

“Ingestion” is a column that explores food within a framework informed by aesthetics, history, and philosophy. / “Colors” features a writer’s response to a specific color assigned by the editors of *Cabinet*. / “Inventory” examines or presents a list, catalogue, or register. / “Leftovers” investigates the cultural significance of detritus.

INGESTION / THE WORD MADE FLESH

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The seventeenth-century French Jesuit Denis Petau (1583–1652), also known as Dionysius Petavius, has long been recognized as one of the very greatest scholarly polymaths in an age of giants. An expert in chronology, Greek medicine, and the history of dogma, Petau gained broad recognition as a reliably anti-scholastic controversialist of prodigious philological endowments and tireless productivity.¹

It has long been a source of sadness to scholars of the early modern period that so little of Petau’s extensive correspondence with his contemporaries appears to have survived. Of a man known to have been in close contact with a vast network of learned clerics and laymen in Italy, the Netherlands, France, and beyond, almost no manuscript letters remain, and the posthumously published selection of the *Epistolarum libri tres* (1652) merely tantalizes with its suggestion of what has been lost.

I write to announce what appears to be the discovery of a fragment of such a letter, a translated transcription of which follows, together with some interpretive and contextual notes. A full analysis and publication of the Latin text (with facsimile) is slated for publication in a scholarly article currently under review.

A word about the way this document came to light. Three years ago, in the autumn of 2006, I purchased from a private bookseller in Antwerp a water-damaged copy of Petau’s *Dissertationum ecclesiasticarum libri duo* of 1641. Internal evidence suggested this particular volume had once been part of the library of Gabriel de Laubépine, the bishop of Orléans, with whom Petau is known to have been on friendly terms. In the course of repairs to the binding I realized, after lifting the endpapers, that one of the boards had been wrapped in a holograph sheet, the uppermost surface of which could be deciphered (despite my best efforts, the portions of the leaf that had been glued under the morocco were unrecoverable). On making a transcription it became clear that I had in hand a private letter to Laubépine himself (he is addressed by his Latinized moniker “Albaspinaeus”) and that the subject is the ostensible abominations of a heretical pseudo-Gnostic sect referred to by the author as the “Ezekielites.”

Putting aside the question of attribution for a moment (and the larger matter of these scripture-devouring Ezekielites, not otherwise, to the best of my knowledge, discussed in the literature of early Christianity), let me present the relevant portions of the manuscript:

Like the Phrygians, who combine falsehood with truth, these delight to collect heaps of writings by which to make false cases for their impostures and [prove their] lies. Thus they announce by means of proofs no less subtle than <illegible, probably "depraved">, that the "ecstasy" of John was that of Adam as well, whose sleep, his rib being removed, was no mere quiet rest but rather, as they would have it, a derangement of the senses occasioned by his having for the first time WORDS in his mouth [i.e., when he was naming the animals]—and that in this word-madness he did give rise to woman, his salvation. For this reason they, like the followers of Prunicus, are menses-eaters, and indulge in other abominations. And of John's eating of the small book in his REVELATION [Rev. 10:10 "I took the little book out of the angel's hand, and ate it up."] they make obscene confusion with the Gospel of John, to wit, "and the word was made flesh" [John 1:14], thinking thereby that the Greek letters themselves <on the scroll> will give life to the body and the <illegible, probably "soul">, but in this as in all things they abominate, for the Evangelist speaks of the incarnation, and the fulfillment of prophecies, not of GOBBLING PAPYRUS and such obscenities as these perform in darkness. Further, these TWO-FACED ONES do with the followers of Quintilla speak many foul things about their tongues, and write thereupon, and indulge in ink-licking. Are they FISH to lap at the sepia of the squid, a formless thing, an abomination? What error there is in the world! How many consume filth. Like a <toothless?> gecko they must be squashed to death. For what they say, further, of Ezekiel—who, before he went unto Chebar, did eat the scroll of the Lord which was as honey [Ezekiel 3:2–3]—is no less false than all their preachings. Since they teach that this was the type of a TRUE EUCHARIST, and thus they do celebrate a supper in which they eat their scripture in honey, and in doing so they make ordure of holiness and consume their seed-corn. May they wither.

What can be said about this strange document? For one thing, the Latin itself is clearly marked by various archaisms and is manifestly redolent of the bombastic style of the ancient heresiologists. In fact, it reads as something very close to a parody of the *Panarion* of Epiphanius of Salamis, that great fourth-century compendium of the sects composed by the vigorously orthodox bishop of Cyprus. A sentence here and there (the curious line about the gecko, for instance; the business about menses-eating) would appear to be lifted directly from this important source.²

My identification of these apparent plagiarisms is perhaps less impressive than it may seem: I immediately suspected a connection to the *Panarion* because Petau, of course, undertook a Latin translation of this Greek work in the second decade of the century, and it was published in 1622.

But plausible as the "Ezekielites" seem as yet another coterie of schismatic enthusiasts in the spiritually fecund zone of the eastern Mediterranean in the years after Constantine's conversion, they are unmentioned in the *Panarion* itself (which, recall, is governed by a strict numerology, and enumerates exactly eighty heresies), and I can trace no further reference to such a community of ecstatic scroll eaters.³

Assuming that the manuscript text is indeed in Petau's hand (I believe it is, and have a hypothesis for how it came to be bound into Laubépine's book, but I must leave all that aside here), I think there are two possible accounts of the origin of this fragment. I will merely sketch them in closing, pending fuller discussion elsewhere.

First, it is conceivable that Petau had to hand portions of Epiphanius's anti-heretical writings now lost to us, and that this fragment represents an excerpt from his translating work that never saw publication. I think this is unlikely, but it is difficult to rule out, and it would be extraordinary. Second, we could have stumbled on some sort of Epiphanian pastiche penned by Petau himself (or conceivably someone else). I incline to this hypothesis, with Petau as the author, and will hazard an alluring rationale: it is well known that Petau's edition of Epiphanius was intended as a correction to the 1543 version translated by the Saxon humanist Janus Cornarius, all of whose works were placed on the Index Librorum Prohibitorum in 1559. The era's confessional disputes made the translation and interpretation of the Church Fathers' writings on heresy an important arena for doctrinal fisticuffs, and Petau was in the thick of such conflicts. The reference to the "two-faced ones" in this text would make a tidy allusion to "Janus" Cornarius, and the whole notion of scripture eating, with its intimations of confusion concerning the nutritive value of "the word" alone, could well be intended as a condemnation of the central tenet of the Reformation itself: a commitment to the salvific power of unmediated access to scripture.

1 On Petau's appetite for polemic, consider Thomas Conley, "Vituperation in Early Seventeenth Century Historical Studies," *Rhetorica*, vol. 22, no. 2 (Spring 2004), pp. 169–182.

2 Compare Frank Williams, trans., *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, Nag Hammadi Studies, 1987 ff).

3 On the diversity of "Eucharistic" practices in this period, see Andrew McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).