

The Spirit of Rivalry in Early Christian Monachism

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THE MONASTIC LITERATURE OF διηγήσεις ψυχοφελείς (“spiritually beneficial tales”) is a treasure-house of curious and often unexpected elements. This article will focus attention on one of these surprises: an element of what could be called “spiritual competitiveness” that appears to have existed, at least occasionally, among certain desert fathers.

A note of rivalry is in fact sounded in the very first lines of the earliest of the Christian monastic documents known to us, Athanasius’ *Life of Antony*. The preface of this work (addressing some monks whose names have not survived) begins thus: “It is a good contest-for-superiority [ἀμιλλὰ] in which you have engaged with the monks of Egypt, setting out either to equal or to surpass them in your ascetic quest for virtue.”¹ Athanasius is, of course, applauding their enthusiasm rather than inciting them to invidious competitiveness. He is encouraging them to strive for excellence, which is no more and no less than one might expect of monks; especially in view of their tendency to appropriate to themselves the title “spiritual athletes,” which is correctly the common patrimony of all Christians.

What we are dealing with here, however, is something that goes beyond striving for excellence: a response that seems to have taken Athanasius’ words a little too literally. We are dealing with monks who seem quite purposefully to have set out “either to equal or to surpass” others in virtue. And not only to equal or surpass, but to know whether one has succeeded in the endeavor. It is a question of striving, and then of seeking to know how well one has done. “Am I out-distancing the field?” (so to speak) and “Who (if anybody) is ahead of

¹ *Vita Antonii, prooem.*, Migne, PG XXVI 838A: ἀγαθὴν ἀμιλλαν ἐνεστήσασθε πρὸς τοὺς ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ μοναχοὺς, ἥτοι παρισωθῆναι, ἢ καὶ ὑπερβάλλεσθαι τούτους προελόμενοι τῇ κατ’ ἀρετὴν ὑμῶν ἀσκήσει.

me?”—these are the sort of questions that seem sometimes to be asked.

It is not unreasonable to make use of the competitive language of the track-and-field stadium (as indeed Athanasius does) for the monastic career, for the Apostle Paul sometimes portrays the Christian life in terms of a race.² So too does the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, when he exhorts the faithful to “run with patience the race that is set before us” (τρέχωμεν τὸν προκειμένον ἡμῖν ἀγῶνα, Hb. 12:1). It could, however, be argued that in using the word ἀγών these writers were responsible for introducing a note of competition into the practice of Christianity: the competition that strives, not merely for excellence, but to exceed the performance of others. It is the distinction that we make between (say) the musician who labors to perfect his skill and the hurdler who strives to outdo his fellow athletes. Paul certainly did not help matters in the famous passage where he says that, in the stadium, many run, but only one receives the prize (1 Cor. 9:24). Presumably he expected his readers to realize that, at this point, his analogy breaks down for Christians, all of whom can expect to be rewarded if they have “fought the good fight [ἀγών] of the faith” (1 Tim. 6:12), which surely is the point of the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Mt. 20:1–16): θέλω δὲ τούτῳ τῷ ἐσχάτῳ δοῦναι ὡς καὶ σοί. But since Paul omitted to spell this out, it is scarcely surprising if some early monks pressed towards the prize as though there would only be one winner, a single gold medal, in the καλὸς ἀγὼν τῆς πίστεως—in other words, if some of the athletes of Christ acted as though they were every bit as much in real competition with each other as the sprinters in the Olympic Games.

Nor was this misconception limited to the simpler monks. Even the great theorist of monastic life, Evagrius of Pontus (*ob.* 399), paraphrasing Paul’s words “Take an athlete: he cannot win any crown unless he has kept all the rules of the contest” (2 Tim. 2:4, tr. Jerusalem Bible) says: “In such a way let the monk (certainly leaving aside every material consideration of this world) progress, running towards the good and beautiful trophies of tranquillity.”³ A trophy (τρόπαιον) is undoubtedly

² 1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7; Phil. 3:14, etc.

³ ἐν τούτοις ἴτω ὁ μοναχὸς μάλιστα ὁ πᾶσαν ὕλην τοῦ κόσμου τούτου καταλιπὼν, καὶ ἐπὶ τὰ ὠραῖα καὶ καλὰ τῆς ἡσυχίας ἀποτρέχων πρόπαια: Evagrius *Rerum monachalium rationes* 2, Migne, PG XL 1253b.

the sign of one's victory—hence, inevitably, of another's defeat, for there is but one first prize per competition.

It would be misleading to suggest that the element of spiritual (or, more correctly, of ascetic) competitiveness is a pronounced feature of the literature of the *paterika* and the *gerontika*. But it is certainly a quietly persistent one. The stories in which it is most clearly discernible⁴ all follow the same pattern more or less, in part or in whole. The pattern is simple enough: a monk supposing himself to be of advanced piety poses the question: to what degree [of holiness] has he attained? (εἰς ποῖα μέτρα, εἰς ποῖον μέτρον, ἔφθασε). Or: with whom is he to be compared [in holiness], with whom does he have his portion [μέρος, as in Lk. 12:46 *etc.*]. In response to the question he is sent to a person (or persons) of less distinguished, usually very humble and of non-monastic status who, in the event, turns (or turn) out to be well ahead of the questioner in holiness. Which greatly edifies him in the virtue of humility.⁵

What makes this topos remarkable (and what this paper is about) is the impropriety of the question asked (or implied). In one of the examples cited below, admittedly a late one (8B), the question is actually characterized as a λογισμός. This is a notoriously difficult word to translate in the eremitic literature; it is not in itself sin, but it does suggest the 'black thoughts' that

⁴ There are less obvious examples; for instance that to which A. J. FESTUGIÈRE drew attention in *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* (Brussels 1971: hereafter '*Historia*' [=Subsidia Hagiographica 53]) ch.11 (cf. "Le problème littéraire de l'*Historia Monachorum*," *Hermes* 83 [1955] 257–84 at 272–77) concerning Abba Sourous: three monks meet and say to each other: "Let each of us reveal his own [spiritual] way of life and how he is honored by God in this life" (ἐπιδειξάτω ἕκαστος ἡμῶν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ πολιτείαν καὶ ὅπως παρὰ Θεοῦ ἐν τῷ βίῳ τούτῳ τετίμηται). The rest of the chapter tells how they vied with each other in revealing their κατορθώματα. As Festugière says, "c'est manifestation un ἀγών"—and also a *topos*, of which he goes on to trace the pre-Christian antecedents. There is also some indication that some monks may sometimes have vied with each other in the matter of fasting; see e.g. J. Cassian *Instit.* 5.22 (ed. and tr. J.-C. Guy, *Jean Cassien, Institutions cénobitiques* (=SC 109 [Paris 1965])); and F. Nau, "*Histoire des solitaires égyptiens*," *ROrChr* 12–18 [1907–13; hereafter 'Nau'] *passim*, providing the Greek text of the first four hundred tales found in Cod. Paris. Coislin 1265 [*Systematikon*; see n.9 *infra*], numbered consecutively with a French translation of tales 1–215. On the general question of the spirit of rivalry among the early monks, see A.-J. FESTUGIÈRE, *Les Moines d'Orient* IV.1: *Enquête sur les Moines d'Égypte* (Paris 1964 [=French tr. of *Historia*]; hereafter 'Festugière, *Moines*') 78 n.

⁵ See the general note in Festugière, *Moines* 90 n.1.

pave the way for sin. Small wonder then that it should be reckoned a λογισμός to seek to know than whom one is holier, for it is a cardinal point of Christian and, *a fortiori*, of monastic teaching that pride is the greatest of sins, and here is the acme of pride. There is a dominical saying that goes right to the heart of the matter: "When you shall have done all these things which are commanded of you, say: 'We are useless slaves; we have [only] done what we were obliged to do'" [δοῦλοι ἀχρεῖοί ἐσμεν, ὃ ὠφείλομεν ποιῆσαι πεποιθήκαμεν, Lk. 17:10]. To this could be added that warnings "If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all and servant [διάκονος] of all" (Mk. 9:35), and even: "To sit on my right hand and on my left is not mine to give" (Mt. 20:23). Yet in spite of these sayings and in spite of the constant insistence on humility as the greatest and most essential of monastic virtues,⁶ we encounter these alleged attempts, even on the part of some eminent professors of the ascetic life, to discover how near the top of the ratings they stand. For example:

(1) Possibly the best known of these 'comparison stories' is "The Tale of Antony and the Leather-Worker," told of Antony the Great (*ca* 250–356), widely believed to have been the first Christian monk.⁷ It actually begins *in medias res* so far as the above *schema* is concerned, for Antony is simply said to have been praying in his cell (*i.e.*, there is no mention of him asking a question) when "a voice" came to him saying that he had not yet attained the stature of a leather-worker living in Alexandria (Ἄντόνιε, οὐπω ἔφθασας εἰς τὸ μέτρον τοῦδε τοῦ σκυτέως τοῦ ἐν Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ ὄντος),⁸ so he went to visit him. Under

⁶ Legion are the references to humility in the apophthegmata and the διηγήσεις, for it is "the crown of virtues" (*Or.* 9; Nau 98, 222, 416). Thus Nau 552 (Euergetinus 1.44.3.8): "A man's works will bring him to perdition if humility is absent, for many end up proud on account of their great works, as did the Pharisee"; and Nau 558 (Euergetinus 1.44.3.4): "Humility is certainly the greatest of the virtues," just as pride is the greatest of sins (Abba Longinus).

⁷ BHG 1442xg; Nau 490; Paul Euergetinus, *Synagoge* I–IV (Athens 1980) 1.45.83; J. WORTLEY, *A Repertoire of Byzantine Beneficial Tales* (forthcoming; hereafter 'W') no. 638.

⁸ There is a hint of this in one of the apophthegmata of the *Alphabeticon* (= *Apophthegmata Patrum, collectio alphabetica*, ed. J.-B. Cottelier in Migne, PG LXV 71–440; cf. J.-C. Guy, *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des apophthegmata patrum* [Brussels 1962 and the translation in French by L.

pressure (εἶπέ μοι, ἀδελφέ, τὰς πράξεις σου) the leather-worker admitted to saying, morning and night: "All this city ... will enter the kingdom of heaven on account of its righteousness and I alone will inherit damnation for my sins." Antony praised him as "a fine goldsmith" (ὡς καλὸς χρυσοχόος) staying quietly at home who *would* inherit the kingdom; whereas he, in the wilderness, had not made as much progress (οὐ κατέλαβόν σε) and clearly was inferior to him in piety.

(2) Very closely associated with this story in many ways is "The Tale of Macarius and the Two Women."⁹ Macarius the Alexandrian (293–393) was a survivor of the first generation of Christian monks and he is by no means without importance in the tradition of eremitic monachism.¹⁰ The story under review tells how, again without any question being posed, "a voice" told Macarius that he had not yet attained the stature of two women of Alexandria; so he went to visit them.¹¹ They told him how they had lived together normally with their husbands (who were brothers) for eighteen (or fifteen) years in the same house without a word spoken in anger. They had thought of

Regnault, *Les sentences des pères du désert, Collection alphabétique* (Solesmes 1981), and in English by B. Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Oxford 1975)]. See *Alphabeticon*, Antony no. 24: "It was revealed to Abba Antony in the wilderness that there is one like unto you (ἔστί τις ὁμοίως σοῦ) in the city, a doctor by profession, who gives his superfluous [income] to those in need and sings the *trisagion* with the angels all day long": PG LXV 84b.

⁹ BHG 999yb: *De praestantia mulierum duarum* (Greek text unpublished); *Systematicon* 20.17 (= *Apophthegmata patrum, collectio systematica*): critical edition by the late J.-C. Guy, completed by Bernard Flusin, in *Les Apophthegmes des pères, collection systématique I* (= SC [Paris 1993]); see also Nau; Latin translation of "Pelagius and John" (6th–7th century) in Migne, *PL* LXXIII 851–1052; French tr.: L. REGNAULT, *Les sentences des pères du désert, série des anonymes* (Solesmes 1985: hereafter "Regnault, SPD anon.") and *Les sentences des pères du désert: nouveau recueil* (Solesmes 1970: hereafter "Regnault, SPD nouv."); Nau 489; W637; Migne, *PL* LXXIII 1013f.

¹⁰ See D. J. Chitty, *The Desert a City* (Oxford 1966) 32f; see also *Historia Lausiaca* 18; he is often called Macarius the Egyptian, but it appears to be the same person; cf. *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* 21; *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* 401ff.

¹¹ εὐχόμενου πότε τοῦ ἀββᾶ Μακαρίου ἐν τῷ κελλίῳ αὐτοῦ, ἦλθεν αὐτῷ φωνὴ λέγουσα: "Μακάριε, οὐπω ἔφθασας εἰς τὸ μέτρον τῶν δύο γυναικῶν τῆσδε τῆς πόλεως." ἀναστὰς οὖν τῷ πρῶτῳ ὁ γέρων καὶ λαβὼν τὴν βαϊνὴν ράβδον, ἤρξατο τὴν ὁδοποιρίαν ποιεῖσθαι ἐπὶ τὴν πόλιν (unedited Greek text in Cod. Paris. Coislin 126, ff. 272–75, and 232, ff. 237^v–38).

joining the order of virgins (τὸ τῶν παρθένων τάγμα)¹² but, at the prayers of their husbands, they had decided to stay, refraining from uttering any worldly statements. Macarius concluded that status is irrelevant; it is God who grants his Spirit to all.

(3) There is a formal statement of ‘the question’ in “The Tale of Eucharistus and Maria.”¹³ This story begins: “Two of the fathers prayed to God to inform them what stature they had attained” (δύο τῶν πατέρων παρεκάλεσαν τὸν Θεὸν ἵνα πληροφορήσῃ αὐτοὺς εἰς ποῖον ἔφθασαν μέτρον: PG LXV 168 D–69 A). A voice came to them directing them to go to an Egyptian village where they were to meet and be entertained by Maria, then by her shepherd-husband, Eucharistus. Coerced into telling wherein their virtue consisted (οὐ μὴ γευσώμεθά τινος ἔαν μὴ ἀναγγείλῃς ἡμῖν τὴν ἐργασίαν σου, the fathers threatened), Eucharistus revealed that their profits were divided three ways: for the poor, for hospitality and for themselves.¹⁴ The couple were chaste¹⁵ and they wore sackcloth by night. The visitors were greatly edified by their experience.

(4) The three foregoing stories all concern monastic persons on the one hand and relatively humble ones on the other, but this is not always the case, as we can see from “The Tale of the Emperor Theodosius II (408–450) and a Jordanite Monk.”¹⁶ This tells of an elder who had spent forty years naked and alone by the Jordan. In prayer, he asked: “With whom do I have my portion?” (μετὰ τίνος ἔχω μέρος;). A heavenly voice answered: “With the Emperor Theodosius [II].” Off went the elder to see for himself—and he was received by Theodosius at Constantinople. Asked about his good works, the emperor admitted that during thirty-nine years in office (so the year is now *ca* 447) he had worn a hair shirt for thirty years, avoiding baths and

¹² This is not the only phrase indicating that ὁ παρθένων might well mean a place for ladies in retirement, rather than a monastery for women. Cf. *Historia Lausiaca* 33.

¹³ BHG 2125: *Narratio de Eucharisto et Maria*, in *Alphabeticon*: “Eucharistos”; W35.

¹⁴ This division of earnings is a *topos* in the psychopelitic literature; see BHG 1318e (Nau 628, W50) pt. 2; BHG 121, 122 (Daniel of Scete 10; W470); Nau 9 (W522); BHG 1075d (Paul of Monembasia 5; W705); BHG 1322g (W864); and also *Vita Antonii* 3.

¹⁵ The *mariage blanc* is another *topos*: at least ten examples are known.

¹⁶ BHG 1445v: *De Theodosio II imperatore narratio altera*; W512; F. Nau, ed., *Pat. Or.* 8 (1911–12) 171–74.

meat. He had performed many good works: "With my own hands I cleanse with oil (σμήχω) and wash the bodies of those who are diseased or afflicted with leprosy and serve them in other ways." In order to earn his food, he occupied himself with calligraphy at the hippodrome, where he never paid any attention to the contests, the winners, or even when he had to award the crowns to the successful contestants. The monk left asking for the emperor's prayers, "For I have not attained to your stature."¹⁷

(5) A similar story with a much less distinguished hero is to be found in "The Tale of the Vegetable-man" (λαχανᾶς),¹⁸ although the language is a little different. There was an elder who, after dwelling in the desert for many years, wished to know whether he was well-pleasing to god (Κύριε πληροφόρησόν με εἰ εὐρέστησά σοι). An angel told him: "You have not yet attained the stature of the vegetable-man of such-and-such a place" (οὐπω ἐγένου κατὰ τὸν λαχανᾶν ἐν τῷδε τῷ τόπῳ), so the elder went to see the vegetable-man and was received as his guest. Very reluctantly, when begged to do so (ποιήσον ἀγάπην, ἀδελφε, εἰπέ μοι τὴν πολιτείαν σου), he told the monk that he only ate at night and that he gave away everything he did not need. Morning and night he would say: "All this city, from the least to the great, will enter the kingdom on account of their good deeds, whilst I go to perdition for my sins"—the same words as in the tale of Antony in (1) above. The monk was not very impressed with this, but then they heard singing outside the gardener's hut. "Does this not trouble you?" he asked the man. "No," he replied; "I think of them as people entering the kingdom." "Forgive me, brother; I have not yet attained that degree of perfection" (οὐπω ἔφθασα εἰς τὸ μέτρον τοῦτο), said the monk, and he returned to the desert without eating.

(6) Another similar story, but with some interesting differences, is found among the Syriac apophthegmata:¹⁹ A monk lived many years as a good member in a community, then in the desert, on herbs. When he asked what his [heavenly] reward would be, he was told to meet a certain shepherd. This man had eaten nothing but vegetables and drunk only a little water once

¹⁷ There are at least five psychopelitic stories about Theodosius II, more than about any other emperor.

¹⁸ BHG 1438i: *De lachanopola*; *Systematicon* 20.22; Nau 67; W538.

¹⁹ Tr. Regnault, *SPD novv.*, 19f; see also E. A. Wallis Budge, ed., *The Paradise, or Garden of the Holy Fathers* (London 1907) I 104; also W858.

a day for thirty years. His wages were given to the poor. The monk, who ate every green thing that came his way, was much impressed by this (“Tu as plus de mérite que moi”). He added to his labors and thus became perfect. The concluding passage, however, indicates very clearly that in this case the element of comparison has been conflated with the motif of the ‘hidden saints’: “Il louait le Seigneur, s’émerveillant du nombre des saints ignorés qu’il y avait dans le monde.”²⁰

(7) As noted above, in all six stories there is the salutary warning that neither the desert nor the monastic profession can in themselves confer holiness; there are holy men and women in all walks of life.²¹ Thus the monk of (5) tells the vegetable-man quite candidly: “Yours is a work that surpasses my labors of so many years” (αὐτή ἐστὶν ἡ ἐργασία ἢ ὑπερβάσα τῶν τοσοῦτων ἐτῶν μου τὸν κόπον). Not quite all the ‘comparison’ stories, however, point outside the cloister. A striking exception is “The Tale of the Mad Gardener.”²² A senior monk wished to know what level he had attained (εἰς ποῖον μέτρον ἔφθασεν). It was revealed to him that a brother in a certain community was more advanced than he was. He interviewed all the monks of that community, and they finally produced the gardener. “What is the manner of your labor?” (τίς ἐστὶν ἡ ἐργασία σου;), the monk asked. Very reluctantly, the brother replied that he was a madman.²³ Also that the higoumen, or superior, stabled the ox that worked the irrigation machine in his cell. Every day

²⁰ Cf. e.g. *BHG* 2101 (Daniel of Scete 7; W461): πόσους κρυπτοὺς ἔχει δούλους, a phrase that often recurs in one form or another: see e.g. *Pratum Spirituale* 18 (end); *Vita Sancti Andreae Sali* (*BHG* 117; *PG* CXI 625–888) *passim*.

²¹ We touch here upon the vexed and ancient question of the comparative value of the contemplative and the practical life: see Festugière, *Moines* 26 n.410. One does, however, sometimes encounter the suggestion that the good works of those who remain in the world are of no value; thus e.g. N500, Greek text in Paul Euergetinus, *Synagoge* 1.44.4, tr. Regnault, *SPD anon.* 201 no. 1550.

²² *BHG* 1440md: *De hortulano salo*; Nau 631; W631; Greek text in Paul Euergetinus, *Synagoge* (Athens 1980) L33.14 (non 17, ut nonulli), pp.489f.

²³ There may be as many as ten incidences of feigned madness in the known tales e.g. *BHG* 1318g, W20; *BHG* 628c, W36; *BHG* 1681b (Serapion 1), W447; *BHG* 2101, W461; *BHG* 2099z, W468; *Systematicon* 15.52, W583; *BHG* 1450e, N408, W592, etc.; it is not clear whether this is one of them.

it destroyed the ropes and mats he had plaited.²⁴ He had suffered all this for thirty years without a cross word or an angry thought for either the higoumen or the ox. The monk went away much edified (καὶ ἀκούσας ὁ γέρων ἐθαύμασεν· ἐκ τούτου γὰρ ἔγνω τὴν λοιπὴν ἐργασίαν αὐτοῦ).²⁵

It should, however, be noted in passing that this is but one manifestation of a story that occurs in many variations, of which the earliest dateable seems to be the tale of the Tabennesiote sister who simulated madness in Palladius' *Lausiac History* (34), written *ca* 407. Only its beginning concerns us here, and there is no preliminary question: "An angel appeared to the holy Piteroum ... and said to him: "Why do you hold yourself in such high esteem for piety, living in such a place as this? [διὰ τί μέγα φρονεῖς ἐνὶ σεαυτῷ ὡς εὐλαβῆς, καὶ ἐν τοιοῦτῳ καθεζόμενος τόπῳ;] Do you want to see a woman who is more pious than you? Then go to the ladies' monastery of the Tabennesiotes and there you will find one with a diadem on her head." What he found was the hidden saint whom all the sisters took for a mad woman and treated with the cruelty that was the common lot of the mentally ill until all too recently.²⁶

Before leaving Palladius, we should briefly mention the strange story of Serapion Sindonion or Sindonita ("the loincloth"), for rarely is the spirit of ascetic competitiveness more strikingly exhibited. Briefly (for the story is quite detailed): when this abba arrived in Rome, he enquired whether there were a great ascetic (of either sex) in that city. Being told that there was an elderly virgin he visited her, only to discover that in a quarter of a century she had never set foot out of doors. He now challenged her to demonstrate her degree of mortification by stepping out. She rose to that challenge, but now he had

²⁴ Is it conceivable that there is here (as my colleague, Rory Egan, suggests) an echo of the traditional story of Oknos, "the weaver," who eternally plaited a rope in Hades that was devoured by an unseen ass behind him as fast as it was woven? Cf. Plin. *HN* 35.137 (*spartum torquens quod asellus adrodit*); Paus. 10.29.2; Prop. 4.3; Diod. 1.97.3 (πλέκοντος μὲν ἕως ἀνδρὸς σχοινίου μακρὰν, πολλῶν δὲ ἐκ τῶν ὀπίσω λυόντων τὸ πλεκόμενον); full references in J. Schmidt, "Oknos," *RE* 17 (1937) 2383ff.

²⁵ *BHG* 1440md, N631, W631; (*sic*) Greek text in Euergetinus, *Synagoge* 1.33.14 (not 17); tr. Ragnault, *SPD anon.*, 275: "en effet il avait deviné par là le reste de sa pratique"; it is not clear whether the text means the visitor's or the mad gardener's *pratique*.

²⁶ *Historia Lausiaca* 34, in D. C. Butler, *The Lausiaca History of Palladius* (Cambridge 1898–1904) II 98 lines 16ff; W206.

another one: to walk back home again stark naked. He was willing to do this, but she refused because (she said) the people would think she was mad or devil-possessed. Serapion now rejoiced in the realization that he had been wrong to think that she was more pious and dead to the world than he was. The whole incident is a curious reversal, even a mirror-image, of the usual topos (which it certainly resembles and echoes in many ways). It concludes: "Then, leaving her humbled and having destroyed her vanity, he went his way."²⁷

(8) The most fully-developed form of the comparison story, indeed possibly the most sophisticated of all the beneficial tales that have yet come to light, is "The Tale of Sergius, the *demotes* of Alexandria."²⁸ This is actually a conflation of four stories in the format: A¹, B¹, C, D, B², A². (A) An Egyptian monk, Elpidius, driven out into the desert by accidie, found a naked elder named Pyrrhus, who claimed to have lived more than seventy years in the desert without seeing a man. At the end of the narrative (A²), Elpidius finds this man dead and gives him burial, but meanwhile Pyrrhus has recounted his story: (B) Pyrrhus fell into the λογισμός of asking God with whom he had his portion and whether there was his equal upon earth (ἐπεισηλθέ μοι ἕτερος λογισμός τοῦ παρακαλέσαι αὐτὸν (sc. God) τοῦ γνωρίσαι μοι μετὰ τίνος ἔχω τὴν μερίδα καὶ εἰ ἄραγέ ἐστὶ τις ἐπὶ γῆς ἐπίσης μου, Wortley 128.31f). When he had accomplished seven days of praying, a voice came to him saying he had his portion with Sergius, the *demotes* of Alexandria: of whom he went in search. It transpires that, in this context, *demotes* means the commissioner for prostitutes in Alexandria. At the end of the narrative (B²) this man follows Pyrrhus into the desert and lives with him there until his death. But meanwhile he recounts, under duress, two stories of some good he had done in this world: (C) Once he paid a beautiful woman toiling in a tavern one hundred pieces of gold to sleep with him. On discovering that she was doing it to pay off the debt that enslaved her husband and children, he let her go untouched,

²⁷ τότε καταλείψας αὐτὴν ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ κλάσας αὐτῆς τὸν τῦφον ἀνεχώρησε, *Historia Lausiaca* 37 (=Butler [*supra* n.26] II 113.16–116.2); W210.

²⁸ BHG 1449i, *De Sergio, demota Alexandrino*; W716; Greek text and French tr. in J. WORTLEY, *Les récits édifiants de Paul, évêque de Monembasie et d'autres auteurs* (Paris 1987: hereafter 'Wortley') 126–37; English tr. and notes in *id.*, *The Spiritually Beneficial Tales of Paul, Bishop of Monembasia, and of Other Authors* (Kalamazoo [forthcoming 1994]).

money in hand, to restore her family. (D) On another occasion he saved the sisters of a community from debauchment by a lascivious governor by hiding them and dressing up the prostitutes to look like them. But when it was over, the girls would not go back to the brothels: they stayed on as sisters.

This is not the place to investigate all the complexities of such an amazing narrative; only the section B¹-C-D concerns us here, a section that is almost certainly derived from the "Paphnutius cycle" (399 *infra*). There is be little doubt that, although the story of Sergius is set in a still-Christian Egypt, the narrative as it stands was constructed considerably later than the tales reviewed so far. It has all the characteristics of the *récit tardif* of the tenth century, a genre in which Paul of Monembasia and other authors whose names are lost composed their tales. There is a Georgian translation of the Arabic text of this story in the Athonite Codex Iviron Georgian 9, an appendix to the Georgian *Pratum Spirituale*. This codex was copied in 977,²⁹ which establishes that date as the terminus ante quem for its publication. Given its developed nature and its similarity to other *récits tardifs*, this may well be the latest of the known 'comparison' stories.

So far we have been looking at 'detached' stories, tales with no particular context of their own that can and do occur in all kinds of collections. But there are also comparison stories firmly embedded in saints' lives, of which two instances have come to our notice. Doubtless many similar incidents are waiting to be discovered in the massive corpus of Greek hagiography.

(9) *The Life of Saint Theodoulos the Stylite of Edessa*³⁰ is a fascinating text. Taken at its face value (which is almost certainly misleading), it is a document of the late fourth century. It tells how, perched on his column at Damascus, Theodoulos asks in prayer: "With whom shall I inherit the kingdom?" A voice replies: "With Cornelius the actor (πανδοῦρος) from the city of Damascus." The saint bitterly laments being classed with this "flute player of the demons" (which might suggest some connection with the "Paphnutius cycle," [17 *infra*]). He descends

²⁹ According to Garitte, *Byzantion* 36 (1966) 396ff.

³⁰ BHG 1785; AASS maii VI (1688) 756-65, 748-55³: see cc.12-18; cf. Delehaye's comments in *Les Saints stylites* (= *Subsidia Hagiographica* 14 [Brussels 1923]) cxviii-cxx: "Il serait aisé d'en trouver les éléments à travers la littérature du Moyen âge."

from his column, goes into the city and asks to be directed to Cornelius the actor. A citizen takes him to the hippodrome and there is Cornelius, an instrument of music in one hand and a prostitute in the other. Theodoulus presses him for details of his virtue, which quite reduces the artist to laughter; but finally, he tells his tale. One night he was returning to his house after a late-night show, and there was a pretty woman standing in the shadows. He pressed her into his embrace and at first she seemed willing enough. But then she started aside like a broken bow and burst into tears. It appeared that she was the child of parents of standing, but an orphan. She had been married to a less-than-satisfactory husband who quickly ran through the dowry she brought him. He had now been in prison for eight months, for debt—and he was dying of hunger. She had been begging, but in vain, and thus she was reduced (much against her will) to prostituting her charms. When Cornelius heard this, he ran to his house, gathered up all the money he could find or borrow, all articles of value and even his theatrical costumes. He wrapped all this in a cloth and gave it to the woman to pay her husband's debts, which amounted to four hundred gold pieces. Here (as in Sergius' story) the message is a little different but nonetheless salutary—and categorical: that one significant act of kindness can outweigh a whole lifetime of ascetic endeavour.

Enough has now been said to demonstrate that, while these comparison stories are indeed beneficial to the soul ($\psi\upsilon\chi\omega\text{-}\phi\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\iota\varsigma$), the means by which they confer their benefit describes some behavior that is, on occasion, rather at variance with the gospel precepts. In every one of the above nine cases, it is either stated or implied that a 'holier than thou' relationship among Christians not only can exist, but also that it can be openly avowed to exist. Several of these are tales about people who would gladly pride themselves on not being as other men are; people who are a little too concerned with their performance (hence, also with its rewards). How could these examples of what looks for all the world like spiritual $\upsilon\beta\epsilon\tau\iota\varsigma$ have found their way into the tradition of eremitic monachism—and managed to stay there, in spite of that appearance?

(10) The answer to the first part of this conundrum is less difficult to find than one might imagine. There is yet another comparison story to be considered and this could well be the oldest of all the stories of the type described so far. It is a second example of a tale embedded in a *vita*: in this case, in *The*

Life of Saint Paul of Thebes.³¹ It is now generally believed that this *vita* was indeed written (in Latin) by none other than the great Jerome/Eusebius Hieronymus (*ob.* 420). The author makes no secret of the fact (in his *Prologus*) that he is writing a quite deliberate counter-blast to Athanasius' *Vita Antonii*, which it echoes in many ways. The object is to demonstrate that there had been a yet older,³² more primitive, more distinguished monk who penetrated the fastesses of the desert even before Antony did. In this Jerome was certainly successful, for the eastern—unlike the western—church has long commemorated Paul, not Antony, as the “*first monk*” (29 October: μνήμη τοῦ ὁσίου Παύλου τοῦ Θηβαίου τοῦ πρώτου μοναχοῦ).³³

Paradoxically, it is not Paul but Antony the Great, who is the protagonist of the incident in the *vita* to which we now turn our attention. The passage in question tells how, when Antony was already ninety years old (*i.e.*, *ca* 341), while he was living in the remoter desert, “the idea came into his mind that there was no monk living in the desert more excellent than he” (c. 7, *haec in mentem eius cogitatio incidit nullum ultre se [perfectum] monachum in eremo consedisse*). He therefore prayed that he might know whether this were true or not. It was revealed to him by night, as he slept, that, yes: there was one, further in, and much better than he was, whom he ought to set out to visit [*at illi pernoctem quiescenti revelatum est esse alium interius multo se meliorem ad quem visendum deberet proficisci*]. The rest of the narrative describes how Antony travelled to see Paul, conversed with him and, eventually, with the help of two lions, buried his corpse.

We now appear to have discovered the archetypal ‘competition’ story; but, alas, it is not quite so straightforward. “Is there any monk living in the desert more excellent than I?”—that is the prayer that the Latin text appears to put into the mouth of Antony. Everything turns on the word *perfectum*; but it may

³¹ BHG 1466; PL XXIII 17–28; also Rosweyde, Hurter (n.34 *infra*).

³² Paul is said to have been 112 years old when he died, compared with Antony's alleged 106. He also has the aura of martyrdom about him: he is said to have fled into the desert at the time of the Decian persecution and never to have returned. It should be added that while Jerome is conceded to have been the author of *Vita Pauli*, it is very noticeable that in his latest and excellent book, *La vie quotidienne des pères du désert en Egypte au IV^e siècle* (Paris 1990) *passim*, Dom Lucien Regnault betrays a certain disquiet with this attribution.

³³ *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* 177.1f.

well be an interpolation. Here is a note by Jean Martianay, the Maurist editor of the text reprinted by Migne: "That word *perfectum*, which we cannot find in any manuscript copy [*sic*], could easily be deleted, if it did not immediately go on to describe how it was revealed to him that there was one, further in, and *much better than he*, which gives some support to it [the word *perfectum*]." ³⁴ The answer seems to have conditioned the question. Because the voice *says* that the other monk is better, the first one is made to ask whether this is so by supplying a word (*perfectum*) that was not previously there. ³⁵

No matter how the word *perfectum* found its way into the text, however, once that word is removed, things begin to make more sense. It becomes clear that, far from falling victim to any invidious pride, all Antony wanted to know was whether there was any monk living *yet further* into the desert than was he, *i.e.*, who had penetrated into the yet remoter zones that were as yet unknown to him. For until then, Antony believed himself (as he is still believed by some) to have been the first monk to leave the periphery of the οἰκουμένη and go off into

³⁴ "Vox isthaec *perfectum*, quam in nullo ms. exemplari invenimus [*sic!*] facile expungi posset, nisi quod statim subdit, revelatum esse *alium interius multo se meliorem*, suffragium quaecunque adderet": PL XXIII 22A-B with n.9 (italics added for emphasis). Presumably Martianay retained *perfectum* in spite of his manuscript evidence against it because it is present in the *editio princeps*, published by Heribert Rosweyde in *Vitae Patrum*, PL LXXIII-LXXIV and ed. H. Hurter, reprinted in W. A. Oldfather, ed., *Studies in the Text-Tradition of St. Jerome's Vitae Patrum* (Urbana 1943) 41. In the absence (as yet) of a critical edition, it is impossible to assert definitely that *perfectum* is an interpolation, but the likelihood is certainly very strong. There are twelve words in Hurter's edition (of which this *perfectum* is one) that are not to be found in a single one of the eighty-nine (out of 128 known) manuscripts examined by J. F. Cherf, as he reports in "The Latin Manuscript Tradition of the *Vita Sancti Pauli*," in Oldfather 65-142, esp. 66.

³⁵ This, in turn, might conceivably have come about because the answer itself had become somewhat distorted. The editor might well suspect—from the alternate reading for *interius*, *ulterius in terris*—that *melioem* (since distance is scarcely patient of value judgements) could have been a mistaken reading for something like *longiorem* or *ulterioem*. But in the light of the versions (see below) such a mistake (if it were such) must have been made very early. I am indebted to my colleague, Professor Rory Egan, for suggesting that, given the questionable usage of *perfectum*, this might be, not an interpolation, but a misreading (say) of *profectum*—which certainly makes more sense. But, as noted above, there is as yet no manuscript evidence for either; we are dealing with an unsolved mystery.

the desert.³⁶ It was in response to his request that he was led yet further into the desert, there to encounter Paul of Thebes.³⁷

It is not inconceivable that, *in its original form*, this is a genuine anecdote of the great Antony. It would have been consistent with the teaching of *Vita Antonii* for someone to have gleaned and preserved an additional anecdote. Athanasius encourages his readers (of whom Jerome was clearly one) diligently to enquire of the Egyptian monks in order to fill out and complete his own report.³⁸ Jerome was in Egypt for some time, shortly before 386. It might have been he who learned this tale from the Egyptian monks; but that in itself is no guarantee of its veracity.

Whether it be fact or fiction, however, no matter how tempting it might be to think otherwise, this incident *with* the word *perfectum* interpolated simply cannot be demonstrated to have been the archetypal 'competition' story, for it is now generally accepted that Jerome's Latin *Vita Pauli* almost certainly precedes all the various Greek and Oriental Lives (ODCC *s.v.* "Paul of Thebes"; the older view, now abandoned, was that Jerome freely translated and expanded a Greek text of *ca* 365–370, possibly brought to his attention by Evagrius of Pontus, which may or may not have rested on the testimony of those who buried Antony.)³⁹ The fact of the matter is that although, as noted above, the word *perfectum* is found in most (if not all) Latin manuscripts, there is not a trace of its equivalent in any known manuscript of the oriental translations or of the two known early Greek versions of the *Vita Pauli* first collated by Bidez and more recently by Corey. The Greek versions read thus:

³⁶ See J. C. O'Neill, "The Origins of Monasticism," in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in honour of Henry Chadwick* (Cambridge 1989) 270–87: "Antony was notable for one thing alone, his zeal to face the devil in a severer test by living among the tombs *and by going out into the desert itself*" (273, my italics).

³⁷ The *motif* of the monk who returns (having been sent away by him at their first encounter) just in time to bury an elder frequently recurs in the tales.

³⁸ Migne, *PG* XXVI 838: ὀλίγα τῶν ἐκείνου μνημονεύσας ἐπιστείλω καὶ ὑμεῖς δὲ μὴ παύσησθε τοὺς ἐνθένδε πλείοντας ἐρωτᾶν· ἴσως γὰρ ἐκάστου λέγοντος ὅπερ οἶδε μόγις ἐπέιξεως ἢ περὶ ἐκείνου γένηται διήγησις.

³⁹ Thus F. Nau, "Le texte original de la Vie de Paul de Thèbes," *AnalBoll* 20 (1901) 130–53, esp. 149f, commenting on J. Bidez, *Deux versions grecques de la Vie de Paul de Thèbes* (Gand 1900).

A: ἐν ἄλλῃ ἐρήμῳ Ἀντώνιος διέτριβεν, ὡς οὐτὸς
 δηγεῖσθαι εἰώθει, ἐν τῇ ἐνθυμήσει τῆς διανοίας αὐτοῦ
 ἐπῆλθεν εἰ οὐδεὶς ἕτερος ἐνδοτάτῳ τῆς ἐρήμου τῶν
 μοναχῶν διάγει. ᾧ διὰ τῆς νυκτὸς ἡσυχάζοντι
 ἀπεκαλύφθη εἶναι ἕτερον ἐνδοτάτῳ πολλῶ βελτίονα,
 πρὸς ὃν ὀφείλει συντυχίας χάριν σπουδάσαι.

B: ἀπήγγειλεν δὲ Ἀντώνιος ἡμῖν ποτε ὅτι ἐλογισάμην
 ἐν ἑαυτῷ ὅτι οὐδεὶς ἄρα τῶν μοναχῶν ᾤκησεν
 ἐσώτερον τῆς ἐρήμου ταύτης. καὶ τῇ νύκτι ἐκείνῃ, ἔτι
 αὐτοῦ ἐνθυμουμένου, ἀπεκαλύφθη αὐτῷ παρὰ τοῦ
 Θεοῦ ὅτι ἐστὶν τις ἐσώτερος καὶ βελτίων σου ᾧ
 ὀφείλεις συντυχεῖν μετὰ πάσης χαρᾶς.⁴⁰

The reader will have noted that it is almost exclusively in the Greek-speaking world and its penumbra that we find examples of the competition story; areas in which there was nothing equivalent to the celebrated *perfectum* in the versions of the *Life of Saint Paul of Thebes*. Paradoxically, so far as I am aware, there is not a single example of a competition story in the Latin west (where the *vita* did include that *perfectum*) that cannot be shown to have been translated almost directly from an eastern source.⁴¹

Might it not, however, be possible that the *Vita Pauli* incident *without* the word *perfectum* could be recognized as the archetypal ‘competition’ story? There are two pointers in that direction: First, as noted above, there is no question in the competition stories told of the earliest monks, e.g. Antony and Macarius. There are all the other elements of the story, but no question. Second, if (as seems to have been the case in the written text of *Vita Pauli*), the answer conditioned the question, is it unlikely that the same thing would have happened as the competition topos was passed along orally, even to the extent of the answer actually supplying the question it presupposed? One can add that even in the stories mentioned above where no

⁴⁰ BHG 1466; Bidez (*supra* n.39) 10–13. The *Synaxarion* (394, 16–20) follows the Greek lives in making it clear that Paul’s significant excellence lay in the distance of his penetration into the desert: Τοῦτον, ὡς φασι, ὁ μέγας Ἀντώνιος καταλαβὼν καὶ τοῦ τόπου καὶ τὸ τρόπον καὶ τοῦ χρόνου τῆς ἀναχωρήσεως ἐθαύμασε· καὶ γὰρ πρῶτος ἀνθρώπων εἰς τὰ τῆς ἐρήμου ἐνδότερα προελθεῖν ἐτόλμησε.

⁴¹ E.g. “Pelagius and John” (the Latin *Systematikon*), PL LXXIII 855–1022: e.g. 20.17, 22.

question is stated, there is in most instances—in addition to the voice from heaven—the statement of the monk on discovering the excellence of the person(s) he has been sent to visit, e.g., “I most certainly have not yet attained anything near your stature.” In most instances, this bears a remarkable similarity to the question asked (when it is stated). One cannot help wondering here too which came first: the question or the conclusion. This narrative, however, has now gone too far out on the limb of speculation—and reached its limit. It must return to more solid ground, where there remains one major stone that has not yet been turned.

More or less coæval with *Vita Pauli* is the “Paphnutius cycle” mentioned earlier, a series of three linked competition tales, somewhat similar to those described above, but also very different in some ways. The cycle occurs in *The History of the Monks of Egypt*,⁴² which (it is now generally agreed) contains substantially material collected in Egypt by visiting monks from Jerusalem during the winter of 394–395. This is what the so-called Paphnutius cycle says:⁴³

In the area adjacent to Heracleopolis in the Thebaïd, the visitors from Jerusalem heard the following about a recently departed father (Paphnutius) who was obviously already becoming something of a legend.

(1) After many years in the ascetic life, Paphnutius asked God to let him know which of the saints who had lived the life of virtue he most resembled [ἐδέετο τοῦ Θεοῦ γνωρισθῆναι αὐτῷ τίνος τῶν κατορθωσάντων ἀγίων εἶη ἂν ὅμοιος]. An angel appeared to him and told him he was like the flute-player at Heracleopolis. When Paphnutius visited this person, he discovered that although he was an ex-brigand and sinful (not to mention his disreputable calling), he did admit to two virtuous acts: (a) he had once saved a virgin from being ravaged by brigands; (b) and on another occasion he had given a woman (who was prepared to sell herself to him for that price) three hundred pieces of gold gratis in order to redeem her husband and children. The man followed Paphnutius into the desert and for three years led a life of great piety.

(2) Paphnutius asked a second time which of the saints he most resembled [τίνι τῶν ἀγίων ἄρα ἂν εἶη ὅμοιος]. This time he

⁴² Festugière, *HME* and *Moines*; English tr.: N. Russel, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* (Oxford 1981).

⁴³ *HME* 14; W165–67. What follows is merely a précis of a substantial story.

was sent to the chieftain of a village [ἔουκας τῷ τῆς πλησίον κώμης πρωτοκωμήτῃ] whose great virtue lay in this: that for thirty years he had slept apart from his wife, practiced great hospitality and almsgiving, observed strict morality in his farming operation, had not taken his child's side in legal action, and so forth. Paphnutius said, however, that the man lacked the acme of virtue: the knowledge of God. So he took him into the mountain (14.10–15). (There is a brief interlude here in which, while fording a river with the ex-chieftain, he prayed God to reveal to him which of the two was greater [ἔδέετο τοῦ Θεοῦ κρείττων φανῆναι τῶν τοιούτων]: he was rewarded by a vision of the other's soul being borne aloft by angels [14.16f].)

(3) Paphnutius asked a third time that it should be revealed to him whom he resembled [πάλιν ἡξίου δηλωθῆναι αὐτῷ τίνας εἴη ὅμοιος]. A divine voice sent him to meet a rich merchant (there is an oblique reference to Mtt. 13:45 here) descending the Nile with a hundred ships, distributing his goods to monks and to the poor. Paphnutius led this man into the wilderness. "Having shut himself up in the cave where his two predecessors had died, [the merchant] persevered with prayer to God. After a little time had elapsed, he left his body and became a citizen of heaven" (14.18–22).⁴⁴ At this point (14.23) Paphnutius lost heart and could no more fight the good fight [τὴν ψυχὴν ἀπελέγετο μηκέτι πλέον ἀσκῆσαι δυνάμενος], but an angel came and assured him of his reward forthwith—and he died before the sun had made another circuit.

It will readily be appreciated that these experiences of Paphnutius are a little different from those of Antony, Macarius, and all the other protagonists whose stories we have reviewed in this paper: they meet people who, in their own way, are trying to lead an ascetic life *in the world*. The moral of the story is loud and clear: monks have no monopoly on holiness.⁴⁵ Paphnutius, on the other hand, encounters: first, a scoundrel who happens

⁴⁴ Tr. N. Russel, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* (London 1980) 97.

⁴⁵ This is not a common theme of beneficial tales, but it is found elsewhere, e.g. BHG 1318y, W51) *de duobus fratribus post alterius mortem reconciliatis*: One of the two brothers died whilst they were at enmity with each other (this is a commonplace). The survivor went first to Mount Olympus, but the elder he consulted there could not help. He was then sent to one who turned out to be a woman. She sent him to a centurion at Constantinople who at first denied that he had any ability to be of assistance. Finally he took the surviving brother to the Great Church by night. The doors opened at his prayers; the dead brother appeared and a reconciliation was effected. The conclusion is that not only monks are holy men.

to have done two good works; then an honest layman who strives to be simply an honest layman. It is only at the third encounter that he finds one already on his way to asceticism, and he is but a pre-postulant, so to speak. Nor does Paphnutius experience any great humility on hearing the deeds of those with whom he is invited to compare himself: "I am not aware of having accomplished anything equal to this myself," he says to the flute-player, "*but* so far as the ascetic life is concerned, you have no doubt heard that I am famous." Thus he tells the honest chieftain he has done well, but one thing he lacks: he must withdraw into the wilderness to lead the ascetic life—which he does. Here, in contrast to the stories of Antony, Macarius, and so forth, the message is that the monastic life *is* the acme of holiness; that he who would be saved must leave *all* and follow Christ. Thus, somewhat paradoxically, though the Paphnutius stories are mainly about laymen, the message seems to be that the road to salvation is a monastic road. It is true that the question posed by Paphnutius seems less obnoxious than the one generally attributed to Antony, but underlying it is the same lack of humility (especially noticeable in the interlude where he is crossing the river) and, eventually, the same salutary warning, even though Paphnutius seems not to realize the full significance of it when he urges his interlocutors, be they never so holy, to follow him into the desert.

The reader hardly needs reminding at this point that we have still to discover whence arose all this invidious comparing and contrasting of levels of piety. Père Festugière first recognized that among the *δηγήσεις ψυχωφελείς* there are a few for which ancient prototypes can be identified.⁴⁶ He drew attention to three stories of the Delphic Oracle all of which resemble the incidents examined in this paper in several ways, but most significantly in that the spirit of competition (*ἀγών*) is distinctly present in them.

The first concerns a rich Magnesian who brought a great offering to Apollo and asked the Pythia who was the best and most enthusiastic of men in honoring the god and made the most pleasing offerings, confidently expecting himself himself to bear the palm (*ὑπολαμβάνοντα δοθήσεσθαι αὐτῷ τὸ πρωτεῖον*). Answer: [Not you but] Clearchus of Methydrium in Arcadia. To him the rich man proceeded and found a farmer living in

⁴⁶ A.-J. Festugière, "Lieux communs littéraires et thèmes de folk-lore dans l'hagiographie primitive," *WS* 73 (1960) 123–53, esp. 142ff.

very simple circumstances but honoring the god with what he had to the best of his ability. "The moral was that the gods preferred the simplest offering given regularly and piously to the most costly and elaborate expenditure of wealth."⁴⁷

Then there is the story of Gyges, ruler of Lydia, who asked the Pythia who was the happiest of men (*an aliquis mortalium se esset felicior*). "Aglaus of Psophis," came the reply—a very obscure Arcadian living on a minuscule farm that he had never left, *parvuli ruris fructibus contentus*.⁴⁸ Third, there is the case of Anacharsis the Scythian (or possibly of Chilon of Sparta) who asked whether any man were wiser than he (εἰ τις αὐτοῦ σοφώτερος εἴη). The reply was formal: "I say that a certain Myson of Oeta has been born in Chen, who is provided with sounder brains than you" (Οἰταῖόν τινα φημι Μύσων' ἐνὶ Χηνὶ γενέσθαι σοῦ μᾶλλον πραπίδεσσιν ἀρηρότα πευκαλίμησιν). Myson was visited and found to be a very simple peasant in an obscure corner of the land.⁴⁹

Parke and Wormell point out that these three cases of answers to question of who is the most pious, the happiest, and the wisest, all follow the same pattern. It need hardly be added that the comparison stories examined above also faithfully reproduce part or (more commonly) all of the same pattern: a question to the divinity, an unexpected answer mentioning a third person, followed by a visit to that person—to which the Christians have usually added some admission of inferiority to that person by the protagonist. Given also the three-fold nature of the Paphnutius cycle, it is difficult to disagree with Festugière:

Tout cela [*sc.* the *Historia* stories] ne brille pas par l'humilité et serait, en vrai, incompréhensible, du moins dans un tel ouvrage à la gloire des moines, si l'on manquait à percevoir, plus ou moins lointains, de vieux souvenirs de folk-lore païen, des échos, à peine atténués, de la φιλοτιμία grecque.

⁴⁷ H. W. PARKE and D. E. W. WORMELL, *The Delphic Oracle* (Oxford 1956) I 384, II no. 238, citing Theopompus, *FGrHist* 115F344=Porph. *Abst.* 2.16.

⁴⁸ Parke and Wormell I 348, II no. 244, citing Val. Max. 7.1.2 and inviting comparison with Plin. *HN* 7.151.

⁴⁹ Parke and Wormell I 384f, II no. 254, citing D.L. 1.106 *etc.* (tr. by the authors).

So much for the Paphnutius cycle. Can this shed any light on how the word *perfectum* found its way into Jerome's text and how the rather obnoxious questions of the other competition stories came into being? So far as the first is concerned, probably not. The absence of *perfectum* from the other versions establishes it as a somewhat late interpolation, but not too late considering its persistence in the Latin MSS. It seems rather unlikely that the influence of the Paphnutius stories brought this about, partly because they circulated (so far as we are aware) in Coptic and Greek, not Latin (though one can never be sure), but mainly because the question asked in all three Paphnutius stories is of the second of the two types described at the beginning of this paper, "Whom am I like?"—not "Is there anybody [comparative adjective] than I?"

What, however, the existence of the Paphnutian cycle does do (as Festugière pointed out) is to demonstrate very clearly that "de vieux souvenirs de folk-lore païen" were certainly in circulation and, moreover, were capable of insinuating themselves into and distorting Christian stories. Thus it is at least plausible that Antony's very simple request to know if there was anybody who had penetrated further into the desert was transformed, through a succession of tales, into the overweening desire to know if he were the holiest of men by the pressure of a prevailing folklore: folklore descended from a culture in which there was nothing amiss in inquiring *an aliquis mortalium se esset felicior*. From this, it is a short step—perhaps even a natural one when the world was Christianized and monachized—to *an ullum ultra se perfectum monachum in eremo consedisse*, no matter in what language the question were asked.

It is nevertheless remarkable that the impropriety of such a question for a Christian (*a fortiori* for a Christian monk), both in the *vita* and in the tales, apparently passed unchallenged. But it may be that this can be explained in terms of more than the pressure of ancient traditions. Attention has already been drawn to the extremely high value placed on humility as a monastic virtue: "Not to judge others, but to consider yourself inferior to everybody ... that is humility."⁵⁰ It need hardly be emphasized that nearly all the earlier stories cited above are not only lessons in humility, but very striking lessons in monastic humility, both

⁵⁰ Nau 330 (=Matoes 11 in *Alphabeticon*, Euergetinus *Synagoge* I.45.29: μή κρίνης [or κρίνε] ἄλλους ἀλλὰ γενοῦ ὑποκάτω πάντων ... αὕτη ἐστὶν ταπεινώσις.

for the individual and for the institution. I suppose the fact of the matter was that some monks did have a tendency to think of themselves as more holy than 'those of the world', and that they had to be continually reminded that this was not necessarily the case. This, however, is not the easiest of lessons to inculcate. A story that would serve the purpose almost had to start with a monk falling into the error it sought to combat. One may therefore conclude that there might well have been persons in old time who were as scandalized by the question of comparative holiness as readers today. Nevertheless, being themselves engaged in the invisible warfare of the *καλὸς ἀγὼν τῆς πίστεως*, they were well aware of the dangers of spiritual pride and hence were probably prepared to close their eyes to the impropriety of the question, for in each case the questioner received his correction. This in the pious (and on their terms not unreasonable) hope that the end would justify the means.

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