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The Literary Portrait of Byzantine Female Saints

Nathalie Delierneux

From the earliest years of Christianity, women distinguished themselves during times of persecution by suffering the same hardships as men in their confession and martyrdom. Their struggles earned them great admiration among the faithful, but if their male counterparts were easily assimilated to 'soldiers' and 'athletes' of Christ in contemporary religious literature, certain adaptations were necessary to extend these exclusively masculine comparisons to women, considered weak and malleable by nature. On the basis of *Galatians* 3: 28 ('There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ'), the Byzantines affirmed that it was through the 'virility' of their spirit, that is, their 'courage' and 'energy', that the heroines could conquer their natural physical frailty and endure the same torments as men.

Once peace had been definitively established within the Church, the category of the 'virile (female) martyr' did not lose any of its prestige, but it did become quite difficult to achieve. At the same time, ecclesiastical authorities imposed ever-greater restrictions on the public functions that had previously been carried out by women within the Christian community, such as the diaconate. The conjuncture of these two factors oriented the piety of women along a variety of ascetic paths that allowed them to fulfil their spiritual vocation and that frequently elicited the admiration of other Christians on account of their extreme rigour.

In the seventh century, however, the Arab invasions cut off Egypt, Syria and Palestine – provinces from which the most extreme forms of asceticism had sprung – from the rest of the Empire. Excluding Arab-held Palestine, after 650 we find no noteworthy hagiographic production until the end of the eighth century. Nevertheless, the ancient models did not disappear. Too attached to their religious and secular culture to relinquish it entirely, hagiographers would instead 'regenerate' these motifs to align them with contemporary perspectives, offering models of female sanctity that were innovative from a literary perspective while still imbued with historical, cultural and social meaning.[1]

[1] Talbot, 'Essere donna e santa', 62–3; cf. Auzépy, 'La sainteté et le couvent: libération ou normalisation des femmes?', 176–9.

Female Sanctity within the Monastery

Convents of nuns were relatively numerous from the fourth century onwards. The ascetic renunciations practised by some of these nuns, often assimilated to a sort of bloodless martyrdom, were the object of much wonder among their fellow Christians. Accounts of their hardships were gradually put into writing in order to provide later generations with models adapted to ideals of womanhood, in which the authors variously set forth the feminine qualities and virtues considered essential to the chosen way of life, as well as appropriate to the heroine's sex.

Among many examples, we might cite the case of Olympias (*BHG* 1374–1375), the famous deaconess and contemporary of John Chrysostom who preserved her virginity despite her brief marriage, or that of Melania the Younger (*BHG* 1241) (*ca.* 383–*ca.* 440), who persuaded her husband to cease all carnal relations following the death of their child and devoted the rest of her life to charitable works and to physical and spiritual asceticism.

Within this category, an interesting example is that of Makrina (*BHG* 1012), who was born around 327 and probably died in July 380; the author of her biography, set in the form of a letter composed shortly after her death, was her own brother, Gregory of Nyssa. Born into an illustrious family, Makrina was betrothed at the age of twelve to an upstanding man, but he died before the marriage and the young girl rejected all other unions out of fidelity to her prematurely-deceased fiancé (*BHG* 1012 – ch. 5). This decision allowed her to devote herself completely to asceticism within her mother's home, and soon afterwards Makrina convinced her mother to renounce their lavish way of life to lead the life of the slaves. Both women prayed and fasted unceasingly, such that they came to seem like incorporeal beings despite the trappings of flesh.

Given his relationship to the subject of his praise, the author himself is particularly implicated in the account. The literary portrait of his sister is that of a saint (*BHG* 1012 – chs. 28, 29, 30, 31, 37) who demonstrates her full spiritual virility, particularly following the death of one of their brothers, Naukratios (*BHG* 1012 – ch. 10). In his narrative, Gregory amplifies the monastic elements; accordingly, the account of the young Makrina's education, which shuns the contaminating effects of profane authors, is certainly more ideal than historical. The ascetic Makrina is exceptional in her piety, humility and charity. She plays a dominant role in the spiritual direction of those close to her (*BHG* 1012 – ch. 6) and, after the death of her father, she becomes a father, teacher, tutor, mother and counsellor for her youngest brother (*BHG* 1012 – ch. 12).[2]

The author also describes his sister as a successor to the early martyrs. At the moment of Makrina's birth, her mother was told in a dream that the child would have 'Thekla' as a secret name and that she would follow the martyr's way of life (*BHG* 1012 – ch. 2), an allusion to both St Thekla's sufferings and her role as a spiritual guide. Shortly before visiting his dying sister, Gregory dreamed that he held shining relics of martyrs in his hands. After arriving at her side, he found that she indeed resembled a martyr, with her mortal form being made resplendent by the Holy Spirit (*BHG* 1012 – chs. 15, 19); on that same occasion, he evoked his sister's sacred remains (*BHG* 1012 – chs. 30, 35) and God-like countenance (*BHG* 1012 – ch. 34).

Although Gregory of Nyssa affirms in his prologue that his narrative, commissioned by a scholar (probably a churchman himself), would be written without grace or sophistication (*BHG* 1012 – ch. 1), this purely literary cliché does not prevent the author from making use of rhetorical effects throughout the account. Thus the prayer that Gregory attributes to Makrina on her deathbed (*BHG* 1012 – ch. 24) is unlikely to have been authentic; it is difficult to see how a dying woman should have had the strength to deliver such a lengthy and structured speech. In writing this passage, Gregory was satisfying his contemporaries' taste for classical rhetoric, despite the distaste that Makrina expressed for such things in the *Life* itself.

A few centuries later, the image of female monastic sanctity had evolved: nuns were no longer only virgins, like Olympias and Makrina, or wives who had renounced all conjugal ties, such as Melania the Younger; they might also be widows and mothers entering monasteries after having led a life of the flesh. Thus, in the ninth century, Athanasia of Aegina (*BHG* 180), having first been widowed and then forced to remarry by imperial edict,[3] convinced her second husband to adopt a monastic lifestyle. However, unlike Melania the Younger, she waited for the death of her second husband before becoming a nun. During the same period, Theodora of Thessalonike, having long mourned the death of her husband, went to the convent of St Stephen in Thessalonike with Theopiste, the youngest of her three surviving daughters, where both became nuns.

Unusually for a female saint, Theodora was honoured by both a *Life* (*BHG* 1737) and an account of the translation of her relics (*BHG* 1739), written in 894 by a certain cleric Gregory. It is quite likely that Gregory was also responsible for the *Life*; its authorship is attributed to him in the later rewrite (*BHG* 1740).[4] Gregory was a privileged witness who participated in the translation of the relics along with his father (*BHG* 1737, ch. 17; *BHG* 1739, ch. 5). His exact relationship with Theodora is unknown, but he makes use of the testimony of eyewitnesses, including his sister, who was cured by the saint (*BHG* 1737, chs. 40, 47, 50; *BHG* 1739, chs. 18, 20), and presumably of Theopiste as well. The latter, who became abbess of the convent, likely commissioned the two accounts from Gregory. Both narratives sought to strengthen the cult of the deceased woman and to allow the monastery to protect

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2 On this *Life*, see Giannarelli, 'La donna e la santità. La 'Vita di Santa Macrina' di Gregorio di Nissa'; and, more recently, see Silvas, *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God.*

3 Remarriage, while condemned by the Church, was tolerated (see Laiou, 'The Role of Women in Byzantine Society', 235; Patlagean, *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance 4ᵉ–7ᵉ siècles*, 115–6) and the State could force widows to marry following wars (Herrin, 'Public and Private Forms of Commitment among Byzantine Women', 190).

4 For a thorough study of the context of the commissioning and redaction of the *Life*, see Kaplan, 'La Vie de Théodora de Thessalonique, un écrit familial'. I warmly thank Michel Kaplan for sharing a copy of the article with me prior to its publication.

its monopoly of the cult against the clergy of Thessalonike (*BHG* 1737, chs. 43, 46; *BHG* 1739, chs. 2–4). Those close to the saint, all of them ascetics, play an essential role in the propagation of her cult, and the *Life* places great weight on the sufferings of Bishop Antony, a distant relative of Theodora, during the iconoclast persecutions of the ninth century.[5] The author Gregory thus implicates Theodora indirectly in these events, even if she did not experience them personally. In the *Life*, he also celebrates the theme of submission, which constitutes one of the chief features of Theodora's asceticism: twice she is severely punished by her superior, Anna, for having disobeyed one of her orders (*BHG* 1737 – chs. 26–36), and Theodora's obedience in the face of these sanctions earns her celestial rewards, to the wonder of the other sisters in the monastery.

Such examples are exceptional in the *Life* of a saint who generally overcame temptation through prayer alone. The emphasis on the theme of submission goes hand-in-hand with the strongly monastic context of the account: according to St Basil, submission to his superior was the monk's chief virtue. At the same time, these passages probably reveal aspects of the genuine historicity of the saint: the *Life* inadvertently betrays a more 'historical' portrait, hidden behind the hagiographic reworking, of a woman who, despite her own wishes, rebelled against the rigidity of monastic authority.

Another essential theme in the *vita of Theodora* is that of monastic stability, that is, the theoretical requirement that a monk (or nun) spend his entire life in the same monastery where he had pronounced his vows. While Theodora, in the *Life*, proclaims her total respect for this principle, in practice she is driven by God to leave the monastery on numerous occasions, albeit with the permission of the abbess, in order to go to market to procure supplies for her fellow-nuns. Later, Theodora does not hesitate to ask Anna to transfer young Theopiste to a convent with less harsh living conditions (*BHG* 1737 – ch. 25). Here again, these contradictory behaviours surely reveal 'authentic' aspects of Theodora's personality. She remains in the monastery less out of respect for monastic rules than by her own wishes: a divine vision suffices to open the convent's doors, with the consent of the abbess.

Inspired to write the *Life* of a contemporary widow who performed neither miracles nor spiritual guidance during her lifetime and who seems to have stood out mainly on account of her obedient character, the author turned Theodora's weaknesses into qualities admired by God himself. Exploiting the essential aspects of the female monasticism of the era in order to extol his protagonist – modesty, absolute submission – he succeeds in turning her into a convincing model for his contemporaries, despite the inconsistencies that can be glimpsed behind the idealised rendering.

Another saintly nun of the ninth and tenth centuries who deserves mention is Irene of Chrysobalanton (*BHG* 952). The anonymous author of her *Life* likely wrote the work under Basil II (976–1025), and like Irene herself, may have been a member of the Gouber family; this is at least suggested by the author's interest

[5] On these issues, see Talbot, 'Essere donna e santa', 64; and, most recently, Kaplan, 'La Vie de Théodora de Thessalonique'.

in Cappadocia, the family's native region. Even if the phenomenon is rare in Byzantium, it is possible that the author was an abbess of Chrysobalanton:[6] the attribution to Irene of certain traits of holiness usually reserved exclusively for male saints might mark it as the work of a female author anxious to offer some relief to her subject's asceticism. It was perhaps the clergy of the capital, but more likely a member of the Gouber family, who ordered the redaction of the text following the family's reconstruction of the Constantinopolitan monastery. This rehabilitation should presumably be linked to the contemporary mention of the monastery in the *Patria*, the guide to the curiosities of the capital and to the introduction of Irene's name into the *Synaxarion of Constantinople*.

An interesting literary trait of this *Life* is the unusual nature of the prologue. Rather than praise the saint's family and geographic origins (following standard hagiographic practice), it celebrates the restoration of images by the empresses Irene and Theodora in the eighth and ninth centuries. According to the editor of the *Life*, J.O. Rosenqvist, it is possible that the *Life* was composed in order to express the author's grief over an imperial injustice done to a relative. This hypothesis would seem to be confirmed by the importance given to an episode concerning a relative of the saint who is slandered before the authorities and saved only through Irene's intervention. In this context, the significance of the prologue seems instead to dwell in the link that it establishes between the saint and Empress Theodora: the latter was responsible for definitively re-establishing peace within the Church and likewise responsible for the arrival of 'Peace' in the capital.

Shortly thereafter, the episode of the three apples of Paradise miraculously offered to Irene by a sailor seems to fit within a similar framework. This passage invites comparison with aspects of the narrative of the *Chronicle* of Symeon the Logothete concerning Empress Theodora, as well as with the latter's *Life* (*BHG* 1731), even if it is impossible to affirm with certitude that these passages were the inspiration for Irene's hagiographer.[7] According to these texts, Theodora won the bride-show organised for Theophilos;[8] similarly, Irene comes to the capital in order to participate in that of Michael III. En route, Theodora is foretold of her imperial union by a hermit, while Ioannikios predicts Irene's vocation as a 'bride of Christ'. Theodora receives one apple from the hermit and a second from Theophilos; the sailor, for his part, offers three fruits to Irene, a sign of her perfect virtue in the eyes of God. Irene thus also wins a 'beauty contest', not human but divine. This association reflects the author's probable need to use his or her ancestry in the

[6] Auzépy, 'La sainteté et le couvent: libération ou normalisation des femmes?', 175, n. 3; Rydén, 'New Forms of Hagiography: Heroes and Saints', 546.

[7] See *Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae*, ch. 130, ed. Wahlgren, 216–7; Afinogenov, 'The Bride-Show of Theophilos: Some Notes on the Sources', 11; Vinson, 'The Life of Theodora and the Rhetoric of the Byzantine Bride-Show', 34 and 55–6.

[8] On the historicity of bride-shows at the imperial court, see the divergent views of Rydén, 'The Bride-Shows at the Byzantine Court. History or Fiction', 183–7; Treadgold, 'The Bride-shows of the Byzantine Emperors'.

service of a particular cause: here, hagiographic and political purposes are in complete harmony.

The *Life of Irene of Chrysobalanton*, written under the guise of historical fiction, illustrates the hagiographic revival of the ninth and tenth centuries, in which the genre came to be used to serve the personal interests of the authors.[9] With great skill the hagiographer combined literary and hagiographic themes in order to align political, social and religious pressures. The text thus shows itself to be a work of impressive quality and demonstrates furthermore the resourcefulness of authors confronted with a cause to be championed.

From the third to the seventh century, the value placed on feminine virility also inspired the phenomenon of holy cross-dressing nuns. Having fled their father's house, usually in order to preserve their virginity, these women spent the rest of their lives in a male monastery where their true identity was frequently revealed only upon their death.[10] Offering a physical demonstration of their soul's virility, this type of exploit allowed the protagonists, as was the case for the early martyrs, to endure an asceticism that was similar and even superior to that of men: rather than flee from male temptation, these saints willingly plunged into it. This situation earned them great respect among the faithful, all the more so since many cross-dressers were falsely accused of paternity, slander which most bore in silence unto their deaths. This was, for example, the case of Apollinaria (*BHG* 148), Marina (*BHG* 1163) and Theodora of Alexandria (*BHG* 1727–1729), who, unlike most cross-dressing saints, fled her home in order to expiate her infidelity toward her husband.

Among the cases of female cross-dressing, it is worth dwelling on that of Matrona of Perge (*ca.* 430-510/515). According to her *vita* (*BHG* 1221), written probably after the beginning of the sixth century by an anonymous author,[11] Matrona left Perge, in Pamphylia, in order to settle in Constantinople with her husband. She attended church day and night, on account of which her husband reproached and even beat her. Finally, driven by her own desire for purity as well as by her husband's cruelty, the saint entrusted her only daughter to a pious woman and, dressed as a man, took refuge in the male monastery of Bassianos under the name of Babylas in order to hide from her husband. Having been divinely informed of Matrona's true sex, Bassianos sent her back, chastising her for having ignored the Biblical requirement that women cover their heads in a church. The account of her exploits continues, with Matrona fleeing repeatedly in order to escape her husband. Finally, a vision brings her back to Constantinople, where she becomes the leader of a female community, performs several miracles, and lives to be nearly a hundred.

This account presents some unusual features when compared with the *Lives* of other cross-dressers. To begin with, Matrona is a wife and mother who flees in order to escape her husband's beatings, rather than a young girl seeking to preserve her virginity. Here it is a woman, Eugenia, who is her 'spiritual teacher' and leads her

[9] See Patlagean, 'Sainteté et pouvoir', 92.

[10] On this topic, see Delierneux, 'Virilité physique et sainteté féminine dans l'hagiographie orientale du IVe au VIIe siècle', 235–40.

[11] Patlagean, *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance 4e–7e siècles*, 135–6.

to the monastery of Bassianos in Constantinople (*BHG* 1221 – p. 791D–792C).[12] This situation is exceptional: even where cross-dressing women are concerned, it is men of God who orient them toward the male monastery, a way of divinely validating a behaviour that was condemned in Scripture and by ecclesiastical legislation, particularly by the council of Gangra in Asia Minor, held around 350.[13]

Another unusual feature of Matrona's *Life* is that her sex is divinely revealed to Bassianos while she is still alive. Despite his rebuke to her on this occasion, it should be noted that when the protagonist later returns to the monastery with a disciple, it is announced to Bassianos that 'Babylas is back with another brother' (*BHG* 1221 – p. 803E). This phrasing suggests that Matrona was still dressed as a man, and likewise for her companion. Furthermore, on two occasions, the abbot himself gives men's habits to Matrona, an act that the author explains by the abbot's desire to act in accordance with God's will rather than man's (*BHG* 1221 – p. 804AB; also p. 812F).

Given that Matrona, a 'historical' saint cited in contemporary sources,[14] bears throughout the narrative heretical traits that had been forbidden at Gangra, it is not surprising that her hagiographer is the only one to explicitly forestall an accusation of heresy, in this instance by denying any resemblance between Matrona's acts and the Manichaean disdain for the body (*BHG* 1221 – p. 791B). With this disclaimer, the author seeks to align contemporary religious demands with the heretical character of his protagonist. Similarly, when the husband of Matrona comes to Bassianos to retrieve his wife, the narrator attributes to him a declaration of principle on the sanctity of marriage (*BHG* 1221 – p. 795D), but this fails to provoke a reaction: the monks simply lie in order to protect Matrona (*BHG* 1221 – p. 795D–E).

This account clearly illustrates the tensions that existed between orthodox theory and actual practices in the fifth and sixth centuries. It also reveals the strategies used by authors to insert their female protagonists into a mould adapted to the expectations of their contemporaries. For Matrona, the objective was achieved: the cult of this 'heretic' entered into the *Menologion* of Basil II and the *Synaxarion of Constantinople*, and it probably lasted until the Palaiologan period.[15]

In later centuries, the model of the cross-dresser did not disappear entirely from Byzantine hagiography. The *Synaxarion* mentions at some length the example of

[12] On the striking presence of women in the *Life of Matrona*, see Catafygiotou-Topping, 'St. Matrona and her Friends: Sisterhood in Byzantium', 211–24.

[13] This council condemned Eustathios of Sebaste (see Saradi-Mendelovici, 'L''infirmitas sexus' présumée de la moniale byzantine: doctrine ascétique et pratique juridique', 94), who rejected social, familial, and religious structures and proclaimed the equality of the sexes by allowing women to crop their hair and dress like men (Patlagean, *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance 4e–7e siècles*, 135–7), in spite of the warning in *Deuteronomy* 22: 5. Such practices were championed by a large number of heretical movements, particularly the Manichaeans. On this issue, see also Constantinou, 'Holy Actors and Actresses. Fools and Cross-Dressers as the Protagonists of Saints' Lives', this volume.

[14] See *Holy Women of Byzantium*, 13–6.

[15] *Ibid.*, 16.

Anna the Younger (*BHG* 2027), a saint who probably lived in the ninth century and who spent part of her monastic life in a male monastery in Bithynia. It is worth noting that unlike earlier cross-dressing nuns who also faced false accusations of fornication, Anna was accused of relations with a fellow monk, rather than with a woman. Even if the text survives only in a later source, the *Synaxarion*, it is nevertheless an important indication of the evolution of the model during the ninth century, a period in which monastic homosexuality reached alarming proportions, if the Stoudites' warnings are to be believed on this point.[16]

Setting aside this late example, a few non-cross-dressing saints were formally called upon to adopt masculine garb. Even if this garment was not initially worn for the deliberate purpose of passing for a man, part of the symbolism associated with cross-dressing seems present nevertheless in these writings, all the more so when the *vita* has underscored elsewhere the virility of its protagonist.

The first example of this type concerns Makrina, the sister of Gregory of Nyssa. After the death of the saint, her brother discovered that on account of her generosity she no longer possessed a suitable habit for the burial rites, so Gregory decided to dress his sister in his own funeral garb (*BHG* 1012 – ch. 29). If this act is obviously yet another way of paying homage to Makrina's saintly soul, the gesture is also probably not unrelated to the reference to her virility made by the author himself (*BHG* 1012 – ch. 1).

A somewhat similar example can be found in the slightly later *Life of Mary the Younger* (*BHG* 1164). This account, to which we will return later in the context of saintly wives, was written by an anonymous author, probably in the eleventh century (unless a few passages written in the tenth century were subsequently rewritten in the eleventh). According to the text, after the death of the saint on 16 February 902,[17] her husband Nikephoros discovered that there was no more clothing in her chests, only that which she was wearing. In order to overcome this lack, he had her buried in one of his own garments.

Although we are far from genuine cross-dressing here, this choice is not without interest: the husband could surely have found woman's garb somewhere in the house with which to dress his deceased wife. In the eyes of the author, this gift permitted Nikephoros to share in Mary's sanctity, since his garment was probably preserved intact like the saint's own body (*BHG* 1164 – p. 697). Moreover, as with Makrina, the gift of a man's clothing ought surely to be connected with the saint's virile character, referenced multiple times in the *Life*. Mary possessed 'the heart of a man in the body of a woman' (*BHG* 1164 – p. 693), and the posthumous donning of men's clothing thus neatly associates her physical and moral features, while also preserving the conjugal bond even after death.

However, it is also noteworthy that in both of these cases, the 'cross-dressing' takes place only after the death of the saint. Whatever the nature of the saint's

[16] Delierneux, 'Anne-Euphèmianos, l'épouse devenue eunuque: continuité et évolution d'un modèle hagiographique', 125–7.

[17] Pratsch, 'Das Todesdatum der Maria (der Jüngeren) von Bizye (BHG 1164): † 16. Februar 902', 569.

virtue, the equality of the sexes within sanctity had its limits, whether in the case of Makrina, sister of a great orthodox theologian, or that of Mary, the exemplary wife.

Saintly Hermits

Alongside monastic examples, female eremitism also enjoyed a certain popularity in Byzantine hagiography, especially up until the seventh century. In the case of women, this way of life was often driven by a desire either to preserve their virginity by escaping a family-imposed marriage, or to perform penance for some serious sins. The *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*,[18] spiritual reflections drawn from great ascetics, offer the names of three 'Desert Mothers' from the fourth and fifth centuries: the most famous is Synkletike, of whom a fifth-century *Life* (*BHG* 1694) also survives. The very existence of these *Sayings* testifies to the prestige that these saints acquired in the eyes of their visitors through their harsh asceticism, an expression of their perfect spiritual virility. Likewise, in his *Philotheos Historia*, written in the fifth century, Theodoret of Cyrrhus evokes the memory of Marana and Kyra (*BHG* 1025), who voluntarily confined themselves to a pen near their native city of Berea, and of Domnina (*BHG* 563), a recluse who dwelled in a hut in her mother's garden.

Even if, after the seventh century, female eremitism rarely appears in its strictest form, women continued to pursue their personal spiritual development by leading a harsh and isolated way of life outside of any monastic organisation. Among the surviving examples, the model of the 'repentant harlot', inspired by the Biblical example of Mary Magdalen, is particularly notable. Having realised the gravity of her sin, the prostitute radically alters her way of life, adopting henceforth a rigorously ascetic regime within the confines of a cell. The most famous example is surely that of Mary of Egypt (*BHG* 1042), whose surviving *Life*, probably written by an anonymous author in the seventh century, was inspired by earlier versions by Cyril of Skythopolis and John Moschos.[19]

A prostitute in Alexandria, Mary travels to Jerusalem to ply her trade. At Golgotha she is miraculously made aware of the depravity of her condition, and subsequently crosses the Jordan and wanders into the desert with a little bread. She spends 47 years there, fighting against a demon who reminds her of the pleasures of her old ways. One day, a monk, Zosimos, finds her, and she tells him the story of her life. She then asks him to keep silent about her presence in the desert and to return a year later bringing with him the Eucharist. Zosimos obeys, and then promises to return for a third time. Upon his third visit, however, he finds her dead

[18] *PG* 65, cols 201A–204B (Theodora); cols 420B–421A (Sara); cols 421A–428A (Synkletike). On these sayings, see Steward, 'The Desert Mothers. The Portrayal of Women in the Sayings and Stories of the Desert'; and Ward, 'Apophtegmata Matrum'.

[19] See Flusin, 'Le serviteur caché ou le saint sans existence'.

and buries her corpse with the help of a lion. He then returns to his monastery, where he reveals the saint's existence.

Unlike the other examples we have seen, the hagiographer in this instance is not a close associate of the saint. He writes in a simple and lively style, and the text is aimed at a wide audience who would find in Mary the proof of the universality of salvation, regardless of the gravity of one's sins. Nothing had destined Mary for divine forgiveness until God takes her salvation into his hands. The author sprinkles his account with numerous dialogues which serve to advance and enliven the narrative; he also alludes to daily life in Jerusalem and Alexandria and adds exotic details such as the miraculous intervention of the lion, elements which contributed to the popularity of Mary's *Life* in both eastern and western Christendom during the Middle Ages.[20]

Between 913 and 919/920, Niketas Magistros, a lay hagiographer, adapted this theme to a new protagonist, Theoktiste of Lesbos (*BHG* 1723–1724).[21] While participating in a military expedition to Crete, the author meets the hermit Symeon, who recounts to him the story of Theoktiste, which a hunter had in turn told him several years earlier; Symeon further 'orders' that it be put in writing so as to preserve the saint's memory. Theoktiste, a nun from Lesbos, is captured by the Arabs during a visit to her sister. They bring her to Paros, where she escapes and goes on to live for 35 years, fed by God. She meets a hunter, whom she asks to keep silent about her existence and to bring her communion the following year. The hunter obeys, but upon returning for a third time to receive Theoktiste's blessing, he finds her dead. Rather than bury her, he takes one of her hands as a relic, but his ship is unable to move until the hand is returned. Once at sea, the hunter tells his story to his companions; they return to the place of her death, but find that the corpse has miraculously disappeared.

The *vita* is written in an elegant and elevated style punctuated by classical and patristic references, a reflection of its author's sophisticated education. If the account is inspired by the narrative structure of the *vita of Mary of Egypt* (*BHG* 1042 – p. 231E), it is certainly not a mere copy. Theoktiste is no longer a prostitute but a kidnapped nun, an adaptation that conforms to the tenth-century situation: A.P. Kazhdan has noted the degree to which the description of Mary's carnal impulses would be inconceivable in this later period.[22]

Family ties are also treated differently in the two accounts: Mary renounces parental love at twelve, out of a thirst for depravity (*BHG* 1042 – p. 3709D), whereas Theoktiste is captured by Arabs while visiting her sister (*BHG* 1723–1724 – p. 229A). This divergence reflects a shift in the relationship between asceticism and familial bonds. In the tenth century, these bonds resisted the traditional pressures of monastic separation, even for women, a situation which can also been seen in the

[20] See *Holy Women of Byzantium*, 65–8.

[21] On the models that might have served as inspiration to the author of the *Life*, see Jazdzewska, 'Hagiographic invention and imitation : Niketas' Life of Theoktiste and its literary models'.

[22] Kazhdan, 'Hagiographical Notes (9–12)', 50.

example of Theodora of Thessalonike and her daughter Theopiste. Similarly, the stolen hand incident is absent in the *vita of St Mary*; this literary motif was presumably added to spice up the account, perhaps because this gesture corresponded to a natural attitude of the faithful toward relics in the tenth century. The episode of the vanished body could serve to buttress the authenticity of a saint of whom no relics were preserved, whereas the *Life of Mary* was based on the existence of a tomb that predated the birth of her cult.[23]

Saintly Wives

The model of sanctity within marriage appears from the fourth century onward, starting with the elegy written by Gregory of Nazianzos, presumably around 370, to mark the first anniversary of the death of his sister Gorgonia (*BHG* 704). As in the case of Gregory of Nyssa and his sister Makrina, the aim of Gregory of Nazianzos is hagiographic, seeking to demonstrate by her example that earthly life is worthwhile only when one seeks to transcend it. Given that he is writing about a relative, however, Gregory cannot ignore certain 'historical' realities, such as the fact that his sister was married. Like the hagiographer of Theodora of Thessalonike, Gregory turns this aspect to the advantage of his subject. In order to do this, he explains that his sister reconciled the best of both celibacy and marriage, joining the loftiness of the first to the security of the second. She thus demonstrated that neither celibacy nor marriage bound one completely to God or the world and, conversely, that neither status separated one from God or the world, either (*BHG* 704 – ch. 8). Exemplary in her charity, Gorgonia was also a chaste, temperate, pious, discreet and modest wife. Like Makrina, Gorgonia was a teacher who converted her husband and household and produced a line of pious offspring. Whatever the situation, God was paramount in her thoughts: her marriage therefore came to be a source of satisfaction for God himself, while she could be considered as the ideal wife in her virility, such as it was described in *Proverbs* 31.

A few centuries later, we find that the model presented by the *Life of Thomaïs of Lesbos* (*BHG* 2454), as well as that *of Mary the Younger*, which we have already seen, differs markedly from Gorgonia's. The anonymous *Life of Thomaïs* was likely written in the first half of the tenth century, since the saint is already cited in the *Synaxarion* before the turn of the millennium. Like the *Life of Mary the Younger*, it was perhaps rewritten in the eleventh century. The text was to be read on the feast of its subject (*BHG* 2454 – p. 234B) in order to glorify her tomb and the Constantinopolitan monastery that housed it; it is likely that community that commissioned the writing of the *vita*. The focus on the Byzantine capital suggests that the hagiographer was writing there and that he was familiar with its topography. He repeatedly cites the names of people healed by the saints and/or the place where they lived, as well as the sites where other miracles occurred. The hagiographer must have written soon

[23] Rydén, 'Literariness in Byzantine Saints' Lives', 51–2.

after the death of his protagonist and must have met eyewitnesses of her deeds, if he was not himself among them. This would be an additional argument for dating its composition to the tenth century (*BHG* 2454 – p. 237E; 238A; 239F; 240B; 241AD).

The anonymous author of the *Life of Mary the Younger* seems to have been an educated layman, whom the clergy of the saint's hometown of Bizye commissioned to write the account; he attaches great importance to her marriage and conversely omits any mention of her ties to a monastery. In his prologue, the author affirms that all humans, whether celibate or married, can struggle toward divine virtue, unlike in an earthly context, where only men can fight battles (*BHG* 1164 – p. 692AB; 699D).

If, at the start of the narrative, the union of Mary and Nikephoros is a happy one, their tranquility is shattered when Mary's brother- and sister-in-law accuse her of fornicating with a slave and squandering household resources, charges which she denies, citing her wifely duty to obey and respect her spouse (*BHG* 1164 – p. 693A–695F). This accusation introduces the hagiographic motif of slanderous accusations of fornication, particularly common in the *Lives* of cross-dressing saints. In this case, the interest lies in the author's remodelling of a venerable literary theme: here the false charge concerns not a failure of ascetic continence but rather of conjugal chastity. This in turn allows the author to affirm the sacral nature of the marriage bed and Mary's own sexual moderation, a quality also attributed to another saint-wife, Gorgonia.

From that point on, Nikephoros becomes violent and has his wife watched by guards. Injured, ill and divinely foretold of her impending death, the saint calls for her husband and once again denies the accusations. She then asks him to sell off her cloak and use the proceeds to pay off her creditors, a gesture that underlines her wish, as a good wife, not to cause expenses for her husband. Nikephoros advises Mary to leave her cloak instead to her children, while he himself will pay her debts (*BHG* 1164 – p. 695E–696E); the saint dies in peace following this marital reconciliation, which is further reinforced by Nikephoros' aforementioned gift of a funeral shroud to his wife.

The situation of Thomaïs presents a number of marked differences from that of Mary, which would appear to contradict some scholars' suggestion that one of the two accounts inspired the other.[24] To begin with, Thomaïs marries Stephen at the late age of 24. Wishing to preserve her virginity, the protagonist resists marriage for as long as possible[25] – an element missing from Mary's *Life*. Second, Thomaïs' hagiographer does not mention any children, while the *Life of Mary* emphasises the theme of procreation and sexual relations between spouses. Nikephoros and Mary have four sons, and in her protests against the accusation of adultery, the saint evokes the unique and sacred character of sex within marriage. After her death, Mary appears to a painter and asks him to depict her accompanied by two of her

[24] According to Paul Halsall, these two accounts are distinct literary creations, and their apparent similarities are but superficial (see *Women's Bodies, Men's Souls: Sanctity and Gender in Byzantium*, 240–41; 390–94 and table A 2.1).

[25] *Ibid.*, 242; 415, n. 64; Laiou, 'The Role of Women in Byzantine Society', 236, n. 16.

sons, and at the end of her *vita*, the author remarked that she could be found facing the Trinity with the 'precious choir' of her children (*BHG* 1164 – p. 699BC; p. 705A).

A third difference between the couples is that the union of Thomaïs and Stephen is stormy from the start, with Stephen beating his wife unceasingly on account of her charity (*BHG* 2454 – p. 235–237A; p. 239A-E). Unlike Mary, Thomaïs is called 'the virgin bride of Christ' (*BHG* 2454 – p. 239E), while Stephen is described as an 'evil and wicked' husband, and even an 'illegal' one, since it is Christ and not Stephen who is the true spouse of Thomaïs. The motif of being 'Christ's betrothed' is certainly not new. Indeed, all sanctity is founded on a basis antithetical to marital union: from the very beginning, ascetics of both sexes were seen as spiritually betrothed to Christ. What makes this theme interesting in the case of Thomaïs is its expression in reference to a wife, probably a sign of historicity; as with Theodora of Thessalonike and Gorgonia, the hagiographer ingeniously exploits the historical fact of the subject's marital status and uses it to reflect her virtues vis-à-vis her celestial fiancé.

This opposition is also reinforced by the *Life*'s repeated plays on the meaning of Stephen's given name, which means 'crowned' in Greek. The crowning of the spouses is the most characteristic element of the Byzantine marriage rite,[26] and the allusions to the contrasting relationship of the man and his name underscores the opposition between Thomaïs' two 'unions'. At a time when engagement was often equated with marriage,[27] her hagiographer certainly glorifies the conjugal union – but it is the celestial one rather than its earthly counterpart that is praised here. If Gorgonia's marriage is pleasing to God, that of Thomaïs, whose sanctity demonstrates itself despite her marital travails, remains a handicap in her quest for perfection and is even 'adulterous' with respect to Christ. Like Mary the Younger, Thomaïs seems to have died from her husband's beatings (*BHG* 2454 – p. 237A-B). As such, the hagiographer describes the saint as a 'martyr' and specifies that, in his eyes, she surpasses in this respect even the ancient heroes of the faith, since the hardships she endured were at the hands of her own husband rather than some stranger; here again we find the two established hagiographic motifs of feminine courage and martyrdom being twinned.

While the theme of the abused wife appears already in the sixth century with the example of Matrona of Perge, it is worth noting the evolution that has taken place. If Matrona did not hesitate to flee from the husband who beat her, a few centuries later we find the abusive marriage described as a sort of martyrdom; rather than be abandoned, it is to be used as a means of achieving virtue through the endurance of hardships.[28] In the first half of the fourteenth century, the *Life of the empress Theodora of Arta* (*BHG* 1736), wife of Michael II Doukas Komnenos (*ca.* 1231–*ca.* 1267/68) offers a final image of conjugal sanctity. Like Matrona, Theodora leaves her marital home, but it is her husband who chases her, pregnant, from his

[26] See *Holy Women of Byzantium*, 303, n. 52.

[27] Beaucamp, 'La situation juridique de la femme à Byzance', 168.

[28] In the late ninth century, Euthymios the Patriarch dissuaded Theophano from leaving Leo VI. In order to secure eternal blessings, she had to endure her conjugal hardships rather than escape from them: see his *vita* (*BHG* 651), 37–9.

palace, in order to consort more easily with his mistress. The saint spends five years wandering like an animal, trying to scrounge up food for her child.[29] Here again we find this type of sanctity evolving into a new combination of ancient models, illustrating very strikingly – and well beyond mere hagiographic embellishment – the realities of imperial life during those troubled years of Byzantine history.

Imperial Sanctity

Along with nuns and hermits, several empresses were also found worthy, for a variety of reasons, of joining the Byzantine roster of saints. Their *vitae* are generally highly politicised[30] and the portraits of women presented in them often bear little relation to standard hagiographical depictions. From a historical, social and literary perspective, however, these narratives are of interest as a means of understanding the complex motives that could lead the State to encourage the writing of such accounts, as well as the authors' own purposes and the literary methods used in their composition.

The anonymous hagiographer of the Empress Irene (*BHG* 2205) (*ca.* 753–803) presumably wrote in the third quarter of the ninth century, after the re-establishment of icons in 843. The account is almost a verbatim copy of the account of Irene's reign in the chronicler Theophanes the Confessor. Given that the only passage of the *Life* that was not drawn from the *Chronicle* concerns the convent of the Princes' Islands, where Irene spent some time following her deposition and before her definitive exile to Lesbos, it is possible that the account was written for this institution, perhaps by a nun.[31] Aside from this passage, the author proves himself to be a poor hagiographer, putting rather little effort into sanctifying his heroine. He does not omit from his account the blinding of Constantine VI, too well known to be left out. However, in describing the arrival of the Athenian Irene in Constantinople, he omits the passages of Theophanes concerning the riches aboard the ships and the warm welcome that she received in the capital; moreover, when affirming that, following Irene's deposition by Nikephoros I, the day turned icily cold, the hagiographer follows Theophanes by attributing these to the usurper's wicked intentions rather than the sadness provoked by Irene's exile (*BHG* 2250 – p. 23), even though a skilful exploitation of these elements would have strengthened the narrative's hagiographic quality.

It is rather Irene's political role that predominates. Aside from her participation in the Seventh Council of Nicaea in 787, whose outcome was largely coordinated by the (male) religious authorities (*BHG* 2250 – p. 11), the saint does not demonstrate the pious iconophile fervour mentioned in other ninth-century hagiographic

[29] On this late female saint, see Patlagean, 'Une sainte souveraine grecque: Théodora, impératrice d'Épire (XIIIe siècle)'.

[30] See Talbot, 'Essere donna e santa', 65.

[31] See Herrin, *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium*, 127.

sources. If the author praises Irene upon her deposition for her defence of the true faith, her downfall has nothing whatsoever to do with holy images. What makes Irene worthy of renown is solely her decision to re-establish icons and the pity inspired by her exile.[32] Nothing more is needed for her to merit a *vita* (probably commissioned after 843 by the victorious iconophile rulers), even if it hardly conforms to the expectations of the genre.

Like that of Irene, the sanctity of the empress Theodora (*BHG* 1731–1735) (*ca.* 815–after 867) is markedly political in nature, particularly in terms of the restoration of icons of 843, of which she was the avowed instigator. Even if the author of the *Life* of this saint (*BHG* 1731) is anonymous, the fact that this text is essentially imperial panegyric is an indicator that her sanctity, rather more political than religious, was orchestrated from the top. This is further underscored by the absence of pilgrims at her tomb or of a popular cult more generally.[33] The positive image offered of Michael III in the narrative corresponds to the wishes of Leo VI, who sought to rehabilitate the man whose assassination had brought his own father (Basil I) to the throne, in order that he might strengthen his own dynasty – tied as it was to that of Michael III. Intended as a demonstration of the new dynasty's legitimacy to the opponents of images, the cult of Theodora also emphasised the continuity between the past and present, particularly with regards to icon worship. As in the *vita of Empress Irene*, this narrative includes a wealth of politico-historical details. However, even if the narrative has little in common with a traditional *Life*, Theodora's hagiographer goes to greater lengths than Irene's to sacralise the image of his subject, whom he presents as a good wife and mother, pious and obedient to masculine authority, who finishes her life in a convent, although she does not seem to have adopted the habit or pronounced monastic vows, even on her deathbed.[34]

The case of Theophano differs from those of Irene and Theodora in that she was not a restorer of images. Written in the late ninth or early tenth century, her *vita* was written in honour of the Martinakioi, the family to which Theophano belonged.[35] Even if the author's identity is unknown, the text offers a few clues. He was an aristocrat (whether layman or monk is unclear), Theophano's contemporary and a friend of her father, though we do not know whether he ever met the saint herself. His father, a bureaucrat, was charged with the decoration of the church of St Elias in the Great Palace and possessed his own church. The author was also able to borrow the ring of Theophano, preserved at the church of the Holy Apostles, in order to cure his wife (*BHG* 1794 – p. 17–8). The author states that he was witness to the posthumous fame of his subject and benefitted personally from her healing powers (*BHG* 1794 – p. 1; p. 17), but this affirmation poorly hides the limited success enjoyed by the cult of imperial relics. Probably writing at the request of

[32] Halkin, 'Deux impératrices de Byzance', 5.

[33] See Vinson, 'The Life of Theodora and the Rhetoric of the Byzantine Bride-Show', 34; Talbot, 'Essere donna e santa', 62.

[34] See *Byzantine Defenders of Images*, 354.

[35] See, for example, Vinson, 'The Life of Theodora and the Rhetoric of the Byzantine Bride-Show', 57.

the saint's family, the author tries to emphasise her relatives' shared part in her holiness. The account notably turns the empress' unhappy marital history into an idyllic one, and from her birth, divine signs announce her imperial destiny while simultaneously reinforcing her aura of sanctity. Her stunning victory at the bride-show organised for Leo VI further strengthens this rosy portrait, even if, in reality, the only factors that led Theophano to the throne were her high birth and her relationship to Eudokia, Leo VI's mother.[36]

Within the context of imperial sanctity, one further case should be considered, that of Theodora of Arta in the thirteenth century. Alice-Mary Talbot has already discussed the example of this empress, wife of the emperor Michael II Doukas Komnenos; her case will be discussed but briefly here, especially since its analysis is rendered all the more difficult by the scarcity of known female saints after the tenth century.[37]

It is worth noting, however, the degree to which this saint's *Life* weaves together common themes of earlier hagiography. An unhappy empress like Theophano, she was also a pious and philanthropic wife like Mary the Younger and Thomaïs of Lesbos. If she suffers at the hands of her husband, it is because of the depravity of the latter, who drives away his pregnant wife so that he can live with his mistress, forcing Theodora to wander in search of food for herself and her child. This element recalls the wanderings of those cross-dressers falsely accused of fathering children who endure the slander and devote their lives to caring for a child who is not their own. After five years, a repentant Michael recalls Theodora to him. Later she founds a monastery that she enters after being widowed, like Athanasia and Theodora of Thessalonike, and in which she spends the remainder of her life in pious asceticism.

The example of Theodora, who, along with Matrona of Chios (*BHG* 1220) in the fourteenth century, is the last Byzantine female saint, offers clear evidence of the enduring nature of hagiographic literary models.[38] Whatever the circumstances or nature of the sanctity, authors of the *Lives* remained faithful to the earlier models that had served for the leading figures of Byzantine holiness from the very beginning. However, their fidelity did not preclude originality: unceasingly revised and adapted, the ancient models acquired through the writings of these authors a new vigour and value.

[36] On this *Life*, see the studies by Alexakis., 'Leo VI, Theophano, a Magistros called Slokakas, and the Vita Theophano (BHG 1794)'; Cesaretti, 'Un leitmotiv narrativo tra la Vita di santa Teofano (BHG 1794) e il Menologio di Basilio II (cod. Vat. gr. 1613)'; Strano, 'La *Vita* di Teofano (BHG 1794) fra agiografia e propaganda'. See Talbot, 'Family Cults in Byzantium: The Case of St Theodora of Thessalonike', 64.

[37] See *Holy Women of Byzantium*, 323–5.

[38] On this paucity of female saints in the Palaiologan era, see Talbot, 'Hagiography in Late Byzantium (1204–1453)', in *ARCBH* I, 188–9.

Female Martyrs

While the Christianisation of the Empire markedly reduced the opportunities to shed one's own blood for Christ, we still find some female martyrs in Persia, witnesses to Christianity's unfailing interest in this form of sanctity: Golindouch (*BHG* 700) was a relative of the Persian king Khusro II (590/591–628), at the end of the sixth century. Shortly after being put to death for refusing to abjure her Christian faith, Eustratios the Presbyter wrote her Greek *Life*, probably based on a Georgian original. Sira (*BHG* 1637), a relative and contemporary of Golindouch, suffered martyrdom under the same circumstances. Her Greek *Life*, adapted from a Syriac original, probably dates from 593–609 (and 628 at the latest).

Thereafter the female martyr mostly disappears, aside from the opportunities presented in the eighth and ninth century by the struggle to defend images. If this silence hints at the possibility that women were less fervent iconophiles than has been thought, it also suggests that despite female devotion to holy images, their efforts – in the eyes of the iconoclasts – were negligible as compared to the vigorous stances of male ascetics.[39]

Only Mary the Patrician (*BHG* 1195), Theodosia (*BHG* 1773y–1774e) and Anthusa of Mantineon (*BHG* 2029h) achieved sanctity through their defence of images. But the first two, commemorated for their protection (in 729/730) of the famous icon on the Chalke Gate (Brazen House) that was supposed to be destroyed, are probably legendary, one dependent on the other and both invented long afterwards in order to serve the ideological purposes of the victorious iconophile party.[40] With regards to Anthusa, an eighth-century saint whose name is commemorated in the *Synaxarion of Constantinople*, it is possible that she was actually an iconoclast whose memory was appropriated by the iconophile tradition.[41]

Aside from these rather dubious cases, hagiographers also evoked other forms of 'torture' willingly endured by saints out of their love for God; such themes testify once again to the enduring importance of martyrdom, even well after the triumph of Christianity was complete. Aside from the aforementioned cases of Makrina or Thomaïs, it is also worth dwelling for a moment on the example of Theodora of Thessalonike, who was ordered by her abbess to spend the night in the freezing courtyard of the convent on account of her disobedience. Faced with Theodora's meek submission to this punishment, a central theme of this monastic *Life*, the superior declares to the nuns that God will count Theodora among the martyrs; one nun, a relative of the saint, affirms that she saw a crown descend from heaven and heard a voice proclaim that the crown was Theodora's. The saint thus experienced a sort of 'at-home martyrdom', created by the abbess in order to

[39] On this issue, see Kazhdan, Talbot, 'Women and Iconoclasm'.

[40] On this matter, see Auzépy, 'La destruction de l'icône de la Chalcé par Léon III: propagande ou réalité?'.

[41] See discussion and bibliography in Talbot, *Byzantine Defenders of Images*, 13–5; and Auzépy, 'La sainteté et le couvent: libération ou normalisation des femmes?', 186.

secure her the crown of obedience – an element that is not unrelated to the duties of Theodora's monastic kindred in the spreading of her cult.

Another example of this type comes from the *Life of Irene of Chrysobalanton*. During a night spent in prayer, Irene's dress caught fire but she herself remained immobile. When a nun rushed to her rescue, the saint reproached her for having deprived her of a crown that an angel had been offering her (*BHG* 952 – p. 46–8). In the same episode, Irene's hagiographer noted the indescribable effluence that flowed out of her burnt garments, similar to that emitted by holy bodies after death. Here the literary originality derives from the fact that this fragrance is produced while the saint is still living. Following a moment in which the saint almost – and quite willingly – gave herself up to death, this perfume proves that this mortal sacrifice, even if incomplete, had been approved by God; Irene's flesh, sanctified by the flames, had been blessed with the same sign of grace as the bodies of dead saints.

As with Theodora of Thessalonike, this passage adapted a venerable model in an original manner, allowing a saint who no longer had the possibility of suffering torture to enjoy, through an 'accident', the glory attached to martyrdom. Even as late as the reign of Basil II (976–1025), torture continued to inspire as much interest as did cenobitic sanctity, and hagiographers did not pass up an opportunity to skilfully adjust this ancient theme to fit the contemporary heroines whose memory they were extolling.

Conclusion

Far from attempting to be exhaustive, the present chapter has merely sought to illustrate through a few brief examples how the literary models of female sanctity presented in the *Lives* could be both traditional and innovative at the same time. Throughout the entire Byzantine period, authors emphasised the importance, for a female saint, of overcoming her natural weakness by demonstrating the 'virility' of her soul. This motif finds its Christian origins in the age of persecutions, when women often showed themselves to be more courageous than men, and it is found everywhere in hagiographic literature, whether the *vita* concerns a nun, a hermit, or a wife. In each case, the authors could find various ways of extolling this essential quality.

However, hagiographers also had to take into account the evolution of the attitudes and expectations of their contemporaries. If the hagiographers of the early centuries frequently described extreme forms of female asceticism, originating in regions far from the capital and sometimes even at the limit of Orthodoxy, later centuries – following the Arab invasions – saw sanctity increasingly centred on the capital. Given this shift, and in the context of a hagiographic production that had become rather more sober as far as women were concerned, authors developed a tendency to 'socialise' their subjects, seeking to integrate them into society rather than exclude them from it, as had been the case in previous centuries. Such a compromise was necessary if the authors were not to lose all credibility among

their audiences and those who commissioned the *Lives*, the latter often being close relatives of the saint and drawn from the highest social ranks (as in the case of the saint-empresses, for example).

Even where saints are concerned, social constraints retain their power: it is often through their obedience, humility, modesty and chasteness that female saints, ideal models of feminine behaviour, acquire the right to be described as 'virile' by their hagiographers. For the most part, it is only after their death that male society attributes sanctity to them and, in certain cases, especially where married women are concerned, that attribution is seriously challenged by authorities.

It is no longer the repentant prostitute but rather a nun fallen victim to the Arab invasions who spends long years in the desert. Even if martyrdom continues to enjoy enormous prestige in Byzantine hagiography, in tribute to Christianity's early centuries, and many others exploit the theme to praise their protagonist, regardless of the nature of her suffering, the context for such torments is transformed. In the eighth to eleventh centuries, it is within the confines of her monastery or her own home that an exemplary nun or wife bravely faces hardships; we can see this as a means of reintegrating asceticism into a more social understanding of sanctity based on the sufferance of one's situation, whatever it may be.

Starting from the cliché of woman tainted by Eve but glorified by the Virgin Mary, hagiographers set themselves to juxtaposing Biblical, patristic and hagiographic elements, erecting from this mixture a multifaceted image of sanctity. Every ounce of the authors' literary ability was wielded in their efforts to adapt and renew these models according to their own talents, the possibilities offered by their imagination and the specific historical details of their subjects' lives. Due to their similarities across the centuries, these literary representations might seem at first glance to be lacking in originality. But a closer examination reveals the many variations that could be played on the shared themes of female sanctity, unchanging and endlessly remodelled as they were.

(Translated by Rowan Dorin)

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PART III
HAGIOGRAPHY AND SOCIETY