CLASS, POWER, AND INFLUENCE: WHO KILLED PRISCILLIAN?

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I. Introduction

The execution of Priscillian of Avila represents the first and only (so far as we know) execution of a heretic by Roman imperial power. Some might quibble that that technically Priscillian was executed for *maleficium* (rather than heresy *per se*), and that technically Magnus Maximus was a usurper not a "real emperor," but the underlying perplexities still remain. What did Priscillian do that merited getting his head chopped off? Why did only Martin of Tours attempt to stop the execution, and not other powerful Church officials (like Ambrose of Milan and Damasus of Rome)? How did the situation get to the point where Priscillian fell under the emperor's sword directly, rather than getting condemned by a council and excommunicated?

After asking the question "who killed Priscillian?" – and after dealing with the inevitable response "why, the executioner, of course!" – many people would say that Magnus Maximus was the individual ultimately responsible for Priscillian's death. It was under Maximus' authority that the execution proceeded, and he was the one to decide after Priscillian was indicted for *maleficium* that the penalty should be death. This paper, however, will argue that viewing just Maximus as ultimately responsible is too simplistic.

After discussing the concepts of "orthodox" and "heretical" in inter-group conflict within the Church and the mechanics of heresiological labelling – both important in explaining how Priscillian ultimately found himself facing a secular court on charges of sorcery – and after giving a brief summary of Priscillian's life and death, this paper will examine the role that seven different parties had in Priscillian's execution: Hydatius, Ambrose, Damasus, Ithacius, the Bordeaux council, Maximus, and Priscillian himself. While some parties may have played a

larger role than others in the manner and means of Priscillian's execution, it will be argued that Priscillian's death cannot be sufficiently explained without taking all nine into account.[1]

II. Monologic and Orthodoxy

As students of history, we are familiar with centuries upon centuries of the dominant Catholic paradigm: centralization of power, distinct hierarchical relationships between clergy, and absolute intolerance for differences of theological opinion. However, it is important to note that this strong consensus was not formed overnight, nor even over 100 years. During the time-period that this paper focuses on – the 380s – the questions introduced above were by no means settled, particularly in more remote locales like Hispania. With one side of the story (and a few contrary accounts that escaped the flames) and hundreds of years of hindsight, it might appear a forgone conclusion who would win (the Catholics) and who would lose (the Arians, the Donatists, the Pelagians, etc.), but to the participants, it was a very real question – with significant consequences for both the winner and the loser.

In speaking about the spread of "heresy enamored" groups in patristic scholarship, Virginia Burrus states that

> Patristic scholars have continued to be drawn to revisionist interpretations of ancient theological controversies… A heightened interest in the subaltern and the subversive flourishes in pockets of inquiry dispersed throughout the academy, as scholars seek to uncover the strategies by which men and women have historically resisted the social and discursive disciplines, the "regimes of truth," of which orthodoxies are formed. As the clarity of the monologic becomes suspect, a new appreciation emerges for the complexity of the dialogic, the many-voiced speech of the historical texts.[2]

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[1] Broader societal factors – such as the solidifying church hierarchy, the centralization of ecclesiastical power, the intolerance of radical asceticism, etc. – also played a role in Priscillian's death. While they will be touched on in this paper, they are not the focus. See Section XIII: "Limitations".

[2] Virginia Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic: Gender, Authority, and the Priscillianist Controversy* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), 1.

As scholarship has moved into more context sensitive approaches, the idea that there was an early orthodoxy that quickly stamped out all contrary views has rightly fallen by the wayside. Put simply, "orthodox" and "heretical" were labels constantly in flux; the absolute, unchanging "regimes of truth" only came about after hundreds of years of power centralization. Consider the case of Nestorius: despite being a vocal opponent of heretics, and (purportedly) being the driving force behind some of Theodosius II's anti-heresy legislation, when his views fell out of favor, Nestorius was himself cast out as a heretic.

According to Caroline Humfress, "Tempting as it might be to view 'the orthodox' and 'the heretical' in terms of the 'monologic' pitted against 'the dialogic', the 'heretic' could in fact be just as monologic as the 'orthodox' – precisely because they believed themselves to be *the* orthodox."[3] In other words, rather than viewing the ecclesiological landscape as composed of one dominant authority (a monologic "orthodox") with a group of marginalized "heretics" – or a collection of groups happy to "believe and let believe" for that matter – it is appropriate to view the situation as one of *a plurality* of monologic groups, each intolerant of the others' differing beliefs. As Humfress says, "Of course, every Christian polemicist (with the singular exception of the Manichaeans) claimed the title of 'true Christian' for himself."[4]

All of this is important with respect to the current work because it establishes some form of theological basis for the disagreement between Priscillian and his opponents.[5] The rest of this

[3] Caroline Humfress, *Orthodoxy and the Courts in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 241.
[4] Ibid, 222.
[5] Much could be written on the peculiarities of Priscillian's theology and its differences from the theology of his fellow Spanish bishops, but, taken on balance, the non-spurious writings from the Würzburg tractates do not present Priscillian as terribly heretical in most of his views, nor terribly different from his neighbors on most points. The fact that he was primarily persecuted due to his views on authority and gender (rather than his Christology, say) is also telling. The

paper will examine these parties' behavior in terms of motivations that might be fairly termed "ambitious, political, and self-serving" – that is, *not* in terms of theological motivations. However, it would be a mistake to take the position that either side did not in fact believe that they were standing up for the truth against dangerous sectarian views. In much the same way it is difficult to understand how a slave-owner in the antebellum American South could convince himself that he was harshly beating his slaves "for their own good and salvation", it is hard to see how bishops acting out of very obviously selfish motivations could at the same time have an unqualified, absolute belief in the rightness of their own views and the wrongness of their opponents' views. Yet this does not mean that it was not so.[6]

III. The Formation and Application of Labels

Heterodoxy – the age-old concept of "other" – was an essential part of the Roman legal framework long before Christians started passing laws in the early fourth century. In fact, for the preceding centuries (during which time they did not have power), Christians themselves had been the heterodoxy to the Roman state religion's orthodoxy. It is no surprise then that Christian laws regarding heterodoxy are not entirely divorced from earlier Roman conceptions of heterodoxy.

From Numa onwards, the Romans thought that the stability and wellbeing of their society depended on faithful devotion to the gods. As Kahlos puts it, "During the republican and early imperial periods, the most important indicator of membership in Roman society and the marker

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characterization of "Priscillian the heresiarch" did not come about until after he was already dead.

[6] A brief perusal of scholarship concerning the psychology of self-deception (much less history in general) will make it abundantly clear that humans are capable of doing objectively incongruous things without a hint of cognitive dissonance. After all, as the saying goes, "no man thinks himself evil".

of loyalty was participation in the sacrificial system of community… participation in the rituals of community was often connected with the welfare of the community."[7] This connection was in no way diminished in the third century as the empire progressed. For example, Caracalla's *Constitutio Antoniniana* in 212, aside from granting citizenship to all free provincials, declared *religio* to be the true basis of Roman citizenship. Diocletian's reforms were also centered around piety – at least his version of it (as delimited in his two law codes compiled in the early 290s). This enduring association between correct religious practice and perceived societal wellness explains why "what we today might classify as an offence or crime against religion was understood under the Late Republic and Early Empire as a crime against the social fabric itself, and as an attack on public order, as it threatened the entire community's relationship with the gods."[8]

As Christianity replaced paganism as the default Roman state religion, the conceptions of *religio* and *superstitio* in and of themselves did not change, but which label applied to what did:

> The juristic development of the *ius sacrum*… had undoubtedly come to a halt by at least the third century… What changed later in the Roman period was not the overall framework for maintaining men and God(s) in their proper relationship, but rather the legal definition of which cultic acts were to count as *religio*.[9]

This means that when the term *superstitio* came to be applied to pagans, Jews, and heretics, it was still essentially *superstitio* – with all the attendant baggage of that designation.[10] According to Humfress, this "recycling of labels" held true for other categories under Roman law as well: "the prosecution of 'illicit' Christian behavior could be developed using a variety of 'criminal' classifications and categories already in existence. In the late imperial constitutions, heresy is

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[7] Maijastina Kahlos, *The Faces of the Other: Religious Rivalry and Ethnic Encounters in the Later Roman World* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 260.
[8] Humfress, *Orthodoxy and the Courts*, 234.
[9] Ibid, 234-235.
[10] Kahlos, *The Faces of the Other*, 267.

referred to variously as a *sacrilegium*; a *criminosa religio*; a *perfidia*; and a *nefaria superstitio*. Heretics were thus potentially punishable under already defined Roman law penalties."[11]

However, heretics were not merely categorized under old labels from the republic and early empire. On the contrary, "rhetorical strategies of naming and classifying were widespread among fourth and fifth-century Christians.[12] For example, in *Codex Theodosianus* 16.5.10, 16.5.11, and 16.5.12 *eleven* separate classes of heretic are prohibited from assembling: the Tascodrogitae, the Eunomians, the Arians, the Macedonians, the Pneumatomachi, the Manichaeans, the Encratites, the Apotactites, the Saccophori, the Hydroparastatae, and the Apollinarians. According to Ayers, "Such heresiological labels enabled early theologians and ecclesiastical historians to portray theologians to whom they were opposed as distinct and coherent groups, and they enabled writers to tar enemies with the name of a figure already in dispute."[13] In this way, heresiological labelling obscured true distinctions in theological development and made heretics appear more dangerous (due to implied organized subversion) than they really were.

Once in existence (i.e., once there was legislation detailing consequences for group membership), these heresiological labels were also used in condemning the non-conformity of new groups, just as the older labels above (*superstitio*, *criminosa religio*, etc.).[14] For example,

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[11] Humfress, *Orthodoxy and the Courts*, 236.
[12] Ibid, 222.
[13] Lewis Ayers, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2. Cf. also Humfress, *Orthodoxy and the Courts*, 237. "[T]he taxonomic naming and grouping… externalizes the threat of the heretic, classifying them into categories already known from heresiological rhetoric."
[14] These were in no way mutually exclusive: a new heresy might be branded both "Arian" and *superstitio* as accusers saw fit. This means that the "available pool" of heresiological labels was constantly growing over time. It was common for newer labels to enumerate specific consequences for some subset of a former label, meaning that those tarred with the new label would not only face legislation related to the new label, *but also* legislation related to the former

when discussing an example of the phenomenon[15] – Arians being called "Porphyrians" on account of their impious conduct allegedly similar to that of the anti-Christian Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry – Humfress comments that "the *legal* censure of divergent theological belief was achieved by defining a new group (Arius and his supporters) and branding it with an old name."[16] In this process a new label – "Arian" – is implicitly created, and it is stated that "Arians" are "Porphyrians" (who in turn would be subclassified under "pagans", whose belief would be subclassified under *superstitio* since it did not conform to the Nicene doctrinal confession of the time).[17] In this way, "through a process of naming, classifying, and reasoning out from existing precedents, any alleged 'deviation' from Christian doctrine could potentially become the focus of a legal case, subject to imperial constitutions, as well as ecclesiastical sanctions."[18]

The most common consequences for a heresiological label sticking were the revocation of rights as a Roman citizen. For example, Humfress notes Constantine's legal measures against the Arians post-Nicea:

> In his attempts to urge the formation of a 'Catholic' and universal body of belief for an imperial church, the emperor Constantine resorted to the sanctions of law in an attempt to enforce the anathemas against Arius and those 'of his opinions'… Constantine apparently condemned Arius (and his followers) with a sentence taken from Roman law: *infamia*. *Infamia* involved the diminution of esteem in which a person was held in Roman society (*estimatio*) – those declared *infames* could be excluded from the right of making

label. As the "theological playing field" got more and more crowded (or at least the set of words used to describe it grew), matters of what punitive legislation applied to whom got correspondingly more complex.

[15] Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.9

[16] Humfress, *Orthodoxy and the Courts*, 226.

[17] For another example, see the characterization of Nestorians as Simonians (cf. Simon Magus) in *Codex Theodosianus* 16.5.66.

[18] Humfress, *Orthodoxy and the Courts*, 228.

> applications in civil and criminal trials or from holding certain offices, as well as more specific disqualifications.[19]

Later developments in Church law extended such restrictions on heretics (i.e., more completely associated heretics with *infames*). For example, heretics and apostates were deprived of their ability to make testaments in *Codex Theodosianus*: Manichaeans in 16.5.7, 16.5.18; Eunomians in 16.5.17; and apostates in 16.7.1. These groups also lost the ability to receive inheritance (cf. again 16.5.7 and 16.5.17, and cf. 16.7.2). Other rights were also abrogated: apostates lost their competence to act as witnesses (16.7.3); Manichaeans, Priscillianists, and Donatists lost their rights to make economic transactions and contracts (16.5.40, 16.5.54); multiple groups lost their rights to serve in administrative and military offices (16.5.25, 16.5.29, 16.5.42; cf. also *Constitutiones Sirmondianae* 6); and many laws even prohibited heretics from being in cities (16.5.13, 16.5.14, 16.5.20, etc.).[20] In short, full Roman citizenship became a function of right doctrine – and in particular, *appearance* of right doctrine.

IV. Summary of Priscillian's Life and Death

Priscillian was an educated layman, probably of senatorial rank.[21] Sulpicius Severus introduces him in the following way in *Chronicles* 2.46.2:

> Priscillian came from a noble, extremely wealthy family; he was sharp, restless, eloquent, educated through his study of many books, and always eager to engage in discussions and debates. He would have certainly been successful, if his great talent had not been

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[19] Ibid, 225. On heretics as *infames*, see also Kahlos, *The Faces of the Other*, 270. "The punishments decreed against heretics and apostates were similar to the traditional sanctions ordered against citizens fallen into disgrace, that is, the removal of the political rights of a Roman citizen."

[20] It is worth pointing out that many of these punishments were really only meaningful for people who were wealthy and powerful. The rationale was likely along the lines of "if we put pressure on those at the top, they will be motivated to apply pressure to those below them so as to avoid penalties from the law, and these people will be motivated to apply pressure to those below them so as to avoid penalties from their social superiors, etc."

[21] Albert Geljon and Riemer Roukema, eds., *Violence in Ancient Christianity: Victims and Perpetrators* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 134.

> corrupted by his depraved aims; many good qualities, of both mind and body could be discerned in him: he was able to stay awake for a long time, to bear hunger and thirst, he had very little greed, and he was extremely frugal in using what he did have. But Priscillian was incredibly vain, and his knowledge of profane matters had inflated his self-opinion more than it should have.[22]

It difficult to know exactly how much of this description is true, how much is rhetorical to serve Severus' purposes, and how much is simply there to enhance Severus' deliberate parallel to Sallust's description of Catiline.[23] A similar situation holds true for Severus' statements regarding Priscillian being taught by Mark of Memphis and his pupils Agape and Helpidius[24] (which, if true, would suggest Manichaean and/or Gnostic beliefs); the opinion of modern scholars is that these supposed teachers were an invention of Priscillian's opponents.[25]

According to Hughes, "The different Churches in Spain already by this time had each of them its circle of ascetics… Priscillian was not in any sense a pioneer in this ascetic movement, but his powerful personality gave it a new impetus and speedily began to transform it."[26] In the 370s, Priscillian gained a following (of both men and women, clerics and laymen) in the southern Spanish regions of Baetica and Lusitania – a following whose distinguishing feature was a form of rigorous asceticism.[27] Soon his views spread north into Galicia, and even over the Pyrenees to Aquitania. This alarmed Hyginus, bishop of Corduba, who informed Hydatius, bishop of Merida, about this growing threat to the stability of the Spanish Christian hierarchy.[28]

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[22] Richard Goodrich, trans., *Sulpicius Severus: The Complete Works* (New York: The Newman Press, 2015), 174-175.
[23] For a brief explication of this parallel, see Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic*, 135-137.
[24] Sulpicius Severus, *Chronicles* 2.46.1; cf. Hydatius *Chronicle* 13b, and Jerome *Epistulae* 133.4
[25] Henry Chadwick, *Priscillian of Avila: The Occult and the Charismatic in the Early Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 8.
[26] Philip Hughes, *A History of the Church. Volume II: The Church and the World the Church Created* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1961), 26.
[27] Geljon and Roukema, *Violence in Ancient Christianity*, 134.
[28] Interestingly, Hyginus rapidly ceased to oppose Priscillian, receiving him into communion both before and after the council of Saragossa. See Sulpicius Severus *Chronicles* 2.47.1, and cf. Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic*, 28.

According to Conti, "Hydatius immediately and vehemently opposed Priscillian and his followers and caused a series of struggles, until he was able to have a council summoned in Saragossa on 4 October 380, which was not attended by Priscillian or any of his supporters."[29] The council was, however, attended by Aquitanian bishops Delphinus of Bordeaux (who would later number among Priscillian's opponents) and Phoebadius of Agen. According to Severus, "a sentence was passed on the absent men: the bishops Instantius and Salvianus were condemned, together with the laymen Helpidius and Priscillian."[30] However, in his book to Damasus of Rome (Tractate II, *Priscilliani Liber ad Damasum Episcopum*), Priscillian maintained that he was not condemned, stating:

> Therefore, in the Episcopal Council which occurred in Saragossa none of us was made a party to a suit and held, none was accused, none was found guilty, none was condemned [*nemo damnatus est*], no crime was ascribed to our name, intention, or way of life, none had – I would not say the necessity, but even the concern to be summoned.[31]

Burrus handles this apparent conflict by noting that "It is highly unlikely that Priscillian would lie about his own condemnation in a letter to the Roman bishop if such a condemnation had actually been issued. But there was probably real ambiguity in the situation, and this ambiguity could have been exploited in different ways by authors in different circumstances."[32] Even though the council's *Acts* make no mention of any explicit condemnation, later authors like Severus may have simply rolled an excommunication soon after the council into the council itself.

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[29] Marco Conti, trans., *Priscillian of Avila: The Complete Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1.
[30] Goodrich, *Sulpicius Severus*, 176. Instantius and Salvianus were two Spanish bishops, and were Priscillian's main supporters.
[31] Conti, *Priscillian of Avila*, 70-71.
[32] Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic*, 30.

In any case, the council "found fault with excessive asceticism and the unsupervised meeting of men and women"[33] – so even without condemning Priscillian directly, its rulings made clear the Catholic bishops' position on the behavior of Priscillian and his followers. After Hydatius returned to his see in Merida, a new conflict broke out. "According to Priscillian's testimony, it was caused by Hydatius' enmity against his group, and was aggravated by the fact that Hydatius had been indicted by members of the clergy and laity of his city."[34] When Instantius and Salvianus arrived in Merida (allegedly to mediate), they were attacked and forced to leave the city in haste. According to Joop van Waarden, "not much later, probably in 381, they [Instantius and Salvianus] succeeded in installing Priscillian as bishop of Avila, thus paradoxically securing his position as a non-conformist against the established clergy."[35] Hydatius, not willing to let this go unopposed, appealed to the emperor Gratian, and received in reply a decree against false bishops and Manichaeans (*rescriptum contra pseudoepiscopos et Manichaeos*)[36] – it is likely that this rescript gave Hydatius the power to identify such parties, because Priscillian, Instantius, and Salvianus gave up their sees without much of a fight (which would be most odd if the rescript gave any room for them to contest the labels). With imperial law against them, the three bishops decided to make a journey to Italy to attempt to gain the support of the bishops of Rome and Milan, and to plead their case before the imperial court.[37]

On their way to Italy, they stopped in Aquitania, presumably to seek support among the bishops there. Conti reports that "they were able to muster considerable local support, especially

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[33] Geljon and Roukema, *Violence in Ancient Christianity*, 134.
[34] Conti, *Priscillian of Avila*, 2. Cf. Priscillian, *Tractatus II* lines 110-130 (according to Conti's numbering – which will be assumed from now on).
[35] Geljon and Roukema, *Violence in Ancient Christianity*, 134.
[36] Conti, *Priscillian of Avila*, 76-77. Priscillian, *Tractatus II* line 143.
[37] Ibid, 3.

in the city of Eauze. Then they moved to Bordeaux, where they hoped to be received by Delphinus… But Delphinus showed absolute hostility and refused to meet them."[38] Priscillian and his companions were, however, received by the wealthy widow Euchrotia on her villa, and when they resumed their journey, Euchrotia and her daughter Procula joined them.[39] While Severus reports in *Chronicles* 2.48.2 that the group first traveled to Rome then to Milan, scholars tend to reverse the orders of these journeys.[40] Apparently, after both Ambrose and the court at Milan refused to receive them, Priscillian and his companions made their way to Rome to visit Damasus (and presumably to give him the aforementioned *Liber ad Damasum*), but when this too failed, they returned to Milan to try again.[41] This time they were successful – either through bribery or by exploiting the court politics surrounding Ambrose, Priscillian was able to obtain the support of Macedonius, Gratian's *magister officiorum*, who cancelled Gratian's previous *rescriptum contra pseudoepiscopos et Manichaeos*, thereby allowing the bishops to return to their churches.[42] At this point, Priscillian and Instantius decided to return to Spain, evidently satisfied by this new rescript (even though they had not really secured the support of Ambrose, Damasus, or the imperial court).[43]

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[38] Ibid.

[39] This was not a terribly good PR move on the part of Priscillian. Priscillian's association with women was one of the reasons the label of Manichean stuck, so bringing women along to his protestation of this very label was somewhat counterproductive. With this being said, they likely provided much needed financial support, perhaps even supplying money for bribes. In *Chonicles* 2.48.1, Severus reports a rumor that Procula had been raped by Priscillian, and had aborted the pregnancy with herbs.

[40] Conti, *Priscillian of Avila*, 3.

[41] Geljon and Roukema, *Violence in Ancient Christianity*, 134. Cf. Conti, *Priscillian of Avila*, 3; Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic*, 84-94; Chadwick, *Priscillian of Avila*, 40.

[42] As to how Macedonius could contradict Gratian's earlier rescript without repercussions, see Neil McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 150-151.

[43] According to Severus, *Chronicles* 2.48.2, Salvianus had died in Milan, presumably during their second visit there.

Priscillian and Instantius were still opposed upon their return – now more by Ithacius of Ossonoba (who was another of the Spanish bishops present at the council of Saragossa) than by Hydatius. Conti states that Ithacius "repeatedly attempted to resist the restoration of the two heretical bishops… [but] when through the proconsul Volventius, governor of Lusitania, Priscillian and his party obtained an order to arrest Ithacius as a *perturbator ecclesiarum*, Icathius decided to leave Spain and take refuge in Gaul, in the imperial city of Trier."[44] Severus describes Icathius' machinations in Gaul in *Chronicles* 2.49.1-2.[45] When in Gaul, Icathius appealed to the praetorian prefect Gregory, and obtained from him a rescript ordering Priscillian and his companions to appear in Trier to answer for their behavior. However, Gregory was not able to get Gratian's support (even though Gratian had initially opposed Priscillian), and Priscillian, who evidently still had the patronage of Macedonius, was able to get the trial transferred to Spain. However, when officers were sent to bring Icathius from Trier to Spain, Icathius evaded them with the help of bishop Britannius.

The political landscape that was proving to be so important in the bishops' dispute changed drastically when the usurper Magnus Maximus overthrew Gratian and established himself in Trier in 383. Wasting no time, Icathius got the new emperor's ear, and convinced him "to convene a council in Bordeaux in which all the parties involved should appear."[46] Probably taking place in 384, the Bordeaux council proved to be quite unfriendly to Priscillian and Instantius. Severus reports that "When Instantius and Priscillian were brought, Instantius was ordered to state his case first. Afterward, having failed to justify himself, he was pronounced

[44] Conti, *Priscillian of Avila*, 4.
[45] Goodrich, *Sulpicius Severus*, 177-178.
[46] Conti, *Priscillian of Avila*, 4.

unworthy to hold the office of bishop. Priscillian, to avoid a hearing before the bishops, appealed to the emperor."[47]

In *Chronicles* 2.50.1-2, Severus reports that Icathius even went so far as to impugn Martin of Tours, who was also known for his asceticism (although he condemned Priscillian). Severus is probably not the most reliable source on the power wielded by Martin (due to his great reverence for the man, cf. his *Vita Sancti Martini*), but if we are to generally accept his sequence of events, Martin delayed the trial as long as he was in Trier, and made Maximus promise "that he would do nothing cruel in resolving these matters."[48] However, after Martin left, the anti-Priscillian faction (including Ithacius and Hydatius) managed to turn Maximus, and it was decided that Priscillian would be tried under the prefect Evodius. Importantly, Priscillian was no longer being brought up on charges of heresy (as he would have been at Bordeaux), but on charges of *maleficium*.[49] Evodius found Priscillian guilty – perhaps in part due to his confession "that he had studied abominable doctrines, had met with indecent women, even at night, and was in the habit of praying naked"[50] (likely obtained under torture, despite the fact that *honorati* were typically exempt from torture) – and he was imprisoned while Maximus was consulted to determine what his punishment should be. When Maximus decided that Priscillian and his associates ought to be sentenced to death, according to Severus, it was decided that a repeat trial was necessary.[51] Severus also states that Ithacius backed out as prosecutor in this second trial, fearing what other bishops would think of his involvement in the final trial of a

[47] Goodrich, *Sulpicius Severus*, 178.
[48] Ibid, 179.
[49] Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic*, 97.
[50] Geljon and Roukema, *Violence in Ancient Christianity*, 136.
[51] Sulpicius Severus, *Chronicles* 2.51.1

capital case. However, Maximus replaced him with Patricius (a secular lawyer), and upon conclusion of this second trial (likely in 385),[52] Priscillian was beheaded.

V. Hydatius

For the first leg of Priscillian's journey to the executioner, Hydatius of Merida was unquestionably his fiercest opponent. Hydatius was the driving force behind the calling of the council of Saragossa in 380, and he was by no means impartial at this council. Says Burrus:

> Whatever the initial intentions and inclinations of the attending bishops may have been, Hydatius exerted considerable effort to turn the council against Priscillian. Priscillian reports that the bishop of Merida came to the council prepared with a memorandum, which evidently presented a program of Christian lifestyle and worship aimed at correcting the supposed abuses of Priscillian and his circle.[53]

As discussed previously, while the council of Saragossa probably did not explicitly condemn Priscillian, it certainly did attempt to reorient and control ascetic practice, and set the ball rolling for Priscillian's eventual rejection by the Church. Hydatius also went on a smear campaign against Priscillian, attacking his use of apocryphal scriptures in particular. It is also quite likely that Hydatius made a personal excommunication of Priscillian around this point.[54]

Following the conflict at Merida and subsequent ordination of Priscillian at Avila, Hydatius was the one who first got the label of Manichaean to "stick" to Priscillian. As discussed previously in Section III: "The Formation and Application of Labels", it was not important that Priscillian was not actually a Manichaean – by getting the label to stick through pointing out Priscillian's asceticism, his choice of reading material, his interest in demonology and dualistic cosmology, and his tendency to hold small-group meetings of mixed genders, Hydatius was able

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[52] For the chronology of Priscillian's final trial and execution, see Chadwick, *Priscillian of Avila*, 132-134.
[53] Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic*, 28.
[54] On private creeds and anathemas, see Humfress, *Orthodoxy and the Courts*, 228.

to bring down consequences of Roman law on his factional enemy.[55] The Manichaean label is important in understanding how an extremely well-educated senatorial-rank nobleman found his head on the chopping block. Similar to how felons today are likely to receive less sympathy concerning punishment for equally or even less severe crimes than their no-criminal-record counterparts, the Manichaean label conditioned later harsh treatment of Priscillian: "situated somewhere between the more intimate enmity of the heretic and the absolutized alterity of the magician, the label of Manichaeism ultimately mediated the slide from charges of heresy to the more deadly accusation of sorcery."[56]

In petitioning Gratian for a *rescriptum contra pseudoepiscopos et Manichaeos*, Hydatius started the proverbial crusade against Priscillian that would ultimately lead to his death: not only with respect to the slide to progressively more damning labels, but also with respect to escalation to higher authority.[57] If the conflict between Hydatius and Priscillian's circle had remained confined to Spain and Aquitania, Priscillian would have never even had the chance to be executed, for church councils do not execute people. Indeed, as the later heresy inquisitions at Toledo and Tarragona show,[58] the worst consequences "Priscillianists" would later face were removal from their sees and withdrawal of communion (excommunication). While this is

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[55] On the rhetorical effectiveness of the Manichaean label, see Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic*, 49. "[T]he charge of Manichaeism was particularly effective as part of a continuing rhetorical strategy to represent Priscillian's circle as private and therefore subversive, since the Manichaeans were commonly associated with secretive and seditious behavior."

[56] Ibid. Cf. also the well-known metaphor of a frog being slowly boiled alive. While people would ordinarily never execute a nobleman for anything other than treason, it seems less outrageous if you make a progression like that of "nobleman → contentious heretic → Manichaean → sexual profligate/seducer → sorcerer" over a long period of time.

[57] On the importance of escalation as a tactic of bishops in Late Antiquity, see Erika Hermanowicz, "Catholic Bishops and Appeals to the Imperial Court: A Legal Study of the Calama Riots in 408," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12, no. 4 (2004): 481-521.

[58] See Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic*, 102-125.

admittedly strong if one considers the contemporaneous viewpoints regarding salvation and Church membership, it still a far cry from public execution like a traitor.

VI. Ambrose

In his *Liber ad Damasum*, Priscillian complains to Damasus that Ambrose had been deceived by Hydatius' tales of his Manichaeanism,[59] and the context of this complaint (between an account of Hydatius' attempt at obtaining a rescript and a report of how Hydatius used said rescript) implies that Ambrose had been instrumental in procuring the rescript.[60] The extent of Ambrose's early opposition of Priscillian is hard to determine due to fact that Ambrose never mentions Priscillian by name in his extant writings, but if Priscillian writes to Damasus that Ambrose had been "completely deceived" (*tota mentitur*), we may be sure that it was something more than passive disinterest.

At the "embassy stage" of Priscillian's journey – before stronger charges like sexual immorality and sorcery appeared – it is interesting to consider exactly why Ambrose would refuse to even interact with Priscillian. Both Ambrose and Priscillian were of the top social classes of their respective territories, and both were extremely well educated (and not just in Christian texts). The number of people, even in some place like Milan, that could carry on intelligent conversations about classical authors would have still been small – and the number of people who could also speak on erudite points of Christian theology and their relationship to the classical canon would have been even smaller. So why did Ambrose blow Priscillian off entirely? One might hypothesize that it was because he disagreed with Priscillian's views, but then one would have to explain why Ambrose was perfectly comfortable writing to Symmachus

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[59] Priscillian, *Tractatus II* line 145ff. "*Uiro etiam spectabili fratri tuo Ambrosio episcopo tota mentitur*…" See Conti, *Priscillian of Avila*, 76-77.
[60] See Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic*, 85, and cf. note 28.

concerning the Altar of Victory in Rome. If Ambrose could write to a traditionalist pagan senator about the restoration of pagan temple sacrifices, it would be most odd if he could not carry on a civil conversation with an ascetic Christian bishop.

In the introduction to his biography of Ambrose, McLynn paints the traditional view of Ambrose the invincible: "Ambrose conquered three emperors in his cathedral at Milan… He preached eloquently to Gratian upon the faith; blockaded himself against Valentinian II in a triumphant campaign of defiance; and brought Theodosius to his knees to make an unprecedented act of public penance."[61] Burrus, however, thinks that Ambrose's position (especially in the early 380s) was much less stable than his achievements might lead one to believe, and that this explains Ambrose's reluctance to have any association with Priscillian. Ambrose faced a significant anti-Nicene contingency in Milan, external opposition from the Homoian bishops of Illyricum (most especially Palladius of Ratiaria), and an uncertain relationship with the emperor Gratian; several of his writings in the period of 380-381 focus on clearing his own name of heresy (similar to Priscillian's *Apology*).[62] It is likely that Priscillian first arrived in Milan in 381 (or perhaps 382) when Ambrose was still dealing with these privatized factions of Homoians in Milan and lingering accusations of his own heresy. At this point, Burrus argues, "We can easily imagine, then, that both Ambrose's own vulnerability to charges of heresy and his self-conscious orthodoxy would have inhibited him from risking the potential embarrassment of association with a Spaniard accused of heresy. Indeed, the timing of Priscillian's visit could scarcely have been worse."[63]

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[61] McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, xi.
[62] Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic*, 85-86.
[63] Ibid, 88.

All of this does not explain Ambrose's failure to act later in the process, however, When Priscillian was facing execution by a secular court, Ambrose would have grounds for protesting no matter current issues in Milan. Due to his influence, it is hard to believe that Ambrose was not kept informed of the proceedings in Gaul as Priscillian proceeded from church council in Bordeaux to secular court in Trier. This same influence would also have let Ambrose stop the execution if he so chose; if Martin of Tours was considered important enough that Maximus listened to him (at least for a time), Maximus would have certainly stopped the execution if he thought it would get him Ambrose's support. So why then did Ambrose not intervene? It is a most vexing question, and one which the sources do not answer for us in any satisfying way. Perhaps Ambrose really did believe that Priscillian was guilty of *maleficium* and worthy of execution. Perhaps his reluctance to step in and save Priscillian stemmed from political considerations with respect to Maximus; Ambrose was certainly careful of whom he openly supported and openly opposed after Gratian's assassination in 383. However, neither one of these possibilities seems particularly satisfying given the severity of the punishment and the possibility of establishing a precedent whereby heretics are *executed* for nonconformity (rather than *excommunicated*).

In my view, the most plausible explanation for Ambrose's inaction is that Ambrose viewed Priscillian as a betrayer of his class and status (as Severus' allusion to Catiline suggests). Just as the *liberatores* took action when Julius Caesar appealed to the people, Priscillian's "populist" tendencies may have justified his death in the eyes of those Church officials (like Ambrose) that wanted to maintain boundaries: between clergy and laity, between men and women, between public and private. All the better if they did not have to get their hands dirty themselves – by leaving Maximus to his devices, the Church officials who wanted an example

made of Priscillian could claim it was just the cruelty of the upstart usurper (plus the overzealousness of a few rogue bishops like Icathius) that led to the execution, not their scheming. In fact, they could even condemn the execution after the fact, and it would have still served their purposes: Priscillian would be gone, and, seeing what happened to him, any other charismatic (especially ascetic) leaders outside of the Church hierarchy would think twice about putting up a fight.[64]

VII. Damasus

While Ambrose wielded a significant amount of power (though, as we have discussed, perhaps not as much as often supposed – especially in the early 380s when he was consolidating his position in Milan), much of his authority came not through his position as bishop of Milan, but through his political shrewdness (and sheer force of personality). Much of Damasus' power, on the other hand, came through his position as the bishop of Rome. This is not to say Damasus was weak-willed or individually unimpressive; on the contrary, under his superintendence Apollinarianism and Macedonianism were condemned, and Rome was transformed into a late antique Christian city – partially through his building programs and his epigraphic poetry.[65]

This difference in power origins is important in understanding why *Liber ad Damasum* exists, but no *Liber ad Ambrosium*. For Priscillian and his companions, gaining the support of Ambrose was desirable mostly due to his celebrity and connections at the imperial court;

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[64] Ambrose did in fact condemn the execution after it occurred, which naturally leads one to ask why he did not condemn the execution earlier (when he still could have stopped it). In my opinion, those wishing to analyze the aftermath of Priscillian's execution with respect to the condemnations of various individuals must also take into account the silence of these same individuals prior to the execution – whether or not they agree with the theory that this silence was present due to preservation of hierarchy and class structure.

[65] See Dennis Trout, trans., *Damasus of Rome, The Epigraphic Poetry: Introduction, Texts, Translations, and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Ambrose alone could not single-handedly win them their fight, but he could help enable the solving of their problems through secular channels. Getting the support of Damasus, however, could solve their problems once and for all – through Church channels. If Damasus were to call an episcopal council at Rome and summon Hydatius to make him prove his accusations of Manichaeanism (which he would probably not succeed at due to a lack of concrete evidence), Priscillian and his companions could significantly decrease or even eliminate the local pressure they were facing, particularly if Hydatius was condemned for being fractious (as Priscillian argued he was in *Liber ad Damasum*).[66] A council in Spain called on Damasus' authority would have similar effect.

Given the similarities between Priscillian's class, education, and status in Spain and Damasus' class, education, and status in Rome, we are again faced with question of why Damasus would choose not to intervene on behalf of Priscillian. Similar to her observations about Ambrose's reluctance vis-à-vis his position in Milan, Burrus, argues that Damasus' refusal to meet with Priscillian can be attributed to factional conflict in Rome (especially that relating to Ursinus).[67] Van Waarden gives another possible explanation by noting that Priscillian's language in *Liber ad Damasum* gives no Damasus no loophole; he frames the course of action that he proposes as the only godly one.[68] Perhaps if Priscillian had not so tried to force Damasus' hand, he would have been more successful in obtaining some measure of support from him. It is further worth noting that unlike Ambrose (whom Priscillian was seeking *personal* support from), Damasus had the option of working through the church hierarchy without even involving himself

[66] On Priscillian's request for a council, see Conti, *Priscillian of Avila*, 76-80. Priscillian, *Tractatus II* lines 156-198.
[67] See Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic*, 90-92.
[68] Geljon and Roukema, *Violence in Ancient Christianity*, 142-143.

directly. In other words, he could have called a church council without presiding over it (either in Rome or in Spain), and let the relevant parties deal with the issue themselves. This would have spared him any fallout from directly associating with Priscillian while simultaneously deciding the issue of Priscillian's doctrine once and for all.

The fact that he did not even do this "indirect" means of resolution suggests that there were other factors influencing Damasus to ignore Priscillian, even at the time of his embassy. He also failed to step in later on in the process when Priscillian was being tried in a secular court, just like Ambrose. Together, these observations point to Damasus wishing Priscillian out of the picture for some reason. As I argue above, I believe the most plausible explanation for this is that he viewed Priscillian as a betrayer of his class and a threat to the maintenance of boundaries important to Church hierarchy, such as those between clergy and laity, between men and women, and between public and private. If this is correct, then while Ambrose and Damasus did not play active roles in Priscillian's execution as accusers or direct actors, their intentional inaction, both with respect to Priscillian's embassy to Italy and especially with respect to his trial in Gaul, undeniably contributed to Priscillian's death.[69]

VIII. Ithacius

Ithacius' machinations closely resembled those of Hydatius from earlier in Priscillian's journey, except now sexual immorality and sorcery were the labels, not Manicheanism, and he escalated proceedings to the usurper Maximus rather than the emperor Gratian. However, Ithacius' participation in the conflict was also qualitatively different than had been Hydatius', since Priscillian and his companions had enough support at this point (Volventius, the governor

[69] Whether or not it is appropriate to say that Ambrose and/or Damasus *killed* Priscillian depends on whether one views failing to act on the ability to save someone as equivalent to or distinct from holding the sword directly.

of Lusitania; Macedonius, Gratian's *magister officiorum*) to make his life dangerous. It is likely that part of Icathius' dogged resistance stemmed from resentment that he was forced to flee Spain to Gaul as a result of his opposition to Priscillian.

Ithacius' twin allegations of sexual immorality and sorcery were not unrelated to each other. In fact, it was very common for charges of Gnosticism, Manicheanism, and/or sorcery to be accompanied by charges of sexual impropriety.[70] In particular, the concept of "seducers" was often linked to 2 Timothy 3:6-7: "For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth" (ESV). Priscillian's extensive education and interest in apocryphal writings, demonology, and dualistic cosmology made him an easy target to accuse of leading women away by means of "excessive knowledge".

Instead of trying to settle the "Priscillian problem" through a rescript as Hydatius had, Ithacius pursued courses of action that would be definitive: first a church council at Bordeaux, then a secular trial at Trier when Priscillian chose to avoid the former. As a consequence of this, his opposition was very public; acting as a formal accuser and litigator, he was not permitted to be vague and nebulous about the bad things Priscillian was doing. In this way, Ithacius' opposition signals a fundamental change in the proceedings – rather than facing someone attacking him through implication and rumor, Priscillian was now facing someone willing to publicly accuse him, and bear the consequences of doing so (at least until the final trial, at which

[70] For a thorough discussion of the concept in relation to Priscillian, see Alberto Ferreiro, "Sexual Depravity, Doctrinal Error, and Character Assassination in the Fourth Century: Jerome Against the Priscillianists," *Studia Patristica* 28 (1993): 29-38.

point it no longer really mattered; Ithacius backing out and getting replaced by Patricius had no real impact on Priscillian's fate nor people's perceptions of Ithacius' involvement).

IX. The Bordeaux Council

The Bordeaux council's culpability in Priscillian's death relates to their unwillingness to force Priscillian to accept their pronouncement (or, looking at it the other way around, their willingness to hand Priscillian over to a secular court). As the example of Instantius clearly shows, Priscillian could have been condemned by the council without being executed – losing his church and getting excommunicated, but avoiding the sword. This example also demonstrates that the council could have moderated the charges being brought against Priscillian (i.e., limited the accusations of *maleficium* and sexual immorality), which would have had the effect of making capital punishment impossible, even if Priscillian was being tried in a secular court.

Given the historical precedent for deciding matters of doctrine in church councils (e.g., Nicea in 325 and Constantinople in 381 – only several years prior to Bordeaux), the Bordeaux council's unwillingness to deal with Priscillian in the Church sphere is most puzzling. In Severus' opinion, the fact that bishops gathered at Bordeaux were not at all sympathetic towards Priscillian's cause in no way diminished the authority the council had.[71] In in 2.49.3, Severus states (emphasis mine) "Our bishops surrendered the point with their usual inconstancy. They should have either rendered a sentence, even against a resistant man or, ***if they themselves were regarded with suspicion, should have reserved the case for other bishops***. They should not have allowed the investigation of such blatant crimes to be referred to the emperor."[72] While several

[71] The lack of support at Bordeaux is why Priscillian had tried to have Icathius extradited to Spain – so that proceedings could occur someplace where he would have more friendly faces. Charges of sexual immorality and sorcery would not have stuck in Spain where Priscillian was actually known on an individual level.
[72] Goodrich, *Sulpicius Severus*, 178.

theories have been put forth as to why the council let Priscillian appeal upwards, the most convincing, in my opinion, is that they were forced to by Maximus. Given that the council eagerly condemned Instantius, it would be most odd if they did not have equal enthusiasm for condemning Priscillian – leading to the natural conclusion that their failure to do so did not stem from a lack of willingness, but from a prohibitory external command.

X. Maximus

Maximus' role in Priscillian's death is the most straightforward of all the parties. After being convinced by Ithacius that Priscillian needed to be dealt with, Maximus convened the Bordeaux council, and after Priscillian successfully appealed (likely through Maximus' express command, as I argue above), Maximus set up a trial to be conducted under the prefect Evodius (breaking his promise to Martin of Tours to handle the situation without doing anything cruel). Following Evodius' indictment of Priscillian on charges of *maleficium*, Maximus decided that the penalty should be death. When Ithacius backed out of the final trial, Maximus replaced him with the secular lawyer Patricius. After this trial concluded, Priscillian was executed on the order of Maximus.

Basically, Maximus was the one that "acted": instead of accusing Priscillian himself, Maximus (or those under his command) carried out the proceedings based on the accusations. Van Waarden speculates that part of the reason Maximus was so zealous in the matter of Priscillian was because he was "an orthodox Nicene Christian… in need of support from the church and from the Eastern emperor Theodosius".[73] In other words, he thought that following

[73] Geljon and Roukema, *Violence in Ancient Christianity*, 135.

the wishes of the accusers would net him favor with both the Church in general and Theodosius in particular.

XI. Priscillian Himself

It might seem odd listing Priscillian himself as one of the primary contributors to his own death, but it is really not so surprising when one examines his behavior. Priscillian was not responsible for his death only because he was unwilling to change his beliefs to conform, but because he made decisions that encouraged conflict and led to escalation.

First and foremost, Priscillian decided to insert himself into the existing Catholic hierarchy (by getting Instantius and Salvianus to ordain him bishop of Avila) and argue with others in the hierarchy. It seems clear from both Severus' account and Priscillian's description in *Liber ad Damasum* that Hydatius did not start the accusations of Manicheanism (and petition Gratian for a rescript) until Priscillian had interfered with Hydatius' see in Merida and had himself been ordained as a bishop.[74] While being "plugged in" to the hierarchy had obvious advantages, it also bound Priscillian to act in line with the decisions of the hierarchy. Had he kept his head down as a layman preacher with a more "cult-like" following (rather than a proper see), Priscillian may have never gotten on the radar of authority outside of Spain; the pronouncements at the council of Saragossa might have been the end of action against him. Following a similar line of reasoning, after Priscillian was removed by Gratian's rescript, he could have gone back to teaching outside the hierarchy rather than deal with higher authority to get himself reinstated (thus making himself "an issue" for said higher authority).

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[74] On Priscillian's inflammatory behavior with respect to Merida, see Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic*, 50-53.

A second way in which Priscillian contributed to his own death were his writings. Priscillian harshly criticizes sorcerers in his *Apology*: when Priscillian mentions Ithacius' accusation of sorcery, aside from denying the accusation vociferously, he states (emphasis mine) "the one who read, proposed, believed, made, had, and put forward this [i.e., sorcery] not only 'must be anathema maranatha', ***but is also to be persecuted with a sword***, because it is written: 'You shall not permit sorcerers to live.'"[75] Of course, Priscillian never imagined that the label would stick to him, so he saw no danger in using this statement as a rhetorical device to show his utmost dedication to orthodoxy. Ironically however, when he was indicted as a sorcerer, his death was justified by his own words. A parallel situation arises from Priscillian's urging of Damasus for a church council in *Liber ad Damasum*: although Priscillian attempted to force Damasus to have the conflict settled in the Church sphere, when Priscillian was actually before a Church council in Bordeaux (albeit a not very representative one), he refused to respect their pronouncements.

Finally, Priscillian *chose* to appeal to the authority of Maximus when he did not like the direction the Bordeaux council was taking. The wisdom of this decision (i.e., the lack thereof) was made evident in its outcome.[76] While it is true that the council had proved itself opposed to Priscillian, it is also true that the emperor too had proved himself opposed by calling the council in the first place. All Priscillian accomplished in transferring the conflict from Church authority to imperial authority was a large increase in the potential consequences he could face for the charges against him. As the saying goes "out of the frying pan and into the fire."

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[75] Conti, *Priscillian of Avila*, 55-56. Priscillian, *Tractatus I* lines 384-386.
[76] Cf. also Hermanowicz, "Catholic Bishops and Appeals to the Imperial Court", 494-495. Appeals to imperial authority were risky due to a lack of buffers between imperial decisions (which were often overly harsh, and consequently typically moderated through levels of authority) and their targets.

XII. Discussion

Throughout every stage in the process, different parties contributed to the series of events that ultimately led to Priscillian's death. After Priscillian interfered with Hydatius' see in Merida and got himself ordained as bishop of Avila, Hydatius accused him of Manichaeism and obtained a rescript from Gratian that allowed him to depose Priscillian. When Priscillian went to Italy to get the support of Ambrose and Damasus, he was ignored by both – they even continued to ignore him as he faced execution in a secular court. Upon Priscillian's arrival back in Spain, Ithacius accused him of sexual immorality and sorcery, and convinced Maximus to convene the Bordeaux council (and then later a secular trial) to deal with him. The Bordeaux council chose not to force Priscillian to accept their authority (thereby allowing the matter to leave the Church sphere); they also chose not to place any limits on the sort of charges reasonable to bring against Priscillian (thereby allowing capital punishment in the secular trial). Maximus convened the Bordeaux council, set up the secular trial, and officially condemned Priscillian to death for practicing *maleficium*. Priscillian himself engaged in behavior throughout the whole process that lead to escalation (both in tension and authority) rather than de-escalation.

In this varied group of "suspects", it is possible to spot several categories. First, the accusers: those parties that actively militated against Priscillian by attempting to utilize the heresiological labelling system (as discussed in Section III) to bring down legal consequences upon him. Hydatius and Ithacius fall into this category. Second, the actors: those parties that participated directly in the condemnation and execution of Priscillian. Of the seven parties discussed in this paper, Maximus is the only one who really falls into this category, since all the final proceedings were ultimately conducted under his authority. Finally, the influencers: those

parties who had the capacity to influence the course of events but did not, for whatever reason(s). Ambrose, Damasus, the Bordeaux council, and Priscillian himself fall into this category.

If any one of these subgroups had not played their part in the sequence, Priscillian likely would not have faced execution. For example, if Hydatius had never gotten the charge of Manicheanism to stick, Priscillian probably would not have lost his see in Avila, more serious charges of sexual immorality and sorcery would have been much less likely to stick to Priscillian, and imperial authority might have never gotten involved in the conflict. It is for this reason that I believe that we cannot say that Maximus alone was responsible for Priscillian's death: while it is true that he had a direct role in Priscillian's death – and by far the most obvious role – it is also true that the actions (or inaction) of a large number of other parties had a direct bearing on the series of events that ultimately lead to Priscillian's death.

XIII. Limitations

The most obvious shortcoming this paper has is its lack of a rigorous treatment of the various societal factors that also contributed to Priscillian's death. Burrus' *The Making of a Heretic: Gender, Authority, and the Priscillianist Controversy* is a good starting place, particularly with respect to the changing societal and ecclesiastic conceptions of the public/private distinction and its relationship to gender. Put simply, looking at the behavior of the people in the controversy is, at best, only half the picture, since people and their decisions are impossible to separate from their particular political, social, and religious contexts.

Secondly, this paper has a degree of what I call "historical hindsight bias" – the idea that the way things happened are the only way they could have happened because they are the way they actually did happen. Historical hindsight bias is a pervasive assumption in historical analysis because it is necessary to get any scholarship done; while noting alternate sets of events

is fascinating, it is really no better than wild speculation (especially if there is a lack of information about the aforementioned contexts in which decisions are being made). Given the difficulty we have establishing what actually did happen in ancient times, any reconstruction of hypothetical events is bound to be even less meaningful.

However – and this is the relevant point – it is important that one does not get so fixated on the historical sequence of events that one loses the ability to see that it *could* have turned out differently. I would argue that rather than being binary, historical hindsight bias varies on a continuum from "likely to accept the existence and plausibility of alternate possibilities" to "likely to reject alternate possibilities as unrealistic or contrived". The validity of this paper's argument rests on a view closer to the latter end of the continuum – that parties other than the actors (i.e., Maximus) were *necessary* links in the chain of events that led to Priscillian's execution. That is to say, when discussing the consequences of what "would have happened" if Hydatius had never gotten the charge of Manicheanism to stick, it is assumed that it would not have been likely for some other party to then come in and get the label of Manicheanism to stick (and petition Gratian for a rescript, etc.). Therefore, Hydatius' actions had a direct bearing on Priscillian's death, and Maximus was not the only person responsible. QED.

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