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Examined as a Form of Iamblichean Theurgy

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This article was originally published in

Platonism Through the Centuries, Selected Papers from the 20th Annual Conference of the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies

Edited by R. Loredana Cardullo, John F. Finamore and Chiara Militello

ISBN 978 1 898910 541

Published in 2025 by The Prometheus Trust, Chepstow, UK.

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Marios Koutsoukos

In 362 CE, when Julian and the legions that had proclaimed him the rightful heir to the purple marched on Constantinople the emperor, who had previously been assumed to be as Christian as any of his recent predecessors, shook the foundations of the religious *status quo* by performing public animal sacrifices and openly declaring himself a follower of polytheism. As Julian wrote to his teacher, the theurgist and Neoplatonic philosopher Maximus of Ephesus¹:

Θρησκεύομεν τοὺς θεοὺς ἀναφανδόν, καὶ τὸ πλῆθος τοῦ συγκατελθόντος μοι στρατοπέδου θεοσεβές ἐστίν. ἡμεῖς φανερώς βουθυτοῦμεν. ἀπεδώκαμεν τοῖς θεοῖς χαριστήρια ἑκατόμβας πολλάς. Ἐμὲ κελεύουσιν οἱ θεοὶ τὰ πάντα ἀγνεύειν εἰς δύναμιν, καὶ πείθομαί γε καὶ προθύμως αὐτοῖς· μεγάλους γὰρ καρποὺς τῶν πόνων ἀποδώσειν φασίν, ἢν μὴ ῥαθυμῶμεν.

I worship the gods openly, and the whole mass of the troops who are returning with me worship the gods. I sacrifice oxen in public. I have offered to the gods many hecatombs as thank-offerings. The gods command me to restore their worship in its utmost purity, and I obey them, yes, and with a good will. For they promise me great rewards for my labours, if only I am not remiss.

The tone of this confession of faith through the acts of the knife upon the altar betrays in Julian a strong desire to emulate the devotional standards imparted to him by his teacher. After all, Maximus of Ephesus had a very close relationship with Julian. As Ammianus Marcellinus informs us², when once Maximus visited Constantinople, the emperor threw all court decorum aside and rushed to greet him warmly. Furthermore, the theurgist escorted Julian on his ill-fated campaign against the Sassanids and was it was him, together with the philosopher

¹ Julian, *Epistles*, 8; Trans. W. Wright.

² Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, XXV, 3; Trans. J. C. Rolfe.

Priscus, who held a last conversation on the nobility of the soul as the emperor lay dying in his tent³:

Meanwhile, all who were present wept, whereupon even then maintaining his authority, he chided them, saying that it was unworthy to mourn for a prince who was called to union with heaven and the stars. As this made them all silent, he himself engaged with the philosophers Maximus and Priscus in an intricate discussion about the nobility of the soul. Suddenly the wound in his pierced side opened wide, the pressure of the blood checked his breath, and after a draught of cold water for which he had asked, in the gloom of midnight he passed quietly away in the thirty-second year of his age.

Maximus was undoubtedly the man responsible for the young emperor's conversion to the worship of pre-Constantinian Rome. Yet, if we trace back Maximus' own philosophical lineage, we will find that he was a pupil of Aedesius, who himself had been a pupil of Iamblichus and the direct successor of the theurgic school of Apamea, which he relocated in Pergamon, in 324 CE. It is quite probable that this Aedesius transmitted to his pupils the theurgic tradition of Iamblichus in a more covert manner during a time when paganism was not looked upon favourably by the imperial authorities (REF). Eunapius, a student of Chrysanthius who had studied under Aedesius as well, recounts that his teacher was initiated into the more esoteric doctrines of theurgy of this school only after twenty years. In fact, Eunapius describes Chrysanthius as having a soul "akin to that of Maximus, and like him passionately absorbed in working marvels (τὰ περὶ θειασμῶν συνενθουσιῶν), and withdrawn in the study of science and divination"⁴.

From Julian's own words it becomes manifestly clear that he himself felt like a spiritual descendant of Iamblichus; a feeling that he had undoubtedly inherited from his teacher. Julian calls Iamblichus "a celebrated hierophant" (ὁ κλεινὸς ἡμῖν ἔδειξε ἱεροφάντης Ἰάμβλιχος)⁵ and, even more explicitly states that he considers Iamblichus his personal initiator into philosophy⁶. He even asks Priscus, another of his teachers, to look up for him all the works of Iamblichus that he can find

³ Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, XXV, 23; Trans. J. C. Rolfe.

⁴ Eunapius, *The Lives of the Sophists*, 474.

⁵ Julian, *Orations*, 4.146B; Trans. W. Wright.

⁶ Julian, *Orations*, 4.146; Trans. W. Wright: Τὸν Χαλκιδέα φημί, τὸν Ἰάμβλιχον ὃς ἡμᾶς τὰ τε ἄλλα περὶ τὴν φιλοσοφίαν καὶ δὴ καὶ ταῦτα διὰ τῶν λόγων ἐμήτησεν (I mean Iamblichus of Chalcis, who through his writings initiated me not only into other philosophic doctrines but these also).

and expresses unreservedly his admiration for the Apamean sage's theosophy⁷. It is also important to note that Julian, despite his broad education in the Platonic curriculum of his time, confesses a complete ignorance of the thoughts of the great Porphyry regarding sacred rites⁸. This detail will become relevant to our discussion shortly.

Having established that Iamblichean interpretations of philosophy dominates Julian's thinking, we arrive at the paradoxical question under consideration: if that is the case with Julian, as all evidence seems to strongly suggest, then how does it come about that his approach to animal sacrifice is at a dissonance with Iamblichus' Neopythagorean proclivities? On the surface, one would have expected that such a purist of Hellenic philosophy as Julian, who traced his intellectual lineage back to Pythagoras just like Iamblichus, would have harboured an abhorrence for shedding the blood of animals and for offering victims upon the fires of the altar. Like Apollonius of Tyana, wouldn't he have preferred to sacrifice incense instead of blood⁹? Wouldn't he have preferred Porphyry's creed of abstinence from killing animals and believed that the smoke from the sacrifices fed *enhylic* daemons instead of gods, that is to say beings yearning to be nourished by the pollution of matter (Marx-Wolf, 2016:14-16)?

One way to explain this would be Julian's self-professed ignorance of the writings of Porphyry. After all, as Heidi Marx-Wolf points out, it is Porphyry who first postulates (in his work *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*) that a "conspiracy" exists between daemons and men. Daemons, being entities tightly connected to material world, craved the shedding of animal blood and yearned to be nourished with the smoke of the sacrifices (Marx-Wolf, 2016:12). These lesser beings in the Neoplatonic cosmic hierarchy often posed as gods in order to sate their hunger and prompted men to perform sacrifices. Men, in turn, were all too eager to comply since the baser elements in their natures also craved for the flesh of animals. Thus, the daemons got the blood and the smoke and mortals the actual meat. Eusebius takes up this argument from Porphyry in his preparation for the Gospel and zealously uses it in his polemic against pagan sacrifices, portraying the pagan daemons as evil, blood-thirsty spirits (Marx-Wolf, 2016:13-14). Perhaps this inadvertent alignment of Porphyry with Christian dogma regarding animal sacrifices

⁷ Julian, *Epistles*, 1.

⁸ Julian, *Orations*, 5.161D.

⁹ Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, XXXI; see also Gábor, 2014:151-152.

is part of what made the Neoplatonic philosopher's views on sacrifice displeasing to Julian.

At the same time, if Julian had been initiated into the “mysteries of philosophy” by Iamblichus as he says, then he is undoubtedly referring to Iamblichus' most esoteric work, *On the Mysteries*. This epistolary work is, in essence, a battle of theurgic wits between Iamblichus and Porphyry in particular. In it, the former deconstructs the objections of the latter concerning metaphysical matters (ranging from the operations of theurgy to the hierarchy of divine beings) and vehemently defends the traditional religious praxis of sacrifice which, in his mind, is derived from the “hallowed antiquity” of the Egyptians (Chiaradonna, 2023:195). Therefore, it is to be expected that Julian would side with Iamblichus on this debate and choose to dismiss Porphyry's opinion on these particular matters.

Nevertheless, as Amianus Marcellinus informs us, “the emperor drenched the altars with the copious blood of victims far too frequently” and that he would offer “one hundred oxen at a time, as well as countless flocks of various animals, and white birds hunted out from land and sea”¹⁰. What are we to make of this overzealous bloodlust of the philosopher-king who, as Marcellinus says, was called by many a *victimarius*, a slaughterer of animals, and who went so often to the temples of the various gods to celebrate the religious festivals of all nations (Knipe in Hitch and Rutherford, 2017:270) to offer his blood-red devotions? And still another question arises: how can Iamblichus condone animal sacrifice himself when in his *Exhortation to Philosophy* he clearly considers himself a Pythagorean or, at least, states that true philosophy has always been one and the same, from Pythagoras up to his own time (De Cesaris, 2018:178, 192)?

This seemingly glaring paradox can be easily understood if we have recourse to what Iamblichus is teaching concerning animal sacrifices in the fifth book of his *On the Mysteries*. In Iamblichus's view animal sacrifices are fully sanctioned by the laws and precepts of theurgy based on the principle that no material and base thing can mingle with the perfect nature of the gods. Divine power annihilates and neutralises matter without coming into contact with it (ἡ δύναμις αὐτῶν ἀναιρεῖ πάντα καὶ ἀφανίζει τὰ σώματα ἄνευ του πρὸς αὐτὰ πελάζειν) and,

¹⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, XXII.12.6.

therefore, a sacrifice cannot constitute an unseemly offering to divine nature¹¹.

Nevertheless, Iamblichus argues against the use of sacrifices in their traditional function of merely honouring the gods or offering thanks for the year's harvest or as a means for asking a favour from divine powers. For Julian, this goal coincides with one very practical aspect of his kingship on the material world: to embody Providence as emperor for his subjects. Such reasons for a sacrifice, Iamblichus states, are more fitting to please humans than gods¹². The true theurgic function of sacrifices, according to Iamblichus, is to cease plagues or famines or draughts which are beneficial to the unity of the whole of the human race and, therefore purify and perfect the soul. It is when sacrifices are performed with this theurgic intent of unification that they are most effective¹³:

Τὸ δὲ μέγιστον τὸ δραστήριον τῶν θυσιῶν, καὶ διὰ τί μάλιστα τοσαῦτα ἐπιτελεῖ, ὡς μήτε λοιμῶν παῦλαν μήτε λιμῶν ἢ ἀφορίας χωρὶς αὐτῶν γίνεσθαι, μήτε ὄμβρων αἰτήσεις, μήτε τὰ τιμιώτερα τούτων, ὅσα εἰς ψυχῆς κάθαρσιν ἢ τελείωσιν ἢ τὴν ἀπὸ τῆς γενέσεως ἀπαλλαγὴν συμβάλλεται.

But the greatest thing, the effectiveness of sacrifices, the particular reason that they achieve such impressive results, to the extent that there can be no cessation of plagues or famines or barrenness without them, nor petitions for rain, nor yet more honourable ends than these, such as contribute to the purification or the perfection of the soul or to its freeing from the bonds of generation (Trans. E. Clarke, J. Dillon and J. P. Hershbelle).

In the Iamblichean scheme of being, the animals offered as sacrifices are regarded as “partial entities involved in matter” (μεθ’ ὕλης αὐτῶν μεταλαγγάνοντα μεριστά) which, sometimes need to perish in order to preserve the constitution of the whole of nature¹⁴. The gods send down to creatures on earth their proper emanations for the salvation of the whole and, therefore, the offering of sacrifices essentially consumes matter and assimilates it through the medium of fire into the nature of

¹¹ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, V.4.202.2-4.

¹² Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, V.5.206.3-10.

¹³ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, V.6.206-207.11-1.

¹⁴ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, IV.9.193.4-7.

the gods, essentially divinising it and elevating it to its first cause¹⁵. In simpler terms, animals are *made* to be sacrificed, according to this particular scheme of the cosmos.

Julian, an emperor whose guiding principle during his reign must have included Platonic political virtue of *philanthrōpia*, (Nesselrath in Rebenich and Wiemer, 2020:40-41), would be keen to make ample use of efficacious sacrifices according to Iamblichus' religious canon. The hecatombs of oxen he offered at the altars of the gods were part of his plan to reunite the Empire under the auspices of the gods and to rectify the unity of a spiritual world shattered and profaned by his Christians ancestors. Perhaps, he even ascribed to (or was inspired by) Iamblichus' idea of immaculate souls: certain souls, Iamblichus claimed in his *De Anima*, were sent into the world of embodiment charged with a purificatory mission to perfect and ultimately save the material world (O' Meara in Huffman, 2014:402-403).

Through them, Julian saw himself as acting for the benefit of his subjects, utilising divine principles to achieve beneficial results in the physical world. At the same time, the theurgic benefit of such sacrifices for his own soul, aiding it towards ascend and, in effect, contributing to his own purification and divinisation could have prompted him to take on the role of *victimarius*. He might have been reluctant to trust to priests such an important task who, unlike himself, had not been "initiated" by the "hierophant" Iamblichus into the true and proper way of theurgic sacrifice. After all, Iamblichus explicitly states that only the theurgists know how to properly perform sacrifices, having made trial of them in the practice of their hieratic art¹⁶:

Εἰ μὲν οὖν ἀπλοῦν τι καὶ μιᾶς τάξεως το παρακαλούμενον καὶ κινούμενον ἦν ἐν ταῖς ἀγιστείαις, ἀπλοῦς ἂν ἦν καὶ τῶν θυσιῶν ἐξ ἀνάγκης ὁ τρόπος· εἰ δὲ τῶν μὲν ἄλλων οὐδενὶ περιληπτόν, ὅσον ἐγείρεται πλῆθος δυνάμενων ἐν τῷ κατιέναι καὶ κινεῖσθαι τοῦς θεοῦς, μόνοι δὲ οἱ θεουργοὶ ταῦτα ἐπὶ τῶν ἔργων πειραθέντες ἀκριβῶς γιγνώσκουσι, μόνοι οὗτοι καὶ δύνανται γιγνώσκειν τίς ἐστὶν ἡ τελεσιουργία τῆς ἱερατικῆς.

If that which is evoked and set in motion in sacred rites were simple and of one order of being, then necessarily the mode of sacrifice would be simple also. But if, in fact, the multitude of

¹⁵ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, V.11.214.4-9.

¹⁶ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, V.21.229-230.10-2.

powers stirred up in the process of the arousal and decent of the gods is such as no one else can comprehend, but only the theurgists know these things exactly having made trial of them in practice, then only these can know what is the proper method of performing the hieratic art (Trans. E. Clarke, J. Dillon and J. P. Hershbell).

What Iamblichus is stressing here is the interconnection and unity of the higher orders of being: if a sacrifice is to effectively propitiate a god, then it must necessarily propitiate the lower orders as well. Therefore, the killing of the animal at the altar may propitiate the lower orders of the *enhylic* daemons but in order to be considered a true act of worship it must also propitiate the gods by combining the right invocations and to produce a complete consumption of matter. This complete consumption of matter is, according to Iamblichus, one of the main characteristics of the epiphany of the gods. In my opinion, Julian took on the role of the *victimarius* to make sure the gods would manifest. In effect, he wasn't just reinstating the old rites; he was rectifying them as well: "The performance of sacrifices, if it is to be complete and without deficiency, should join together the whole class of higher beings", Iamblichus states categorically¹⁷ and, apparently, Julian takes heed.

At the core of this doctrine lies the Iamblichean conception that matter is an emanation of the divine father-creator (τοῦ πατρός καὶ δημιουργοῦ). Thus, the immaterial is present in the material in a divinized and perfected way (Lecerf in Afonasin et al., 2012:178), which renders it suitable for the reception of divine epiphanies. At the same time, gods are not constrained by anything of a lesser nature than they are. Therefore, it would be irrational to believe that the shedding of animal blood could deter the descent of a god. In addition to this, Iamblichus believes that gods are the administrators of the geographical regions allotted under their care. An offering made to them from their own local produce, as it were, is both pleasing to them as well as appropriate¹⁸:

Δῆλον γὰρ δήπου τοῦθ', ὅτι τοῖς ἐπιβεβηκόσι τινῶν τόπων θεοῖς τὰ ἀπ' αὐτῶν γεννώμενα προσάγεσθαι εἰς θυσίαν ἐστὶν οἰκειότατα, καὶ τοῖς διοικοῦσι τὰ τῶν διοικουμένων· αἰεὶ μὲν γὰρ τοῖς ποιοῦσι τὰ ἑαυτῶν ἔργα διαφερόντως ἐστὶ κεχαρισμένα, τοῖς δὲ πρώτως τινὰ παράγουσι καὶ πρώτως ἐστὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα προσφιλή

¹⁷ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, V.22.231.8-10.

¹⁸ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, V.24.235.1-5.

It is obvious, after all, that for those gods who preside over one region or another the products of those regions are the most suitable to bring to sacrifice –to the administrators the fruits of their administration; for in all cases their own creations are particularly pleasing to the creators and to those who are the primary producers of something such things are dear to a primary extent (Trans. E. Clarke, J. Dillon and J. P. Hershbell).

Some of these things display to a more vivid extent the principle of *symatheaia* when they are preserved intact, such as the animals of Egypt or holy men (ὁ ἱερός ἄνθρωπος)¹⁹, but others display a more prominent *sympatheia* when they are sacrificed since their resolution into the first principle of their primary elements makes them akin to the causal principles of higher beings and are more honoured by the gods. For someone who accepted this cosmological principle, it stood entirely to reason that not only gods could be influenced through sacrifices but also that one distinguishes between the correct and the wrong ways of going about it (Addey in Afonasin et al., 2012:134-135). In simpler terms, Julian did not only know how to sacrifice but also *what* to sacrifice and *where* in order to ensure the prosperity of his empire through efficacious communion with the gods.

This communion with the gods, according to Iamblichus, relied heavily also on prayer: the efficacy of animal sacrifice was reinforced and brought to perfection. In fact, three degrees of prayer were demanded: first, the introductory, which leads to contact and acquaintance with the divine; then the conjunctive, producing a union of sympathetic minds and calling forth benefactions sent down by the gods even before the request is expressed while achieving whole courses of action even before they form as thoughts; and thirdly a degree of the prayer that is marked by ineffable union with the divine, and was able to establish all authority in the gods (Brisson in Dillon and Timotin, 2016:113-114).

With that in mind, Julian when sacrificing was performing an act of theurgy. He could not always rely on the dissipated and scattered priesthood of his time to raise such prayers to the gods, or, perhaps he saw the act of sacrificing as the *par excellence* practice of theurgy that could bring about a divine epiphany with all the benefits this entailed for himself and for the empire. He was seeking what Iamblichus termed the perfect fulfilment (τελείαν ἀποπλήρωσιν) of the soul.

¹⁹ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, V.24.235.10-11.

This beatific state of being, Iamblichus states, sometimes precedes sacrifices, sometimes again comes in the middle of them and at other times it just brings sacrifices to a suitable conclusion. Iamblichus writes that such practices accustom the eyes of the operator to the brightness of divine light, gradually brings to perfection the capacity of our faculties for contact with the gods and leads one up to the highest level of consciousness they are capable of, as well elevates gently the disposition of the mind²⁰. In other words, it brings about all the goods that a philosophically-minded person would like and a philosopher-king ought to possess.

In this sense, animal sacrifice was much more than adherence to ancient custom with Julian. It was his own practical experiment with theurgy, a bold expression of his individualised religiosity. Though it was expressed within the framework of a long-established religious canon, in the emperor's hands it became effectively an experiment in seeking divine epiphanies. Ironically, his untimely end according to apocryphal Christian narratives was caused by an epiphany of Saint Mercurius who was charged by god himself with the task of the emperor's assassination²¹. Ultimately, Julian's sacrificing spree was a sanguine attempt at uniting the partial to the whole in the microcosm of the Roman Empire. I would even go as far as consider the religious aspect of Julian's reign as history's most elaborate theurgic ritual, seeing that it was carried out in an empire-wide scale.

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²⁰ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, V.26.238-239.12-10.

²¹ *Chronicon Paschale*, 552: The most saintly Basil bishop of Caesarea saw in a vision the heavens opened and the saviour Christ seated on a throne, crying out and saying, 'Mercurius, go and slaughter Julian the emperor, he who is against the Christians (Trans. M. Whitby).

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