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Holy and Unholy Miracle Workers

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Once upon a time there lived on the island of Crete a saintly man, Cyril, bishop of Gortyna. The persecutors of Christians arrested him, put him on a cart driven by oxen, and sent him to be executed. All of a sudden, in the middle of the way, the oxen stopped, and there was no means to make them continue; the executioners had no choice but to murder the saint at this spot, divinely chosen, where later the center of Cyril's veneration was established.¹

So far, so good. In another saint's vita we read a similar story: a man ordered the felling of an enormous tree that he wanted brought to his mansion; a magnificent train of seventy teams of oxen was formed to drag this gigantic tree, but all of a sudden, in the middle of the way, the oxen stopped, and there was no means to make them continue. But unlike the miracle with Cyril of Gortyna, it was not divine force that stopped the oxen. It was the evil, devilish, insidious spirit that hampered the movement of the train, and the intervention of the saint, Eustratios of Agauros by name, overcame the evil power and destroyed the devilish spell.²

In these particular cases we are assisted by the hagiographers who make it crystal clear that these two analogous events were a far cry from being identical: the devil was able to perform miracles that, on their surface, were indistin-

I am extremely grateful to Henry Maguire for his friendly criticism and attempts to make my style clearer and my English closer to the norms of grammar.

¹ BHG 467; vita ed. P. Franchi de' Cavalieri, *S. Cirillo vescovo di Gortina e martire*, ST 175 (1953), 201–29.

² BHG 645; ed. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, 'Ανάλεκτα Ἱεροσολυμιτικῆς σταχυολογίας, IV (repr. Brussels, 1963), 381.10–24.

guishable from those worked by or with the help of divine force. How could an ordinary Byzantine have distinguished good and beneficial miracles from the pseudo-miracles launched by the devil and his companions in order to cheat and confuse the faithful? Did he possess—do we Byzantinists possess—a litmus test to separate the sheep from the goats, the holy miracles from the unholy tricks?

A miracle is a change or alteration of the “natural” order of the material world due to the intervention of a power from outside.³ The agent of the holy miracle could be God himself, whose major function was to warn and to chastise sinners by sending disasters (earthquake, famine, locusts, enemies, and so on); the Virgin and angels who interceded before God on behalf of suffering mankind; holy objects, especially the icons and the cross; and the host of saintly men and women who stood in close and personal relations with the population of the empire and for whom miracle working was the indicator of sanctity. The vita of Mary the Younger is especially demonstrative in this respect since the hagiographer states that many people refused to acknowledge her sanctity just because Mary, though a pious woman, had not justified her holiness by performing miracles.⁴

It would be a very important (and a very difficult) task to collect from manifold Byzantine sources complete information about miracles and to categorize them. To the best of my knowledge, this work has not yet been planned. What I am suggesting now is a very schematic and, by necessity, incomplete and preliminary classification.

The following types of miracle were particularly popular with Byzantine saints.

1. *Healings*. Saints cured the sick by touch, by exorcism, by application of material objects (parts of the saint's garment, olive oil from the lamp burning above the saint's tomb, myron), by incubation, by the correction of bad behavior, and sometimes by illogical means, such as a stroke of a sledgehammer on the ailing member of the human body.⁵

The major achievement in healing was victory over death, which could

³ A. Dierkens, “Quelques mots de conclusion,” in *Apparitions et miracles* (Brussels, 1991), 185.

⁴ *BHG* 1164; ed. *Acta SS* Novembris IV: 692E.

⁵ *BHG* 173; ed. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Varia Graeca Sacra* (1909; repr. Leipzig, 1975), 37f.

take the form of resurrecting a dead person, or the passive preservation of a saintly body after the funeral; the peak in such miraculous activity was the dead John of Polybotos' annual participation in the commemoration of his feast day.⁶

2. *Overcoming space and time.* Some saints and some holy objects obtained an ability to move with extreme speed. More frequent, however, was the capacity to penetrate across time, to the past (revealing hidden circumstances, such as theft) and especially to the future: the saint was usually able to foresee occurrences of a private life (including the day of his own death) and to prophesy political affairs and misadventures. The gift of vision (or sending a vision) belongs to this category of miracle, the highest of visions being the visit to paradise and to hell.

3. *Providing food.* The most typical miracle of providing food was the multiplication of food by creating an inexhaustible store of grain or olive oil; another means of overcoming a shortage of provisions was inciting a generous donation of food at the moment when the community was on the brink of starvation.

4. *Struggle against natural disasters.* Since the Byzantines envisaged numerous natural disasters, this category of miracle was especially variegated. A very substantial phenomenon was salvation on the sea. It had a double aspect: some saints were able to calm storms, thus saving ships from destruction, while some saints were miraculously saved from tempests or from the cruelty of persecutors who threw them (or holy objects) into the sea; dolphins appear as saviors of several holy men.

Another type of miracle is the crossing of a river—it could be a torrential stream or a wide waterway. Many categories of “salvage” miracles were connected with agricultural labors: the termination of a drought or the protection of a threshing floor from an imminent rain; the extermination of insects, especially locusts; the increase of a harvest or of a fish catch; making barren soil or dried plants bear fruit. To this category belong also the saving of a building from an earthquake or fire.

5. *Taming wild beasts.* Saints had a close connection with nature and therefore were capable of being on good terms with all kinds of animals: from lions, hyenas, and bulls to small rodents that were dangerous to crops and gar-

⁶ *Synaxarium CP*, 279f, with a parallel text, cols. 277.48–280.51.

dens. Saints knew how to communicate with animals, how to castigate them for misdeeds, and how to make them serve people.

6. *Endurance*. The idea of sanctity is closely connected with denial of mundane interests and sensuality. Miraculously, the saint is able to endure a harsh diet, long vigils, hard chores; his needs are minimal, his garment rough, his bed coarse; he lives in a cave or stays on an elevated platform, on top of a pillar—in rain and snow, in freezing cold or scorching heat. The saint is ready to suffer for the sake of the Christian faith; a special subgenre of hagiographical literature, *martyria* or *passiones*, praises those saints who were victims of persecutions but miraculously overcame their ordeals. They withstood their tortures, survived molten lead and red-hot iron, and emerged from the sea; even their cut-off members became reattached to their maimed bodies.

It is not yet possible to establish a hierarchy of miracles, even though some kinds of miracle were more highly esteemed than others: thus healings were performed by each and every saint, whereas only the major saints were able to overcome time and space and to defeat the cataclysms of nature. The hagiographer of George of Amastris distinguishes various levels of miracle working:

To chase away demons, cure ailments and perform other multifarious wonders (of which both historical and poetical works tell constantly) is not a surprising achievement of saints who preserve the spotless likeness [to the original, i.e., God] and have got, for their sympathy toward the Christians [lit. “people of the same race”], the energy to work miracles—but to tame the elements and command the force of winds and curb the billows of the sea putting on them a rigid bridle and insurmountable limit—this is actually a deed of divine nature, that “has spread out the heavens like a tent” [Ps. 103:2].⁷

The ability to work miracles was not, however, limited to holy men and women. The faithful had constantly to expect the attacks of demonic forces able, by God’s dispensation and to the detriment of mankind, to break the natural order of things and perform unholy miracles. An episode related by Anna Komnene demonstrates how deeply this fear of evil miracles penetrated the minds of highly educated Byzantine intellectuals. Emperor Alexios I and Patriarch Nicholas III Grammatikos decided that Basil, the leader of the Bogomils, must be burnt. A huge fire was lit in the Hippodrome, and a great multitude of

⁷ BHG 668; ed. V. G. Vasil’evskij, *Trudy* 3 (Petrograd, 1915), 55.12–56.3.

people gathered to observe the execution; Basil, however, despised the punishment and boasted that angels would come to his rescue. The royal historian says: "Now, there was much talk going on, as everyone repeated the marvellous prophecies he had made, and the public executioners were afraid lest somehow the demons that protected Basil might perform some extraordinary miracle (with the permission of God)—the scoundrel might be seen in some public place, where many people met, coming unscathed from the midst of this tremendous fire." With some relief, Anna adds that when the executioners thrust Basil into the flames, nothing extraordinary happened: "There was no odour and nothing unusual in the smoke except one thin smoky line in the centre of the flame."⁸

A mortal was able to sell his soul to the devil and to acquire witchcraft. The Byzantines created a series of Faust-like legends which reach their peak in the story about Heliodoros, the anti-hero in the *vita* of Leo of Catania.⁹ Heliodoros, like his predecessors, struck a contract with the devil and became a magician: he arranges the victory of a chariot at the horse races; he sends an illusionary vision to women compelling them to take off their clothes; he transforms stones into gold and causes confusion in the market; he makes a design of a ship in the sand and sails on this ship from Catania to Constantinople, and, even more remarkably, he enters a bathhouse in Catania and, overcoming time and space, reemerges in a bathhouse in the capital. Despite all the superficial similarity between Heliodoros' activity and saintly miracle working, the difference is substantial: the main feature of holy miracles is their beneficial character, their usefulness. The saint rescues, feeds, and comforts people, creates good, and teaches how the Christian must comport himself or herself.

The difference between the holy and unholy miracle becomes evident in

⁸ *Anne Comnène, Alexiade*, ed. B. Leib, III (Paris, 1945), 227f; Eng. trans. E. R. A. Sewter (Harmondsworth, 1969), 502–4.

⁹ *BHG* 981. Two versions are published: V. Latyšev, *Neizdannye grečeskie agiograficheskie teksty* (St. Petersburg, 1914), 12–28, and A. Acconia Longo, "La vita di s. Leone vescovo di Catania e gli incantesimi del mago Eliodoro," *RSBN* 26 (1989), 3–98. The most recent study (with bibliography) is M.-F. Auzépy, "L'analyse littéraire et l'historien: L'exemple des vies de saints iconoclastes," *ByzSl* 53 (1992), 62–67, and the response by A. Acconia Longo, "A proposito di un articolo recente sull'agiographia iconoclasta," *RSBN* 29 (1992–93), 10–17. See also her "La vita di s. Leone di Catania," *Sicilia e Italia suburbicaria* (Soveria Manelli, 1991), 215–26.

the stories about contests between the saint and the magician. The contests—a frequent element of hagiographical literature—are usually limited to theoretical discussion the purpose of which is to prove the advantage of the Christian creed over pagan, Jewish or Muslim systems of belief; it can be terminated by the execution of Christian martyrs whose death, followed by miracles, is a moral and religious victory, or it can be accomplished by a miraculous locking up of the mouth of the saint's opponent—the saint just makes him mute and unable to continue his slander of the Christian faith. The legend of Pope Silvester, known in Greek versions, makes the parties compete in the power of magic. The Jewish magician Zambres performed a stupefying act: he murmured some words into the ear of a bull that fell dead, so that the companions of Zambres became triumphant—but too soon. Silvester announces that Zambres slaughtered the bull with the help of Satanic force, but he, Silvester, assisted by God, who lives and gives life, will resurrect the animal. And so he did.¹⁰

Beneficial magic competed with evil witchcraft on a specific terrain, that of sexual drive. Theodoret, in the *Historia religiosa* (chap. 8, 13.8–19), relates a story about a harlot who attracted a married man using bewitching charms. The saintly man Aphraates intervened; he prayed, says Theodoret, and his prayer “obscured (or “impaired”) the energy of the sorcery.” Besides the prayer, Aphraates employed a typically magical means: he gave the wife of the bewitched libertine a vial with olive oil and advised her to anoint the unfaithful man with the [holy] oil.

The hagiographer of Irene of Chrysobalanton describes a similar episode.¹¹ A girl entered Irene's convent leaving behind her betrothed; the man (certainly incited by the devil) headed to a magician who managed to bewitch the young nun: attacked by a frantic lust for her former fiancé, she lost control and, leaping and moaning, kept calling him by name, which naturally caused a scandal in the nunnery. Irene and the nuns prayed, but with no avail, until the Mother of God, St. Basil, and St. Anastasia came to help. The saints threw “from the air” a parcel described quite “naturalistically”—it is said to have weighed about three pounds and contained, among other magic devices, the

¹⁰ The contest of Silvester and Zambres is included, among others, in a vita of Constantine the Great: H. G. Opitz, “Die *Vita Constantini* des codex Angelicus 22,” *Byzantion* 9 (1934), 549–51.

¹¹ BHG 952; ed. J. O. Rosenqvist, *The Life of St. Irene Abbess of Chrysobalanton* (Uppsala, 1986), 52–65, text and Eng. translation.

lead figurines of the two lovers. As in Theodore's story, the victim of the sex drive was anointed with oil, but it was not enough: the nuns burned the evil figurines on glowing charcoal, magically liberating the sufferer from the unholy passion.

Unholy magic causes death, confusion, sexual misbehavior; holy miracles are creative, healing, and reviving. But was it always so?

There is a little-known "vita and martyrdom" of two of St. Paul's disciples, Jason and Sosipatros, the central episode of which represents a contest between a pagan magician and the Christian martyrs.¹² Unlike the legend about Pope Silvester, in Jason and Sosipatros' vita it is the pagan sorcerer who works a humane and creative miracle, plowing and sowing a field that within an hour produced a crop; from this grain the sorcerer immediately baked some bread. By contrast, the Christian miracle was cruel and destructive: the saints burned a palace with its inhabitants and murdered the magician. Certainly, in this case the destruction and death could be justified since the victims were heathen; to them, probably, the words of Ezekiel (33:11), so frequently repeated by the Byzantines, did not refer: "I have no desire for the death of the wicked. I would rather that a wicked man should mend his ways and live." Be that as it may, the pagan magician was here a provider of food, and the disciples of St. Paul arsonists and killers.

Chronologically considered, saintly miracles can be divided into three categories: miracles before achieving sanctity, ones during the period of earthly sanctity, and posthumous miracles. The first category encompasses predictions of future holiness, including the appearance of supernatural phenomena and pronouncements by respectable persons of the previous generation; an unusual but pious comportment on the part of "the saintly baby" (e.g., refusing to take the mother's breast on fast days); and an unusual aptitude for learning or a complete incapacity to master elements of knowledge that is to be overcome by divine intervention. A specific form of the "pre-sanctity" miracle is the "automatic" or "mechanical" conversion: a pagan mime engaged in a satirical presentation of Christian ritual or an observant Jew copying Christian pious gestures experiences on the spot a miraculous transformation and becomes a martyr in the name of Christ or an energetic proselytizer.

The miracles performed during the period of "adult sanctity" differ with

¹² BHG 776; published in Doukakes, *Megas Synaxariastes*, April (Athens, 1892), 438-56.

regard to the will of the agent. In some cases the holy man or woman continues to be a "saintly baby" to the extent that he or she is unaware of his or her extraordinary power and extraordinary destiny: a licentious flutist, an ordinary prostitute, or a modest craftsman can work healings or accomplish wondrous deeds without construing the nature of their performances; on the other hand, some saints, especially the so-called thaumaturges, act in full consciousness of their force, proud of their gift and ready to serve those who are in need of assistance. The alleged contradiction between these two wings of the totality of holy persons (the "hidden" and the "declared" sanctity) is smoothed by the existence of an intermediary group: the saints who tried to escape their growing fame and who even pretended to be simpletons (the fools for Christ's sake) whose behavior trespassed the norms of civilized society.

The posthumous miracles are often healings performed at the tomb of the saint or in his or her church. But the most powerful saints (George, Nicholas, Demetrios, Andrew, Theodore) were much more than handy healers—they defended cities, rescued captives, found stranded cattle, punished injustice, in short, fulfilled important social functions beyond their proper purloins.

The miracle in Byzantium had no well-defined boundaries, first of all because the frontier between the natural and the supernatural was obscured in the minds of the population of the empire. Had an earthquake natural causes such as the movement of underground waters, or was it a product of a purposeless tossing of an enormous dragon deep under the surface of the earth, or was it a sign of divine wrath? The Byzantines suggested all these answers. Some scientific minds denied the miraculous nature of miracles and, particularly, explained wondrous medical cures by natural effects corresponding to the teaching of Galen.¹³ Second, the miracles would take place in a real, even in a down-to-earth setting, as when a saint would be overrun by a cart and remain unhurt, or they would acquire an epic character, of which the killing of a huge dragon is a modest example. The vita of Makarios of Rome begins with a sober description of the travel of three monks across Syria; it continues in an India populated with fairy-tale men and beasts, and terminates at the border of Para-

¹³ G. Dagron, "L'ombre d'un doute: L'hagiographie en question, VIe–XIe siècles," *DOP* 46 (1992), 59–68. On various theories of earthquake, see A. Kazhdan, "Social'nye i političeskie vzgljady Fotija," *Ežegodnik muzeja istorii religii i ateizma*, 2 (1958), 136; and A. Kazhdan and S. Franklin, *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Cambridge-Paris, 1984), 77.

dise.¹⁴ The landscape transits from the real world to the vernacular geographic fantasy to the sublime region of the religious universe—within the framework of a single text.

Finally, there was no palpable boundary between evil magic and the beneficial miracle, and the human gaze, even that of a clever observer, wandered in despair from one outlandish fact to another, wondering how to interpret what could be seen around it.

Niketas Choniates was one of the most educated and most critical of Byzantine historians.¹⁵ He dealt primarily with the common and natural occurrences of human life: wars, political intrigues, love affairs, envy, and hatred. He noticed that some events defied a natural explanation, but were foul and ridiculously nonsensical and could not be perceived as miracles. The first of the sorcerers Niketas describes is Skleros Seth, an astrologer who was eventually blinded by order of Manuel I. According to Choniates (p. 148), Seth managed to incite an insane lust in a virgin by sending her a "Persian apple" (a peach) so that she allowed him to deflower her. Another sorcerer was Michael Sikidites who knew how to darken the sight of spectators by a magic spell, that is, he used mass hypnosis, but in Choniates' words he conjured up demons to assault his victims.¹⁶ Once he made a boatman in a small vessel carrying a cargo of bowls and dishes jump up from his bench and smash the pottery to smithereens. Later on the poor man related that he had suddenly seen a serpent stretched over the bowls and eager to devour him. After the pottery had been smashed, the serpent disappeared. Another time, Sikidites, while bathing in a bathhouse, made his companions see some black men who jumped out of the hot water tap and chased them out of the room, kicking them on the buttocks (p. 148f).

Even though Choniates' stories are taken not from hagiographical sources but from Constantinopolitan rumors, they contain the paraphernalia typical of the ambiance of hagiographical demons: lust and rape, the bathhouse, the ser-

¹⁴ BHG 1004–5; ed. A. Vasiliev, *Anecdota graeco-byzantina* (Moscow, 1893), 135–65.

¹⁵ Niketas Choniates, *Historia*, ed. J. L. van Dieten (Berlin-New York, 1975); Eng. trans. H. Magoulas, *O City of Byzantium* (Detroit, 1984).

¹⁶ On Seth see W. Seibt, *Die Skleroi* (Vienna, 1976), 109f. It is possible that Siki-dites is the same person as Michael Glykas, historian and exegete: H. G. Beck, *Kirche und theologische Literatur im byzantinischen Reich* (Munich, 1959), 654.

pent. The empty talk of Choniates' contemporaries acquired the shape of tales about the standard demonic actions, in which the serpents and dragons were incarnations of evil forces, the aim of magic was to subdue the will of a pious woman and to lead her, "like a mare," to the desert, and the bathhouse—the backbone of ancient popular culture—was haunted by demons.

Choniates does not know whether he should believe the stories about evil magicians. He had probably met the man called Basilakios who led a strange life and was extremely popular due to his predictions. The people streamed toward him, and some women attended and interpreted his silence, vague utterances, and wild gestures. Choniates seems to be critical toward Basilakios' fortune-telling. "His predictions," said Choniates, "were never accurate; his wording was erroneous, contradictory, and enigmatic." His laughable behavior (he scrutinized the breasts of women and examined their ankles) could attract only rustics and boors. But did Choniates really consider Basilakios to be always erroneous? He does not confess it, but we shall see that his own narration contradicts his general statement.

Emperor Isaac II invited Basilakios to tell him the future. When the man appeared before the *basileus*, he showed no respect for the palace and its inhabitants. He ran around the room making frenzied gestures and suddenly struck the emperor's image set up on the wall, gouged the eyes on the portrait, and after that snatched the emperor's headgear (p. 448f). This action seems enigmatic and silly, but if we remember that soon after meeting Basilakios Isaac II was blinded and lost his crown (Choniates wrote about the event and described it in his *Chronike diegesis*), the behavior of the fortune-teller ceases to be nonsensical—it was a prediction of the emperor's destiny.

Ambivalence was a typical feature of the Byzantine (probably, wider—of the medieval) world view. The attitude of the Byzantines toward the miracle was ambivalent in a double sense: on the one hand, there was no foolproof method to use to distinguish between a holy and an unholy miracle; on the other hand, even the intellectuals, who looked on magic and fortune-telling with disgust, could not liberate themselves from an obscure feeling that these despised magicians were able to transmogrify reality and to read the future.