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John Orphanotrophos and Saint Nicholas: a special relationship?

Some observations in light of figural evidence

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Abstract

Despite the celebrity of John Orphanotrophos and his crucial political role during the reign of the empress Zoe, his devotion toward Saint Nicholas has received limited attention. The special relationship between John Orphanotrophos and the saint can be followed both through written sources and figural evidences. According to Skylitzes, in 1034, saint Nicholas healed John Orphanotrophos from a rare disease. The contemporary miracle offers an interesting area of investigation and a vantage point on Saint Nicholas' cult during the eleventh century. A further lens through which we can interpret this event is the illustration which follows Skylitzes' account in the famed manuscript in Madrid (Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitr. 26-2, fol. 209r). Additionally, a group of seals linked to Orphanotrophos' personality and their iconography will be further discussed in relation to the evidence given by historical sources.

Keywords: John Orphanotrophos, Saint Nicholas, Church of Saint Nicholas in Myra, John Skylitzes, healing dream, intercession, pilgrimage.

This paper aims to investigate the miracle performed by Saint Nicholas in 1034 in favor of John Orphanotrophos. Halfway between historical and hagiographical account, the present miracle features an unique morphology among the interventions of Saint Nicholas inspired by contemporary events.¹ Furthermore, as it will be clarified, it takes on a broader meaning in the context of the current knowledge on his cult in the early and middle Byzantine period.

The personality of John Orphanotrophos, the powerful eunuch brother of the Emperor Michael IV the Plaphagonian (1034-1041), has attracted modern historians as representative of the *noir* face of Byzantine court, full of corruption, conspiracies and intrigues.² Both for moderns and contemporary commentators, his activity in the shadowy corridors of the palace offered a very wide range of motifs to criticize the truly controversial reign of Zoe (1042 -1050). We do have a particularly detailed

¹ See especially the group of rescues from Saracens' threat, that appeared in Nicholas' hagiographies from the ninth century on.

² In this historiographical perspective Raymond Janin's contribution to the study of John Orphanotrophos character's appears quite illuminating: R. Janin, "Un ministre byzantin: Jean l'Orphanotrophe (XIe siècle)", *Échos d'Orient* 30, no. 164 (1931), 431-43.

portrait of him in Michael Psellos' *Chronographia*, filled with blame tempered by admiration.³ John Orphanotrophos distinguished himself with his severe virtues in the court life as if he were still a monk,⁴ in spite of his unscrupulous and brutal policy-making. In fact, it is well known, that John was the master of a family policy which made it possible to arrange his four brothers in sensitive positions within the imperial administration. From Psellos to Zonaras, from Glycas to Skylites and Cedrenus, historians from the eleventh and from the following century, all agree on the crucial political role played by John Orphanotrophos during the reign of Zoe.⁵

Essays on John's domestic intrigues can particularly be followed in juicy anecdotes in the *Synopsis historion* by John Skylitzes⁶ and its lively images in the famed illuminated manuscript in Madrid, dated within the twelfth century (Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Virt. 26-2).⁷ Regarding our subject, we will focus on the narration of the first year of the reign of Michael IV the Plaphagonian

³ Michael Psellos, *Chronographia*, translated by E. R. A. Sweter (New Heaven: Yale University Press: 1953), IV, 57, 12. John came from a family of money lenders, he first has gained the confidence with the emperor Basil the II (976-1025) and only few years later he gained the favor of Romanos III Argyros (1028-1034). According to Micael Psellos it was John himself to ignite the liaison between his younger brother Michael and the empress Zoe, which would have abruptly led to the unfortunate end of the aging emperor Romanos.

⁴ Michael Psellos, *Chronographia*, IV, 57, 12; Cedrenus underlines John's monastic career: Georgius Cedrenus, *Historia compendium*, ed. I. Bekker, Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae, (Bonn: Weberi: 1934) 503-4.

⁵ Michael Psellos, *Chronographia*, IV, 57, 12-14 already mentioned; further accounts of John Orphanotropos' activity is given in: Ionannes Zonaras, *Annales*, XVII, 13-15.

⁶ Ioannis Scylitzae, *Synopsis Historiarum*, ed. I. Thurn, Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae, 5 (Berolini, De Gruyter: 1972), 397. John Skylitzes (flourished 1081) was a high dignitary, his *Synopsis* is the story of byzantine emperors from the ninth to the middle eleventh century: For an introduction to the author and his work: A. Kazdhan, A. Cutler, "Skylitzes, John", *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 1991), 2, 1914; V. Tsamakda, *The illustrated Chronicle of Iohannes Skylites in Madrid* (Leiden, Alexandros Press: 2002), 22-23; J.-C. Cheynet, "Introduction: the author and his family", in *John Skylites a Synopsis of Byzantine History 879-1049*, introduction, translation and commentary by J. Wortley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), ix-x; B. Flusin, "Re-writing history: John Skylitzes' Synopsis historion", in *John Skylites a Synopsis*, xi-xxxiv.

⁷ Despite the high number of manuscripts containing the work of Skylitzes, the one in Madrid is the only one illustrated, and moreover with an impressive number of miniatures, totalling 574. The illustrations are ever-present in literature because they are an inexhaustive source of information on habits, costumes, military techniques, fashion and so on. Possibly, the manuscript was executed by a Sicilian or southern Italian mastery within the twelfth century (Grabar leaned towards a later date) the manuscript has been kept in the Monastery of San Salvator de Faro in Messina, thereafter in the Cathedral of Messina around the sixteenth century until, finally, in 1712 it arrived in the National Library of Spain. A. Grabar, *L'Illustration du manuscrit de Skylitzès de la Bibliothèque Nationale de Madrid* (Venise, Insistut hellénique d'études byzantines et post-byzantines de Venise: 1979); V. Tsamadka, *The illustrated Chronicle of Ioannes Skylitzes in Madrid* (Leiden, Alexandros Press: 2002).

(1034-1041), his brother. The reckless behaving of the empress for his new husband accession to the throne, was producing a series of catastrophic consequences throughout the empire, already dangerously threatened from military attacks from all fronts. In September 1034 a severe earthquake struck Jerusalem, a column of fire appeared in the sky – premonitory sign of serious events – and the Saracens captured the city of Saint Nicholas, Myra.⁸

In the same year, Skylitzes reports that John Orphanotrophos was suffering from a severe mouth ulcer. None of the most illustrious doctors of Constantinople was able to treat his rare disease. John was in despair when “Nicholas, the great miracle-worker, appeared to him in a dream commanding him to come to Myra as quickly as possible for that was where he would be healed”.⁹ The Orphanotrophos immediately followed Nicholas’ instructions and he reached the sanctuary of Nicholas in the far Lycian city of Myra. Grateful for having received a prompt recovery, he gave generous donations to the sanctuary and provided Myra a stronger town walls.¹⁰ In the Madrid Chronicle the event mentioned above is described by its own illustration (fol. 209r, fig. 1).¹¹ In the background of the sumptuous arcades of the palace, a curtain opens to reveal the bedroom of the Orphanotrophos.¹² John is bedridden and he is sleeping with his improbably stretched arm with the elbow bent, supporting the head. Saint Nicholas stands behind the bed, clad in the traditional bishop garments, with his intense gaze and severe facial expression. The saint is addressing, with his right hand, the lying figure. Both Nicholas and John Orphanotrophos are identified with inscriptions

⁸ John Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, 397, ed. J. Wortley, 374. The earthquake in Jerusalem and the capture of Myra by Saracens are also included in: Ioannes Zonarae, *Epitome Historiarum*, XVII; Michael Glycas, *Annales*, 587; Georgius Cedrenus, *Historiarum Compendium*, 513.

⁹ “Ἔλκους δὲ διανεμομένου τοῦ ὀρφανοτρόφου στόμα καὶ πασῆς ἰατρικῆς τέχνης ἀπειρηκίας, ὄναρ αὐτῷ ἐπιστας ὁ μέγας ἐν θαύμασι Νικόλαος ἤκειν ἐν Μύροις τὴν ταχίστην ἐκέλευεν, ὡς ἐκεῖσε τευξόμενος θεραπείας. ὁ δὲ θάπτων, ἢ λόγος ἐκεῖσε φοιτήσας, καὶ μύροις καὶ ἄλλαις πολυτελείαις τὸν τοῦ μεγάλου θεῖον δεξιωσάμενος ναόν, καὶ τείχει περικλείσας τὴν τῶν Μυρῶν πόλιν ὄχυρωτάτῳ, θεραπείας τυχὼν ἐπάνεισιν”: Ioannes Scylitzae, *Synopsis Historiarum*, 397.

¹⁰ Ioannis Scylitzae, *Synopsis Historiarum*, 397; John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis*, 374. Unfortunately no trace of these eleventh century town walls has been detected.

¹¹ Tsamadka, *The illustrated Chronicle*, 235.

¹² Grabar describes the presence of this curtain as curious: Grabar, *L’Illustration du manuscrit*, 108. For the reasons that will be further addressed, this detail led us to ponder that, in the present illustration, is depicted the church of saint Nicholas in Myra itself, instead of the Palace in Constantinople. Curtains and textiles were part of liturgical space architecture in medieval and byzantine churches. Looking at the whole collection of architectures of private houses and imperial apartments in the Madrid manuscript, the space depicted is conceivably John Orphanotrophos’ bedroom. Despite this, it feels right not to exclude an alternative reading. Further references and insights on this issue: M. G. Parani, “Curtains in the Middle and Late Byzantine House,” in *Catalogue of the Textiles in the Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Collection*, ed. G. Bühl and E. Dospěl Williams (Washington, DC, 2019).

painted in red. Apparently, both in the present illustration and in the written account nothing that astonishing is happening but the saint's intervention in favor of John. In the canon of hagiographical stories on Saint Nicholas it is possible to detect a significant group of nocturnal apparitions within dreams and, more generally, a quite intense activity of the saint during night hours.¹³

The event recorded by Skylitzes is highly precious for the study of the development of Saint Nicholas' cult. Actually, barely one hagiographical source of this kind could be found in the eleventh century for any saint. Even if concisely resumed, Nicholas is depicted, without any doubt, performing a healing by a "speech dream". Likewise, in several early Byzantine hagiographical accounts, the saint gives instructions to the sick person within a vision in a dream, without coming directly in contact, through touch, with the sick part of the body.¹⁴ This peculiar group of miracle dreams unite different saints, physicians and healers, whose therapeutic powers have given fame to their sanctuaries where worshippers went on pilgrimage to receive a cure.¹⁵

In Skylitzes' account, the most interesting element worthy of consideration is the explicit mention of Myra. The city is, in fact, indicated as the place where to achieve healing, a punctual reference to a facet of Nicholas' cult in his famed sanctuary.

In recent years the team of Prof. Yildiz Otügen and Prof. Sema Doğan has uncovered the earliest area of Nicholas sanctuary in Myra, in the north east corner of the church, according to small findings dated to the sixth century. Here, the first oil pouring chamber, the *martyrion* of Saint Nicholas, is connected to a further room equipped without openings, that the team has detected as a place intended

¹³ G. Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos der heilige Nikolas in der griechischen Kirche. Texte und Untersuchungen*, II (Leipzig-Berlin, Teubner: 1917-1919), 368-440.

¹⁴ S. Constantinou, "The Morphology of Healing Dreams: Dream and Therapy in Byzantine Collections of Miracle Stories", in *Dreaming in Byzantium and Beyond*, ed. by C. Angelidi and George T. Calofonos (Farnham, Ashgate Publishing Limited: 2014), 21-34.

¹⁵ It would not be possible to list comprehensively. See the Miracles of Thecla: *Vie et Miracles de Saint Thècle*, trans. and ed. G. Dragon, (Bruxelles, Société des Bollandistes: 1978), 336.36-42; and the Miracles of Kyros and John collected by Sophronios of Jerusalem: N. Fernández Marcos, *Los Thaumata de Sofronio contribution al estudio de la incubatio Cristiana* (Madrid, Istituto Antonio de Nebrjia: 1975), 23-32; Constantinou, "The Morphology of Healing", 27-9; A.- M. Talbot, "Pilgrimage to Healing Shrines: the evidence of Miracle Accounts", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 56 (2002), 159-61. The literature on Christian incubation, its evolution and relationship with pagan rituals is very extensive; I need only to quote for detailed further references: *Ritual Healing: Magic, Ritual and Medical Therapy from Antiquity until the Early Modern Period*, eds. I. Cspergi, C. Burnett (Firenze, SISMEL, Edizioni del Galluzzo: 2012); G. H. Renberg, *Where dreams may come. Incubation sanctuaries in the Greco-Roman world* (Leiden-Boston, Brill: 2016), chap. XIV (for Christian sources).

to host incubation rituals.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the contemporary narrators of the translation of Nicholas' relics (1087) underline that the tomb of the saint was unapproachable at the end of the eleventh century.¹⁷ According to archeological data the vault of the oil pouring chamber had been restored within that century.¹⁸ The miracle of the healing of John Orphanotrophos is the one and only additional source we do have in order to value the existence and the long life of this local religious practice activity in the first sanctuary of Nicholas in Myra.

Considering now the figural evidence given by the manuscript in Madrid, Nancy Patterson Ševčenko has made a comparison of the compositive scheme of the illustration with the most famed nocturnal apparitions of Nicholas within a dream, which appeared to the emperor Constantine and the praefectus Ablabius in the *Praxis de Stratelatis* (fig. 2). The artist of the Madrid manuscript should have drawn inspiration from the iconography of these episodes.¹⁹ The similarity between them is indeed undeniable. John Orphanotrophos is depicted lying in bed, where he is confided both because of illness, a condition that is underlined by the position of the arm,²⁰ and because he is sleeping. Saint Nicholas' apparition is rendered through his depiction, full-length, standing bedside. The iconographic development of Saint Nicholas' dream apparitions, their origins and their relation with written sources, would take us too far from the issue here dealt with.²¹ Suffice it to call into question the relation between the couple of dream apparitions mentioned and the illustration of the healing of

¹⁶ S. Y. Otügen, *La basilica di San Nicola*, in *San Nicola Splendori d'Arte tra Oriente e Occidente*, catalogo della mostra (Bari, Castello Svevo, 7 dicembre 2006- 6 maggio 2007), a cura di M. Bacci (Milano, Electa: 2006), 47-60; - - -, "2002 yılı Demre-Myra Aziz Nikolaos Kilisesi kazısı ve duvar resimleri koruma-onarım ve belgeleme çalışmaları", *Adalia* 8 (2005), 263-75; S. Doğan, N. Çorağan, V. Bulgurlu, Ç. Alas, E. Fındık and E. Apaydın, *Demre-Myra. Aziz Nikolaos Kilisesi* (Istanbul, Arkeoloji ve Sanat Yayınları: 2014), 103-7.

¹⁷ Otügen, *La basilica di San Nicola*, 47-48. Giovanni Arcidiacono, *Traslatio Sancti Nicolai*, ed. S. Silvestro, *Santi, Reliquie e sacri furti: san Nicola tra Montecassino e normanni* (Napoli, Liguori: 2013), 103; Niceforo, *Tractatus de Traslatione*, ed. Silvestro, *Santi, Reliquie*, 128.

¹⁸ Otügen, *La basilica di San Nicola*, 47-49.

¹⁹ N. Patterson Ševčenko, *The life of Saint Nicholas in Byzantine Art* (Turin, Bottega d'Erasmus: 1983), 115-22.

²⁰ Patterson Ševčenko, *The life of Saint Nicholas*, 118. This iconographic device is well documented in Greek classic and Hellenistic art is continuously deployed in Byzantine and Medieval iconography: H. Maguire, "The Depiction of Sorrow in Middle Byzantine Art", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 31 (1977), 132-40.

²¹ A preliminary overview on this issue, with a complementary analysis of hagiographical sources has been presented by the author in a paper titled "Hidden Healing Dreams: re-thinking a facet of Saint Nicholas' iconography in Byzantine world" on the occasion of the *Third International Conference on Byzantine and Medieval Studies*, Nicosia, Municipal Multipurpose Center, 18th January 2020. The present investigation derives from the wider material thence collected.

John Orphanotrophos. What if, rather than one being drawn from the other, the composition was the most immediate and obvious way of depicting a healing?²²

Returning to John Orphanotrophos, none among the historians who gave attention to the activity of John during the reign of his brother Michael, mentions the miraculous event that occurred between Constantinople and Myra. The only exception can be found in George Cedrenus' *Synopsis historion*, where the episode is recorded, following Skylitzes' account, so closely that the Greek texts appear identical.²³ However, this circumstance is not particularly surprising since Skylitzes' Chronicle has been listed as the major source for Cedrenus from the year 811.²⁴ In this perspective, the mention of the healing of John Orphanotrophos in Cedrenus' *Synopsis* cannot be assumed as a corroborative source.

Nevertheless, additional documentary and figural evidence can be profitably added to the overview. In the Dumbarton Oaks Collection of Seals four pieces – plus one in the Harvard Art Museums – are inscribed with the name of John, monk and *orphanotrophos*.²⁵ The seals here to be discussed belong to two different types. The first two seals feature on the obverse the bust of Saint Nicholas, identified by the inscription, blessing with his right hand and holding the book with the other hand (BZS.1951.31.5.2967, fig. 3; BZS.1958.106.5637; fig. 4). The other three seals feature on the obverse a rarer representation of Saint Nicholas standing as a whole figure, likewise here identified

²² The compositive scheme overlaps, for instance: Saint Nicholas healing Leo in the fragment of a tryptic (Sinai, Monastery of Saint Catherine, Michigan inventory number 33) (see: K. Weitzmann, "Fragments of an early St. Nicholas triptych on Mount Sinai", in *Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας* 11 (1982-1983), 11-23), Saint Nicholas healing a woman (possibly from infertility) in the "South burial chamber" in the early twelfth century frescoes in the church of saint Nicholas in Myra (see: Doğan, Çorağan, Bulgurlu, Alas, Findık and E. Apaydın, *Demre-Myra*). Additionally, a similar scheme is developed in the healings operated by Saint Eustratius of Armenia, both in dream and in wakefulness, in the twelfth century Epistyle with Deesis and Scenes from the Life of Eustratius (Sinai, Monastery of Saint Catherine, Michigan inventory number 1638) (see: N. Patterson Ševčenko, "The Posthumous miracles of Saint Eustratius on a Sinai Templon Beam", in *Byzantine Religious Culture. Studies in honor of Alice-Mary Talbot*, ed. by D. Sullivan, E. Fisher, S. Papaionnu (Leiden-Boston, Brill: 2012), 267-87).

²³ Georgius Cedrenus, *Historiarium Compendium*, 512.

²⁴ A. Kazhdan, "Kedrenos, George", *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 1992), vol.2, 1118; L. Tartaglia, "Meccanismi di compilazione nella Cronaca di Giorgio Cedreno", in *Scrivere Leggere Interpretare: studi di antichità in onore di Sergio Daris*, ed. F. Crevatin, G. Tedeschi (Trieste, EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste: 2005), 296-302.

²⁵ The identification of the owner with John Orphanotrophos has already been expressed by: C. Zacos, A. Vegerly, *Byzantine Lead Seals* (Basel, J. J. Augustin: 1972), vol. 3, 1147-49, nos. 2677bis (a)- 2677bis (b); J. Nesbitt, "The orphanotrophos: Some Observation on the History on the Office in Light of seals", *Studies in Byzantine Sigillography* 8 (2003), 59-61.

by the inscription,²⁶ turned left with his hands upraised towards the *manus Dei*, a detail that is now hardly visible (BZS.1951.31.5.488, fig. 5; BZS.1955.1.4885, fig. 6; BZS.1958.106.222, fig. 7). The whole group of five seals presents on the reverse a six-line inscription – fully preserved in four out of five seals – with the following prayer: “Lord, help your servant John, monk and orphanotrophos”.²⁷ In addition to this group, a copper tessera in the Fogg Collection is signed by John Orphanotrophos (Harvard, Fogg Collection 2967). The owner self-defines himself in the same manner, “monk and orphanotrophos”, and the obverse of the tessera similarly shows the bust of Saint Nicholas. The only variation to detect is represented by the last two letters of the inscription in the reverse. The usual prayer ends with the letters IR, possibly a chronological reference to the “second indiction”, namely the year 1033/1034,²⁸ when John was healed and went on pilgrimage in Myra. We are tempted to welcome this interpretative clue precisely in light of the iconographic features of the seals.

The image of the intercession, the half or full-length figure, turned towards the *Manus Dei* is almost exclusively reserved for the Mother of God (*Hagiosoritissa*) in the majority of lead seals within the eleventh and the twelfth century. Among the twelve saints similarly depicted, who exceed this rule, Nicholas is undoubtedly the most frequently represented, with a total amount of eighteen seals, including the three here examined.²⁹ Definitely, the prestigious position of Saint Nicholas in the hierarchy of Byzantine saints and his recognized role as intercessor is not limited to the relation with John Orphanotrophos. Yet we would argue that the iconography of the seals here discussed underlines the effectiveness of Saint Nicholas as mediator of divine grace and salvation, solidly based on facts, a special homage to the saint from his fascinating worshipper, the Orphanotrophos.

In conclusion, the account of the healing of John Orphanotrophos represents a source of information both for the cult of Saint Nicholas and for his sanctuary in Myra. We are allowed to suggest that, at

²⁶ Only in the seal numbered BZS.1958.106.222 the inscription accompanying the saint no longer visible.

²⁷ “Κύριε βοήθει τῷ σῷ δούλῳ Ἰωάννη μοναχῷ καὶ ὀρφανοτρόφῳ”: Zacos, Veglerly, *Byzantine Lead Seals*, 1147-49.

²⁸ On this copper tessera and on the reading of the two letters of the inscription as “12 indiction” or “indiction 2”: Zacos, Veglerly, *Byzantine Lead Seals*, 2766; Nesbitt, “The orphanotrophos: some observations”, 60.

²⁹ In this regard, the anonymous seal dated to the mid eleventh century with the Theothokos turned left on the obverse and Saint Nicholas turned right on the reverse both of them towards the *Manus Dei* (Dumbarton Oaks Seals, no. 61; BZS.1958.106.1934) deserves particular attention. Within the eleventh century another seven anonymous seals (BZS. 1955.1.3556; BZS. 1955.1.3555; BZS. 1958.106.4877, BZS. 1958.106.4013, BZS. 1947.2.1864, BZS. 1955.1.1801, BZS.1955.1.1800) and two more are by the *prothospatarios* and *strategos* Nicholas (BZS.1947.2.1157). On the overabundance of Nicholas portraits on lead seals and on the presence of Nicholas paired with the Virgin see: J. Cotsonis, “The contribution of Byzantine lead seals to the study of the cult of the Saints (sixth-twelfth century)”, *Byzantion* 75 (2005), 433-37. Unfortunately, the present seals are not mentioned by the scholar.

that time, the church was frequented by worshippers³⁰ and also, possibly, that the ancient therapeutic practices there were still being undertaken. Furthermore, the importance of Skylitzes' testimony derives from being independent from the "official" hagiographical sources on Nicholas' life, therefore, it betrays a facet, usually underestimate, of the devotion towards the saint.³¹

³⁰ Pilgrimage accounts are often much less precise. At the beginning of the twelfth century, interestingly after the arrival of the relics in Bari, two famous pilgrims mention Myra; Seawulf (1102-1103) explicitly tells "*Adorato sacro sepulcro*" while Danil (1106-1108) does not mention the Church but only the way to Myra and we cannot say if he was able to visit it: J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrimage 1099-1185* (London: Taylor & Francis Ltd: 1999), 98, 125, 154.

³¹ In this perspective it is useful to consider the latter healing of King and Saint Stephen Uroš III Nemanijć or Stephan Dečanski (1276-1331). Since from the first life written around the year 1331 by the archbishop Danilo II, Nicholas came into several dreams announcing and then curing the blindness of the Prince before his accession to the throne. The hagiographical construction of the Serbian Saint is out of "official" hagiography of Saint Nicholas as the Orphanotrophos biography in Skylitzes *Synopsis Historion*.



Fig. 1. Saint Nicholas appears in a dream to the sick John Orphanotrophos in Illuminated manuscript of the Synopsis Historiarum by John Skylitzes (Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Virt. 26-2, fol. 209r.).

Image property of the Biblioteca Nacional de España.

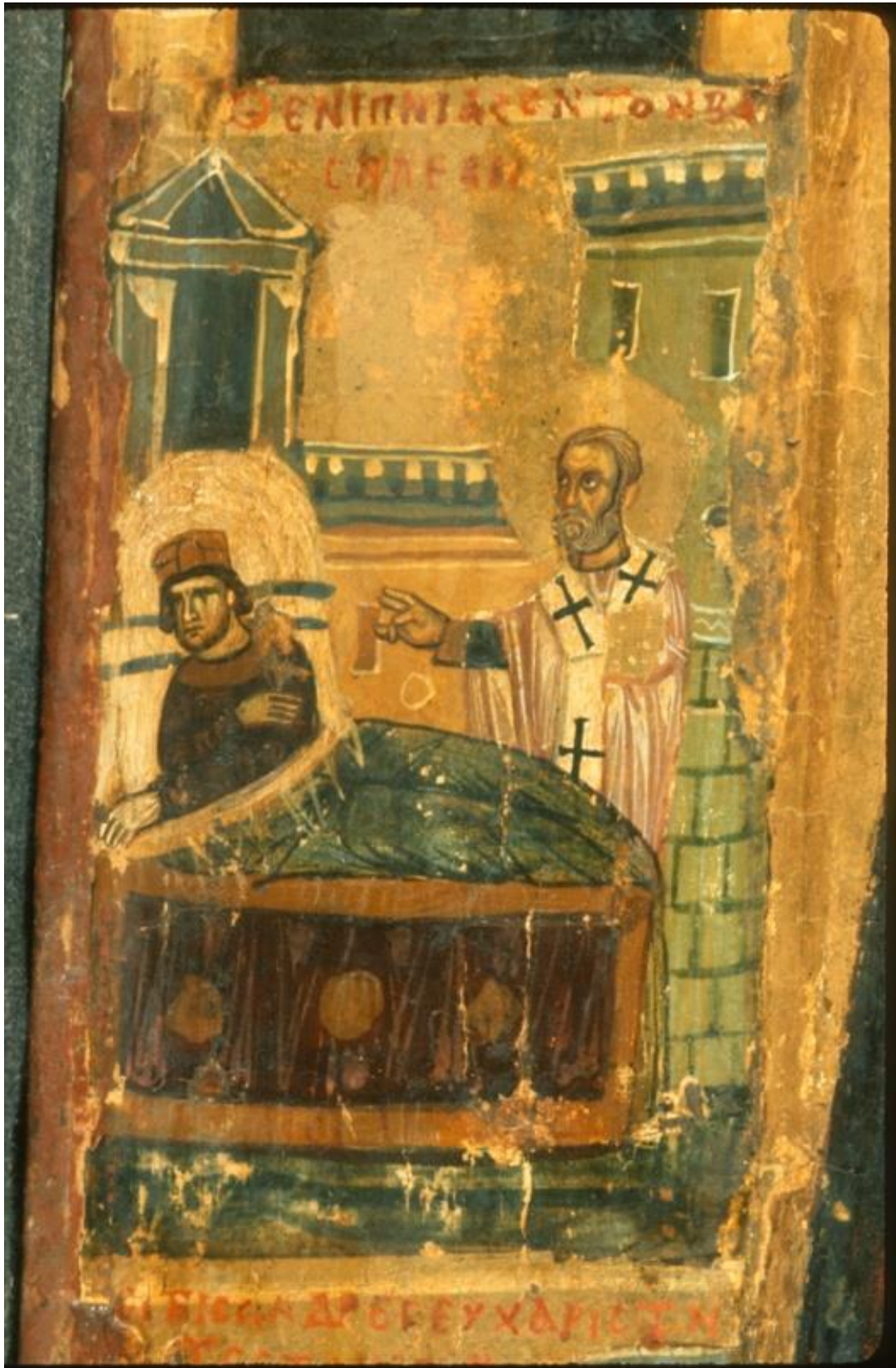


Fig. 2. Mount Sinai, Monastery of St. Catherine, Vita Icon of Saint Nicholas (XII century), detail. Saint Nicholas appears in a dream to the emperor Constantine.

Published through the Courtesy of the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai.



Fig. 3. a.-b. Washington D.C., Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Lead Seal of John monk and orphanotrophos. On the obverse the bust of Saint Nicholas. BZS.1958.106.5637. (26.0 mm).

© Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC, BZS.1958.106.5637



Fig. 4. a.-b. Washington D.C., Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Lead Seal of John monk and orphanotrophos. On the obverse the Saint Nicholas turning towards the *Manus Dei*. BZS.1955.1.4885. (27.0 mm).

© Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, BZS.1955.1.4885.



Fig. 5. a.-b. Cambridge (MA), Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Bequest of Thomas Whittemore, Lead Seal of John monk and orphanotrophos. On the obverse the Saint Nicholas turning towards the *Manus Dei*. BZS.1951.31.5.488. (26.0 mm).

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Fig. 6. a.-b. Washington D.C., Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Lead Seal of John monk and orphanotrophos. On the obverse the Saint Nicholas turning towards the Manus Dei. BZS.1958.106.222 (23.0 mm).

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Slaves' lives in saints' Lives: What information about slaves can be found in Byzantine Lives of saints?

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Abstract

Slavery played a very important role in Byzantium, and is therefore present in various narrative sources, one of which is hagiographical literature. This article briefly discusses how trustworthy and valuable information in hagiographical texts are, and attempts to pinpoint the vocabulary commonly used for slaves in them. It also examines slavery in Byzantium by analysing the way slaves are portrayed in saints' Lives, based on certain enlightening examples that belong to this genre. With an emphasis on important aspects of a slave's life, namely relations with masters, marriage, professional activities and, finally, manumission, it aims to offer insight into their lifetime and everyday activities, which are usually accurately depicted in the Lives of saints.

Keywords: slaves, slavery, saints' Lives, Byzantine hagiography

Hagiography

Slavery is a phenomenon that has been present around the world since antiquity and, although defining it might be challenging, it is generally accepted that 'throughout history civilizations have institutionalized the possession and ownership of human beings within juridical, social, economic and cultural frameworks'.³² This institution also existed throughout the one-thousand-year history of the Byzantine Empire, where it played a very significant part. Apart from legal and historiographical texts, references to slaves can also be found in hagiographical sources, especially in saints' Lives. Hagiography probably is the richest literary genre of Byzantine literature. Hagiographical texts include saints' Lives, *Martyria* (martyrs' trials, tortures and executions), *Apophthegmata* (collections

³² Youval Rotman, "Forms of Slavery in Mediterranean History," in *A Companion to Mediterranean History*, ed. Peregrine Horden and Sharon Kinoshita (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 263.

of Desert Fathers' stories and sayings), collections of miracles that took place either during the holy men's and women's lifetime or after their death, and short stories regarding their relics or icons.³³ Lives are the biographies of saints. These narratives highlight their heroes' sanctity and their function, which is presented as the ideal Christian behaviour, in the Byzantine society. At the same time, they provide various vivid details about ordinary Byzantines' reality. As saints interacted with every social class, their Lives also entail information about life at different levels of Byzantine society.³⁴ These are usually not present in "official" historiographical sources, such as histories or chronicles, whose authors, mostly members of the aristocracy, 'were mainly interested in the upper classes'³⁵ and were usually concerned with imperial or military history. In addition, since writers' main aim was to demonstrate their protagonists' holiness, they can offer useful information unintentionally, without specifically focusing their attention on it. Nevertheless, Lives include several literary *topoi* and subjective features. Although these can also be a source of information as they can offer insight on writing practices or each author's perspective, one should keep in mind that, as every source, Lives must be handled with caution.³⁶ Despite any difficulties in their use as historical evidence, however, scholars have long recognised their historical value and the fact that their details are of great importance, as they are invaluable sources, sometimes the best we have for the representation of everyday life, especially for social, political and economic history.³⁷

³³ Alexander Kazhdan, "Byzantine Hagiography and Sex in the Fifth to Twelfth Centuries," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990): 131, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1291623>; Cyril Mango, *Βυζάντιο. Η αυτοκρατορία της Νέας Ρώμης* (Athens: MIET, 2002), 290-91; *ODB* s.vv. 'Apothegmata Patrum, hagiography, martyrion, vita'.

³⁴ Averil Cameron, *The Byzantines* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 119, 116-17.

³⁵ Michel Kaplan and Eleonora Kountoura-Galaki, "Economy and Society in Byzantine Hagiography: *Realia* and Methodological Questions," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography. Volume II: Genres and Contexts*, ed. Stephanos Efthymiadis (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 390.

³⁶ Eric Brook, "Hagiography, Modern Historiography, and Historical Representation," *Fides et Historia* 42, no. 2 (2010): 10-11; Amalia Iliadi, *Οι βίοι των Αγίων της Βυζαντινής περιόδου ως ιστορικές πηγές* (Trikala: self-publishing, 2006), 43; Kaplan and Kountoura-Galaki, "Economy," 406-7.

³⁷ Brook, "Hagiography," 2; Cameron, *The Byzantines*, 129; Aikaterini Christofilopoulou, *Βυζαντινή Ιστορία Α, 324-610* (Thessaloniki: Vaniias, 1992), 69-71; Iliadi, *Οι βίοι*, 21-22; Kaplan and Kountoura-Galaki, "Economy," 389; Mango, *Βυζάντιο*, 293.

Slavery in Byzantium

Amongst other topics of social history, hagiographical texts provide information about slavery, which was largely accepted and practiced in Byzantium.³⁸ Byzantine society preserved its predecessor's, Roman society's, division of people into free, freedmen and slaves. This was introduced into Byzantine law by Justinian I³⁹ in the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, and was reiterated several times in subsequent legal codes.⁴⁰ Although historians agree that the institution of slavery revived in the ninth and tenth centuries and started declining from the eleventh century onwards (the last *Neara* concerning slaves was published by Manuel I Komnenos around 1167), it was actually present throughout the empire's history until its fall in 1453.⁴¹

Slaves were considered living things and were placed between human beings and movable or immovable, non-human, property (chattel), as a kind of property that could move on its own, along with farm animals.⁴² The main sources of slaves were prisoners of war, foreign slaves that were imported and traded in the empire (mostly in Constantinople, where there was a big slave marketplace until 1453), and house births, as children whose both parents or just mothers were enslaved would automatically become the owner's property.⁴³ Other ways of becoming a slave was capture by pirates, forced enslavement of a free person, and voluntary enslavement which, however, was declared invalid by Leo VI, unless practiced in order to marry a slave.⁴⁴ Slaves did not have any rights: they were not allowed to hold ownership, accept a bequest or take part in any form of purchase, although they could be sold and bought, pawned and bequeathed. In addition, they could not appear at court, give public

³⁸ Kyle Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275-425* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 505-6; Günter Prinzing, "On slaves and slavery," in *The Byzantine World*, ed. Paul Stephenson (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

³⁹ For the transliteration of Greek names, I have followed *ODB*.

⁴⁰ Christine Angelidi, "Δούλοι στην Κωνσταντινούπολη τον 10ο αι. Η μαρτυρία του Βίου του οσίου Βασιλείου του Νέου," *Βυζαντινά Σύμμεικτα* 6 (1985): 33-34, <https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.695>; Prinzing, "On slaves," 92-93.

⁴¹ Angelidi, "Δούλοι," 33; Helga Köpstein, "Μερικές παρατηρήσεις για τη νομική κατάσταση των δούλων κατά την Πείρα," in *Πρακτικά του Α' Διεθνούς Συμποσίου: «Η καθημερινή ζωή στο Βυζάντιο. Τομές και συνέχειες στην ελληνιστική και ρωμαϊκή παράδοση.» 15-17 Σεπτεμβρίου 1988*, ed. Christine Angelidi (Athens: EIE, 1989), 410.

⁴² *ODB* s.v. 'slavery'.

⁴³ Köpstein, "Μερικές παρατηρήσεις," 414; *ODB* s.v. 'slavery'; Prinzing, "On slaves," 93.

⁴⁴ Youval Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 25.

testimony, as they were considered incompetent to do so along with women, children and mentally deranged people, travel, choose their master or the nature of their work⁴⁵ and get married.⁴⁶

It seems that certain measures taken by emperors from the ninth century ameliorated living conditions for slaves, as they appear to have gained a few property rights. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries slavery's status started declining and the institution became less common and significant after the state 'preferred to use its slaves as freedmen and to set them up where it needed them...[, and make them] subject to taxes or military service'⁴⁷. At the same time, they were also given the right 'to receive the basic sacraments of baptism, the Eucharist, and funeral rites, which increased their status as individuals and improved their general living conditions'.⁴⁸ In addition, the process of their manumission was simplified and even encouraged.⁴⁹ Finally, according to Leo VI's *Neara* 38, imperial slaves had the right to own land and purchase it freely, while, according to a *Neara* published by Alexios I Komnenos in 1095, owners had to allow their slaves to get married in a Christian ceremony and have their marriage blessed. Until then, slaves were only allowed to perform non-Christian weddings, because otherwise they had to be emancipated. This *Neara* 'banned any other form of union between slaves, imposing Christian marriage as the only legitimate conjugal union and thus completing the institutional framework for the marital lives of slaves'.⁵⁰ At the same time, it reassured masters that slaves would remain their property. That way Christian slaves' marriage was acknowledged within the religious framework⁵¹ and their social status was equated to that of free citizens in the religious level.⁵² However, the law 'in no way changed the legal status of married slaves, since it clearly stated that Christian marriage was no argument in favor of emancipation'.⁵³

⁴⁵ Liz James, "Men, Women, Eunuchs: Gender, Sex, and Power," in *A Social History of Byzantium*, ed. John Haldon (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 35; Kōpstein, "Μερικές παρατηρήσεις," 412; Katerina Nikolaou, *Η Γυναίκα στη Μέση Βυζαντινή Εποχή* (Athens: EIE, 2016), 261-62.

⁴⁶ According to Duby, marriage 'regulates the transmission of wealth from one generation to another... [and, therefore,] plays no role at all for the slave..., who mates but does not marry'. (Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest. The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France*, trans. Barbara Brey (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 19)

⁴⁷ Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery*, 129.

⁴⁸ Marcus Rautman, *Daily Life in the Byzantine Empire* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 22.

⁴⁹ Ioannis Karayannopoulos, *To Βυζαντινό Κράτος* (Thessaloniki: Vantias, 2001), 446.

⁵⁰ Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery*, 143.

⁵¹ Rotman, "Forms of Slavery", 269-70.

⁵² Karayannopoulos, *To Βυζαντινό Κράτος*, 411-12; Kōpstein, "Μερικές παρατηρήσεις," 415-16.

⁵³ Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery*, 143.

From the eleventh century owners were also not allowed to separate slaves who had been married or to dissolve these unions in order to sell or manumit slave families' members.⁵⁴

Terminology

As already stated, references to slaves are very often in hagiographical texts. First of all, it would be necessary to briefly point out the different terms that are frequently used for them in these sources. According to Rotman, these words are: *δοῦλος* and *δούλη* for men and women (respectively) slaves and subordinates, *οἰκέτης* and *οἰκέτις* for domestic male and female slaves, *θεράπων* and *θεράπινα* for male and female servants, *παιδίσκη* for young female slaves and *παῖς* or *παιδίον* for young male servants, and *ἀνδράποδον* for both slaves and enslaved war captives.⁵⁵

The above-mentioned terms generally contained several meanings and were not used exclusively to describe slaves, or to designate them as such in the legal sense.⁵⁶ *Παιδίσκη*, *παῖς* and *παιδίον*, for example, were also used in their literal meaning, solely referring to a little girl, or a child respectively, while *παῖς* is also found in the expression *αἱρετικῶν παῖδες* (“heretics’ disciples”), thus describing free people and not slaves. As for *ἀνδράποδον*, it was also used metaphorically for an emotional bondage, as in the “slave of greed” or “slave of adultery”, while when used in plural it could portray enslaved populations and not individual slaves.⁵⁷ In order to determine whether or not they are referring to this social category, one has to take into consideration the overall context of the source, the date and the place that it was written, as well as its type, as different terms are used in different genres.⁵⁸ It is also noteworthy that the two most common words, *δοῦλος* and *οἰκέτης*, were used with regard to various social relations in the phrases *ὁ δοῦλος/ὁ οἰκέτης τοῦ Θεοῦ* (“the servant of God”) and *ὁ δοῦλος/ὁ οἰκέτης τοῦ βασιλέως* (“the servant of the emperor”). The former expression is used in reference to saints, who owed a service to God, or, when there is no definite article, simply to Christians and their private devotion to God, in which case it was also used by priests during the reception of communion. The second phrase refers to all high public, military or civilian, officials and title holders who provided a form of service to the emperor, and it consciously echoes religious

⁵⁴ Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery*, 142.

⁵⁵ Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery*, 82-84, 87.

⁵⁶ Prinzing, “On slaves,” 93.

⁵⁷ Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery*, 83-85, 88.

⁵⁸ Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery*, 83.

practices.⁵⁹ These observations should be kept in mind and could be rather useful to critical readers of saints' Lives who are searching for information in them.

Slaves' lives in saints' Lives

Topics regarding slavery are often present in many episodes of saints' Lives. As slaves were mostly domestic, an interesting theme that is usually mentioned is their living conditions in relation to their masters' behaviour towards them.⁶⁰ Some slave owners treated their slaves morally, such as Philaretos the Merciful and his wife Theosebo. Philaretos owned many slaves who were serving in his house, but lost them along with the biggest part of his property when he fell into poverty. However, he did keep one slave and one young slave girl, whom his wife took care of as she were a family member, asking him to give her the same amount of food as he would give to herself, their children and their daughter-in-law during a famine.⁶¹ In the *Life of Andrew the Fool, protospatharios* and military leader Theognostos bought Andrew and, as he was interested in his education, he ensured he would learn how to read and write, so that he could become his *notarios* (secretary) and be put in charge of his other slaves. Theognostos also gave Andrew some of his clothes and, being concerned about his health, he sent him to a church where he could be treated when the latter started acting as if he were mad.⁶² Many other masters also appear to have been interested in their slaves' health and therefore used to address saints in order to ask for their healing when they were sick. According to the *Life of Basil the Younger*, the owner of a workshop in Constantinople who was worried about his slave's life, because he was suffering from dropsy and he was dying, went to the saint's house and, crying, begged him to save his slave. Basil was moved by the man's gesture, visited the slave and healed him.⁶³ Theodosia, sister of Irene of Chrysobalanton, asked saint Eustratios to heal her female slave who was bleeding inexplicably,⁶⁴ while the wife of a general asked for oil from the oil lamp of the tomb of saint Theodora of Thessaloniki in order to heal her blind slave.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Paul Magdalino, "Court Society and Aristocracy," in *A Social History of Byzantium*, ed. John Haldon (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 222; Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery*, 87-88, 166-67.

⁶⁰ Nikolaou, *H Γυναίκα*, 265.

⁶¹ *Life of Philaretos the Merciful* 131.

⁶² *Life of Andrew the Fool* 2.

⁶³ Angelidi, "Δούλοι," 37-38.

⁶⁴ *Life of Eustratios of Agauros* 33.

⁶⁵ *Life of Theodora of Thessalonike* 56.

On the other hand, there is also evidence of owners who were mistreating or even beating their slaves. This was the case of Megethios in the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, who promised the saint not to harm his fugitive slaves, thus succeeding in regaining them, but hung them by their hands and brutally whipped them once they were back at his house.⁶⁶ The most prominent example is found in the *Life of Mary the Younger*, in which the hagiographer places emphasis on the household's slaves. Mary was falsely accused by her husband's, Nikephoros, siblings of mismanaging their house's finances and committing adultery with one of her slaves. Nikephoros believed them and cruelly questioned her most faithful servant, threatening to kill her if she did not reveal the man's name to him. When she bravely denied that her mistress, who was always nice towards her slaves and willing to help them, had an affair, although she knew that her life was in his hands,⁶⁷ the enraged Nikephoros threw her on the floor and had her whipped.⁶⁸ However, it seems that treatment of slaves was primarily a literary device characterising their owners and it can be said that it mainly reflected the authors' point of view.

Relations between masters and their female slaves were rather common as is obvious from the recurring references in the laws to financial penalties for unfaithful married men who had affairs with their servants. If these relationships resulted in the birth of children, they would belong to the slave's master, provided he was a free man.⁶⁹ An indication of this phenomenon can be found in the *Life of Basil the Younger*, where, apart from the saint himself, the other two main characters are the author, Gregory, and the servant of *primikerios* Constantine, Theodora, who was placed in the saint's service when he resided in Constantine's house. Gregory quickly makes sure to note that Constantine did not have any kind of relationships with her or any of his female slaves, suggesting, according to Nikolaou, that this was not commonly expected from a male master.⁷⁰ Theodora's story also attests to the fact that, until Alexios I Komnenos' *Neara* in 1095 regarding the marriage of slaves, they did not use to get married. In the second half of the narrative, the author describes Theodora's journey to the hereafter and her passing through the twenty "air customs", where she was interrogated for her sins,

⁶⁶ Iliadi, *Oi βίοι*, 223.

⁶⁷ According to church leaders and holy men, such as Theodore of Sykeon, slaves were expected to demonstrate such behaviour and obey owners who treated them well. (Rautman, *Daily Life*, 21; Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery*, 136)

⁶⁸ *Life of Mary the Younger* 8; Helen Saradi, "The City in Byzantine Hagiography," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography. Volume II: Genres and Contexts*, ed. Stephanos Efthymiadis (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 434.

⁶⁹ Nikolaou, *Η Γυναίκα*, 268; Eleftheria Papayianni, "Το πρόβλημα των δούλων στο έργο των κανονολόγων του 12^{ου} αιώνα," in *Το Βυζάντιο κατά τον 12^ο αιώνα: Κανονικό Δίκαιο, κράτος και κοινωνία*, ed. Nicolas Oikonomides (Athens: Εταιρεία βυζαντινών και μεταβυζαντινών μελετών, 1991), 426-30.

⁷⁰ Nikolaou, *Η Γυναίκα*, 268-69.

at the end of the ninth century. As she used to have relationships with other men while she was joined with a slave of the same house, with whom she had two children, she was accused of fornication in the checkpoint of adultery. The angels who accompanied her though defended her by stating that she was not legally married to that man because, since they were both slaves, they did not have the right to get married, but were just joined by their owner, whose will they followed. This argument convinced the demons, who let Theodora pass.⁷¹ Her history confirms that slaves were not allowed to get married until 1095, something we know from Alexios I' *Neara*.

Saints' Lives can also provide information about slaves' employment and activities. As slavery was an urban phenomenon, most slaves were found in cities, where they were serving in the palace, monasteries or private households of high public officials or businessmen, being an indicator of their owners' economic level. 'However, nothing specific is known about their function; they assisted the master of the place or his agent in all sorts of ways in the business of managing the estate',⁷² helping them in their everyday activities. Philaretos' young servant, for example, used to help his wife sift the grain,⁷³ while in the *Life of Irene of Chrysobalanton* we read that her slave was assisting her in her outdoor activities and was once sent to the house of one of Irene's friends. The saint had foretold her friend's, Christophoros, death, and so her slave went to check on him and then announced his passing, thus proving Irene's foreseeing power.⁷⁴

Slaves could also be employed as labourers, artisans or skilled workers in workshops or other businesses, of which sometimes they were placed in charge, with the exception of enterprises of moneychangers and bankers. Although they were not allowed to make any profit, they could become members of the guilds (apart from that of silk dressers), like free men, according to the records in the *Book of the Eparch*.⁷⁵ According to the *Life of John the Almsgiver*, the customs official Peter of Alexandria, who owned many slaves, gave ten pounds of gold to one of them that was serving as his secretary, and ordered him to purchase a business in Jerusalem. Such financial investments were considered secure, since 'the individual to whom the sum was entrusted was completely dependent'.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Angelidi, "Δούλοι," 41, 47-49; Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery*, 142, 154.

⁷² Jacques Lefort, "The Rural Economy, Seventh-Twelfth Centuries," in *The Economic History of Byzantium. From the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century. Volume 1*, ed. Angeliki E. Laiou (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2002), 242.

⁷³ *Life of Philaretos the Merciful* 131.

⁷⁴ *Life of Irene of Chrysobalanton* 22.

⁷⁵ Cameron, *The Byzantines*, 89; Gilbert Dagron, "The Urban Economy, Seventh-Twelfth Centuries," in *The Economic History of Byzantium. From the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century. Volume 2*, ed. Angeliki E. Laiou (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2002), 409; Michel Kaplan, "The Producing Population," in *A Social History of Byzantium*, ed. John Haldon (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 161-62.

⁷⁶ Dagron, "The Urban Economy", 421.

As for domestic slaves, a certain Theodore that was a “head slave” is found in the *Life of Basil the Younger*. His master, a wealthy man with many slaves, trusted him very much and had placed him in charge of managing his house’s finances. This resulted in the envy of another servant, who paid a witch to cause a serious disease to Theodore, which was ultimately healed by the saint. In the same *Life* we find the female slave of the wealthy eunuch Ioannis who was placed in charge of his other slaves. Despite her master’s trust towards her though, she wanted to steal his gold, and therefore she too decided to pay a witch who caused Ioannis dementia, which was again treated by Basil. This, according to Angelidi, attests to the fact that, at least in the middle of the tenth century, some slaves had the ability to independently handle large amounts of money, since the sum that the two slaves gave to the witches was rather significant for that period.⁷⁷ References to the above-mentioned activities of slaves then confirm the fact that they were allowed to practice certain tasks in households or workshops.

Manumission was a frequent phenomenon in Byzantium, as it was a practice that was inherited from the Roman Empire, and is therefore present in saints’ Lives. Slaves could be emancipated by being purchased, marrying a free man (as the couple had to have the same status), or by their masters. In the latter case, their owners could mention them in their wills (where historians find the most evidence regarding manumission), in specific acts of emancipation or in documents which they drafted when they decided to sell their property, including slaves, as an act of piety or in order to join a monastery.⁷⁸ In addition, they could have them baptised, or declare them freedmen ‘in public or in a church or before three witnesses who could attest the act in writing’.⁷⁹ Michael Maleinos, Elisabeth of Heraclea and Theophanes the Confessor all appear in their *Lives* to have sold their properties, distributed the money and manumitted their slaves so as to retreat in monasteries.⁸⁰ The same goes for the wealthy Athanasia, who granted freedom to some of her slaves, made sure they would be comfortable by ‘providing them with houses and expenses’, and showed an interest in their spiritual life by ‘exhorting [some] to a manner and zeal like her own’ before confining herself in a monastery.⁸¹ An interesting example is found in the *Life of Basil the Younger*, who foretold that the slave of a craftsman would be freed after his owner’s death (in contrast to the previous examples, where slaves were manumitted during their masters’ lifetime); Angelidi notes that if an owner died without having drafted a will, the

⁷⁷ Angelidi, “Δούλοι,” 36-37, 39, 42-45.

⁷⁸ Kaplan, “The Producing Population,” 146.

⁷⁹ Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery*, 120-21.

⁸⁰ Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery*, 120.

⁸¹ *Life of Matrona of Perge* 44.

state would take possession of his slaves, until Basil I ruled that they should be let free.⁸² It is noteworthy that masters are mostly depicted manumitting their slaves instead of donating them or selling them and donating the proceeds, probably in an effort by hagiographers to present moral Christian attitudes to slaves and slavery.

As for freedmen, despite the fact that manumission abolished legal disadvantages, they still faced barriers to social recognition⁸³ and remained with their masters until the latter died (when they were probably given some kind of property), as they were still financially dependent on,⁸⁴ and grateful to, them. An indication of their gratitude is found in the example of the freed slave of John of Damascus who, according to the latter's *Life*, was the only one among the by-standers that bought the sacks his former master was selling in a market, even though they were rather expensive, once he recognised him.⁸⁵ Andrew the Fool and Elias the Younger are both presented as freedmen in their *Lives*, but, being saints, they were exceptions in that they were emancipated so as to fulfil their destinies as holy men, and therefore left their owners: Andrew was sent by his master to a church, as he was considered to be mentally ill, but was freed when there was no improvement,⁸⁶ while Elias left his master and also left Africa, where he had been sold as a slave,⁸⁷ and travelled to Jerusalem.⁸⁸

Finally, there were slaves who fled in order to pursue a monastic life or to escape from abusive masters. According to Justinian's law of asylum, in the first case they could enter a monastery if flight had been their only crime, and their owners had the right to retrieve them provided that they could prove the flight had harmed them and that the slaves had not been ordained. The same law stipulated that fugitive slaves could also be accepted in a church. Nevertheless, their masters usually tried to find them, as in the example of the four slaves that became monks but were still reclaimed by their

⁸² Angelidi, "Δούλοι," 37, 46-47.

⁸³ Prinzing, "On slaves," 93.

⁸⁴ Nicolas Oikonomides, "Οι βυζαντινοί δουλοπάροικοι," *Βυζαντινά Σύμμεικτα* 5 (1983): 299, <http://dx.doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.689>.

⁸⁵ Iliadi, *Οι βίοι*, 110-11.

⁸⁶ *Life of Andrew the Fool* 2-5.

⁸⁷ Byzantines were sometimes also presented as being enslaved, usually by Arabs, a practice that accorded with reality, thus developing a new model for sainthood (see Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery*, 160-66). For an interesting eyewitness account of such an abduction, see Konstantinos Karatolios, "Travelling as a Hostage. The Testimony of Kaminiates's *Capture of Thessalonike*," in *Voyages and Travel Accounts in Historiography and Literature. Volume 1-Voyages and Travelogues from Antiquity to the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Boris Stojkovski (Novi Sad: Trivent Publishing, 2020).

⁸⁸ *Life of Elias the Younger* 14.

owner in the *Life of Hypatios*.⁸⁹ In the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* some slaves arrived at his monastery looking for refuge, but he

returned them to their owners, whom he lectured on how to treat slaves... The case of Theodore Sykeon was not unique and proves that the law of asylum was not applied immediately and that the church sometimes preferred to throw its lot in with the masters, even though it had the authority to do the opposite.⁹⁰

From the end of the ninth century, owners' consent was required for slaves' acceptance in monasteries, as the state sided with the former against the Church. Nevertheless, flights were still common, and therefore authorities searched for fugitives and returned them to their masters. Luke the Younger's experience attests to that, as he saw several runaway slaves on his way to Bithynia, who were probably heading to the monasteries of Athos and Bithynia,⁹¹ and he was also questioned by soldiers who were guarding slaves' passages, as they mistook him for a slave because of his unkempt appearance.⁹² It seems then that Lives provide rather accurate descriptions of all kinds of manumission of slaves, including valuable information about their life as freedmen.

Conclusion

Hagiographical literature offers historians useful evidence regarding various topics of political, economic and social history. Saints' Lives include several references to slaves, who were omnipresent throughout Byzantium's history, informing us about their living conditions, relations with their masters and employment, as well as the circumstances under which they could be emancipated. Unavoidably, there are certain disadvantages related to this genre, such as the ambiguous terminology regarding slaves and the fact that Lives' main aim was to 'propagandise certain ideas, attitudes and values', praise the saints and urge people to follow their example, thus sometimes being exaggerated in their overall descriptions of society and the saints' role in it,⁹³ as specific depictions of slaves in hagiography might mostly reflect this genre's ideological concerns. However, hagiographical

⁸⁹ Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery*, 144-46, 150.

⁹⁰ Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery*, 151.

⁹¹ *Life of Luke the Younger* 4-9.

⁹² Iliadi, *Oi βioi*, 244.

⁹³ Iliadi, *Oi βioi*, 23, 422.

narratives shed light on obscure areas of social activity which are not dealt with in other literary genres such as histories and chronicles, and, while incidentally describing society and Byzantines' attitude towards slavery, Lives are considered to be valuable sources of information for historians.

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