<sup>90</sup> *Haer.* 8.20.1: περὶ δὲ πολιτείαν πεφυσιωμένως ἀναστρέφονται, ἑαυτοὺς διὰ βρωμάτων δοξάζειν νομίζοντες, ἀπεχόμενοι ἐμψύχων, ὕδροποτοῦντες καὶ γαμεῖν κολύοντες, καὶ τῷ λοιπῷ βίῳ καταξήρως προσέχοντες, μᾶλλον Κυνικοὶ ἢ Χριστιανοὶ οἱ τοιοῦτοι κρινόμενοι. "Nevertheless, in their bloated arrogance, they turn the Christian lifestyle upside down. Thinking to glorify themselves through foods, they keep away from the meat of ensouled animals and drink only water. They forbid marriage and dedicate the rest of their lives to harsh austerity—proving to be more like Cynics than Christians" (transl. by Litwa 2016). Cf. Epiph. *Adv. haeres.* 2.47.1.6-7.

Evidence of this can be found in the available documentation, in which both the Brahmins – about whom we have already observed various testimonies – and the Sarmans are attributed peculiar living conditions, which relegate them to a marginal existence, marked by ascetic practices<sup>91</sup>.

In this regard, it is useful to observe how the term ἐγκράτεια is used to define the behaviour of the Brahmins. On the one hand we have seen it in Dio Chrysostom's text to underline the positive qualities that distinguish them; on the other hand, Palladius uses it in his treatise *De gentibus Indiae* to indicate their peculiar inclination to limit procreation, in the same context in which their habits are described as being completely far from civil life<sup>92</sup>.

A different matter is the opinion of Christian authors, especially the author of the *Refutatio*, on the Brahmins. From a careful analysis of the available sources we can conclude that the point of view in the different texts oscillates between the greatest praise and exaltation of their customs – that are inspired to high principles of morality and closeness to God – and a minimum of disapproval and condemnation of their atypical barbarous traits.

Few examples are sufficient to illustrate these two contrasting ways of describing and judging. The first is provided by an observation by Tertullian, who, in order to defend the Christians from the accusation of being unproductive, exclaims: “We are not forest dwellers and strangers to life like the Brahmins and the gymnosophists of India”<sup>93</sup>. The second is the already mentioned passage by Eusebius, who – quoting Bardesanes – is clearly in favour of their blameless behaviour. The third can be read in a homily by John Chrysostom (*Hom. in 2 Cor. 15.3*), who points out

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<sup>91</sup> Porph. 4.17.1, quoting Bardesanes (= *FGrH* 719 F 2), reports that the gymnosophists are formed by two “sects” (αἱρέσεις): one is that of the Brahmins and the other is that of the Samaneans (Σαμαναῖοι). With regard to the latter, it is said that those who want to belong to the class of the Samaneans shave their hair, abandon their property, leave their wife and children, and go out of town to discuss theological issues. See also Hieron. *Adv. Iovin.* 2.14, who quotes Bardesanes to mention the same subdivision into two groups of the gymnosophists, who showed great *continentia* in their diet.

<sup>92</sup> Pall. *De gent. Ind.* 1.11 (ed. Berghoff 1967): παρ’ οἷς οὐδὲν τετρά ποδον ὑπάρχει, οὐ γεώργιον, οὐ σίδηρος, οὐκ οἰκοδομή, οὐ πῦρ, οὐκ ἄρτος, οὐκ οἶνος, οὐχ ἱμάτιον, οὐκ ἄλλο τι τῶν εἰς ἐργασίαν συντελούντων ἢ ἀπόλαυσιν συντεινόντων. “The Brahmins have no quadrupeds, no agriculture, no iron, no buildings, no fire, no bread, no wine, no clothes and nothing else of what is needed for work or pleasure” (transl. by the author).

<sup>93</sup> Tert. *Apol.* 42.1: *Neque enim Brachmanae aut Indorum gymnosophistae sumus, silvicolae et exules vitae.* Above translation by the author.

the impossibility of living without agriculture like the Scythians and the gymnosophists:

Ἀλλὰ καὶ τουτῶν αὐτῶν τῶν τεχνῶν ἀναγκαιοτέρα πασῶν ἡ γεωργική, ἣν καὶ πρώτην εἰσήγαγεν ὁ θεὸς, τὸν ἄνθρωπον πλάσας. Ὑπδημάτων μὲν γὰρ ἄνευ καὶ ἱματίων δυνατὸν ζῆν, γεωργικῆς δὲ χωρὶς, ἀμήχανον. Τοιούτους τοὺς ἀμαξοβίους εἶναί φασι τοὺς παρὰ Σκύθαις νομάδας, τοὺς Γυμνοσοφιστὰς τοὺς τῶν Ἰνδῶν. οὗτοι γὰρ καὶ οἰκοδομικὴν καὶ ὕφαντικὴν καὶ τὴν τῶν ὑποδημάτων εἶσαν τέχνην, μόνης δὲ τῆς γεωργικῆς δέονται.

But the most necessary among all these techniques is agriculture, that was first introduced by the god that moulded man. It is in fact possible to live without shoes and clothes, but not without agriculture. Such are said to be those that live on carts, the nomads among the Scythians and the gymnosophists among the Indians. These have in fact neglected the art of building, weaving and shoemaking, but need agriculture alone<sup>94</sup>.

This last passage shows very strongly how the Greek cultural pattern – already well attested in the sources<sup>95</sup> – of representing the Brahmins as an alterity far from civilization was still active in a Christian environment of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

Comparing the *Refutatio* Chapter 1.24 with the three above mentioned passages, it is easy to notice that the author's representation of the Brahmins is quite benevolent, as it can be seen from several details: the justification of nakedness, the approval of their devotion to God and to prayer, the illustration of their doctrines on the Logos and the inner battle, which are in line with what the Christians, either heretical or orthodox, were asserting.

Despite this section appears in a treatise against heresies, whose aim is to list and classify them in order to reject them, the *Refutatio* author's

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<sup>94</sup> Translation by the author.

<sup>95</sup> As an example, we can cite Ps.-Callisth. 3.6: here Alexander tells the gymnosophists that if everyone were equal to them, the world would be wild, the sea would not be sailed, the land would remain unsailed, marriages would not be celebrated, nor children would be born. Compare Apul. *Flor.* 6.8. who points out that the gymnosophists do not know how to cultivate the fields, how to dig for gold, how to tame a horse, how to tame a bull, how to shear and graze a sheep or a goat, but only how to exercise wisdom. Very similar is Palladius *De Gent. Ind.* 1.11 (Berghoff 1967) quoted in n. 92. In the *Collatio Alexandri et Dindimi* (2.3-15, ed. Steinmann 2012) the theme of inactivity and absence of civilization is widely developed. Cf. Di Serio 2018.

point of view does not imply a critique of the Brahmins' lifestyle, nor of their thoughts. This document can reasonably be numbered among those that celebrate them as a mirror of the ideal of ascetical life, although obscured by an incomplete doctrine: see for example what Palladius says about their *gnosis* in the above cited passage.

On the opposite side in the 4th century we find Hilary of Poitiers (*In psalm.* 64.3), who polemizes about the ascetic practices that falsely appears highly moral: he condemns harshly the naked philosophers<sup>96</sup> and the heretics:

*Plures enim sunt in demersissimo erroris profundo locati, qui doctrinae suae perversitatem quadam inanis laboris probitate commendent. Cernimus namque nudis philosophos corporibus algere; ipso etiam coniugiorum usu magi abstinent; haeretici sicco panis cibo vivunt.*

Indeed, many are in the deepest error, they hide the perversity of their doctrine with the honesty of a useless effort. We observe therefore the philosophers who bear the cold with naked bodies; the magicians who abstain from the custom of marriage; the heretics that live upon dry bread<sup>97</sup>.

In view of what we have so far considered, the elements on which this connection is based emerge clearly.

Still with regard to the Brahmanic heresy, another relevant observation is suggested by the words of Epiphanius (*Exp. fid.* 10.2), who expresses an emblematically ambiguous opinion:

Ἑβδομήκοντα δύο μὲν ἀηδεῖς φιλοσοφίαι ἐν τῇ τῶν Ἰνδῶν ἐμφέρονται φατρία, τῶν τε γυμνοσοφιστῶν, τῶν τε Βραχμάνων, ἐπαινετῶν τούτων μόνων, τῶν τε Ψευδοβραχμάνων, τῶν τε νεκροφάγων, τῶν τε αἰσχροποιῶν, τῶν τε ἀπηλεγμένων.

There are seventy-two repulsive philosophies in the Indian nation, those of the gymnosophists, the Brahmins (these are the only praiseworthy ones), the Pseudo-brahmins, the corpse-eaters, the practitioners of obscenity, and those who are past feeling<sup>98</sup>.

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<sup>96</sup> It is likely that in this passage there is a connection with the Indian sages who used to walk around naked. In this regard, André & Filliozat 1986: 396-397, meant that the philosophers mentioned here are the Indians. Cf. Orazio in Hilary of Poitiers 2005: 345.

<sup>97</sup> Translation by the author.

<sup>98</sup> Translation by Williams 2013.

Therefore, the only praiseworthy philosophers among the Indians are the Brahmins, but they are critically mentioned with others who are absolutely to blame.

To conclude this overview, we can also recall a passage by Augustine (*De civ. D.* 15.20.1), who proposes again the same assimilation between heretics and naked philosophers, branding them both as inhabitants of the earthly city:

*Ad eam namque pertinent etiam, qui deviantes ab huius fide diversas haereses condiderunt; secundum hominem quippe vivunt, non secundum Deum. Et Indorum gymnosophistae, qui nudi perhibentur philosophari in solitudinibus Indiae, cives eius sunt, et a generando se cohibent.*

Among these are some of the heretics who have fallen from the faith of the City of God into the city of man and now live according to man and not according to God. There are also the gymnosophists, those naked philosophers in the solitudes of India who abstain both from eating food and begetting children<sup>99</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusion

The analysis of Chapter 1.24 of the *Refutatio* has highlighted how the data reported in it on the way of life of the Brahmins have a clear connection with what the Greek authors described about this community. In particular, we have verified what elements the author of the *Refutatio* draws from the Greek tradition, which underlines their distance from civilization. However, the information about their theological system can be traced back to the writer's own viewpoint, who speaks of the God of the Brahmins in Christian terms. Subsequently, analyzing other testimonies of the Fathers of the Church, who reported information about the Brahmins, the mechanism of assimilation between their regime of deprivation and the ascetic practices of the Encratites has emerged. We have noted that in their judgement Christian authors could oscillate between the benevolent presentation of such behaviors, as in the case of the *Refutatio*, and their radical condemnation.

In light of all this, it can be concluded that the relationship between the atypical, abnormal features of the Indian wise men and the heretical practices clearly illustrates how the *topos* of "marginalization" works complementarily in two different contexts: the Greek one, in order to

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<sup>99</sup> Translation by Walsh & Monahan 1952.

underline the *Otherness* of barbarian peoples, and the Christian one, in order to praise or condemn the extreme choice of those who renounce the norms of a civilized lifestyle.

In this regard, Chapter 1.24 of the *Refutatio* on the Brahmins can therefore be considered as a crossroads between the two different cultural backgrounds, which intersect and overlap, by using elements that constitute an already consolidated representative *cliché*. Nevertheless, the peculiarity of this text, compared to the previous Greek tradition, lies precisely in its overall presentation, from which emerges a “virtuous” link between the lifestyle of the naked Indian sages and the prescriptions observed by the early Christian ascetics.

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