

This is an extract from:

*Holy Women of Byzantium:  
Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation*

*edited by Alice-Mary Talbot*

No. 1 in the series Byzantine Saints' Lives in Translation

Published by

*Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection  
Washington, D.C.*

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Trustees for Harvard University

Washington, D.C.

Printed in the United States of America

[www.doaks.org/etexts.html](http://www.doaks.org/etexts.html)

## 2. LIFE OF ST. MATRONA OF PERGE

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### *Introduction*

The *vita* of Matrona evokes many themes found in the Lives of women saints: like Mary/Marinos, she lived for a while as a transvestite nun; like Mary of Bizye and Thomais of Lesbos, she had an abusive husband, and while still a laywoman led a pious and ascetic existence, marked by acts of charity; like Elisabeth the Wonderworker and Athanasia of Aegina, she was the abbess of a convent. At the same time, her *vita* presents some distinctive features, especially her extensive travels, the prominent role played by women,<sup>1</sup> and the fact that she and the nuns of her convent openly wore a male monastic habit.

Although Matrona spent many years as the abbess of a nunnery in Constantinople, she is most renowned for the first three years of her monastic career, which she spent in disguise in the male monastery of Bassianos;<sup>2</sup> this is the aspect of her life normally featured in the sources.

At the same time, she is known to have been a historical figure who in her old age opposed the Monophysite policy of the emperor Anastasios I (491–518). She is documented, for example, in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Theodore Lector (ca. 525), which is preserved only in summary form. With a chronological reference point of A.D. 460 (when Daniel the Stylite mounted his column), the text states that many persons excelled at that time in monasticism, “among them the famous Matrona, who had abandoned her home, her wealth and her husband, and pretending to be a eunuch, entered a men’s monastery. . . . The wonderful Bassianos, too, distinguished himself at that time.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A point emphasized by Topping, “Matrona.”

<sup>2</sup> St. Bassianos and the monastery which took his name are usually spelled with a double “s” (from the Latin Bassianus); see, e.g., Janin, *Eglises CP*, 60 f. In the *Synaxarion of Constantinople* and in the Greek text of the *vita*, however, the name is rendered Βασσιανος. To avoid confusion, the name will be spelled throughout as Bassianos.

<sup>3</sup> *Theodoros Anagnostes. Kirchengeschichte*, ed. G. C. Hansen (Berlin, 1971), 109.3–6.

A story told by the chronicler Theophanes (d. 818), which also appears to stem from Theodore Lector,<sup>4</sup> recounts that the emperor Anastasios, acting through his patriarch Makedonios II (496–511), applied pressure on a number of prominent monasteries of Constantinople to force them into line with his anti-Chalcedonian religious policy. Among the monasteries in question were those of Matrona and Bassianos. A certain deacon Chrysaorios was deputized to enforce compliance, but Matrona, a staunch supporter of the Council of Chalcedon of 451, stood firm in refusing communion with the official church. Makedonios wisely decided to leave the recalcitrant monasteries in peace and not to start a persecution. This incident is placed by Theophanes, whose dates are not always reliable, in the year from Creation 5991, corresponding to A.D. 498/499.

No *Life* of Bassianos has survived, but a notice in the *Synaxarion of Constantinople*<sup>5</sup> states *inter alia* that he “flourished” in the reign of Marcian (450–457) and set up a monastery at Constantinople, which Matrona entered in disguise.

Yet another source is a mutilated hymn (*kontakion*) attributed to Romanos the Melode (d. after 555), which relates that Matrona came of a distinguished family, was forced into marriage by her parents, did her best to avoid intercourse with her husband, but nevertheless gave birth to a daughter. At this point the text breaks off.<sup>6</sup>

The *Life* of Matrona presented here (the so-called *vita prima*) is preserved in an eleventh-century manuscript, Par. gr. 1519. As the editor of the *vita*, H. Delehayé, has suggested, its anonymous male author may have been a monk at Bassianos’ monastery who made use of the notes taken by the nun Eulogia.<sup>7</sup> The *vita* is written in a conventional and straightforward hagiographic style, but is distinguished by its length, unusual for a female saint.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Theoph. 1:141–42 = Theodore Lector, ed. Hansen, 129.18–25.

<sup>5</sup> *SynaxCP* 127–28.

<sup>6</sup> *Sancti Romani Melodi cantica dubia*, ed. P. Maas and C. A. Trypanis (Berlin, 1970), no. 89.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *AASS*, Nov. 3:789A. The hypothesis of E. C. Topping (“Matrona,” 223–24) that the author must have been a woman, most probably a nun at Matrona’s monastery, is invalidated by the hagiographer’s use of masculine participles to refer to himself (791A, 792D, 812A).

<sup>8</sup> In this volume, only the *vita* of Theodora of Thessalonike is longer.

Delehaye declared the text to be of dubious value, written not earlier than the middle of the sixth century.<sup>9</sup> He was unfavorably impressed by the romantic story of Matrona's wanderings in the Near East, skeptical of the alleged prevalence of idolatry at Beirut, and inclined to question the prominent role assigned to the deacon Markellos of Emesa, who, by a strange coincidence, bore the same name as the author of a well-known opusculum concerning the discovery of the head of St. John the Baptist at Emesa,<sup>10</sup> an incident that does figure in our *Life*. Delehaye might have been even more skeptical had he noticed the anachronistic reference to the church of St. Mary the New at Jerusalem, dedicated in 543.<sup>11</sup> His intuition that the *Life* as we have it could not have been composed before the middle of the sixth century is thereby confirmed. Certain other elements, however, strongly suggest that the author was not guided only by oral tradition and his own imagination, but that he had, as he himself claims, a written source (whether it was or was not in the form of notes taken down by the nun Eulogia). Particularly significant is his extraordinary reticence about Matrona's courageous stance in the face of the emperor Anastasios. The coded reference to the "tempest" and "upheaval" that overtook the Church at the time<sup>12</sup> would be understandable on the part of an author writing while Anastasios was still alive. But why omit one of Matrona's most famous achievements, especially one in the cause of orthodoxy, if the text was first written in the second half of the sixth century or later? References to certain named persons, such as the mother of the ex-prefect Elias and the mother of the *scholastikoi*, who accompanied Matrona from Beirut to Constantinople, the soon to be forgotten empress Euphemia, and Antiochiane, wife of Sphorakios, also suggest a source close in time to the events narrated.

It is a matter of conjecture how much of the information given in the *Life* is genuine and how much was added by the later redactor. Statements to the effect that the vegetable garden at Bassianos' monastery and the buildings put up by Matrona "still exist today" point to the later date, although it should be remembered that monastic foundations at Constantinople in the fifth and

<sup>9</sup> *AASS*, Nov. 3:786 ff.

<sup>10</sup> The text is to be found only in the 17th-century edition of C. DuCange, *Traité historique du chef de S. Jean Baptiste* (Paris, 1655), 215 ff.

<sup>11</sup> See below, note 59.

<sup>12</sup> See below, note 115.

sixth centuries were often of short duration. The incident relating to the discovery of the head of St. John the Baptist, introduced for the sole purpose of associating a miracle with Matrona, may also be regarded as suspect and it certainly strains the chronology of the early part of the *Life*. Indeed, the Baptist's head was discovered in February of 452 or 453.<sup>13</sup> By that time, we are told, Matrona had already risen to the position of superior of the monastery of Hilara in Emesa (i.e., had been there more than a few months), prior to which she had spent three years at Bassianos' monastery at Constantinople. Yet, from what little is known, the latter monastery was established only in the 450s. If, therefore, the discovery of the Baptist's head is eliminated, only two chronological anchors remain: Matrona's return to Constantinople seems to have taken place between 472 and 474<sup>14</sup> and her contest with the emperor Anastasios in ca. 500. Assuming that she entered Bassianos' monastery not before 455, she may have been born ca. 430 and died by 510–515.

Matrona's *Life* cannot be regarded, therefore, as an entirely sincere document, and it certainly contains a good part of padding. At the same time it offers some unique glimpses into conditions in the Byzantine capital in the fifth and sixth centuries.

Little is known of the cult of Matrona. She was commemorated in her own convent on 9 November at least until the twelfth century according to a twelfth-century manuscript of the *Synaxarion of Constantinople*.<sup>15</sup> A notice on her is included in the tenth-century *Menologion of Basil II*, complete with a miniature depicting her in a nun's habit.<sup>16</sup> Her cult seems to have died out by the Palaiologan period, as there is no mention of her in the accounts of Russian pilgrims.

<sup>13</sup> The indications of the sources (i.e., the opusculum of Markellos cited above in note 10 [452 and 453], and Marcellinus Comes and the *Chronicon Paschale* [*sub anno* 453]), though unusually detailed, are discordant. The more likely date appears to be 452.

<sup>14</sup> See below, notes 85 and 88.

<sup>15</sup> *SynaxCP* 203.53–54; 8 November is also listed by the *Synaxarion* as an alternate feastday.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Il Menologio di Basilio II* (*Cod. Vaticano Graeco 1613*) (Turin, 1907), fol. 169; see also *LCI* 7:587.

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[p. 790]

THE LIFE AND CONDUCT OF THE BLESSED  
AND HOLY MATRONA

1. The books entitled *Paradise*,<sup>17</sup> which are indeed paradise, have passed on to us the lives of men and women who have practiced monasticism, both in communities and in solitude, including those whose light shone forth in Egypt. It is fitting, however, to add to these the *Life*, full of benefit for our souls, of the blessed and holy Matrona, a woman who, as we shall presently relate, displayed the traits of holy men in the midst of monastic men and mastered the feats of accomplished solitaries. That she was no ordinary woman or in any wise deficient, but rather, greater than those women who had already distinguished themselves in asceticism, is evident from the holy flock about her, quite large in number and bedecked with the cultivation of virtue, <a flock> which she gathered together and brought as an offering unto God. Even if one were to leave the rest of her story untold, this alone would suffice to her praise: the constitution of such a flock; which, we have no doubt, she will increase and protect and shepherd. For though she has left this life, she has not departed from those here: she stands by and abides with every soul which practices monasticism and strives after her way of life and teaching, especially now that she has ceased from her labors of asceticism; existing as a mere soul, free of all toil, she is released from the warfare over her own thoughts and is able by divine grace to cleanse our thoughts. With boldness she appears in the company of those who have lived lives such as hers, and she comes even to us, with the longing and understanding and foresight of a loving mother. All this notwithstanding, a detailed account of her achievements must be undertaken, insofar as this is possible; for one may with justice marvel at her on account of each and every one of the facts related and may also derive no ordinary benefit from these same. Now, I wish to begin at an earlier point in the story of her life, but attend ye with diligence and share in the contest. For wheresoever speech is wise and pious, it behooves the listener to give heed to the

<sup>17</sup> This was the title of the *Lausiaca History* by Palladius, the most famous collection of stories about the earliest Egyptian monks, and of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. The *Meadow (Leimonarion)* of John Moschos was also known as the *New Paradise* (cf. Photios, *Bibliotheca*, cods. 198, 199). Moschos himself (PG 87:3104c) mentions yet another similar collection entitled *Paradise*.

speaker, in order that the latter may follow the example of the careful husbandman and the former that of the good ground receiving the seeds;<sup>18</sup> otherwise, the teacher will have cast his words aimlessly and in vain, and the listener retire empty-handed, having learnt naught from what has been said. *But I am persuaded better things of you, though I speak thus,*<sup>19</sup> after the manner of the blessed Paul, [p. 791] and I shall relate her story from the beginning, following the practice of narrators.

2. There is a certain large and broad district subject to the Romans that lies along the borders of Cilicia and Isauria and is known as Pamphylia, most probably so called because of its populousness and the fact that its inhabitants come from all over the earth.<sup>20</sup> There are forty cities in this district, one of which is called Perge<sup>21</sup>: it is here that this glorious and blessed Matrona had her origins. Now, once she had received the customary upbringing and a liberal education from her parents, and had come to the age of marriage, she was united with a man by the name of Dometianos,<sup>22</sup> and became the mother of a daughter by the name of Theodote;<sup>23</sup> and indeed, as we shall show presently, abandoning everything, she was to give her to God. How, after her marriage, she was humble and moderate, taking no care whatsoever for the adornments and cosmetics that worldly women are accustomed to use, cultivating instead manners of piety and prudence; and how she neglected all indulgence of the body, neither bathing nor allowing intercourse with her husband, being mindful of the blessed Paul's saying *that those that have wives should be as though they had none,*<sup>24</sup> I shall refrain from relating at length, for the sake of brevity.<sup>25</sup> However this may be, she left her homeland by the wish of the God of all and

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Lk. 8:15.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Heb. 6:9.

<sup>20</sup> Pamphylia, a province of southern Asia Minor, means literally "land of all races" or "of mingled races."

<sup>21</sup> The site of Perge, a short distance northeast of Attaleia (modern Antalya), has been excavated. For a general account, see G. E. Bean, *Turkey's Southern Shore* (London, 1968), 45–58.

<sup>22</sup> Otherwise unknown, Dometianos appears to have been a man of some standing; cf. below, note 61. He may have gone to Constantinople on official business.

<sup>23</sup> Her name means "given to God."

<sup>24</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 7:29.

<sup>25</sup> The author evidently knew nothing about Matrona's early life and did not take the trouble to fill it out with usual commonplaces.

with the assent of her husband, who accompanied her, though he was not privy to her well-made plans, and came to the Queen of Cities, Constantinople. Once arrived in the imperial city, she hastened to the sanctuaries of the saints; and therein she remained, not only by day but also by night, in prayer and vigils, humbling her body with fasting, that it might be obedient to the pious designs of her soul. She did not consider the body to be the most evil of foes, after the manner of the hateful and loathsome Manichaeans,<sup>26</sup> but constrained its unreasonable urges with great wisdom, correcting it as is necessary, in obedience to the blessed Paul who says, *Make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof.*<sup>27</sup> Now, she was not satisfied with this alone, nor did she think it a great thing to humble the body unless she also brought consolation to those in need. In secret, then, from her husband, she cared for the poor to the extent of her ability—all the more remarkably as her body was young and vigorous, when the waves of passion are wont to be strongest. For she was then twenty-five years old,<sup>28</sup> when she accomplished ascetic feats before becoming an ascetic, training herself in advance and preparing for the future. In this good and God-pleasing exercise she had as a teacher the blessed Eugenia,<sup>29</sup> who not only in name but also in deed showed nobility of soul, chastity of body, and manliness of heart. For she was one of those women who devoted themselves to all-night psalmody,<sup>30</sup> displaying the traits of martyrs for the martyrs' sake.

3. Now while the blessed Matrona was thus engaged, great sorrow weighed down upon her husband Dometianos, who was carried away by absurd notions and thought that the blessed one was leading the life of a courtesan because of her frequent attendance at the all-night vigils. Wherefore a dispute arose between them, Dometianos forbidding her to go to the services

<sup>26</sup> Manichaeans were adherents of a dualist system of religious belief, allegedly founded by the Persian Mani, which emphasized the conflict between good and evil.

<sup>27</sup> Rom. 13:14.

<sup>28</sup> See introduction, p. 16, for discussion of the chronology of her life.

<sup>29</sup> As suggested by E. C. Topping ("Matrona," 215 n. 28), it is probably not coincidental that Eugenia, Matrona's first spiritual teacher who led her to the monastery of Bassianos, bears the same name as an earlier Alexandrian nun who lived in disguise in a male monastery; cf. *BHG* 607w–608b.

<sup>30</sup> Probably as a member of a voluntary confraternity (cf. *ODB*, s.v.) centered on a shrine, like the one recorded in the 7th century at the church of St. Artemios in Constantinople.

and Matrona constraining him to allow her to do so. After many days and with many words she won him over, and she went off to the church of the Holy Apostles.<sup>31</sup> There she concentrated her thoughts with all zeal and invoked them with tears: "Have compassion with me," said she, "O holy apostles and lights of the universe! Beseech the Lord Christ on my behalf, that I may be delivered from this vain life and be deemed worthy truly to serve Him, for I fear the <Last> Judgment and I am afraid of the punishments <hereafter>. Scorn not, O holy apostles, my wretched petitions, nor reject me as unworthy, but bring me unto yourselves and all the world unto God Who loves mankind. Soften the heart of my husband, for it is he who hinders and thwarts me. Give me aid, I pray, and grant me succor, I beg." After the blessed one had prayed for such and similar things, when evening came on, the keepers of the church called out to all, as is the custom, that they should leave; and the blessed one, finding the abode of a certain Susannah,<sup>32</sup> an acquaintance of hers, in the porticoes adjoining the church, remained with her on account of her virtuous way of life. This Susannah had been enrolled from an early age in the order of widows<sup>33</sup> there, embracing chastity and a life devoted to God. <Matrona>, then, remained with her that evening, and on the morrow she went off to her teacher Eugenia and spoke again yet more fervently of her intentions, this [p. 792] being the result of her great longing for the Lord and rejection of the delights of this world. Many opinions were put forth: neither did the student give way nor the teacher relent, and special consideration was given to the matter of the child Theodote. Then the blessed Matrona uttered something in the vein of Abraham and quite beyond nature itself: "Let there be nothing in common between me and my affections," said she. "Let the honest Susannah take my child, and let the monastic life sustain me." The matter did not remain one of words, but became fact: the blessed Susannah accepted the child Theodote and took the place of her mother.

<sup>31</sup> The famous church built by Constantius II (337–361) on the fourth hill of Constantinople. Next to it were the imperial mausolea.

<sup>32</sup> Like Eugenia, Susannah bears the same name as an earlier woman (Susannah of Eleutheropolis) who lived as a monk; cf. Topping, "Matrona," 214 n. 25 and 216 n. 44.

<sup>33</sup> The order of widows, an ancient institution of the Church, was a consecrated office of women devoted to good works; see Gryson, *Ministry of Women*, 35–41. The statement that Susannah had been enrolled in the order from an early age is, however, something of a contradiction, as members of the order normally had to be at least fifty years old.

4. There remained, then, the consideration of how and where she was to become a nun and, once she had become one, how she would escape the notice of her husband. Said the blessed Matrona, "Heaven forbid that Dometianos should cause trouble for the convent which receives me and thus should keep me from the goal of my salvation!" Now while they were occupied in these counsels, merciful God showed them in a nocturnal vision what was to be done. In a dream the blessed Matrona thought herself to be fleeing her husband and rescued by certain monks. From this she understood that she was to enter a male monastery and thus escape the notice of her husband. Cutting her hair and dressing herself as a eunuch she went off to the church of the Holy Apostles with the aforementioned <Eugenia>. After extended prayer she took up the holy Gospel, and by God's providence this lesson came up: *The Lord said to His disciples, "Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."*<sup>34</sup> O declaration of blessed and divine words! O clear and manifest revelation! O faith of the souls of them who have discovered God's will! Without hesitation, then, after these revelations, putting all their hope in God and making Him counselor and assistant of their actions, they went off, the blessed Eugenia leading the way and the blessed Matrona following her; and God's grace guided them to the monastery of the blessed Bassianos.<sup>35</sup> There pious hunger made strong those who struggled <in the monastic life>; there frailness of body carried off the prizes of victory over the ranks of demons, and gold was trodden underfoot and reckoned as naught; there poverty was esteemed together with virtue. To such an honorable flock did the blessed Eugenia bring the holy Matrona and enrolled her among the pious monks: she was now completely transformed into a man and bore a man's name, Babyilas. For like that valiant and holy martyr of Christ,<sup>36</sup> the holy instructor of those meek and blessed youths, or like Eleazar, the

<sup>34</sup> Mk. 8:34.

<sup>35</sup> This monastery was situated outside the Constantinian walls, not far from the cistern of Aspar (modern Sultan Selim); cf. Janin, *EglisesCP*, 60–61. The monastery must have been quite new at the time of Matrona's arrival if it is true, as related in the *Synaxarion of Constantinople* (*SynaxCP* 127.5–13), that Bassianos came to Constantinople under Marcian (450–457) and set up his establishment with the assistance of John, a man of consular rank (= John Vincomalus, consul in 453). Cf. above, p. 14.

<sup>36</sup> St. Babyilas of Nikomedeia, allegedly martyred under Diocletian (284–305), is represented as a schoolmaster. His *Passion* is edited by F. Halkin, *Ineditis byzantins d'Ochrida, Candie et Moscou* (Brussels, 1963), 329–39.

teacher and companion of the seven youths in the Old Testament,<sup>37</sup> so also did Matrona accomplish feats of endurance and asceticism in a frail body; she was honest toward God and solicitous toward those who sought salvation. After this digression, then, let me bring the narrative back to the monastery of the holy Bassianos, which, as has been said, the blessed Matrona had entered as a man. The multitude of the brethren<sup>38</sup> there marveled at her struggles, taking into account, as was right, the fact that a eunuch, one frail by nature, endeavored not only to vie with them in ascetic labors, but strove to do yet more, fasting patiently and taking little nourishment, tempering his anger and resisting desires, abiding in prayer, abounding in love, most eager in obedience, persevering in labors of the earth and, greater than all these things, not giving in to the despair that besets those who practice continence. Nor did they envy her, for the striving for virtue is not subject to envy, but rather, they strove to imitate and gave heed to her way of life as to a most important lesson. This great zeal of the blessed one for the Lord very nearly revealed her secret to those who shared in the contest with her, but she quickly diffused suspicion with the wisdom of her soul, and contrived to escape everyone's notice. What happened was this.

5. There is even today a garden<sup>39</sup> belonging to the disciples of the blessed and holy Bassianos. Now, while the blessed Matrona was working the ground there, as is the custom for monks, and comporting herself most eagerly with her fellow worker (this was the remarkable Barnabas, the later superior of the same monastery, who had at one time led a life on the stage, but had now [p. 793] chosen a way of life like hers, striving for piety), the latter was affected by a certain human weakness, inasmuch as he had only recently turned from his vain and frivolous life. Said he to her in a jocular manner, "How is it, brother, that the lobes of both your ears are pierced?"<sup>40</sup> But the blessed Ma-

<sup>37</sup> Cf. 2 Macc. 6:18–41, which tells the story of Eleazar, a teacher of the law, who was martyred under King Antiochos for his refusal to eat sacrificial meat, as were the seven brothers who followed his example. The memory of the Maccabean martyrs was celebrated on 1 August; cf. *BHG* 1006–10κ.

<sup>38</sup> According to the *Synaxarion*, the number of monks at the monastery grew to three hundred.

<sup>39</sup> See introduction, p. 15. The author may well have been a monk at Bassianos' monastery.

<sup>40</sup> This suggests that it would not have been abnormal for a man to wear a single earring.

trona replied curtly, "You, brother, have indulged yourself in a frivolous manner, unbefitting our profession. You should be paying attention to the ground, not to me. But since you are minded to learn of this, hear the reason. The woman to whom I formerly belonged was lovingly disposed toward me, maintaining me with all generosity and luxury, and she shrank not from putting gold about my ears, so that many of those who saw me said that I was a girl." Thus did the holy Matrona divert the suspicion of the blessed and holy Barnabas, though she was thereby brought to a state of uncommon anxiety and commotion, distracting her mind with many divers considerations and remembering the words of her teacher Eugenia: "It is a difficult thing," said she, "and indeed impossible for a woman to enter a male monastery or, once entered, to escape notice." But she took recourse yet more fervently in her entreaties toward God, saying, "I have hearkened unto Thy voice, O Master, and received Thy command in the matter of monasticism. And since I have not withstood Thee, but rather have followed eagerly Thy command to follow, do Thou settle the affairs of my life through Thy grace. Let me not be deprived of the things for which I hope, O Lover of mankind, nor let me abandon unfinished the course that I have begun, lest I suffer reproaches of disgrace from the other contenders. Provide Thou always for Thy suppliant: show me what is expedient for me and assist me in attempting it. For without Thine inclination it is impossible for men to accomplish any good thing, and especially for women, who are easily disposed through weakness to evil's diversion." Such were probably the words with which the noble Matrona besought God.

6. Now, it was not only a matter of speaking of the outcome of better things, but also seeing it. For so it is with one pious in understanding that he sees future things not yet present. On this account I am again moved to marvel at her as at one of the holy women of ancient times. Leaving aside the great multitude of them, to avoid surfeit of speech, I shall mention only that Susannah of old,<sup>41</sup> who was distinguished and glorified for her prudence; the same might also be said about this <holy Matrona>, for she put all her hope in God and left all her affairs to His inclination: she clove to her ascetic practice and

<sup>41</sup> The heroine of the Book of Susannah, a short apocryphal book of the Old Testament, which relates the story of the virtuous Susannah, who was falsely accused of adultery by two lustful elders.

took care for spiritual perfection. Now, the blessed and holy Bassianos, though endowed with the grace of prescience, was at first unaware of this cleverly devised, marvelous deed; but he soon found it out. For the Lord God shall make no word, according to Scripture, which He shall not reveal unto His servants the prophets.<sup>42</sup> The blessed Bassianos, then, was also a prophet, by reason of his prescience, whereby he found out <the secret> on this wise. In a dream he thought he saw a man, decorously attired and pleasant of face, in short, one bearing the marks of a certain divinity of nature, who said to him, “The eunuch you have in your monastery is not a eunuch, but a woman”; and after repeating this three times, he withdrew. Thereupon the blessed and holy Bassianos considered how the matter stood. He did not wish that the blessed <Matrona> should become the object of vulgar talk, but thought to summon her and rebuke her privily, in the presence of her supervisor alone. Now, there was a certain pious man, Akakios, also an archimandrite<sup>43</sup> of the monastery of the godly minded Abramios at the third milestone,<sup>44</sup> who also saw <in a dream> on this same night the same man in the same attire; and he said to him, “Tell your brother Bassianos that the eunuch he has is no eunuch, but a woman.” In the morning, then, the blessed Bassianos summoned the deacon John, who held second place after him and was Babylas’ supervisor; and he related his dream to him. While he was thus occupied, the messenger of the most divinely favored Akakios presented himself with a message that was to be delivered in secret. When asked by the doorkeeper, as is customary, the purpose of his visit, he declined to tell, saying that he had been commanded to give the message to the most holy Bassianos alone. Upon hearing this, the holy one ordered that he should come up; and learning from him the message, he dismissed him, saying, “Well done, brother. May the Lord grant you reward for your trouble. The Lord’s will be done!” Then the blessed Bas-

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Tob. 12:11.

<sup>43</sup> Archimandrite is a term with various meanings (cf. *ODB* 1:156); in this case it is the superior of a monastery.

<sup>44</sup> The monastery of Abramios was probably founded in the 5th century and is attested in 518. Our text provides the only indication that it was situated at the Triton, i.e., the third milestone, which would have been inside the Theodosian walls if measured from the Milion; for more details, see C. Mango, *Le développement urbain de Constantinople (IVe-VIIe siècles)* (Paris, 1985), 33 n. 58. The discussion by Janin (*EglisesCP*, 4–6) is rather confused on this point.

sianos went with John into the sacristy,<sup>45</sup> and after extended prayer he took up the holy Gospel and this lesson came up: *The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid [p. 794] in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.*<sup>46</sup> Accepting this as another vision, he commanded that the blessed one should be summoned: “Call Master Babyllas,” he said.

7. Now when she had been summoned, he regarded her with a stern countenance and said, “Tell me, sister, what prompted you to dare such a thing against us, secretly bringing temptation all the while?” <The blessed one>, upon hearing the amazement in his speech and seeing the sternness of his countenance, added fear to fear and trepidation to trepidation. For she was quite faint of heart. Directly she had heard those who summoned her saying, “The lord abbot is calling for you,” she knew within herself how the matter stood and she moaned, saying, “Woe is me, wretch that I am! For I am cast out as one unworthy. Woe is me, miserable one that I am! For it has been discovered what I am, and I am no longer counted a brother among the brethren; no longer am I thought to be a eunuch, nor to be addressed as Babyllas, but am soon once again to be a woman and to be called Matrona.” Then, accepting the reproach, she covered her head with her cloak and, prostrating herself on the ground at his feet, she answered softly and with great fear: “Not to bring temptation upon your flock, Master, did I come—Heaven forbid!—but to flee the world and the things in it.” Hearing this, <the blessed Bassianos> said to her, “So be it. You have all the while escaped notice as a woman, and have done no harm to us who were unaware of this. But how have you approached the divine mysteries with your head uncovered? And how have you offered the kiss of peace<sup>47</sup> to the brethren?” Said she, “During the divine mysteries I have pulled my cloak halfway over my head, feigning a headache. And as for the symbol of peace and seal of love, I have not shunned it, for I considered that I offered myself not unto human mouths, but unto God’s angels and men free of passion.”

8. The holy and blessed Bassianos was amazed by this wondrous answer and said to her, “Why, then, if you had such a purpose with regard to God,

<sup>45</sup> The *diakonikon*, normally the sacristy south of the apse; cf. *ODB* 3:1594, s.v. Pastophoria.

<sup>46</sup> Lk. 13:21.

<sup>47</sup> In the Byzantine period it was customary to give the kiss of peace on the lips; cf. Taft, *Great Entrance*, 389–92. See also Chap. 35 of the *Life* of Mary of Egypt, below.

did you not enter a women's monastery?" Recovering somewhat from her fear and taking courage to pronounce more words in her defense, <the blessed one,> lying upon the floor at his feet, revealed her affairs as before God. Said she, "If it please your Holiness, I had become the wife of a man and the mother of a child. But, wishing to serve God rather than marriage and sin, I would go to the all-night vigils of the holy martyrs. However, my husband would prevent me, now insulting me, now quarreling and striking me; at times he even threatened me. Seeing this and suffering from him on every occasion, I lost heart, I moaned, I cried and besought God night and day that He might soften his heart<sup>48</sup> and satisfy my desire.<sup>49</sup> While I did this I considered entering a women's monastery, but I knew that, if I did so, I should not escape the notice of my husband; and unless I did this [i.e., escaped notice by disguising myself as a monk], I should bring affliction upon myself and the monastery. For my husband would have neglected nothing that would have brought harm and distress upon me, as I have said, and the monastery. In this state of faint-heartedness, longing for salvation and caught up in many calculations, as I slumbered one day, I thought I saw myself fleeing my husband, as he pursued and threatened me. When I was about to be overtaken by him and suffer irreparable <injuries>, I was rescued by pious monks. Upon waking I knew within myself that I had to take refuge in a male monastery and thus hide from my husband. Going, then, to the blessed Eugenia, I related these things to her. There was with this Eugenia a certain Susannah, and I commended my child to their keeping, inasmuch as they were pious and God-loving women with whom I had become acquainted at the all-night vigils. Upon hearing this, <the blessed Eugenia> thanked God, Who desires the salvation of all. Thereupon, we devised the plan that my child Theodote should be given over to the lady Susannah, and that I, dressed as and transformed into a man, should enter a men's monastery; and we fulfilled in deed that which we had planned. For as soon as the child Theodote had been given over to the aforementioned Susannah, I put off my female attire forthwith and cut my hair; and, in a word, becoming a man both in garb and purpose, with Eugenia's assistance and God's guidance I came to this holy monastery of yours, a eunuch in appearance and Babylas by name; and once received I became one of your flock, even if I have now been found unsuitable and unworthy of you."

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Job 23:16.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Ps. 126 (127):5.

9. When the most holy Bassianos had heard the details of this cleverly devised and extraordinary action, he marveled at <the blessed Matrona's> intelligence and accepted <the genuineness of> her purpose; and consoling her with spiritual words, he bade her stand up, and then he asked her which life she would henceforth choose, [p. 795] the monastic or the secular. She replied that she would choose the monastic life, for, she said, she had loved this life from the beginning, and on its account she had taken leave of her husband, her child, abundant wealth,<sup>50</sup> indeed the entire world and everything in it; and she averred that to her very death she would not forsake it. Marking the fullness and sincerity of her purpose, the blessed <Bassianos> said to her, "Take courage, my child and sister. The Lord Jesus Christ, Who has chosen you out unto salvation and enlightened your soul, that you should so love Him, He Himself shall guard you and fulfil your every desire." With these and many other words did he console and counsel her, renewing, as one might say, and restoring her purpose; then he bade her rest in one of the monastery's cells and, in compliance with the usage of her sex, to tie round her head <as a headcovering> a piece of cloth that happened to be at hand. After all this had occurred, in the late evening, he commanded her to leave the monastery, instructing her thus: "Depart, sister, and remain with one of your acquaintances, in expectation of God's assistance and our counsel, for we shall not neglect you."

10. Thus, the blessed Matrona departed from the monastery, conducted by the deacon Markellos, and was once again received in the abode of Sussannah. But before the blessed one departed from the monastery, God, *Who filleth the will of them that fear Him*<sup>51</sup> and assists in every way to the good of them that love Him, had taken her child Theodote unto Himself, lest she should add despair to despair and might, out of concern for the child, somehow slacken in her purpose. Wherefore, finding that she had died, <the blessed one> felt joy rather than grief, for she was thus set free of concern for <the child>, and the latter, also set free, had departed hence before experiencing the evils of this life. As greatly as she grieved over her separation from the monastery, even so great was the consolation she found in her rejection of the child: for this, too, was God's doing, to assuage in one part the suffering she

<sup>50</sup> Not merely a commonplace (*topos*). By all accounts Matrona was a person of wealthy background who consorted with the rich and mighty on equal footing.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Ps. 144 (145):19.

felt in another. Thus did the blessed Matrona lie hidden in the abode of the worthy Susannah, or rather, thus through Susannah did God preserve her, even as a spiritual treasure, who would enrich and enlighten many souls. But though she lay hidden, talk of her spread everywhere, and report reached every ear proclaiming that a woman had lived undetected in a men's monastery, even if her disguise was at last discovered. Whereupon her husband Dometianos learned the facts concerning her; and after he had run round to other monasteries, he came running like a wild beast to the monastery of the blessed Bassianos, shrieking with violence and shouting loudly and beating at the doors with stones, saying, "Give me my wife. Give me my hope. Give me my consolation. For *Whom God hath joined together, put ye not asunder.*"<sup>52</sup> Uttering these and other such words and wrongly accusing Eugenia of having been her guide and imputing to her countless wrongs, he was told by Eugenia: "Who this woman is of whom you speak, I know not: it was a man seeking salvation, a eunuch by the name of Babylas, whom I brought to this monastery." And the disciples of the blessed Bassianos said to him, "We, brother, did not receive any woman: ours is a monastery of men, not women. We did receive a eunuch by the name of Babylas. And until a short time ago, he was satisfied, he said, with our way of life and remained with us; but then he devised a better plan, and thought to go to Jerusalem, to shut himself up in a cave. Such was his intention when we sent him off a few days ago. For the rest, whether he has remained in this city, or has gone to the Holy Places, as he said <he would>, God alone knows; we are blameless in this matter. Wherefore, if even you, who now stone and abuse us, wish to be saved, we shall receive you with joy and shall not censure you for your abuse. For we have been taught by the Lord to receive those who persecute us, for He received the persecutor Paul and made him a preacher of the Gospel. Wherefore, inasmuch as you are a man, albeit ever such a bad one, we shall receive you: for this is in name and in fact a monastery of men, even as we have said. If you do not know this, go hence and the entire city will assure you thereof." Hearing this Dometianos was all the more stirred with anger and fired with rage, and since he had nothing reasonable to reply or to do, inasmuch as he had been told that it was a eunuch that they had received and that he was no longer among them, he withdrew in dejection and vexation.

11. Now, it was no ordinary anxiety and concern that the blessed and

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Mt. 19:6.

holy Bassianos had for her, fearing as he did lest he should destroy the soul he had received from God. Forthwith he summoned his deacons and the foremost of the brethren and said to them, "What shall we do, brethren, about our sister who has departed from us? For even if she has proven to be a woman, nevertheless she was and is one of our members. Wherefore I am grieved beyond measure on her account and [p. 796] am distressed: in a word, my entrails are rent asunder when I think of her position, lest the ever wily devil should dull her resolve, or lest her husband should hear of where she is and entrap her, and such great effort and such longing should be extinguished and perish." Then the deacon Markellos said to him, "Despair not on this account, most honorable father, but commend her to God Who loves mankind and pray for her, and He will be able to preserve her. If your Holiness sees fit to send her to a women's monastery, there is a monastery in my city, Emesa,<sup>53</sup> that of the blessed Hilara,<sup>54</sup> which is very beautiful and has sheltered and still shelters holy souls; it is there that I arranged for my sister to be a nun. Send her then, father, for a time to this <monastery>, and be in some wise relieved from your great care for her." Hearing this the holy one was pleased by the good counsel and instructed him, saying, "Go, deacon, do as you know best, for the Lord's sake, and dispatch her by ship." Straightway the deacon found a ship departing to the East, and putting her on board sent her off. The blessed Matrona, then, inasmuch as she desired indeed to follow Christ, neither objected in any wise nor deliberated, but accepted her superior's order as God's command and went off eagerly, requesting nothing else from him save his worthy and holy prayers and a bit of bread as a blessing. For she knew, she knew with certainty and was convinced that, with these latter as shipmates and traveling companions, all would proceed according to her desire and to her profit; by God's grace, this came to pass. For she made the whole voyage with ease and calm, and consumed but very little of the blessed bread, a most remarkable fact and sure proof of her faith. Arrived, then, at the monastery of Hilara, the blessed Matrona was kindly received, and she said to the sisters, "Take, my ladies, from this blessed <bread> given me by my superior, for his blessing is great and worthy. For he is a holy man, who truly loves God and is loved by Him."

<sup>53</sup> The modern Hims in Syria.

<sup>54</sup> This establishment does not appear to be recorded elsewhere. St. Hilaria (called Hilara in the *vita*), martyred in the 3rd century, was also a woman monk; cf. A. J. Wensinck, *Legends of Eastern Saints. II. The Legend of Hilaria* (Leiden, 1913), 9–89.

She gave them some of her <bread>, and received some from them; and together they praised and glorified God. Now, having entered that monastery, the blessed Matrona so devoted herself to humility and asceticism and nobility of conduct, and so did she shine with virtues, that the sisters, in their admiration for her life and their love for her on account of her noble struggles and fitting manners, asserted that upon the decease of their mother superior they would submit themselves to her as guide and leader and spiritual mother.

12. But since it was necessary that such excellent virtue and conduct should also be proven through <miraculous> signs, neither did the Lord omit these. For at that time the precious head of the holy Forerunner and Baptist John was discovered.<sup>55</sup> The discovery was made in this wise. During the course of many days one of the local farmers saw fire rising up from the place where he was,—where the Baptist's holy head was to be found. Unable to understand this strange sign, <the farmer> went off to the bishop<sup>56</sup> and told him what he had seen. The bishop realized that the fire portended some mystery and, without any delay or hesitation, took all his clergy and went to the place. Pronouncing a prayer, he commanded that the ground be dug up. The digging done, a pot was found, which contained the holy head of the Forerunner. Thereupon rumor spread throughout the entire region, and people of all ages assembled, together with those from the monasteries, for a procession bearing <the head>, with psalmody and the appropriate honors, to the church. This blessed one, then, perfect servant of Christ that she was, came thither with the sisters from the monastery and was among those who had gathered in reverence to the holy head. As proof to the assembled throng and confirmation of the discovery, fragrant oil gushed forth from <the head>, and all were drawing it off for themselves as a blessing. <The blessed one> also came forward to draw off <the fragrant oil>; and having drawn it, she became a distributor thereof, involuntarily. For the throng would not cede her an exit: cut off in their midst she was forced to distribute to all of them as they all cried out to her: "Dispense to all, O servant of Christ!" As she was thus occupied, then, dispensing to all unstintingly, a man blind since his mother's womb rushed

<sup>55</sup> The circumstances of the discovery, as given here, do not quite tally with the detailed and allegedly eyewitness account by the archimandrite Markellos; cf. his text, along with an early Latin (6th century) translation by Dionysius Exiguus, in DuCange, *Jean Baptiste*, 215 ff. For the date, see introduction, p. 16.

<sup>56</sup> He is called Ouranios by the archimandrite Markellos.

past all the others, the bishop and the clerics (for all of these latter were distributing <the fragrant oil>), and approaching her, besought and prayed her anoint his eyes with the oil. Stretching out her hands, then, the blessed one did as asked. Straightway the eyes of the blind man were opened and he began to glorify and praise God, Who through the blessed Matrona had granted him the gift of beholding the image of man and of perceiving man's beauty, [p. 797] delivering him from the constant falling and stumbling that congenital darkness and lightless life had caused him. This miracle proved <the blessed one's> greatness at that time, and all trod one upon the other and stood on the tips of their toes in their attempt to get a glimpse of her. Nor was she any less marveled at afterwards by all. Everyone would say, "She is the one who lived for a time as a monk, escaping notice among men: therefore has she been magnified by receiving from Christ the grace of healing."

13. It was because of this fame that Dometianos, too, came to Emesa. Arrived there, he learned in which monastery the blessed one dwelled; but since he could not gain access to her, he sent a message to her through certain noblewomen (from whom he had information of her), and asked to be permitted to do obeisance to her, making a pretense of supplication and cloaking his plot in the guise of reverence. But when the blessed Matrona was told of his appearance and stature and his manner, she recognized that it was her husband and she said, "Go, my ladies, and await me for seven days, while I consider the matter, then I shall meet him with convenience in your presence." Persuaded by her they departed and relayed to him this answer, and Dometianos waited for seven days, anticipating the eighth as a great feast. But the blessed Matrona, escaping the notice of the sisters, set off for Jerusalem, taking nothing with her save the hair-shirt she wore, a staff in her hand, and a bit of the blessed bread given her by the most holy Bassianos. When the seven days had passed, the women came seeking her in accordance with their agreement, but they were told by the sisters that "We have not seen her since the day she met with you. Wherefore we are borne down by great grief and no common affliction on her behalf, deprived as we are of such a great good and pondering what sort of powerful demon could have shaken so valiant a soul and taken it from this house." Withdrawing, then, they reported to Dometianos what they had been told.

14. When he learned of this he was sore aggrieved, and he made countless inquiries after her. Hearing that she had betaken herself to the Holy Places (for her fame made her conspicuous everywhere), he hesitated not in the least

nor despaired of finding her, but came at once to Jerusalem and learned from certain pious women that she was there. For they told him that her stature was tall and fine, her garment of hair, her skin white, and her countenance bright and joyous; and thereby he understood that she was the blessed one, and he inquired after her abode. They told him that she had no abode, but slept either on Golgotha<sup>57</sup> or in the Anastasis<sup>58</sup> or in St. Mary's<sup>59</sup> or in whichever of the other churches where she stayed late <on a particular night>. Said he to them, "If you point her out to me, I shall reward you handsomely." Said the women to him, "Go you to the holy Anastasis, and we shall go to St. Mary's. We have described her attire to you. If you find her yourself, well and good; if we <find her>, we shall let you know." Having thus decided and divided the churches among them, the women went off to St. Mary's and Domitianos to the holy Anastasis; and <straightway> the blessed Matrona caught sight of him, though she turned neither to the right nor the left, but kept her gaze downward and continued undisturbed on her way. When she approached him, she bent over toward the ground, as if to pick up a stone, and thus escaped his notice. He passed by her, paying no attention, and went into the Anastasis in search of her; but she, escaping his notice by her clever device, fled him and went away from the Anastasis. Having escaped him, however, she encountered the women. For as she was making her way toward holy Zion,<sup>60</sup> they met her and said, "A certain illustrious man of the emperor's

<sup>57</sup> The hill where Christ was crucified, marked by a rocky outcrop about 40 m east of the Anastasis church; cf. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 177, and *ODB* 3:1870, s.v. Sepulchre, Holy.

<sup>58</sup> The Rotunda of the Anastasis (Resurrection) was a circular church that enclosed the tomb of Christ at Jerusalem and was part of the church of the Holy Sepulcher; cf. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 176–77.

<sup>59</sup> The text makes it clear that this church was in the direction of Mt. Zion, i.e., south when coming from the Anastasis, and so can only have been St. Mary the New (the Nea Ekklesia of the Theotokos), the largest church in Jerusalem, built by Justinian and consecrated on 20 November 543. The building had been started some thirty years earlier; cf. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 166 (s.v., New Saint Mary). The allusion to this church provides a terminus post quem for the date of composition of the *vita*; see introduction, p. 15.

<sup>60</sup> Also called Sion, a holy place in Jerusalem that included such sites as the house of Caiaphas and the Column of the Flagellation; cf. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 171–72, and *ODB* 3:1905.

suite<sup>61</sup> has come, he says, on your account, wishing to do obeisance to you and to receive your blessing. He goes about himself in search of you, and has also dispatched us for this purpose.” Said the blessed Matrona to them, “I have made a vow to go to Paneas,<sup>62</sup> and I am eager to find traveling companions<sup>63</sup> in order to fulfill it. Allow me three days, I pray, and I shall meet with him in your presence.” Having said this, the blessed one got rid of the women with her reasonable answer, and finding traveling companions she set off for Mt. Sinai. Then the women sought out Dometianos and relayed the blessed one’s answer. But he knew from experience, from her answer in the monastery, that her message was merely a ruse and a trick: that she had thereby eluded the women and sent him this message with the intention of going off elsewhere; and he spared no time in making inquiries and seeking traces of her, like a Lacedaemonian dog trained in the hunt.<sup>64</sup> Finding some other women who told him, “If you seek the woman of noble stature who wears garments of hair, she has set off for Mt. Sinai,” he hesitated not a moment nor [p. 798] balked at the length of the journey, but set off in pursuit of her. Now, when the blessed Matrona learned that he had come thither, women dispatched by him having so informed her, she was seized with great fear; and changing her attire she went to the region of Beirut. She found there a temple of idols and dwelled therein, choosing to be devoured by demons or beasts rather than fall into the hands of her husband. Said she, “If I serve God, demons cannot harm me. As for beasts, if I truly and piously pursue virtue, perhaps they will respect me; but if my husband gets hold of me, he will treat me more cruelly than demons and beasts.” Taking up her abode, then, in the idols’ temple, she per-

<sup>61</sup> The expression λαμπρός ἀνήρ τοῦ κομητάτου has a technical meaning. λαμπρός, or rather λαμπροτατος, was a title equivalent to the Latin *clarissimus*. *Comitatus* designated the emperor’s household and chief ministers with their respective staffs who always accompanied the emperor when the latter was on the move.

<sup>62</sup> Paneas (Caesarea Philippi) was north of Jerusalem, hence in the opposite direction from Mt. Sinai; cf. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 167. It was a center of pilgrimage, famous for a statue of Christ, allegedly set up by the woman with an issue of blood (cf. Mt. 9:20–22).

<sup>63</sup> One might note that Matrona thought it wiser to travel to Sinai with a group of companions; see also the end of Chap. 26.

<sup>64</sup> For a parallel to the expression “Lacedaemonian dog,” cf. *Historia Alexandri Magni* (Recensio A), ed. W. Kroll (Berlin, 1926), 74.1.

formed without ceasing the order of psalmody that had been handed down to her.<sup>65</sup>

15. Now, it happened once, as she performed the nightly psalmody, that demons sang most fervently in response, for she heard the voices of many men singing. Taking fright and fortifying herself with the sign of the cross, she completed the psalmody, considering within herself and saying, "This place is deserted and the house unhallowed; there is no village in this place, nor have any passersby approached; whence, then, come these voices?" With these thoughts in her mind she went outside the temple, to find out whence the voices came. But neither finding nor seeing anyone, she went back inside the idols' temple. These voices continued to be heard for many days thereafter, so she fasted for three days and prayed intently to the Lord that He should reveal to her the cause. Swift to hearken unto those who cry out to Him<sup>66</sup> by night and by day, the Lord God overlooked not her prayer, but hastened to make the revelation unto her. For as she completed her psalmody on another day, the demons began to sing impiously and to utter discordant, shameful sounds and to bring fire to the door of the temple. But the blessed one sealed herself continuously <with the cross> and rebuked them, and they fled with the fire into the mountains. Recognizing this to be the doing of the Enemy [i.e., the Devil], she looked this way and that, to see what had become of <the demons> or whither they had run off; and looking up she saw the mountains shrouded as it were in a sort of darkness.

16. Sometime later she was oppressed by great thirst, and going a short distance from the temple she found blossomy, tender greens. Picking some of these she pressed them to her lips and tongue, in order to assuage her thirst and alleviate the extreme dryness. But the merciful and compassionate Lord, seeing such great endurance and patience, wrought an ancient miracle: not feasting an ungrateful people but nourishing a soul which loved Him, not showering down a marvelous rain of plenteous manna,<sup>67</sup> but providing her with a spontaneous meal in this desolate place. For though all the place was dry and without water, she did find one spot which was moist; and beseeching God and taking Him as assistant, she came to this spot and dug in the earth

<sup>65</sup> Evidently by Bassianos.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Ps. 101 (102):2.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Ex. 16; Ps. 77 (78):24.

with her hands. After much toil she came to sharp stones, and in them she dug a small hole; and the further her hands went down <into the ground>, the more moisture she felt. Having found a bit of water she withdrew, reckoning that it was the hour of psalmody. But when she returned on the morrow after completing her morning rule, she found the hole which she had dug the day before filled with water. Kneeling, she thanked the Giver of good things, and standing up she picked a few greens. For the place where the water was abounded in them, as the *gifts* of God are *perfect*<sup>68</sup> and unailing and they require no season to come to perfection. She washed them in water, and letting the water run off because of the dirt, she took the greens and went inside. Now, wherever the water ran out of the hole, it brought forth tender, leafy greens. Coming, then, every day after her morning prayers and picking and washing the greens, she would let the water run off and then stop it again when it was clean; and eating the greens and drinking from the water, at the customary hour of repast after the evening psalmody, she glorified God for all His gifts to her. Thus did that place supply her ever after, as if by way of tribute, with the amplest daily nourishment.

17. For a long time the blessed one enjoyed such meals and made progress in her intense asceticism, but then the evil demon, unable to bear seeing her rejoice in the Lord, armed himself with another device against her. Transforming himself into a woman fair of face and [p. 799] of solemn and noble bearing, he approached the holy one and addressed her with no little flattery: "What are you doing here, madam, you who are young and quite fair of form? This is no place for you: it is a dwelling of idols and demons. Come to Beirut, for it is a beautiful and hospitable city, which provides for all people. It is desolate here: there is no provision for the necessities of life. Furthermore, heaven forbid that any of those men who often come here should do you harm, desirous of committing sin with you." Recognizing<sup>69</sup> that this was the Tempter, the blessed one answered saying, "I have greens. I have water. Christ my Master provides for me in abundance. I am satisfied with these things and seek nothing else." Hearing this the demon withdrew, saying, "Out of consideration for you have I counseled you to do that which I know to be to your advantage, nor shall I cease to counsel you. For the rest, it is for you to test and do that which is good." After a few days he came again in the same guise

<sup>68</sup> Cf. James 1:16.

<sup>69</sup> Reading γνοῦσα for ἀγνοοῦσα.

and said to her, "I do indeed take thought for you, madam, and have compassion for your youth. I am troubled and concerned lest such great beauty and comeliness should wither and perish in the harshness of this place. Wherefore I pray you, heed my fitting counsel: come to my mistress, Beirut, where there is a hospice worthy of you and everything requisite for your protection and service." But replying with great wisdom and understanding, "It is not beauty of the body I seek but of the soul, and if I make my comeliness without to wither, I renew that within," she put the woman to shame and chased her off.

18. Nevertheless, the mischievous one would not desist from tempting her. Abiding but a short time he assumed the form of an old woman, common and ugly, with fiery eyes, and set upon her, insolently threatening and menacing her, uttering mindless things in keeping with his purpose. When she made no reply whatsoever, on account of the disorder of his speech, he became all the more frenzied with rage and fired with anger, and he said to her, "I have used such words toward you, in such a manner on such matters, and you answer me nothing?" But the blessed one fortified herself, as she was wont, with the sign of the cross. Then putting his hands to his head, he rent and tore them in pieces with his teeth and cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Shall I, who have vanquished many with force and worsted yet more, not be able to defeat you? Just give me time. For even if I cannot deceive you in your youth, I shall bring the most dreadful things upon you in your old age.<sup>70</sup> And lest you now escape my hands, I shall incite Beirut against you, especially those who delight in this place and are enslaved to the worship of the idols;<sup>71</sup> I shall drive you from this entire country." Having said this and similar things the evil one vanished. To such an extent, then, did the malignant one annoy her; but he found it impossible to deceive her in any wise, and he durst not annoy her in an obvious manner, for God's grace overshadowed her. Wherefore, after such great trials, she was seized with joy, and the snares of the demons gave way to a beauteous vision. For as she said the evening prayers there appeared

<sup>70</sup> Cf. below p. 61.

<sup>71</sup> Remnants of paganism survived in the eastern empire well into the 6th century; for a particularly vivid account of paganism and magical practices in Beirut, see Zacharias Rhetor's 6th-century *vita* of Severos, ed. M.-A. Kugener in *Severe, patriarche d'Antioche* [PO, 2] (Paris, 1903), 48, 51, 58–63, 65–75. For a general discussion of the last stand of paganism against Christianity, see R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York, 1987), and F. R. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization, c. 370–529*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1993), esp. 2:29–49 on Beirut.

to her three men; and whether they were men or angels, she neither knew then nor said later, though it would be impious and indeed wholly alien to Christians not to think this visitation divine. For God, in condescension to our weakness and for our benefit, is wont to present visions of the Incorporeal Ones [i.e., angels] in the form of embodied men. As she sang, then, <these three> entered and remained kneeling behind her for a long time. Though the blessed one was afraid, she did not cease singing, but directed her gaze this way and that, desiring to see what they were doing; she did not, however, turn round. When she began the psalmody of the evening office, the men rose from their prayer, and telling her three times, "Pray for us, O servant of Christ," they withdrew and vanished.

19. But thereafter there was talk of her in Beirut, and many went out unto her, both men and women, and especially noblewomen, for in a few days report of her had spread everywhere. All told of how her angelic way of life and splendid purity had routed the demons in the temple and put them to flight. Now, among the many who came together to see her and receive her blessing, there came also a certain woman with her daughter, whose name was Sophrone. When this Sophrone, then, saw the blessed [p. 800] Matrona, she was moved to compunction, and could not bear to leave the blessed one or follow her mother, saying, "From henceforth is this holy one both mother and father to me." Though her mother did her utmost and pressed her, that she should at least take leave of her own family, she would in no wise assent to depart. On this ground did other daughters of heathen <parents> also attach themselves to the blessed Matrona: coming to her they fell down at her knees, crying, and said to her, "Deliver us, holy mother, from the vanity of the idols and deception of the demons, and lead us unto the God you serve." Receiving them the blessed one first tempered their bodily habits and then, once she had strengthened their spiritual reasoning and prepared them, over the course of many days, for the hope that lies in store for Christians, she would have the rites of chrismation<sup>72</sup> and baptism performed upon them. Keeping these women, together with the first one, and teaching them letters and poring over Scripture with them, especially the blessed David,<sup>73</sup> she made them children of God.

<sup>72</sup> Anointing with holy oil at the time of baptism.

<sup>73</sup> I.e., the psalter.

20. Yet another maiden, also a heathen, heard of these things, and she too desired to see the blessed Matrona and to associate herself with her. Now, once when her relations were to perform the customary libations to vain idols, they left her in the house, to bring the flour and wine and whatever else they had prepared for the demons and to follow them, while they went on beforehand and began the foolish <rites>, awaiting the maiden's arrival. But seizing the opportunity the young woman distributed the wine and flour and everything else to the poor, deeming it better to satisfy the hunger of the needy than to serve deaf, senseless idols; and then, finding women who were going off to the blessed one, she followed them. Not knowing what the girl had done, those who worshiped the abominable idols waited for her. When a long time had passed and she did not come, they returned and looked for her. Learning from those who happened to be about what she had done, that she had gone off to the Christian woman in the temple, they ran in pursuit of her; but she had gone in to the holy one. As they stood by the door of the temple and saw her prostrate at the feet of the blessed one, beseeching to be received by her as the others had been received, they called out to her with the most dreadful threats: "Come out here," they said, "impious one, lest we give you, together with this temple that has been profaned and also your teacher, over to the flames. Who has prompted you to this foolish and lawless action? Why have you forsaken light for darkness? Why have you kindled such anger against us? Are you not afraid, wretched one? Do you not tremble to have done such a lawless deed? Are you not mindful that the gods have power to smite you and this teacher who has thrust herself upon you? Do you not consider how great is the offense you have committed, putting wretched, hopeless paupers before the most great and glorious gods? Flee your impiety. Renounce your folly. Regain sound and prudent reason. Forsake this wretched teacher and her mournful manner, for she has received her just deserts. Come out! Come out from thence, lest this place of salvation become for you a tomb of destruction. We shall bear you no malice, unhappy one, only come away. We shall beseech them whom you have angered, but you must not remain here." Saying this and similar things they promised the maiden much, and flattered her yet more, while threatening and abusing the holy one; and then they withdrew, promising to burn the temple and the women within on the morrow. Whereupon the godless ones received no reply from the blessed Matrona, save, "This girl is the servant of the God of your gods. For ours is a mighty God, the Maker of heaven and

earth, but your gods are abominations, works of the hands of men who are born and die, <idols which> molder and putrefy and in the end serve as fuel for the fire.”

21. The girl lay prostrate at her feet and, after the godless ones had gone, she begged and entreated her: “Receive me,” she said, “O servant of Christ, receive me who am desperate and deceived, having served until now vain <gods>; <I have been> ignorant of my God and Savior, following my enemy and destroyer. Join me to those <women> who are with you and lead me to your Christ. Show me the path of life and guide me safely upon it. Yea, I beg you, O servant of Christ, let me not be called unworthy of you nor be taken from your flock, O holy mother.” Saying these and similar things the maiden moved to tears the blessed Matrona and the freewomen<sup>74</sup> who had assembled about her. Then the blessed one counseled her for a considerable time and said, “Take heart, my child: our God loves mankind and He shall receive you who truly repent.” [p. 801] She raised her up and, taking her and the <other> sisters, she went straightway out of the temple, telling the freewomen, “Wait here, I pray you, until we return.” Then she collected a great multitude of dried plants and, returning, made three great piles of them; and she said to the freewomen, “Have you servants who can attend to some business for me?” The others replied that they had; and summoning three of their attendants, she told them, “Go, I pray, into the city and say unto the godless ones who not long ago threatened us that ‘The Christian woman informs you that you should not trouble yourselves to bring wood from the city. For I have already prepared dried plants for you, and you will find fire here. Tarry not, therefore: I await you. If it is necessary to prepare anything else, let me know in advance and I shall prepare it. I am eager to spare you any hardship, only be diligent!’” The servants, then, went into the city and gave the heathens<sup>75</sup> the holy woman’s message. Hearing this and marveling at the steadfastness and dauntlessness of her soul, her noble-mindedness and the wisdom of her thinking, they neither sent any answer nor durst they return.

22. Now, after the servants had gone off and brought back no reply, the

<sup>74</sup> The Greek word ἐλευθεραί, rendered here as “freewomen,” could also mean a “widow” or “wife” in this period; see Lampe, *Lexicon*, s.v. ἐλευθερος, A.6.

<sup>75</sup> The Greek word is Ἕλληνες (Hellenes), meaning “pagan,” “adherent of the old Greek religion.”

blessed one said to the freewomen, "I pray you, tell the most God-loving bishop to send me a priest, a deacon, and a deaconess."<sup>76</sup> Hastily they made their way into the city and, coming to the church, they related everything to the people; and they informed the bishop likewise. It was the talk of all the city that the Christian woman who lived in the temple had converted heathens, and that she continued to convert many others, and that all who saw her were moved to compunction and came to the knowledge of God. Forthwith, then, the bishop sent clerics as she had requested, and nearly the <whole> city <including> all the freewomen, some in covered litters, others in sedan chairs, and yet others on foot, went out to her; and seeing her they derived great profit and were filled with compunction and indeed received a spark of the knowledge of God. For who, upon seeing that honorable and holy figure, her worn face and, in a word, her mortified body, was not moved to compunction and greatly benefitted, becoming a different person? Wherefore all were edified, and praising God for all the miracles wrought through her they returned to the city with great joy.

23. Then the blessed Matrona took the maiden who had been converted and gave her into the hands of the priest, deacon, and deaconess, saying to them, "I pray your Holinesses, take this humble maiden, that she might now turn aside from the error of the idols. When you have instructed her and baptized her, bring her back to me here." Taking her the clerics conducted her to the church. Then, when they had instructed her after the fashion of the Christians and baptized her, they took the disciple back to the teacher; and she remained with her, in the company of the other maidens who had come before her, and received all manner of spiritual instruction. The blessed one gave her the name Euche [Prayer]. Several other women joined as well, so that there were eight in all. Many persons at that time derived profit merely from the sight of the blessed one and, goaded by divine longing, they began to live better lives. For the figure of that blessed and true servant of God was venerable, her speech accessible and conversation with her full of profit, and association with her gave pleasure in but a short time; in a word, one never had

<sup>76</sup> Deaconesses, the female counterpart of deacons, were women whose primary function was to assist at the baptism of women. The office could be held only by unmarried women or widows of mature age; cf. *ODB* 1:592–93 and Gryson, *Ministry of Women*, 88–90.

enough of seeing her, and upon thinking of her one was filled with longing. Many who were with her then found it difficult to depart from her, reckoning it a loss to be deprived of her venerable company even for a short time.

24. Now, all the while that she lived thus, piously and honorably, prospering before God's angels and before men, the blessed Matrona feared her husband, lest, on account of her fame, he should find her there as well. Moreover, she desired to see her superior, the blessed Bassianos. Caught up between these two considerations, she thought of moving either to Alexandria or to Antioch, in order to escape the notice of her husband. Although she desired to live in Constantinople, on account of her superior and the proximity to the brethren with whom she had lived the monastic life, she restrained herself, thinking again of her husband. "For if," she said, "he did not shrink from pursuing me when I had gone to Emesa, Jerusalem, and Mt. Sinai, would he not all the more pursue me and perpetrate dreadful things if he heard that I was in Constantinople?" [p. 802] Occupied with these <thoughts> the blessed one earnestly besought God to reveal unto her the profitable course. For if ever she met with difficulty, either in her deeds or her thoughts, she referred the matter to God and waited for the answer from Him.

25. For many days she waited upon Him and prayed Him reveal to her that which was profitable. Then once, as she slept, she saw three men who came to her and said, "We have come here for your sake, Lady, for one of us will take you to wife." She thought herself to say to them in the dream, "Whence come you, and what are your names?" Then, she said, they told her that one of them was called Alexander, another Antiochos, and the other Constantine. Said she to them, "I will have none of you, for I have made a promise unto God to remain pure, and on His account I have renounced my lawful husband." Thereupon it seemed as if they were discomfited and said to one another with contention, "I shall have her!" Each of them said this same thing, and thus saying they drew lots to settle the dispute. The lot fell to Constantine; but because Alexander and Antiochos were not satisfied with the first drawing, they drew again. After they had drawn a third time and the lot had three times fallen to Constantine, the blessed one thought herself to say to them, "Whether you draw lots or not, I will have none of you. I have told you once and for all: I have committed myself unto God." Thus replying in her sleep she awoke. Now, after she awoke, when she had comprehended the meaning of the vision, she rendered thanks unto God, the Giver of good things. For she understood that the three men represented the three cities

which had been in her thoughts: Alexander, Alexandria; Antiochos, Antioch; and Constantine, Constantinople.<sup>77</sup>

26. Convinced, then, by this dream that it pleased God that she should live in Constantinople, she thought only of her departure and the journey: not that she was concerned for herself—for she knew that God Who loves mankind, Who had shown her where it pleased Him that she should live, would provide for her—but she was anxious about how or where she would leave the sisters with whom she lived. While the blessed Matrona was occupied with such cares and concerns, the freewomen whose acquaintance she had made came to her, to visit her and derive spiritual profit. After considerable conversation, she told them of her desire and of the vision from God. The freewomen, inasmuch as they loved her and were loath to part with her, were grieved and said, “O most God-loving Mistress, if this is to be, we know not whether we ought first to regret the desolation of our souls or your good and profitable conversation. To whom shall we come hereafter for solace, or to which other mother shall we have recourse that we might be consoled, or to which teacher shall we run that we might be taught by her to scorn this temporary, vain life and in no wise prefer it to the coming, everlasting life? Who hereafter, once we are bereft of you, will assuage the afflictions that weigh upon us? Who, when you are gone, will be able to refresh with words, as with a sponge, those beset with despondency? Who will speak to us of love for a husband, of love of children and godly housekeeping? Who will instruct us in good deeds and every good work in service to God? Considering all these things we are filled with all manner of sorrow and despondency, bereft of all solace. Nor can we prevent you <going>, for God has concurred with your desire. But the mother of the ex-Prefect Elias and the mother of the *scholastikoi*<sup>78</sup> are going off to their children in Constantinople, and if your Holiness so commands, we shall speak to them about you: through your holy prayers they too will be preserved, and your Godliness will make the journey with them.”

27. Having said this, the freewomen were deputed by the blessed one, and

<sup>77</sup> It is unusual for cities to be personified by men instead of the female figures normally encountered on coins, diptychs, and other artistic representations; see, for example, Alan Cameron, “Anthusa: Notes on the Iconography of Constantinople,” *BSCAbstr* 8 (1982), 41.

<sup>78</sup> Elias or Helias, probably an honorary prefect, cannot be identified. The same applies to the unnamed *scholastikoi* (a title favored by advocates and rhetors).

hurriedly they made their way into the city and told the other women about her. Directly they heard, they rushed out to the blessed one, to encourage her, fearing lest she should put off going and they should thus be deprived of the salvation and benefit which gushed forth from her. The blessed one assented to sail with them, and she took counsel with them, that the sisters might go to the most God-loving bishop. But taking the matter upon themselves, the freewomen rushed into the city and informed the bishop. Without a moment's hesitation the bishop summoned two deaconesses known for their nobility of life and most excellent conduct and sent them to the blessed Matrona, that they should receive the sisters who were with her. Said he to them, [p. 803] "See to it, sisters, that you preserve the sisters you receive from the most holy woman, lest through life's vanity you should become slack and neglectful, or should conduct your lives unfittingly and thereby give these women whom God has delivered from the error of idols over to the deception of unlawfulness, and you should then render account to God on their behalf on the day of judgment." Hearing this the God-loving deaconesses went off with the freewomen to the blessed one and received the aforementioned sisters. Giving them over, the blessed Matrona said to the deaconesses, "O spiritual mothers and sisters, I commend these souls to you and to God: be unto them mothers in body and spirit, and take care for their salvation for as long as you shall have them, that you may present them on the day of judgment perfect, pure, and without offense, unto Christ, Who has chosen them." Having said this, she kissed them as a loving mother and admonished them as a good teacher, and she gave them leave to depart with the deaconesses.

28. Then the other freewomen took the blessed Matrona to themselves, like some great treasure and instrument of salvation, and because the blessed one so desired they also took one of the sisters who had been with her: the one who had been first to follow her and to love her way of life, Sophrone by name. With haste they set sail from the city of Beirut and, after an unexpectedly calm passage, swiftly reached the Imperial City. For He Who had revealed to her the place of her trials, showing her in a night vision the city that would receive her, granted her an undisturbed and speedy voyage. Coming to anchor at St. Irene's,<sup>79</sup> she sent word of herself to the deacon Markellos; and when he

<sup>79</sup> The church of St. Irene of Perama (not to be confused with the larger and more famous St. Irene's near Hagia Sophia) was situated on the Golden Horn shore, opposite Sykai (Galata). It was rebuilt by the *oikonomos* Marcian in the middle of the 5th century; cf. Janin, *EglisesCP*, 106–7.

heard, he came to her forthwith. Upon seeing him, the blessed one and Sophrone did obeisance to him upon the ground. But the honorable deacon said to her, “Whence are you come, my Lady sister? Why are you here? What has prompted you to leave the monastery to which you were sent and to come here?” In answer the blessed one said, “It is not by desertion that I have come, honored father, but out of my desire for my venerable and holy superior, and in order that I might receive his blessing.” Moved to compunction, the deacon received her. Then the blessed one related to him all that had befallen her: how after he had dismissed her she had made her way forthwith to the monastery, and how Dometianos had pursued her, and how she had been forced on his account to leave the monastery; how upon reaching Jerusalem she had barely escaped falling into his hands; how again she had gone to Mt. Sinai; how she had lived in Beirut, and how she had become well known there; how many had been through her moved to compunction and many saved; and how and by what cause she was again in the Imperial City. In brief, she hid from him none of the things she had done, not wishing to make a display of herself—Heaven forbid! for this was an emotion alien to that holy soul—but to convince him that she was not there by desertion, but had come in accordance with a vision and her desire.

29. When he had heard this the deacon Markellos went up to the holy Bassianos and told him everything, saying that the Lord Babylas, the eunuch, had come from the East and had brought with him another brother.<sup>80</sup> Upon hearing this the holy Bassianos was sorely grieved and said to the deacon, “Why has he come again?” Said the deacon, “He is here to receive your Holiness’s blessing.” The blessed <superior>, then, thanked the Lord, and pronouncing his habitual words, “Blessed is the Lord,” he paused briefly and then said to the deacon, “Go, my child, and arrange for lodging, in which he is to abide; God and we shall take care for the rent. Pay the passage money first, then take him up to the <lodgings>.” Whereupon the deacon went off and did everything as commanded: finding a quite suitable dwelling in <the district of> St. Thomas<sup>81</sup> above the colonnade, he left a deposit; and taking the key he went down to the sea and brought up the blessed Matrona and the sister with

<sup>80</sup> The implication is that Matrona and her companion are in male attire.

<sup>81</sup> The best known church of the St. Thomas region was that built on the property of Amantios near Julian’s Harbor. The Amantios in question is usually identified with the chamberlain of the emperor Anastasios I (*PLRE* 2:67–68), but there is some reason to believe that the church may have existed earlier; cf. Janin, *EglisesCP*, 248–50.

her. The freewomen who had made the voyage with her entreated him, and they too came up into the monastery with her, that they might also receive the holy elder's blessing. When they entered, upon seeing the blessed Matrona and the freewomen with her, the holy [p. 804] Bassianos thanked the freewomen, uttering a prayer, and said, "May the Lord Jesus Christ give you the reward of your compassion, for you have taken her to yourselves and have not allowed her to suffer affliction in any wise." To the blessed Matrona, who lay at his feet, he said, "Rise, child. What is it again that you want? Why have you come here?" In answer the blessed one said, "I have come to receive a blessing from your holy mouth, holy father." He enquired also about the sister with her, and learning how she had joined her, this blessed and truly holy one [the superior] became speechless and wept with them. He paused briefly and then commanded the deacon to bring three pieces of blessed bread,<sup>82</sup> three girdles, and three cloaks.<sup>83</sup> When they had been brought, he prayed for a long time; and sealing them with the sign of the cross, he gave them to her, saying, "Go, my child, settle yourself and save the souls that the Lord shall send you. Preserve yourself and present your way of life as a model to those who are being saved, that those who are taught by you may see the things you teach through words being fulfilled in you through deeds. But do not receive any servant against the wish of her master or mistress, on account of the holy canons."<sup>84</sup>

30. It is my opinion that the blessed and holy Bassianos did this not from human understanding and wisdom, but through the influence of a divine force. The very fact that he was in ecstasy and, hesitating a short while, suddenly requested the aforementioned pieces of blessed bread as well as the girdles shows beyond doubt that this was a divine thing. For the blessed <Matrona> had not come for this purpose, nor had she sought any such thing from him. Receiving from his holy hands the blessings of the girdles and other things he gave her, and from his blessed lips the words of confirmation, she was amazed at the strangeness and miraculous character of the thing. But

<sup>82</sup> *Eulogia* bread was bread that had been blessed but not consecrated (and thus was to be distinguished from the bread of the eucharist); it later came to be known as *antidoron*. Cf. G. Galavaris, *Bread and the Liturgy: The Symbolism of Early Christian and Byzantine Bread Stamps* (Madison, Wisc., 1970), 109–66.

<sup>83</sup> As we learn from Chap. 51, these were men's girdles and cloaks.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. canon 4 of the Council of Chalcedon (ed. Joannou, *Discipline*, I.1:72–74, or Rhalles-Potles, *Synagma* 2:226).

when she had regained her courage she said to him, "Venerable and holy father, I beseech you, I have seven other sisters in the city of Beirut: what is your command concerning them?" Learning to whom they had been commended, he ordered the deacon Markellos to give to the captain who had brought the blessed Matrona the passage money and expenses for the sisters who were in Beirut, and to enjoin him to bring them with dispatch to Constantinople. When this had been done, and the freewomen had also written, through the captain, to the bishop and their relations in Beirut, that they should send them without delay and assist in their speedy embarkation, the most holy Bassianos said to the deacon Markellos, "Take these <women>, honorable child, and conduct them to the quarters you have arranged. For the Lord's sake, I pray you, take care of them with diligence, in the knowledge that, if you neglect them, you shall have committed a great sin, even as if you take thought for them, so shall you receive great reward from the Lord. Whatever the brethren have for nourishment, send this also to them daily; nor take careful thought only for their nourishment, but for each and every thing." Saying this and giving blessed bread to the freewomen also, the blessed Bassianos dismissed them.

31. With the permission of the deacon Markellos the freewomen accompanied the blessed one to her lodgings, and the deacon uttered a prayer and installed the blessed one there; and from then on he saw to their every need. Once the blessed one had been installed in her rooms, the freewomen went off to their children. For they had not sent word of themselves to their beloved children until the blessed one had been installed in her lodgings and they had made certain of this: such was the affection they had for her, and so greatly did they revere her and hold her in all honor, that they counted her installation <in her quarters> more important than being with their own children. For they thought, "Now that we have been saved through her prayers, we shall be able to see our children afterwards. But if we do not first see that she is installed and learn where her dwelling is, we shall have to search for her later, and the loss will be great, for there is no one who shall bring word of her."

Now, while the blessed Matrona dwelled in her lodgings, performing the customary psalmody in the rule which had been passed down to her, the letters arrived in Beirut and were delivered to the bishop. Without any hesitation or delay the bishop commanded the deaconesses to hand over to the captain the sisters they had received from the blessed one, having himself enjoined <the captain> beforehand to preserve them with all care and humility. Straightway,

then, <the captain> took on board provisions, from the freewomen who had sailed with the blessed one as well as from the bishop, and set sail from Beirut. Upon reaching the Imperial City, he sent word to the deacon that the sisters had arrived; and the deacon Markellos reported to the most blessed Bassianos concerning them. He inquired whether he wanted them to come first to him, to receive his blessing; and at the <most blessed> one's command, he went down to the ship at the seashore and brought them up. When they had come, he blessed them, [p. 805] and admonishing them with many passages from the Holy Scriptures to obey the blessed Matrona in all things and to keep her commandments always, he gave them blessed bread and sent them off to their mother superior.

32. Now, while the blessed <Matrona> was thus occupied, thanking God for having directed her superior's goodwill toward her and for having preserved the sisters she had received contrary to the purposes of others, report of her spread throughout the city and she became famous in the mouths of all. It was impossible for so great a marvel to lie hidden: everyone was possessed by eagerness and all were equally keen to be first to see her and learn from her what she had feigned or devised in order to enter such a strict monastery; and, once entered, how she had escaped notice for so long. Since everyone, then, was flocking to her and deriving benefit from her, the blessed empress Verina,<sup>85</sup> wife of the blessed Leo, also heard of her, and being a God-loving and venerable woman, she too came to her, to receive her blessing and learn the details of her life. When the blessed <Matrona> told her how she had entered the monastery and in what guise, and how after such a long time her secret had been revealed to the most holy Bassianos, she marveled at the greatness of the undertaking, approving the manliness of her purpose, and bade her pray for her and her children,<sup>86</sup> and the emperor. Then the blessed one gave her pieces of blessed bread that had been soaked <with wine>, but she asked for nothing whatsoever in return, though the empress quite expected to be petitioned by her for something, seeing that the blessed <Matrona> dwelt

<sup>85</sup> Although active in pious works and the building of churches, Verina was a person of rather questionable character. The text implies that her husband, Leo I (d. 18 January 474), was still alive at the time.

<sup>86</sup> Verina had two daughters, namely, Ariadne, married since 466/467 to the future emperor Zeno (474–491), and Leontia, wife of Marcian, son of the western emperor Anthemius (on whom, see next note).

in rented lodgings and was in no wise prosperous. The blessed empress Verina, therefore, derived extraordinary benefit by her not asking for anything nor being ashamed to give such pieces of blessed bread to an empress, and commending herself to her she withdrew.

33. Now, a certain Euphemia, who had been the wife of Anthimus,<sup>87</sup> who had formerly reigned as emperor in Rome, had been since that time an acquaintance of the blessed one,<sup>88</sup> and she knew by experience of the beneficial actions wrought through her. And when Antiochiane, the wife of the patrician Sphorakios<sup>89</sup> (I mean the Sphorakios who had constructed the all-holy and all-beauteous church of the great and victorious martyr Theodore),<sup>90</sup> fell ill at that time, <Euphemia> went to visit her. As is usual in conversations, especially with those who are ill, Antiochiane discussed the cause of her illness, finding fault with her physicians. For though she had spent a great deal of money on them, they had not been able to help her in the least; on the contrary, the illness had got worse through their ineptitude. Showing compassion for her Euphemia said, “My lady patrician, why do you spend money on physicians, who can take the money but know not how to help? You ought rather to approach generous God, the physician who takes no fee. Betake yourself, therefore, to the wonder-working and holy woman who has now settled in our city. For she is the one, that I may tell you of her briefly, who was possessed by divine longing and, fleeing her husband and by clever contrivance transforming herself into a eunuch, spent three years<sup>91</sup> in the monastery of the blessed Bassianos. When she was afterwards discovered through a revelation, being no longer able to live among the men, she was sent off to a women’s

<sup>87</sup> Anthimus is a variant form of Anthemius, who reigned as Augustus in the West from 467 to 472; cf. *PLRE*, 2:96–97. His wife Euphemia, oddly qualified as “a certain” (τις), was the daughter of the emperor Marcian.

<sup>88</sup> Her meeting with Matrona should probably be dated after 472, when her husband was murdered.

<sup>89</sup> Sphorakios or Sporacius was consul in 452. *PLRE*, 2:1026–7, distinguishes him, perhaps wrongly, from a Sporacius who appears to have been prefect of Constantinople sometime between 474 and 491. His wife Antiochiane is not mentioned elsewhere.

<sup>90</sup> Situated on the main street (Mese), not far from Hagia Sophia, this church was rebuilt by Sphorakios following a fire, perhaps that of 465. See remarks in C. Mango, “Epigrammes honorifiques, statues et portraits a Byzance,” *Studies on Constantinople* (Aldershot, 1993), pt. ix, 25–28.

<sup>91</sup> This information is given here for the first time.

monastery in the East. Her husband pursued her there also, and she fled to many other places, until she returned hither in accordance with a divine vision. In sum, on account of her pure and blameless conduct and her heavenly and angelic way of life, she has effected many cures and converted those gone astray and has helped and still helps a great many. Hasten, therefore, to her and tell her all, doubting naught, and you shall be delivered completely from the ailment that afflicts you.”

34. When Antiochiane, wife of Sphorakios, had heard and learned these things, she thanked Euphemia most profusely and bade her go with her to the blessed Matrona. They made an agreement and on the morrow they both came to her. Finding her singing the morning office, they waited until she finished. [p. 806] When she had finished singing, they did obeisance to her and sat down with her. After the conversation had gone on for a considerable time and the blessed one had uttered the customary < blessings > and benefited them, healing their souls before their bodies, Antiochiane gently and trustingly took the blessed one’s hand and placed it on the place that pained her. As the blessed one did not know the reason for this, Antiochiane said to her, “Mistress mine and servant of Christ, I am employing your touch to assuage the suffering that afflicts me, and in so doing I expect not to be disappointed, for already, with the holy God’s help, I have felt benefit.” Making light of this, the blessed one said to her, “My lady, I am a sinner, and such as I am so is my touch. But the Lord Jesus Christ Who visited Peter’s mother-in-law and cured her of the fever<sup>92</sup> will visit you also and will cure you of the pain which troubles you.” Feeling forthwith strength and benefit, Antiochiane remained by her; and bidding Euphemia go home, she said to her, “I shall remain with my physician until my complete recovery.”

35. Now, while < Antiochiane > remained with the blessed < Matrona >, her eunuchs asked the blessed one’s doorkeeper for quarters in which they might keep the animals and put away the covered litter. But she told them, “Besides the lodging in which we live, we have none other, and even for this do we pay rent. How could we have yet other quarters, we who are foreigners and have not even the necessities of life?” The eunuchs then went and reported to their mistress what they had been told. Antiochiane acknowledged the goodwill of her servants, and marveling at the blessed Matrona’s praiseworthy poverty and blessed penury she said to her, “I have heard, Mistress mine, that you dwell in

<sup>92</sup> Cf. Mt. 8:14–15.

rented lodgings, and I am sorely grieved.” The blessed one said, “I do dwell in rented lodgings, but God and my superior provide for them and for us.” Said Antiochiane again to her, “Let it not be so with you, I beg you, my lady. By God’s bounty I have many beautiful estates: accept one of them for the ransom of my sinful soul and live in it, unto the salvation of the many souls who will be saved through you and me. Whichever estate pleases you, this shall I grant you forthwith, making it over to your full ownership.”

36. Hearing this the blessed Matrona perceived her goodwill from her words, and understanding that she desired to give her a place to be dedicated to God as a haven for human souls, she agreed to accept it and sent for the deacon Markellos; and telling him of the proposal, she left the matter in his hands. Taking the servants who had been instructed to show him the estates, the deacon came to the place called Severiana, where the monastery of the blessed <Matrona> was built, which was then a rose garden. He was pleased by the situation of the place because of its vicinity to other monasteries, especially that of the blessed Bassianos (of which he was a member), and because of its being within the city walls.<sup>93</sup> He came to the blessed Matrona and the Christ-loving Antiochiane and reported that the place was quite well and good and its situation suitable, but that it required much repair. When the deacon had said this, Antiochiane forthwith drew up the property grant to the blessed Matrona, and signing it she gave the document to her; but she made the holding of the property over to the deacon Markellos, as Matrona’s representative, promising to carry out also the repairs. Then she thanked the deacon for his persistence, and departed sound in soul and body. Nor did she prove faithless in that which she had promised, but paid for the appropriate improvement of the place. In this wise, then, did the blessed Matrona get her monastery in this place and establish her spiritual flock, which through her holy prayers and God’s assistance exists to the present day, practicing asceticism unswervingly in accordance with the rule handed down to her. Taking full ownership, then, of the estate, [p. 807] she left the rented lodging upon the instruction of her superior, the most holy Bassianos (for she undertook nothing without his consent), and moved to the lawful stadium of

<sup>93</sup> I.e., the Theodosian land walls, completed in 413. The name Severiana may be due to Severos, one of the patrons of Bassianos. It eventually became attached to a hostel for the elderly, which was still standing in the 10th century. See A. Berger, *Untersuchungen zu den Patria Konstantinopoleos* (Bonn, 1988), 526.

ascetic practice, along with Eugenia, mentioned earlier in this *Life*,<sup>94</sup> who had assisted her in every good deed from the beginning. Now this was no idle or barren change of residence, but lighting tapers and performing quiet and solemn psalmody she moved to the place which had been granted her. Thus did the blessed one attain the end of the vision in Beirut: becoming a lawful resident<sup>95</sup> of Constantinople as had been made manifest in the revelation, she opened the arena of asceticism [viz. the convent] and provided a glimpse of the bridal chamber of salvation, in which she wedded many a soul unto Christ.

37. She brought with her to this <new> place and house twelve sisters, for another four had been added to the eight. Installed, then, in that place by the will of God, the blessed one shone forth marvelously through her way of life, and her fame increased exceedingly. Her flock grew daily, waxing greater in number: in the love of God it was broadened, though it was straitened in the capacity of space. There was not room enough at the time of prayer, but the fear of God prompted them to treat the straitening as relaxation. Seeing her flock grow and increase in number, the blessed one rejoiced and was glad, and she besought God day and night on its behalf saying, “Thou, Lord, inasmuch as Thou art merciful, hast gathered it together: do Thou also protect it, inasmuch as Thou art holy. Longing for Thee, Master, hath summoned them all, and fear of Thee shall preserve them all. Even as Thou hast provided for their souls, so neglect Thou not their bodies. Thou seest, Lord, the straitening. Thou beholdest the poverty. Thou understandest every thing. Comfort us all, inasmuch as Thou art good and lovest mankind.” So did the blessed Matrona invoke the succor of God in this matter; and God, *Who fulfilleth the will of them that fear Him*<sup>96</sup> nor is slow to hearken unto them, in accordance with His truthful promise, “*While thou are yet speaking, I shall say: Behold, I am here,*”<sup>97</sup> heard her supplications.<sup>98</sup> To her who sought the kingdom of heaven,

<sup>94</sup> Cf. pp. 20–29, passim.

<sup>95</sup> It appears that possession of landed property entailed the right of residence at Constantinople. Provincials were discouraged from remaining in the capital longer than necessary, as shown especially by Justinian’s legislation; cf. *Novellae* 80 and 86 (*CIC* 3:390–97, 419–23).

<sup>96</sup> Cf. Ps. 144 (145):19.

<sup>97</sup> Is. 58:9.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. Ps. 144 (145):19.

in accordance with His word, *did He add also all riches and abundance in this world.*<sup>99</sup>

38. Now, on the annual feast of the victorious martyr Lawrence,<sup>100</sup> when all the city gathered together in his holy house (for his feast is a great one and is celebrated gloriously, fragrant oil from his holy relics being distributed on this day to the honor and glory of his martyrdom)—on this <feast>, then, there were two sisters, pious of manner and noble of birth, who came together with the others to receive a portion of the holy oil. When they had received the blessed bread with all the others, after the completion of the holy mysteries and dismissal of the festal offices, as they went through one of the streets adjoining the monastery, they heard the sound of psalmody coming from the buildings. Struck by the strangeness of the sound (for they knew that place to be an estate, not a monastery), they enquired of those living nearby who it was performing this psalmody. When these latter had told them of the blessed one, relating the events of her life, they got down from their litters and went in to her. Upon seeing that venerable and angelic figure, wondering at the marvelous and strange nature of her attire,<sup>101</sup> they remained with her for a long time, profiting from her counsels. To such an extent were they edified by her holy words and the sisterhood's marvelous appearance, that one of them, Athanasia by name, pricked with divine longing, said to her sister, "Go home, my sister, and fare well: for from this moment this holy one is mother, father, and sister to me. For what profit shall I have henceforth from this vain life? Even if I should seem to prosper in some wise or reign as empress, is not all thereafter death? Shall I not become ashes and dust? Shall I not, who am today borne about by servants and eunuchs, soon be committed to the grave and trampled underfoot by them? Does not dishonor succeed to glory, and disease obscure the most celebrated beauty? Go, then, go, I beg you. Go in peace, and allow [p. 808] me to lament my sins."

39. Saying this the honorable and blessed Athanasia caused her sister

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Mt. 6:33.

<sup>100</sup> Celebrated on 10 August. The basilica of St. Lawrence was built by the empress Pulcheria and completed in 453. It stood close to the Golden Horn, near modern Ayakapi (according to Janin, *EglisesCP*, 303–4) or farther to the northwest, at modern Balat (according to Berger, *Untersuchungen*, 530). It must have been fairly close to Matrona's nunnery.

<sup>101</sup> I.e., her male monastic garb.

fright and anxiety, and the latter was compelled to ask her, "Did I not give your husband assurances concerning you? Was it not perhaps because your husband knew beforehand what you intended to do that he <tried to> prevent you going? What has suddenly come over you? Why do you strive to beset me with temptation? How can I leave without you? If I were to leave, what excuse should I give concerning you? Keep your desire to yourself, and guard your intention in your heart. I do not command that you desist from this good purpose, even if it is very hard and burdensome and difficult of accomplishment; only come with me now: spare me troubles and concerns. Put your house in order: first convince your husband, and abandon not your good goal." Saying this and more she also besought the blessed Matrona to bid her return home. The blessed one sat with both of them, hearing the words of both: she marveled at the quickness of the change in the one and counted blessed the fervor of her faith, but she accepted the good reason of the other's exhortation. Seeing what needed to be done, she said to the blessed Athanasia, "Go, child, for the meanwhile back to your house with your sister, and make trial of yourself, but do not reveal your plan to your husband. If this thought abides with you, then may God's will be done. For longing after God, my child, is like a seed which comes up forthwith but does not forthwith bear fruit. Just as seed thrown upon any land whatsoever will bring forth the blade, but will not in every <land> come to perfection,<sup>102</sup> even so will the word of God introduce its own warmth in whichever soul it enters, though it will not endure permanently in every <soul>, but will disappear with time or be stifled by worldly cares or fade through indifference. Wherefore, my child, it is not in the least strange or marvelous if, coming here and receiving a spark of God's love, you have been possessed forthwith by the desire for asceticism; nor, moreover, do you deserve great approbation. One need not, therefore, be convinced by you now, until you can provide a witness to your character, for you are still young: the flame of bodily desires burns within you, and the flower and beauty of bodily form is upon you. You are adorned with great wealth, you have now taken a husband, you are of a noble lineage, you have acquired much property, your body is delicate and weak, you are served in every wise by handmaidens and attendants. Asceticism, my child, is for one who serves, not one who is served."

40. Saying these and similar things the blessed Matrona was unable to

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Mk. 4:28.

convince her, for her desire for asceticism and love of God prompted Athanasia to resist the teacher and induced her to pledge readiness for everything. The blessed one, then, summoned the deacon Markellos and told him of her. The deacon gave Athanasia many admonitions, and offering a prayer over her he said, "Holy God, Who has given you this thought and warmed your heart, that you might love Him with all your soul, shall Himself fulfill your desire and finish your course." Thus he persuaded her to leave the monastery. Now, the blessed ones [viz. Matrona and Markellos] had said these things not in opposition to her good intention and zeal, but only to test her purpose, in fear lest being young she should make a false start and be unable to bring it to fulfillment; for she was <but> eighteen years of age. Thus was the blessed Athanasia persuaded to depart with her sister.

41. But not only did she not abandon her goal or diminish in any wise her good desire, rather, she took care for spiritual perfection: she practiced asceticism, accustoming herself to humility through training of the body, praying constantly, and moaning yet more constantly and denouncing her sins. But while the blessed Athanasia was occupied with this most beautiful and goodly exercise and spiritual training, her first and only begotten child died. She did not lament greatly nor grieve in an unseemly manner, as is usual with women who love their children, but wept for it somewhat, so much as to demonstrate the appropriate natural feelings within her, neither suffering nor acting effeminately in any wise. After a few days had passed, she came again to the monastery, bringing with her nothing for her own service: no fragrant wine, no white bread, no [p. 809] fish, no embroidery, no carpet, nor any other of the things to which a noble and wealthy woman is accustomed; but satisfied with their austere way of life, enduring the hardship of <sleeping> upon the bare floor, she contented herself with greens <prepared> without oil and dried figs and made do with the harshness of rush mats instead of the luxury of embroidered bedding. For that holy and honorable and God-loving community of the blessed Matrona was not supplied with the latter, but rather, being rich in godly poverty and being broadened through love, they bore their straitened circumstances and poverty as though they were relaxation and luxury. She spent three days, then, bearing everything gladly and without the slightest pain: she was late neither to the evening nor the morning office; she marked how the sisters gathered together at the hour of the office, how they knelt down, how they rose up; how they began; how they stood singing without distraction; how from the evening until the morning office the blessed Ma-

trona did not recline her body in relaxation, but sitting on a small wooden chair fulfilled her need for sleep, and how after the office and the great toil of standing she returned to the same position; and, moreover, how, as the <other> nuns slept, she would first stretch out her hands in tearful prayer and then wake them at the hour of the office, and would do everything in the same wise as her superior, the most holy Bassianos. Marking all of this, Athanasia returned to her home.

42. Now, using the harvesttime as a pretext—for it was the appropriate season—she had left her husband at home, and having gone out to her estate, she there worthily imitated Terce, Sext, and None and performed all the other offices on the same wise as in the monastery. But then she was informed by her chief stewardess,<sup>103</sup> who had charge of all the movable property, that the servant Kallopodios had broken into the back side of the money chest<sup>104</sup> and, having stolen a bag of gold, had run off. Hearing this and referring everything to God, the blessed Athanasia returned to her house as quickly as she could. Now, the servant had stolen this gold on the instruction of her husband. For he [the husband] was a squanderer, and not having enough for himself, he found an opportunity, while the honorable and excellent Athanasia was on her estate. He contrived that the stewardess, though unwillingly and contrary to her habit, should go outside the house; and while she, under the constraint of his command, went down to the gate, he ordered the servant to break into the money chest, take in his hands the bag he found in it, and come down <from the house>. Now, as the servant came down the stairs, carrying on his shoulders the <bag of> stolen money bulging out from behind, with his master following him, he met the stewardess; and suspecting what had happened, she stopped the servant and put her hand on the bag he was carrying. Then when the master shouted angrily from behind, she let the servant go; and the latter, descending with him to the gate, gave the money over to the master. The

<sup>103</sup> The Greek term is ἡ μειζότερα, the feminine form of μειζότερος, μειζών, which is probably an exact equivalent of majordomo; cf. Lampe, *Lexicon*, s.v. μεγας, B. 4. For a parallel usage in 7th-century hagiography, see A.-J. Festugiere, *Vie de Theodore de Sykeon*, 1 (Brussels, 1970), chap. 34.6.

<sup>104</sup> Designated as μουζικτιον (variant μουζακτιον), a rare term also used by John Moschos (PG 87.3:2936D and 3093B [where μου ζικτια should be emended to μουζικτια]). The word was discussed by J. Duffy and G. Vikan (“A Small Box in John Moschus,” *GRBS* 24 [1983], 93–99), who were unaware of our text. It can now be said that a μουζικτιον was specifically a strongbox for keeping valuables and that it could be, as here, of some size. It was not a pyxis.

<stewardess> then went up <to the estate> and reported this crooked business. When the blessed Athanasia had returned from her estate and learned from the stewardess the details of what had happened, she calmly summoned the servant and asked him why he had done this. He told her straightway everything about the matter, and that he had done it at the command of his master. As he was innocent, then, she dismissed the servant; and finding the accusation of theft as a reasonable pretext for separation from her husband,<sup>105</sup> she lived alone, as having repudiated him.

43. Then she summoned the deacon Markellos and, falling at his feet, implored him to send her some of the blessed bread of which the sisters partook. Markellos refused, saying, “You cannot bear such a way of life, for you are delicate and accustomed to eat divers dishes prepared with oil.” But her eunuchs bore witness in her favor saying that, from the time she had gone to her estate, she had not been to the bath, nor put off her silken garment, nor had she slept upon a bed, but had only put down a carpet upon the floor and slept upon it what appeared to be sleep. Nor had she partaken of her usual food, but of that which was light and plain. Then acknowledging her endurance and seeing the persistence of her pious intention, <Markellos> promised to send her <the blessed bread>. He went to the blessed Matrona and told her all this about the blessed Athanasia. The blessed Matrona rejoiced to hear of her excellent accomplishments, but still she feared lest she should undergo a change through diabolical assault or worldly circumstances and should slacken and become negligent. Forthwith, then, she rose up with her company of sisters in prayer and supplication on her behalf, nor did she cease thereafter to remember her and to entreat God to strengthen her intention and preserve in her the same good and honorable purpose. From that time on, greens without oil and dried figs were sent to her at the ninth hour. Thus provided for and sufficing on such a diet for a considerable time, it occurred to her [p. 810] that it would be a pious work for her to requite the sisters. Sending a few *nomismata* to a bakery,<sup>106</sup> she arranged that the blessed Matrona should be

<sup>105</sup> Justinianic legislation does not include a husband’s theft of his wife’s property as sufficient grounds for her to divorce him; cf. *Novella* 117.9 in *CIC* 3:558–60.

<sup>106</sup> Although registered as owner of real estate, Matrona does not appear to have been entitled to a free bread ration, which at Constantinople was attached to the ownership of houses (*panes aedium*). See J. Durliat, *De la ville antique a la ville byzantine* (Rome, 1990), 195–211. The reason may have been that her property was a *proasteion*, i.e., a suburban estate situated outside the Constantinian walls. A ration was worth about three gold pieces (*nomismata*) a year.

supplied with a few loaves every day, for the sustenance of the sisters. The blessed Matrona, now able to provide her sisters with loaves, thanked God all the more—for she believed Him to be the cause of all good things—and strove that she herself should be found by Him worthy of the bounties granted her. For she believed firmly that the provision of more things becomes a source of more punishments unto those who do not live a life worthy of His commandments.

44. Now, the blessed Matrona prayed for her without ceasing, and Athanasia herself contrived to make her heart worthy of these prayers: she clove unto God all the more, and the longing for asceticism became more urgent within her. She did not cease to importune her husband daily to release her. Sometimes she would say, “I cannot live with you, who are mean in your intentions and lecherous and are given to unlawful deeds,” and at other times she would promise to give him much money if he would release her with goodwill. For she feared lest, if she left him and went off straightway, she should be liable to the judgment of the Lord that says that *Whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery*;<sup>107</sup> for that which is meant of the woman is meant also of the man. Furthermore, if she were to leave him, she would cause no small trouble for the monastery that received her, since he would come in search of her. Therefore she was resolved not to leave him in a heedless manner. Whereupon, admonishing him for a long time with the assent and cooperation of our Lord Jesus Christ, she brought him into concurrence with her good purpose. This done, she removed herself from every matter on all sides: to some of her slaves she granted freedom, providing them with houses and expenses, while exhorting others to a manner and zeal like her own. Then taking herself and all she had she went to the blessed Matrona in the monastery, and laying everything down at her feet after the example of the apostles in the Acts,<sup>108</sup> she entreated her saying, “O servant of Christ and holy mother, behold, you now have me and all that is mine. Consecrate me and all this to God, and administer us with the wisdom you possess. Neglect not my salvation out of consideration for my wealth, but take care and look after me as you would for the poorest of your sisters, for the weight of riches makes even heavier the burden of transgressions.”

45. The blessed Matrona acknowledged her goodwill but rejected the bur-

<sup>107</sup> Mt. 5:32.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Acts 4:35.

den of administration, telling her, “God, Who has called you to this house, my child, and has directed your heart to despise wealth and the world and to serve Him, will be able also to keep you in our midst until your last breath. But as for the property, I beg you, my child, administer it yourself as you know how and as God will show you; or else put it in the hands of one who will be able to serve your noble intention. For I—I confess to you—fear my many sins, lest I should not learn to administer this as might please God, and should add burden to my burden.” But the blessed Athanasia was greatly grieved by this and, beseeching her with many tears to accept the administration of this <property>, she pleaded her cause with reason and said appropriately, “If you, who have served God for so many years and have done that which pleases Him and have attained boldness <before Him> through your way of life —if you refuse the administration <of the property>, how can you commend its administration to me, the most sinful of all persons, who until the present have lived in iniquity, a slave to greed and lawless acts, wherefore my soul’s eye has been blinded?” With such pleading and appropriate speech did she convince the blessed Matrona to take upon herself the guardianship <of the property>. Forthwith she summoned the deacon Markellos and referred all this through him to the most holy Bassianos. The latter then responded to her thusly: “As you think best, my child, so should you do. The Lord God shall help you in every good deed.”

46. Then the blessed Matrona took over the stewardship with the prayer of the blessed elder [i.e., Bassianos] and, after consultation with the deacon Markellos, she put up a wall around her entire monastery. She also constructed a three-storied building, giving over the first story to a charnel house for deceased sisters,<sup>109</sup> after the fashion of the monastery of the blessed Bassianos, though the lower chamber was rather darker on account of the position of the place. The second <story> she set apart as a winter chapel, and likewise the third as a summer chapel, both these latter being also after the

<sup>109</sup> It was customary in Byzantine monasteries for the bones of monks and nuns to be removed from the cemeteries after a certain period of time, and transferred to ossuaries or charnel houses. The ossuaries were usually located on the lower level of a cemetery church, while the second floor (and in this case third floor as well) housed a chapel where funerary and memorial services were conducted. Cf. Ch. Bouras, *Nea Moni on Chios. History and Architecture* (Athens, 1982), 191–92 (with illustration); A. Orlandos, *Μοναστηριακή ἀρχιτεκτονική* (Athens, 1958), 146–48; G. Millet, *Le monastere de Daphni* (Paris, 1899), 23–24.

fashion of the chapels in the monastery of her superior.<sup>110</sup> And by the grace [p. 811] of God these chapels stand to this day, displaying their beauty: they proclaim in perpetuity the intelligence and zeal of the blessed Matrona, and attest to coming generations the offering of the blessed Athanasia. When the monastery had been given the form which it now exhibits, she distributed the remaining money to monasteries round about, employing the honorable Markellos as minister in this ministry. Of the blessed Athanasia's property, then, did the desert with its luminous solitaries receive a share, as well as Jerusalem and Emesa and Beirut and, in a word, all the East, in order, so I think, that on the day of Resurrection the blessed Athanasia might have witnesses from the ends of the earth to her magnanimous benefaction.

47. Thus did the monastery of the blessed Matrona take on a fitting beauty and become like other monasteries. Thus did the blessed Matrona receive recompense for her many tears and toils, the Lord Jesus Christ having looked favorably upon her labors and struggles. It is for this reason we have included the story of the blessed Athanasia in this account: that we might show how the blessed Matrona often besought many things of God, and God swiftly granted her everything in abundance. Thus did the blessed Athanasia flee the snares of this life: she lived fittingly as a nun, and as a nun she *finished her course*.<sup>111</sup> Having cleverly deceived her husband she practiced asceticism and brought the work of asceticism to perfection. Thus did she love God and bring love to fulfillment. Thus did she yearn for poverty and at last find the kingdom of heaven. Thus did she scatter insatiate wealth, which draws one down, and love the poverty of the Lord. To finish briefly, let me say that this woman, out of her extraordinary piety, that she might not pronounce with her own mouth the names of abominable gods,<sup>112</sup> declined to read <accounts of> the struggles of the holy and victorious martyrs, though she honored the martyrs above all. For she constantly pressed her face, ears, breast, and all her limbs upon the chests containing their glorious relics, in order to sanctify herself, and clove to them with extraordinary love. There were also seven eunuchs

<sup>110</sup> A winter chapel in a monastery not far from Matrona's is mentioned in the early 7th century in the *Life* of Theodore of Sykeon, ed. A.-J. Festugiere, *Vie de Theodore de Sykeon*, I (Brussels, 1970), chap. 135.14. The multistory arrangement described here is attested in Syria, from where it was probably imported.

<sup>111</sup> Cf. 2 Tim. 4:7.

<sup>112</sup> I.e., the pagan gods to whom the martyrs refused to sacrifice.

and three ladies of the bedchamber<sup>113</sup> who followed her in her purpose: the three latter remained with her as nuns in the monastery, and she sent the eunuchs to male monasteries. For fifteen years she lived under the supervision of the blessed Matrona and became a model of perfect obedience and humility to the sisters with whom she lived and to all mankind as well, and then she departed this life unto the Lord, to join those who have pleased Christ of old.

48. Thereafter, then, did the blessed Matrona, though increased in buildings and expenditure, as has been related, persist in her asceticism, bringing herself closer to God through a diligent way of life and offering Him also many other souls that had been brought to perfection. For the blessed one was a spiritual husbandman and, receiving neglected and barren souls, she tended them with careful and experienced ascetical attention; and when they had become fruitful through good works she offered them to Christ. Nor did she escape the attacks of temptations while she did all this. That mischievous demon, who in Beirut had told her, “Even if I cannot deceive you in your youth, I shall assault you with pernicious temptations in your old age,” did not cease to afflict her. Through visions he frightened her at night, and he made trial of her through incidents by day: striving and contriving in every wise the wretched one gave her not the slightest respite.

49. Now, when the blessed one saw that she had performed through God’s grace the greater part of her feats of asceticism and that most of her life was past and she was now declining downward to earth, soon to pay nature’s debt (for both those who have achieved as well as those who have idled must die, to be requited for their deeds), she desired to behold the repose that awaits the just after their tribulation here <on earth>. So desiring, she entreated the Lord Christ in her usual way to reveal this unto her. After she had remained seven days in fasting and earnest prayer, when sleep had overcome her, she thought herself in a garden, with green grass and a grove, adorned with many and divers trees. And then she was just inside a splendid house, illuminated by the purest light, and there was a woman in it, and she was clothed in imperial garments and arrayed with all manner of beauty. Then, having approached this woman’s knees, she was sent by her inside yet another house, greater in size and splendor than the first. Once inside this <house>, she conversed with some other women, marvelous in their attire and appearance; and

<sup>113</sup> Κουβικουλαρίαι; it was quite common for an aristocratic woman to keep female servants to attend her when she entered a convent.

then she awoke. Having seen this vision toward the end of her holy life, and having given her soul assurance of the houses, called by the Lord *mansions*,<sup>114</sup> in which those who have lived good lives are deemed worthy to dwell, the blessed Matrona strove to make herself worthy of habitation in them. [p. 812]

50. We, who have been deemed worthy to compose this her *Life* at a later time, relate this vision as the consummation of her achievements. For she was no longer alive when these things were written down, but after she had departed to a better life, it was God's best beloved Eulogia who related these things, being pressed by those who afterwards desired to learn her story. For this blessed Eulogia had practiced asceticism and worked with her from the beginning: some of her achievements she had seen most accurately with her own eyes, and she had heard the blessed one herself tell of others and had made note of them. For the blessed Matrona, seeking to encourage her sisters through her example, often sat with them, counseling them as a loving mother, and told them of the assistance she had from God Who loves mankind: not in order to show off—Heaven forbid!—nor to publish her achievements, but in order to edify and convince them that if one serves God and does what is pleasing unto Him, even though he be persecuted, or attacked, or he be in the desert unbeknownst to anyone, still will he not be abandoned by Him. Thus, then, did the honorable and most blessed Eulogia live with her for many years, and having seen some things, as I have related, and made note of others, she committed them to writing. She related these things, and as many of them as might be revealed at the time were written down, for the tempest which then buffeted those who desired to serve Christ honestly and the upheaval of the most holy churches kept the greater part of her achievements hidden.<sup>115</sup> This partial account, then, of her achievements has given us who come after her the chance to delight in her as if she were still alive, and hereby shall those who come after us be edified through her. Not only to us but also to those hereafter shall the blessed Matrona be shown to be a diligent teacher, no longer seen and heard talking but read about and known, unto the end of time. Thus shall she be a model of salvation unto ages to come for those who wish to be saved. Thus has she proved and shall she hereafter prove many worthy of the kingdom of heaven. Thus having conducted her life did she

<sup>114</sup> Cf. Jn. 14:2.

<sup>115</sup> I.e., because of the pro-Monophysite policy of the emperor Anastasios I, the full story of Matrona's career could not be published; cf. p. 15 above.

bring enlightenment to many and convert many who had gone astray. Thus in her deeds and teaching did she become an exact copy of her teacher the most holy Bassianos and was proven a flawless mirror of his way of life, having diligently preserved his legacy and passed it on to those who came after her.

51. For that most holy one [Bassianos], who dwells among angels and is a peer of the saints, after he had adorned the desert with his achievements and thwarted the devil's many wiles, had received his monastic rule from God and had been taught his order of the daily office by an angel. He established many monasteries following his rule throughout the world,<sup>116</sup> and he founded two in the Imperial City: a male one, which he himself founded and which by God's grace stands to the present day, keeping his rule and deriving its name from his, and another one, founded by the most holy Matrona, whose name it bears, which also still exists and preserves the order of the office as he prescribed. For in the same wise that the most holy Matrona, upon renouncing the world, had been deemed worthy to assume the monastic habit from the holy elder, even so did she bestow <the habit> upon the women who came to her. Just as the most holy Bassianos laid his hand upon those whom he received <as monks> only after a long time and much trial, so did the blessed Matrona refuse to bestow the habit upon any woman who came to her unless she had spent time in proving her intention. And again, even as the holy elder had done before the holy altar: when the mysteries were set out and appropriate lessons were read and psalmody performed, those receiving the holy habit, exemplifying the crucifixion of the Lord and confessing through <their assumption of> the habit the rejection of their own will, were first tonsured by him and then girded and finally invested by him with the cloak, with much admonition and instruction, so did the blessed Matrona do before the holy altar when she received those who had come to her, commending them to those who were to take charge of them, and so again did she do when she completed their initiation before the holy altar, after those who had charge of them had testified to their way of life. In short, she did everything after the fashion of her supervisor. And after she had returned from Beirut, and he had ordained her overseer of souls, so to speak, and had given her authority for the laying of hands on others <to receive them>, he did not give her woolen girdles and veils, such as women are accustomed to use, but wide, dark leather

<sup>116</sup> The *Synaxarion of Constantinople* (*SynaxCP* 127.8–9) records that Bassianos, a native of the East (probably Syria), had dwelled in many lands.

men's girdles and white men's cloaks, which they wear constantly. Through the benevolence and love of mankind of our Lord Jesus Christ this same order has been followed unto the present day in her monastery, preserved by those who have succeeded her.

52. Thus did the blessed Matrona live a pious and devout life [p. 813] and preserved with diligence the monastic rule bequeathed to her by the most holy Bassianos. Having reached her hundredth year, more or less<sup>117</sup> (she had become a monastic at the age of twenty-five, and spent the remainder in asceticism), and having *finished* well *the course* of her ascetic struggles<sup>118</sup> and preserved the orthodox faith<sup>119</sup> until the end, she left this life, in healthy old age, on the seventh of November, and went to join her holy fathers and brethren of all ages. As successor and guardian of her flock she left the honorable and most God-loving deaconess Mosilia, who was adorned by her way of life and her wisdom and abounded in humility and love. As spiritual fathers and brothers the most blessed and holy Matrona had—and still has—the most holy Bassianos, her superior, and all those after him who shall keep his <rule>. By their intercessions may we all be deemed worthy to obtain mercy on the day of judgment, through the grace and love of mankind of our Lord Jesus Christ, to Whom be glory and power, to the ages of ages. Amen.

<sup>117</sup> Probably an exaggeration, although she appears to have lived at least eighty years.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. 2 Tim. 4:7.

<sup>119</sup> Once again, an allusion to her struggle against Monophysitism.