

Hagiographic Invention and Imitation: Niketas' *Life of Theoktiste* and Its Literary Models

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Ἐπαινεῖν μὲν τὰ χρηστὰ καὶ πρὸς ἀρετὴν καὶ
εὐσέβειαν ἄγοντα μακάριον καὶ ἀνδρῶν
ἔστιν ἀγαθὸν καὶ ὄντως ἀξίων ἐπαίνου.

Praising that which is good and conducive to
virtue and piety is a blessed <deed> and a
trait of good and truly praiseworthy men.

THE *LIFE OF THEOKTISTE*,¹ a tenth-century hagiography composed by a Byzantine writer named Niketas,² while usually praised for its literary form, nevertheless remains understudied by scholars. The text was highly esteemed by its contemporaries: in the second half of the tenth century Symeon Metaphrastes included it in his *Menologion*, a collection of saints' lives, providing it with a new prologue and ending. The *Life* was also praised in Psellos' *officium* commemorating Metaphrastes.³ Modern scholars have also been susceptible to its charm: the *Life* has been called the most interesting work of hagiography of its century,⁴ and Niketas judged to be a skillful

¹ For the Greek text (abbreviated here *VTh*) I rely on H. Delehaye's edition in *Acta Sanctorum Novembris IV* (Brussels 1925) 224–233; transl. A. C. Hero, in A.-M. Talbot (ed.), *Holy Women of Byzantium* (Washington 1996) 101–116 (here *HWoB*).

² A detailed (as far as the sources allow) account of Niketas' life and career, which was marred by exile, is included in L. G. Westerink, *Nicéas Magistros, Lettres d'un exilé (928–946)* (Paris 1973) 23–38. Westerink identifies Niketas, the author of epistles, with the author of the *Life of Theoktiste*, and provides a stylistic comparison of the two, 41–46.

³ Symeon's *Menologion*: PG 114–116; Psellos' *officium*: PG 114, 199–208.

⁴ K. M. Setton, "On the Raids of the Moslems in the Aegean in the

writer.⁵ However, such vague appreciation of the *Life*'s literary qualities did not ensure it much scholarly attention. H. Delehayé published a ten-page study of the *Life* in 1924, in which he pointed out that Niketas relied heavily on the *Life of Saint Maria of Egypt* and that Theoktiste was probably a fictitious person.⁶ After Delehayé, the *Life* appears sporadically in articles concerned with Byzantine hagiography or the Arab raids in the ninth and tenth century, but one can hardly find a scholarly text devoted exclusively to it, far less to its specifically literary merits.

This neglect of the *Life* may be in part due to the unconventional character of the text. It is an unorthodox hagiography, so to speak, one which combines hagiographic conventions with erudite and self-conscious eloquence and as such requires other hermeneutical tools than do mainstream hagiographies. Intertextual references in the *Life* range from the Bible to Homer, from Basil the Great to Achilles Tatius. The style and narrative techniques owe probably as much to pagan novels and Second Sophistic models of eloquence as to earlier hagiographic writings. The *Life* is marked by an extraordinary level of authorial presence and authorial self-awareness, a feature which undercuts the hagiographic mode by shifting readers' attention from Theoktiste, the saint, to Niketas, the author.⁷ It is by no means a harmonious and unproblematic blend, and occasional references to the *Life* in scholarship reveal disagreement in their assessment of the very nature of the text. A. Kazhdan believed that Niketas simply reformulated the story of Maria of Egypt in the spirit of the morality of his own times,⁸ while B. Flusin

Ninth and Tenth Centuries," *AJA* 58 (1954) 311–319, at 313–314 and n. 14. Setton apparently believed that the *Life* was composed in the ninth century ("the most interesting ninth-century life").

⁵ H. Delehayé, "La vie de sainte Théoctiste de Lesbos," *Byzantion* 1 (1924) 191–200, at 197.

⁶ Delehayé, *Byzantion* 1 (1924) 191–200.

⁷ For conventional hagiographic modes see T. Pratsch, *Der hagiographische Topos* (Berlin/New York 2005).

⁸ A. Kazhdan, "Hagiographical Notes," *BZ* 78 (1985) 49–55, at 49–50, and "Byzantine Hagiography and Sex in the Fifth to Twelfth Centuries,"

distinguished the *Life* from other, “sincere” hagiographies and suggested in passing that it may be a parody, presumably a parody of hagiographic writing.⁹ The discrepancy between the interpretations proposed by Kazhdan and Flusin demonstrates well the fundamental problem which the reader of the *Life* encounters: what sort of text is it? Is Niketas writing for the religious edification of his readers, as Kazhdan seems to believe? Or is he merely paying lip-service to hagiographic conventions, or even mocking them, as Flusin suggests?

This paper is an attempt to answer these questions. I will begin with an examination of the self-presentation of Niketas, who simultaneously plays the roles of a character within the story and of its narrator, and suggest that Niketas’ self-presentation is designed to detach him from the world of religious devotion that he encounters. I will analyze the ekphrasis of the church of the Mother of God and argue that its role is to break the illusion of artless narrative and to turn the reader’s attention towards the author and his literary project. In the second part of my paper, I will consider closely the relationship between the *Life of Theoktiste* and its literary model, the *Life of Saint Maria of Egypt*. I will examine how Niketas, by modeling his text on a former hagiography, negotiates with the premises and religious horizons of the hagiographic tradition. I will argue that although a hagiography may be “mimetic” and have an openly fictitious character without lacking “sincerity,” i.e. a deep religious concern, Niketas’ elaboration of the model downplays the religious questions raised by the author of the *Life of Saint Maria* and presents itself as a work of literary play rather than of spiritual instruction.¹⁰ The *Life* is a “translation” of the hagiographic mode into the mode of literary ambition and performance, a work of autonomous literary value, ex-

⁹ *DOP* 44 (1990) 131–143, at 136.

⁹ B. Flusin, “L’Hagiographie monastique à Byzance au IX^e et au X^e siècle,” *RBén* 103 (1993) 31–50.

¹⁰ The need for a literary approach in the field of hagiography was recently underscored by S. Efthymiadis, “New Developments in Hagiography: The Rediscovery of Byzantine Hagiography,” in *Proc. 21st Internat. Congr. Byzantine Studies I* (Aldershot 2006) 157–171.

ploring the tensions between the heterogeneous elements of its intellectual and literary tradition, and thus anticipates the transformation of Byzantine culture in the subsequent centuries.¹¹

The first word of the opening sentence (quoted at the start of the paper) of the *Life of Theoktiste*—ἐπαινεῖν, “to praise”—does not strike the reader as an inappropriate beginning for a hagiographic narrative. Praising piety and the deeds of saints, for the glory of God and the benefit of men, is the essence of hagiography. But the sentence immediately shifts the reader’s attention from the subject of the *Life* to its author, from the praise of piety to the praise of the writer. As the text unfolds before us in the process of reading, the centrality of the figure of the author, signaled in the first sentence, becomes more and more manifest.

The *Life of Theoktiste* is—or pretends to be—an account of Niketas’ own experience. The narrator reports that he was sent together with the general Himerios by the emperor Leo VI (886–912) on a diplomatic mission to the Arabs on Crete, but the wind forced them to change course and stop at Paros. They decide to use the opportunity to see the cathedral of the Mother of God. As they were admiring the abandoned church and especially its ciborium, a hermit coming out of the wilderness approached them. Led by curiosity Niketas entered into conversation with him. The hermit, whose name was Symeon, told him a story which he had heard once from a hunter, who had come to Paros from Euboea to hunt deer and wild goats. During his visit to Paros the hunter visited the church and noticed some lupine seeds soaking in water, from which he inferred that there was a holy man living there. Before leaving the island, the hunter returned to the church and encountered there a holy woman, Theoktiste. She told him the story of her life: a nun from Lesbos, brought up in a

¹¹ For the transformation of Byzantine culture in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and comparison with preceding centuries, see A. Kazhdan and A. Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Berkeley 1985); A. Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium. The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge 2007).

convent from childhood, she had been seized by Arabs in her youth (a remarkably novelistic trait) and transported to Paros. There she managed to escape and remained on the island afterwards, leading an ascetic and solitary life. Theoktiste asked the hunter to bring her the Eucharist the next year when he would again visit Paros, and the hunter promised to do so. The next year he brought her the sacraments and after meeting with her joined his companions in hunting. When he visited the church shortly before leaving the island, he found Theoktiste dead. Desiring to possess a relic he cut off her hand, wrapped it in cloth, and took it with him to the ship. The hunters set sail in the late evening expecting to reach Euboea by morning; however, at daybreak they found out that they were still in the harbor at Paros. The hunter realized that this was the consequence of his impious act, and hurried to the church, where he put the hand back in place; then he returned to the ship, and when they were out at sea he told his companions what had happened. The hunters decided to return to the island to bury the saint, but the body had miraculously disappeared. After narrating the hunter's account, Symeon asks Niketas to write down the story of Theoktiste and rescue it from oblivion, a request which Niketas fulfills by writing the *Life*.

Niketas thereby takes on the role of a story-teller, employing first-person, "autobiographical" narration, which ensures that his readers know through whose eyes they will look at subsequent events. His reference to Himerios and Leo VI identifies him as a man connected with the court and political life, although his current situation is contrasted with the one described in the *Life*: as Niketas implies, Leo VI is now dead and Niketas believes that at the moment of his death the good fortune of the Romans perished.¹² He is clearly not a typical author of hagiography: a layman involved in politics and

¹² According to Eprem, an eleventh-century Georgian translator of Metaphrastes, these few words (βασιλέως ... τὴν εὐτυχίαν Ῥωμαίων τῷ τάφῳ συνθάψαντος, 225D), which appear also in Metaphrastes' redaction, enraged Basil II who prohibited the reading of the Metaphrastic collection in all churches (C. Högel, *Symeon Metaphrastes. Rewriting and Canonization* [Copenhagen 2002] 69).

diplomacy, whose real interests might have led him rather to write a biography of a general than a saint's life (in *VTh* 225E Niketas mentions that he plans to write about Himerios and his deeds in the future). In the prologue, Niketas himself hints at the incongruity between his lifestyle and worldview on the one hand, and his role as a hagiographer on the other:

Still, I do not know how I forgot myself and proceeded to write such a story, seeing that by my words and deeds I am far removed from what I describe and am aware that such compositions befit other men whose exertions and lives rival those of the persons they praise (*VTh* 225D; *HWoB* 102).

This passage, although at first sight perhaps a typical expression of Christian modesty and humility, when read in light of Niketas' self-presentation as it unfolds in the *Life*, reveals his detachment from his own text: he is removed from hagiographic reality both as a writer and as a person.

Niketas' social and cultural background is clearly contrasted with that of the monk whom he encounters. Symeon, as he himself claims, has "nothing to say about homeland and family lineage and all the other things upon which city-dwellers pride themselves" (*VTh* 226D, *HWoB* 105). His words express a Christian renunciation of worldly matters, and by directing them at Niketas and his companions he clearly distinguishes their mode of life from his. In the passage depicting the appearance of the monk there is an echo of Homer's description of the Cyclops: οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐώκει ἀνδρὶ γε σιτοφάγῳ, ἀλλ' ἀσάρκῳ μᾶλλον καὶ ἀναίμονι (*VTh* 226D; *HWoB* 105, "for he did not look like a man who lived on bread, but like someone without flesh, almost without blood"); cf. *Odyssey* 9.191, οὐδὲ ἐώκει ἀνδρὶ γε σιτοφάγῳ, ἀλλὰ ῥίῳ ὑλήεντι ὑψηλῶν ὀρέων. The Homeric passage emphasizes the alienation of the Cyclops from the human world: he does not resemble a bread-eater, and in fact he is not one: his diet, among other things, clearly sets him apart from the human race.¹³ Similarly, emaciated

¹³ The association of hermits with Cyclopes appears also in the twelfth-century *Commentary on Homer* by Eustathios of Thessalonike (A. Kazhdan, *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* [Cambridge 1984] 152).

Symeon does not look like a bread-eater, and in all probability bread is not the hermit's daily food.¹⁴ The parallel between Symeon and the Cyclops hints at Niketas' own identification with Odysseus: Niketas approaches the old man led by curiosity: *περιεργότερος ὢν καὶ συνιέναι δεινὸς ἦθος ἀνδρός, παρεκάλουν τὸν μέγαν* (*VTh* 226E), just as curiosity led Odysseus to explore the island of the Cyclopes (*Od.* 9.173–176). There is some distrust and cautiousness in Niketas' conversation with Symeon. He asks the monk to reveal some mysterious things, *τι τῶν ἀπορρήτων* (*VTh* 226E), to him and his companions, and when the monk refuses, claiming that he does not possess any such knowledge, Niketas suspects that he does not tell the truth (227A). When Symeon decides to engage in conversation with him, Niketas starts by asking about the ciborium, planning to lead him gradually to more lofty topics. Niketas' curiosity and cleverness mirror the traits of Odysseus, and the reference to the famous Homeric tale indicates, moreover, the fictitious character of Niketas' story: Niketas, like Odysseus, is a teller of tales, and a truthful account is not what we should expect from him.¹⁵

The story of Niketas' encounter with Symeon constitutes a frame for another meeting, the one between the hunter and Theoktiste, and there is considerable resemblance between the two events. Symeon has been living alone in the wilderness near an abandoned church on Paros for more than 30 years, and the same church was a home for Theoktiste, who had spent 35 years there; did Symeon, after hearing the story of Theoktiste from the hunter, decide to follow in her footsteps? Both Niketas and the hunter meet the hermits by the church. Both Symeon and Theoktiste are described as having an extraordinary appearance, as being in special communion with God, and having the ability to predict the future. The parallel

¹⁴ In the *Life* soaked lupine seeds are presented as typical hermit food (*VTh* 228B).

¹⁵ The *Life of Theoktiste* was compared to the *Odyssey* by S. Efthymiades, who explored the motif of journeys in Byzantium in the eighth to tenth centuries: S. Efthymiades, "Νοεροὶ καὶ πραγματικοὶ ταξιδιώτες στὸ Βυζάντιο τοῦ 8ου, 9ου καὶ 10ου αἰώνα," *Byzantina* 20 (1999) 155–165, at 165.

character of the two meetings underscores the difference between the characters, social positions, and worldviews of the hunter and Niketas. The casual and aesthetic religiosity of Niketas differs from the hunter's candid, simple-minded and crude devotion. Niketas converses with the monk led by curiosity rather than by religious devotion (*VTh* 226E, ἐγὼ δὲ περιεργότερος ὦν) and he walks to the church in order to admire its architecture. The hunter, however, is distinguished from his companions by his piety—he visits the church every time they visit the island to pray there, and he looks for a hermit expecting to gain something great from him (228A–B).

It is not only because of his perspective as a layman and his political career that Niketas is at odds with the religious values of a hagiographer. His fondness for pagan Greek literature manifests itself in literary allusions and narrative technique: sea travel, the change of plans because of natural phenomena—a change which eventually proves to be fruitful—and the subsequent ekphrasis of the harbor of Paros imbue the story from the outset with the feel of a novel. One notices a particular resonance with Achilles Tatius' *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, which starts with a description of the harbor of Sidon, the city to which the first-person narrator of the novel arrives after a severe storm. The similarities do not end here: while in Sidon, the storyteller visits the shrine of the Phoenician goddess Astarte to thank her for his safe arrival, and his walk through the city prompts a lengthy ekphrasis of the painting of Europa, the bull, and Eros. Niketas and his companions likewise after coming to anchor at Paros walk to the church of the Mother of God, where, after prayers, they admire the beauty of the building. The ensuing ekphrasis of the church and its ciborium is a praise articulated by a man of eloquence and culture, the *pepaideumenos theates* invoked by Lucian:

When a man of culture beholds beautiful things, he will not be content, I am sure, to harvest their charm with his eyes alone, and will not endure to be a silent spectator of their beauty; he will do all he can to linger there and make some return for the spectacle in speech (*Hall* 2, transl. Harmon).¹⁶

¹⁶ For an analysis of the figure of *pepaideumenos theates* in *The Hall* see S.

Lucian's text is a lucid exposition of the nature of ekphrasis, and whether Niketas had read it or not his handling of ekphrasis is in accord with the general principles of ekphrastic discourse. He does not remain silent, but strives to render the beauty of art by means accessible to a writer, that is by displaying his rhetoric and literary ambitions. The ekphrasis, which combines ideas of nature, represented by the marble, and of art, consists of two parts: in the first, Niketas describes the church; in the second, his attention turns to the ciborium. The description of the church structure and the columns emphasizes the equilibrium between art and nature: the artist is said to have striven to bestow beauty on nature, τὸ κάλλος ἐφιλονεΐκησε τῇ φύσει προσνεῖμαι (*VTh* 226B), with φιλονεκεῖν describing his effort to enhance natural beauty rather than to surpass it. But the artist who carved the ciborium, the description of which follows, took his art to a higher level, where the marble lost its natural appearance—the stone no longer looks like stone, but like thickened milk. The artist's mastery creates an object which denies its origins: it looks as if it were not carved with iron or with hands and by means of skill. The very nature of ekphrastic discourse encourages us to go further and consider these images as reflective of Niketas' ideas about his own art of writing.¹⁷ For him, the text whose goal is to em-

Goldhill, "The Erotic Eye: Visual Stimulation and Cultural Conflict," in S. Goldhill (ed.), *Being Greek under Rome. Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic and the Development of Empire* (Cambridge 2001) 154–194, at 160–167; G. W. Dobrov, "The Sophist on his Craft: Art, Text, and Self-Construction in Lucian," *Helios* 29 (2002) 173–192; Z. Newby, "Testing the Boundaries of Ekphrasis: Lucian on the Hall," *Ramus* 31 (2002) 126–135.

¹⁷ J. Elsner, considering the role of ekphrasis in Greek and Roman post-classical literature, notes that "the descriptive inset about a work of art becomes not only virtually a necessary trope to prove a text's participation in the great tradition, but also an increasingly complex device for authorial self-reflection on how readers might relate to the text." In Hellenistic and Roman *ekphraseis*, the figure of the artist is always "a potential figure for its author and the sheer artifice of the finest painting or sculpture a metaphor for the artistry of the text in which it appears." See J. Elsner, "Introduction. The Genres of Ekphrasis," *Ramus* 31 (2002) 1–18, at 4 and 8. On self-reflexivity in the Byzantine novel of the twelfth century, see Kaldellis, *Hellenism* 262–263.

bellish reality without changing its character yields to the one which transforms it and forces the viewer to step into the world of illusion, into the world in which things appear to be something other than they are. The world of the *Life of Theoktiste* is such a world of illusion not just because Niketas relates an invented story about a fictitious saint, but because he creates an imaginary reality in which incongruous elements coexist. He writes a hagiography that reads like a novel. Using literary allusions, he depicts a monk who looks like a Cyclops. Through the direct references to the *Life of Maria of Egypt*, Niketas brings her back to life, “disguised” as Theoktiste.

The short description of the ciborium is carefully composed (*VTh* 226B). Niketas and his companions are “struck with delight” at its sight (κατεπλάγημεν τῆς τεραπνότητος), and only after describing its marvelous carving does Niketas inform the audience that the ciborium “lay broken in pieces” (ἔκειτο τεθραυσμένον), and that their hearts were filled simultaneously with admiration for the artist’s skill and with rage against the person who destroyed it (ἡμῶν καὶ θαυμαζόντων καὶ καταβούντων). It is Niketas’ gaze, his imagination, and his art that bring the scattered pieces together. Although description of a sacral artifact is justifiable within hagiographic narrative, Niketas’ display of eloquence, focusing on the sculptor’s artistry (which stands in for his own literary skill) and the aesthetic qualities of carved marble, points towards his disconnection from hagiographic reality rather than his commitment to it. This disconnection is emphasized by the comparison of the marble of the ciborium to a statue of Selene: τοιοῦτῳ ποτὲ ἐγὼ λίθῳ τεθέαμαι διφρηλατοῦσαν ἐπὶ ταύροις Σελήνην (226B; *HWoB* 105, “made of such stone I saw once Selene driving a chariot drawn by bulls”). The reference to the pagan divinity makes the comparison rather inappropriate for hagiographic praise, and emphasizes that Niketas’ discourse belongs to the realm of rhetorical ekphrasis. Moreover, this is a reference to the novel of Achilles Tatius, where Kleitophon, describing the beauty of Leukippe, refers to a painting of Selene: τοιαύτην εἶδον ἐγὼ ποτὲ ἐπὶ ταύρῳ γεγραμμένην Σελήνην.¹⁸ The sculp-

¹⁸ Ach. Tat. 1.4. Although some editors find Σελήνην here problematic

ture of a pagan goddess, the erotic context of the passage in *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, the world of the Greek novel—all these elements point to a reality alien to hagiography and highlight the nature of Niketas' ambition.

As a literary device, ekphrasis urges the reader to step out of the narrative and turn his attention to the author and his art. In the case of the *Life of Theoktiste*, the ekphrasis emphasizes the author's interest in sculptural *mimesis* and encourages the reader to consider Niketas' text as an example of literary mimetic practice. In the second part of this paper I would like to follow this thread and examine the relationship between the *Life of Theoktiste* and its literary model, the *Life of Maria of Egypt*, a seventh-century hagiography. I will begin with an analysis of the *Life of Maria* and its reliance on Jerome's *Life of Saint Paul the First Hermit*. The relationship between the lives of Maria and Paul will serve as an example of hagiographic imitation and as a background for the examination of Niketas' own mimetic writing.

The *Life of Maria of Egypt*, which enjoyed immense popularity among mediaeval audiences, describes the conversion of a harlot, who, after renouncing her previous way of life, spends the rest of her days in the desert.¹⁹ However, we may assume that the *Life of Maria* owed its popularity not only to its piquant details, but also to the literary skill of the author, who carefully developed its narrative frame. The account of the saint is embedded in the story of Zosimas, a pious monk, who, after achieving the highest level of ascetic discipline, realized that he

and propose to read Εὐδώρα instead, E. Vilborg offered convincing arguments for keeping it: *Achilles Tatius. Leucippe and Clitophon. A Commentary* (Göteborg 1962) 21–22.

¹⁹ The Greek text of the *Life of Maria of Egypt* (here *VM*) is in *PG* 87.3 3697–3726. An English translation, by M. Kouli, is included in Talbot, *Holy Women* 70–93. A much-needed new edition of the *Life* was promised by the translator. For studies of Maria's *vita* see e.g. P. Cox Miller, "Is There a Harlot in this Text? Hagiography and the Grotesque," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33 (2003) 419–435; L. L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions. Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia 1997) 71–94; B. Ward, *Harlots of the Desert. A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources* (Kalamazoo 1987) 26–56.

did not know any person who surpassed him in virtue. A divine voice reminds him that there is no mortal man who has achieved perfection and orders him to travel to a monastery situated near the river Jordan. After reaching the monastery, Zosimas joins the monks who live there. During Lent, Zosimas, in obedience to a monastic rule, goes into the desert. There he meets Maria, a former harlot, who renounced her sinful life and now lives in the wilderness, relying on God for her nourishment and well-being. She tells him her story, who later shares it with other monks. It circulates by word of mouth, until it reaches the author, who finds it worth writing down.

The author's care in creating the frame narrative is apparent in many passages. The first-person narrator, who does not include any information about himself, retells Zosimas' account. He signals his presence in the prologue and at the end of the text, and also makes comments on some aspects of the story during the course of the narration. Throughout the text, readers are reminded that this is the story told by Zosimas through the phrase *ὡς ἔλεγε* or similar.²⁰ This technique has certain advantages: it enables the author to claim that he is conveying Zosimas' personal account, but, at the same time, because the monk does not tell it in the first person his subjective voice does not dominate the narrative (as does Niketas' in the *Life of Theoktiste*). The story of Maria's scandalous life is told by her in the first person, and therefore including indecent details in the narrative is justified by making them a part of her confession. The author skillfully makes use of the opportunities provided by the topic: Zosimas is looking for a spiritual father, but finds a spiritual mother (*VM* 3704D, 3708B);²¹ the landscape of the desert is used to highlight the dynamics of Zosimas and Maria's encounter (e.g. 3705C: Maria and Zosimas stay on opposite banks of a streambed; 3721B: Maria and Zosimas stay on opposite banks of the Jordan); the manner in which the

²⁰ *VM* 3700B–C, 3701C, 3704D, etc. Kouli in her translation renders the phrase “as he told <us>,” but the narrative framework of the text precludes direct contact of Zosimas and the narrator.

²¹ V. Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints. An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia 2004) 148.

characters learn each other's name reflects the level of their spiritual development (*VM* 3705C–D: Maria's knowledge of Zosimas' name, being evidence of her supernatural abilities, terrifies him; 3724A: Zosimas regrets that he did not ask Maria her name, which he learns only after her death, 3703C).

It has, moreover, been noticed by scholars that the narrative structure of the *Life of Maria* was greatly influenced by Jerome's *Life of Paul the First Hermit*.²² Jerome's work, which gained popularity among Greek-speaking audiences, as witnessed by several Greek translations,²³ is a short hagiography which claims to transmit an account of the first ascetic inhabitant of the desert. According to Jerome, contrary to common opinion it was not Saint Antony who was the first to withdraw into the desert but Paul of Egypt—probably a fictitious character. Jerome's account of Paul is not intended to cover the whole span of its hero's life: he provides a brief description of Paul's withdrawal into the desert, skips the hero's *media aetas* (*VP* 1.4), and focuses on Paul's meeting with Antony.

²² For Jerome's *Life of Paul the First Hermit* (= *VP*) I follow the edition E. M. Morales, P. Leclerc, A. De Vogüé, *Jérôme. Trois vies de moines* (Paris 2007) 144–183. English translation, by P. B. Harvey Jr., is included in V. L. Wimbush (ed.), *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity. A Sourcebook* (Minneapolis 1984) 359–369. For comparison of the *Life of Maria* with the *Life of Paul* see F. Delmas, “Remarques sur la vie de sainte Marie l'Égyptienne,” *EchOr* 4 (1900–1901) 35–42; P. B. Harvey Jr., “‘A Traveler from an Antique Land’: Sources, Context, and Dissemination of the Hagiography of Mary of Egypt,” in G. N. Knoppers and A. Hirsch (eds.), *Egypt, Israel, and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Leiden/Boston 2004) 479–499. Both scholars enumerate the resemblances between the two lives. B. Flusin draws parallels between the three lives (Paul, Maria, Theoktiste), calling the three saints “saints cachés”: “Le serviteur caché, ou Le saint sans existence,” in P. Agapito and P. Odorico (eds.), *Les Vies de saints: genre littéraire ou biographie historique?* (Paris 2004) 59–71.

²³ Different Greek translations of the text are provided and examined by K. T. Corey, “The Greek Versions of Jerome's *Vita Sancti Pauli*,” in W. A. Oldfather (ed.), *Studies in the Text Tradition of St. Jerome's *Vitae Patrum** (Urbana 1943) 143–250. E. A. Fisher offers general information about translations from Latin into Greek around the fourth century and analyzes some examples, among them Jerome's *Life of Hilarion*: “Greek Translations of Latin Literature in the Fourth Century A.D.,” *YCS* 27 *Later Greek Literature* (Cambridge 1982) 173–215.

Several elements of Jerome's story are easily recognizable in Maria's hagiography. A thought occurred to Antony that there was no monk more perfect than himself. When at night it was revealed to him that deeper in the desert there lived a man who surpassed him, Antony decides to search for him. In the *Life of Maria*, Zosimas is similarly disturbed by the thought that he has surpassed all others in ascetic discipline and so he leaves his monastery, instructed by a divine voice, in order to find a person who exceeds him in perfection. Zosimas is 23 years younger than Maria, just as Antony is 23 years younger than Paul.²⁴ In his pursuit of Maria, Zosimas moves towards the inner part of the desert, ἐπὶ τὸ τῆς ἐρήμου ἐνδότερον (*VM* 3705B), just as Antony does in his quest for the man who exceeds him in religious devotion (*VP* 7.2, *atque illi per noctem quiescenti revelatum est esse alium interius multo se meliorem*).²⁵ Antony and Paul spend nearly a day in discussion about who should break bread, Antony arguing that Paul is older, and Paul that Antony is his guest (11); likewise, Zosimas and Maria dispute about who should give a blessing, Maria maintaining that Zosimas should, being the priest, and Zosimas that Maria should, as her communion with God is manifest to him (*VM* 3708 A–B). Both Antony and Zosimas are entrusted with the task of burying the bodies of the saints, and they do this with the help of lions (two in the case of Antony, one in the case of

²⁴ Antony is 90 years old, Paul 113 (*VP* 7.1). Likewise, Zosimas is 53 years old (*VM* 3700 B), while the age of Maria may be easily calculated—she is 12 when she comes to Alexandria, and spends 17 years there; then she lives 47 years in the desert (*VM* 3709C, 3716C)—thus, as Kouli notes (*HWoB* 85), she is 76 when she meets Zosimas. Though the age parallel might be accidental, it is more probable that this is a conscious play with Jerome's narrative.

²⁵ The Greek translations of the life render *interius* either adverbially (ἐνδοτέρω τῆς ἐρήμου) or with an adjective (τις ἐσώτερος). Cf. also Athan. *V.Ant.* 49.4: εἰ δὲ θέλεις ὄντως ἡρεμεῖν, ἀνελθε νῦν εἰς τὴν ἐσώτεραν ἔρημον. J. E. Goehring writes about “a sort of hagiographic competition that resulted in accounts of desert saints whose remoteness from the inhabited world became truly mythic” and observes that the remote location of Paul's living confirms his superior status: “The Dark Side of Landscape: Ideology and Power in the Christian Myth of the Desert,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33 (2003) 437–451, at 443.

Zosimas).

Rather than dwell on a detailed comparison of the two texts, I will focus on the nature of their relation. The terms we traditionally use to describe the use by one author of elements of another text, words like “influence,” “dependence,” “imitation,” “model,” either are vague or put us on a wrong track. What exactly is the author of the *Life of Maria* doing with Jerome’s narrative and for what purpose? He appropriates some elements of it, while changing others, playing a “what if” game. In his spiritual life, Zosimas follows in the footsteps of Antony and, urged by a divine voice, looks for the person surpassing him—but what if the ideal ascetic sought for turns out to be a woman?²⁶ The author of the *Life of Maria* exploits the possibilities of this situation, setting Zosimas onto a road not traveled by Antony. We do not know what part of the audience of the *Life of Maria* was able to recognize the link to Jerome’s text; the text is self-contained and the reader does not need to think about Antony and Paul to make sense of the narration. However, when the reader recognizes that the author refers to the *Life of Paul*, the text gains an additional layer of meaning. The parallel narrative framework and the incorporation of many motifs from Jerome’s hagiography emphasize the places where the author deviates from it. The most significant change is putting a repentant harlot in the place of Paul, the icon of perfect asceticism. This modification is thought-provoking, especially in the context of narratives focused on the spiritual superiority of one character over another. Jerome depicts Paul as a more perfect ascetic than Antony, but along the same lines as Antony: this is what the divine voice tells Antony, and it is signaled by his age and place of dwelling (*interius*, deeper in the desert); similarly, Maria is superior to Zosimas, who is already superior to all others. But while Antony’s travel through the desert in search of Paul enables him to come closer to the ideal and, from the moment of their meeting, Jerome emphasizes their parity (they greet each other by name, which is evidence of their supernatural knowledge, and their dispute

²⁶ Another text exploring similar issues (a harlot becoming an ascetic) is the *Life of Saint Pelagia the Harlot*.

about who is going to break the bread ends in compromise), the author of Maria's life modifies these episodes in a way that highlights Maria's superiority: she is the one who finally concedes to give the blessing and she knows Zosimas' name, while her own name will be revealed to him only after her death. This modification leads us to think about Paul and Maria and the different models of sanctity they embody: on the one hand, pious and joyful Paul in a romanticized desert, whose bodily needs are taken care of by God sending him bread each day; on the other, a repentant woman, seeking extreme measures of repentance to match the extreme sinfulness of her previous life. Does Maria's experience bring her closer to God, make her "love more," as in the case of the woman who anoints Jesus' feet in the Gospel of Luke (10:37–47)? By using Jerome's text as a background, the author of the *Life of Maria* questions and challenges it. The search for the utmost embodiment of Christian virtues is performed and deepened through literary emulation.

In using the *Life of Maria* as a matrix for his own narration, Niketas chose a text referring to, and already reworking, former hagiographical writing. We do not know if he had read Jerome's *Life of Paul* and was aware of the connection between the two narratives, but we may notice that his technique of rewriting and reshaping his model resembles that of the author of the *Life of Maria*. He appropriates numerous expressions and images, which appear mainly in the story narrated by the hunter²⁷ and which invite comparison of Theoktiste and the hunter to Maria and Zosimas. Theoktiste looks like Maria and, like Maria, is naked. She asks the hunter for his cloak, prays to assure him that she is not an apparition, describes her solitary life on the island, and asks him to bring the Eucharist next time—in all these passages readers find verbal and narrative

²⁷ Most references to the *Life of Maria* occur in the hunter's account of Theoktiste; however, some echoes may be found also in the first paragraphs—for example, the detail concerning Nisiris, an Arab commander, repeatedly trying to carry the ciborium out of the church (*VTh* 227B) resembles Maria's failed attempts to enter the church in Jerusalem (*VM* 3713A).

echoes of Maria's *Life*. Niketas continues the game of substitution: the woman remains, although the motif of sinfulness and repentance disappears, but for the pious Zosimas is substituted a simple-minded, though religious, hunter. Niketas clearly expected his audience to know the *Life of Maria* and to be able to recognize references to it: he makes sure that no one misses the link between the two lives by making Symeon, who conveys the hunter's account, mention Zosimas explicitly:

As you see, my friend, many details were left out of my account ... The man who met the great <Theoktiste> was not like the great Zosimas who knew how to investigate the lives and struggles and achievements <of saints>; on the contrary, he was a man of the mountains, obtuse and ignorant of such things (*VTh* 231E–232A, *HWoB* 114–115).

The fact that there is no “great Zosimas” here who is responsible for the transmission of the story in the *Life of Theoktiste*, but instead a chain of persons, makes Niketas more important as a narrator. The narrator in the *Life of Maria* is hidden behind the figure of the ascetic monk, while in the *Life of Theoktiste* Niketas' story-telling is in the foreground.

Symeon's words draw attention to the substitution mentioned above and to the figure of the hunter, whose religious devotion prompts a desire to possess a relic and leads him to cut a hand off the saint's body, an act which resembles the cutting off of a part of a hunted animal. His first-person account is carefully constructed and contains a superb rendering of his character. As a hunter, he is an acute observer of his surroundings and has knowledge of diverse plants and animals living on the island: after saying his prayers in the church, he immediately notices some lupine seeds soaking in water, and makes a digression about how islands differ in their vegetation (*VTh* 228 B). Another digression, this time describing unusually large deer and wild goats living on Paros—θαύμα καὶ ιδέσθαι καὶ διηγῆσασθαι—similarly emphasizes the hunter's interests (229 E). His down-to-earth demeanor is contrasted with the spiritual and elevated nature of Zosimas. The monk chased the creature he had met in the desert ἐλπίζων ὅτι τινῶν μεγάλων θεωρὸς καὶ ἐπόπτης γενήσεται (*VM* 3705B), with ἐπόπτης meaning “spectator,” but also “a person admitted to mysteries.” The hunter, by contrast, infers from the lupine seeds

soaking in water the presence of a holy man—the process of coming to this supposition resembles the process of inferring an animal’s presence from its tracks—and he prays to meet him: τυχεῖν δὲ ἠὺχόμεν τῷ μεγάλῳ τούτῳ θηράματος· ἤλπίζον γὰρ κερδάναι τι μέγιστον παρ’ αὐτοῦ (*VTh* 228 B). In this hunting image the holy man becomes a prey, θήραμα, and the hunter hopes to gain great profit from him. Again, when Zosimas during his prayer noticed Maria for the first time, the immediate thought that crossed his mind was that this must have been a φάσμα δαιμονικόν (*VM* 3705A)—and no wonder, for, as every reader of Saint Antony’s life knows, the desert is full of demons—but when the hunter perceives something unusual while praying in the church, his first guess is that it is a spider web, a natural phenomenon (*VTh* 228 D). Compared to Zosimas, the hunter appears comic, and this is also emphasized by a classical allusion in the hunter’s account of his meeting with Theoktiste. He describes his fear when he heard her voice, and adds a general remark: τὸ γὰρ ἀπροσδόκητον ἐξαπίνης φανὲν δουλοῖ τὰ φρονήματα, κὰν θρασὺς τις εἶναι δόξη καταπλαγεῖς ἔστηκε κεχηνώς (*VTh* 228D; *HWoB* 109–110, “for when something unexpected appears suddenly, it enralls the spirit, and even if one thinks of himself as fearless, when taken by surprise, he stands with his mouth agape”). This wording clearly refers to the speech of Pericles in Thucydides (2.61), which contains an exhortation directed to Athenians facing the plague: δουλοῖ γὰρ φρόνημα τὸ αἰφνίδιον καὶ ἀπροσδόκητον καὶ τὸ πλείστῳ παραλόγῳ ξυμβαῖνον.²⁸ This reference, comparing the fear of the hunter at the sight of emaciated Theoktiste to the fright of the Athenians struck by gruesome plague, has a comic effect, which is increased by the fact that the gravity of Thucydides’ phrase is quickly undermined by the comic image in the very next words of the *Life*, “stands with his mouth agape.”

The figure of the hunter from Euboea naturally raises the

²⁸ A similar passage may be found also in Achilles Tatius (1.3.3): τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἐξαίφνης ἀθρόον καὶ ἀπροσδόκητον ἐκπλήσσει τὴν ψυχὴν ἄφνω προσπεσὸν καὶ κατεβάπτει. But Niketas’ wording seems to resemble more that of Thucydides.

question of the possible connection between Niketas' text and Dio Chrysostom's *Euboean Oration*, a first-person account of a visit to Euboea, describing at length a meeting with a hunter living there, and scholars have argued both for and against Dio's influence.²⁹ The suggestion that there is a connection between the two texts is tempting, as it expands the spectrum of literary allusions in the *Life*; however, it is difficult to prove because of the absence of any direct verbal references to Dio's text. It is possible that Niketas knew it—Photios and Arethas bear witness to the fact that Dio was read in ninth- and tenth-century Constantinople—and if he did, it is reasonable to suppose that he had it in mind when he was composing the *Life*.³⁰ There are some narrative parallels in the two texts: the authors assume a first-person narration and relate their coming by sea to a barely inhabited Aegean island. What happens there—Dio's meeting with the hunter and Niketas' encounter with the hermit—unexpectedly provides a frame for a story. But it must be noticed that if Niketas was indeed referring to Dio through the figure of the Euboean hunter, then this reference has a polemical character. In the *Life of Theoktiste* there is no place for Dio's idealized image of natural simplicity of rural life and for human brotherhood reaching beyond social differences; instead, the hunter's obtuseness is emphasized and his simple-minded religiosity is ridiculed. For Niketas' hunter *δυσθήρατον χρήμα τὸ σωφρονεῖν* (*VTh* 230D).

The introduction of the hunter into the text is followed by another shift of emphasis: the female figure is no longer the focus of the story. Niketas' hagiography, while claiming to be the life of a saint, focuses more on other characters than on Theoktiste herself: in the *Life of Maria* about sixteen pages out of twenty four describe the meeting of Zosimas and Maria and her burial (counting the pages in the English translation, *HWoB*

²⁹ The possible influence of Dio's *Euboean Oration* on Niketas was suggested by O. Karsay, "Der Jäger von Euböa," *AAntHung* 23 (1975) 9–14. Kazhdan, *BZ* 78 (1985) 49, argued against Karsay's view, believing that Niketas did not need Dio's *Euboicus* to introduce the hunter from Euboea.

³⁰ Relevant passages by Photios and Arethas are included as *testimonia* in H. Lamar Crosby, *Dio Chrysostom* (Loeb) V 386–417.

77–92); in the *Life of Theoktiste*, the hunter's narration about Theoktiste occupies six pages of out sixteen, and it is full of digressions (*HWoB* 109–114). Niketas deprives Theoktiste of the attributes that ensured Maria's popularity, notably the extreme sinfulness of her former life balanced by her equally extreme repentance. Theoktiste is presented as a pious nun, brought up in a convent from childhood, like Zosimas in the *Life of Maria*. She is a more passive character than Maria: her journey from Lesbos to Paros, unlike Maria's voyage from Alexandria to Jerusalem, is involuntarily—she is seized and transported by Arabs. She escapes and remains on the island to which she is brought, a much less dramatic decision than Maria's withdrawal into the desert. In general, the description of Theoktiste's life is short and unexciting, for which Symeon blames the hunter, who was not able to find out more about the saint. Thus, when Niketas in the epilogue claims that his story tells of Theoktiste's "ascetic discipline and her contest and battle against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world" (*VTh* 232D, *HWoB* 115, with a biblical quotation from Eph 6:12), he seems to be paying mere lip service to these aspects of the genre of hagiography.

The *Life of Maria*, although presenting two contrasted characters—a pious monk and a repentant woman—depicts them as united in their religious devotion. Although the narrative does not allow Zosimas to reach Maria's level of sanctity, they both realize their quest for God through the same means, namely asceticism. They meet each other in the midst of the desert, where they came to overcome their human weakness. This spiritual bond is missing from the *Life of Theoktiste*. The hunter's religiosity is utterly different from the devotion of Theoktiste, and the gap between them is emphasized by the episode narrating the death of Theoktiste. The death and burial of a saint constitutes a vital element of hagiographic stories, and its significance is manifest in Jerome's *Life of Paul* and in the *Life of Maria*. The duty to bury Paul and Maria is entrusted respectively to Antony and Zosimas, who become the saints' heirs at the moment of burial.³¹ Thus, the deaths of Paul

³¹ This is explicit in the *Life of Paul*, *VP* 16.8: *pūs haeres*.

and Maria leave Antony and Zosimas with an implicit obligation to strive for the perfection that the deceased had embodied. In the *Life of Theoktiste*, the hunter fails to arrange a burial for the saint; instead, he sacrilegiously cuts off her hand. When he realizes his error and comes back later with his companions to bury the saint, they are not allowed to perform this duty—the body has disappeared. The significance of this episode in light of the lives of Paul and Maria is evident: the disappearance of the body is not only a miracle indicating the sanctity of Theoktiste, but also depicts the hunter as a person unworthy of burying her.³²

What are the implications of Niketas' deviations from the *Life of Maria*? He is not engaged in the search for the perfect embodiment of asceticism and the debate about different models of sanctity. The *Life of Theoktiste* does not explore the paradoxes of spiritual superiority in the way the *Life of Paul the First Hermit* and the *Life of Maria* do. This theme is abandoned by Niketas, both within the narration (the characters do not compete for the title of the perfect ascetic) and on the intertextual level (Niketas does not offer an alternative, competing model of sanctity, as the author of the *Life of Maria* did). The desert, symbolizing the search for perfection and providing a shared spiritual space, is missing. The paths of the characters presented by Niketas, with their different social backgrounds and distinct religious horizons—a hermit-nun living in the wilderness, an uneducated hunter, an ascetic hermit, a learned member of the upper class—cross only accidentally. This lack of one overarching religious perspective within the narrative is reproduced by Niketas' incompatibility with his role as a hagiographer. Hagiographic writing presupposes that the author shares and emulates the saint's religious devotion—hagiography itself is an ascetic practice³³—and Niketas breaks from hagiography by violating this salient principle. The literary ambitions of Jerome and the author of the *Life of Maria*, though manifest in

³² The disappearance of the body may also be another sign of the fictitious character of the narrative.

³³ See D. Krueger, "Hagiography as an Ascetic Practice in the Early Christian East," *JRelig* 79 (1999) 216–232.

the careful structure of the narratives and literary emulation of their predecessors, do not eclipse their religious concern. Niketas, on the other hand, is focused on literary aspects of the narration, and the attention of the reader is drawn towards the skill of the author rather than towards the spiritual world of his characters—just as in the ekphrasis of the church on Paros, the attention of Niketas focuses on the mastery of the sculptor rather than on the religious function and metaphysical significance of the described artworks. Niketas sets out on a hagiographic adventure with the concerns and interests of a *belles-lettres* writer, and creates a hybrid text, which obfuscates the boundaries between hagiography and novel, between past and present, between reality and imagination.

At this point we may come back to the alternative readings proposed by Kazhdan and Flusin. I hope that this examination of the *Life of Theoktiste* has shown that it was not written for the religious and moral edification of its audience, but for the enjoyment of educated and sophisticated readers, who were expected to recognize allusions and appreciate their literary sophistication. Niketas' text is not imbued with religious zeal, which is the essential component of hagiographic genre, and in this sense is "insincere." But is it a parody? If we understand by "parody" a text whose main purpose is to mock and ridicule, than, in my opinion, that is too strong of an expression for the *Life of Theoktiste*. Undoubtedly, there are some passages filled with humor (the substitution of the hunter for father Zosimas is comic), and some hagiographic motifs are derided (for example the obsession with relics). But the ridicule is mild and concealed. Symeon Metaphrastes' decision to include the *Life* in his *Menologion* indicates that Niketas' mockery was gentle enough not to offend a pious Byzantine audience.

Recent scholarship tends to see the ninth and tenth centuries as "encyclopedic," focused on systematization of the ancient intellectual heritage, paving the path for the cultural change of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, in which the process of assimilation of and reflection on the classical literature began.³⁴

³⁴ Kazhdan and Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture* 14–15, 136–138. For changes in approach to the reception of antiquity, reflecting transformation

However, we may observe that the *Life of Theoktiste*, though a product of the tenth century, is imbued with a kindred spirit to the one which shaped the literature of the next two centuries. Niketas explores the same tensions, the same “opposing forces” inherent in Byzantine culture, which P. Roilos finds at play in the twelfth-century novel: “Hellenism and Christianity, antiquity and ‘modernity’, tradition and experimentation, secular and sacred, ‘high’ and ‘low’, pleasure and asceticism, realism and fantasy, individuality and universality.”³⁵ The *Life of Theoktiste*, therefore, with its fascination with cultural heterogeneity, anticipates the vibrant literary culture of the subsequent centuries.³⁶

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of Byzantine culture, consult Kaldellis, *Hellenism*.

³⁵ P. Roilos, *Amphoteroglossia. A Poetics of the Twelfth-Century Medieval Greek Novel* (Washington 2005) 302.

³⁶ I am grateful to Anthony Kaldellis who read several versions of this paper for his encouragement, advice, and invaluable comments on both content and style. I also wish to thank Stephanos Efthymiadis for reading the paper and for his helpful suggestions.