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4. LIFE OF ST. THEOKTISTE OF LESBOS

translated by Angela C. Hero

According to her *vita*, Saint Theoktiste was born near the town of Methymna on the Aegean island of Lesbos. Having lost her parents in early childhood, she was placed in a nunnery where she later took monastic vows. At the age of eighteen she was taken prisoner by Arab pirates from Crete who raided her native Lesbos, but managed to escape her captors during a stop at the island of Paros. For the next thirty-five years she lived as a hermit on that uninhabited island until a visiting hunter from neighboring Euboea discovered her accidentally at the abandoned church of the Virgin. To him she confided the story of her life, and after receiving the holy sacraments which he brought at her request on his subsequent visit, she died. Instead of burying the holy woman's body,¹ the hunter cut off her hand to keep as a relic, but a supernatural force prevented him from carrying it home: his boat would not sail back to Euboea until he realized his error and returned the relic to its proper place. Afterwards, as he and his companions were sailing home unimpeded, he confessed to them the act that was responsible for their troubles. At once they reversed their course, and upon reaching Paros rushed to the place in the church where the hunter had found Theoktiste lying dead, only to discover to their horror that the body had disappeared. After searching at length, but in vain, all over the island for the remains of Theoktiste, they were finally allowed to return home to Euboea safely.

The *Life* of Theoktiste, as presented by Niketas Magistros, is a story within a story within a story: while accompanying Admiral Himerios on a mission to the Arab rulers of Crete (in 910),² the author and his companions

¹ See Chap. 20, where the hunter voices his regret for having failed to place the holy woman's remains in a grave, and Chap. 21, where her body is said to have disappeared not from a grave but from the place in the church where it had been lying and on which it had left its marks. This evidence goes against H. Delehaye's assumption that the hunter buried Theoktiste; see "La Vie de sainte Theoctiste de Lesbos," *Byzantion* 1 (1924), 194 (hereafter Delehaye, "La Vie").

² Since Niketas accomplished his mission successfully and returned to the capital before the death of Leo VI in May 912 (Chap. 13), he cannot be here referring to

were forced by headwinds to put in at Paros. During their brief stay there, they came upon a saintly hermit by the name of Symeon who told Niketas the story of Theoktiste as he himself had heard it a few years earlier from a Euboean hunter; it was Symeon who urged Niketas to save the tale from oblivion by writing it down.

Noting the similarities between this *vita* and that of St. Mary of Egypt (see *vita* no. 3 in this volume), students of hagiography agree that Niketas did not write the biography of a historical saint, but the story of a legendary figure.³ However, as A. Kazhdan has pointed out,⁴ Niketas' account is not a mere plagiarization of a famous piece of early ascetic literature. Although inspired by and borrowing from the *Life* of Mary of Egypt, the *vita* of Theoktiste diverges from its model both in its unusual literary format and in the character of its heroine. Unlike Mary of Egypt, Theoktiste is portrayed as a chaste woman whose struggle is not against the demons of the flesh but against the havoc wrought by war and enemy raids. As such, she resembles Athanasia of Aegina and Theodora of Thessalonike. Her *vita* is a version of the legend of Mary of Egypt, but it reflects the political and social climate of the ninth century.

Furthermore, the historical framework in which Niketas places the *vita* is not without interest. It provides information regarding the Arab raids and their effect on the islands of the Aegean following the capture of Crete, which

Himerios' final campaign, which lasted from the summer of 911 to the spring of 912 and ended in the defeat and subsequent imprisonment of Himerios by Leo's successor, Alexander; see R. Jenkins, "The Date of Leo VI's Cretan Expedition," *Hellenika*, supp. 4 (1953), 277–81 (hereafter, Jenkins, "Cretan Expedition"). Most probably Niketas accompanied Himerios on the successful expedition of 910 which, as Jenkins suggests, might have sailed first to Crete to secure the neutrality of the Cretan Arabs before attacking Syria and sacking Laodikaia; see R. Jenkins, *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries* (New York, 1966), 210. On Himerios, a civil official who served as an admiral under Leo VI, see Jenkins, "Cretan Expedition," and V. Grumel, "La revolte d'Andronic Doux sous Leon VI. La victoire navale d'Himerius," *EO* 36 (1937), 202–7. On the expedition and its dating, see also Tsougarakis, *Byzantine Crete*, 52–55.

³ See Delehayé, "La Vie," 195–96; O. Karsay, "Der Jäger von Euboa," *Acta AntHung* 23 (1975), 10–11; L. G. Westerink, *Nicetas Magistros. Lettres d'un exilé* (Paris, 1973), 27–28 (hereafter, Westerink, *Nicetas*). For an incisive analysis of the views of Delehayé and Karsay, see A. Kazhdan, "Hagiographical Notes: 9. The Hunter or the Harlot?," *BZ* 78 (1985), 49–50 (hereafter, Kazhdan, "Hunter").

⁴ See Kazhdan, "Hunter," 50.

may have occurred sometime between 823 and 828;⁵ it describes Paros as an uninhabited island;⁶ it preserves the only surviving description by a Byzantine writer of the cathedral of Paros—an early Christian basilica later rebuilt by Justinian I (527–565);⁷ and through the prosopographical details it contains it helps to complete the portrait of the author who has been identified by L. G. Westerink with Niketas Magistros, a high-ranking official and man of letters who rose to prominence under Romanos I Lekapenos (920–944), following the marriage of his daughter, Sophia, to Romanos' son, Christopher.⁸

Niketas' reference to the death of Leo VI (886–912), “the truly fortunate emperor who took with him to the grave the <good> fortune of the Romans”

⁵ On the dates and effects of these raids, see V. Christides, “The Raids of the Moslems of Crete in the Aegean Sea, Piracy and Conquest,” *Byzantion* 51 (1981), 76–111. On the date(s) of the Arab conquest of Crete, see Christides, *Conquest of Crete*, 85–88. His views are criticized by Tsougarakis, *Byzantine Crete*, 30–41, who argues that the Arab conquest of Crete was a gradual process that cannot be dated precisely.

⁶ One must assume that the island had been fairly recently abandoned as a result of the Arab raids, since the presence of the basilica indicates a populated settlement from at least the early Christian period. See also note 7, below.

⁷ The Paros cathedral, dedicated to the Dormition of the Virgin (15 August) and located in the island's present capital, the town of Paroikia, has been known since the 17th century as Hekatontapyliane (the church of a Hundred Gates), a scholarly attempt to classicize the demotic Katapoliane. The latter is derived either from *καταπολα* (from *κατω* and *πολη*), “below the city,” seeing that the church is built on lower ground than the town (see H. H. Jewell and F. W. Hasluck, *The Church of our Lady of the Hundred Gates in Paros* [London, 1920], 3, with pertinent bibliography; hereafter Jewell and Hasluck), or more plausibly, from *καταπολια* (*κατα την πολη*), “in the direction of the city.” See P. Zerlentes, “Περί τοῦ ἀξιόπιστου τοῦ συναξαρίου Θεοκτιστῆς τῆς ὀσίας,” *BZ* 10 (1901), 162 (hereafter, Zerlentes) and G. N. Korres, *Ἡ Ἐκατονταπυλιανὴ τῆς Παροῦ* (Athens, 1954), 33–37 (hereafter, Korres). I have been unable to consult the most recent book on the church, T. C. Aliprantis, *Ἡ Ἐκατονταπυλιανὴ τῆς Παροῦ* (Thessalonike, 1993).

According to tradition, the original basilica was built by Constantine the Great (d. 337) at the request of his mother, St. Helen, who on her way to Jerusalem to search for the cross had been forced by inclement weather to seek refuge in Paros; cf. A. C. Orlandos, “La forme primitive de la cathedrale paleochretienne de Paros,” *Atti del VI Congresso Internazionale di Archeologia Cristiana, Ravenna 1962* (Vatican City, 1965), 159–68. On the surviving building, a domed basilica dating from the middle of the 6th century, see Jewell and Hasluck, and Korres.

⁸ For a biographical sketch of Niketas, see Westerink, *Nicetas*, 23–38. On the identification of Niketas with the author of the *Life* of Theoktiste, see *ibid.*, 41–46.

(Chap. 4), provides the terminus ante quem for the date of the *vita's* composition. As Westerink argues convincingly, such a statement would have been incongruous after 919, when the author himself became actively involved in the political fortunes of the Lekapenoi.⁹ It was, therefore, during the troubled period of the regency for Constantine VII (913–919) that Niketas most probably wrote the eulogy of Theoktiste and delivered it before an unspecified audience for the glory of God and the edification of others (Chaps. 2–3). Nearly half a century later, Symeon Metaphrastes included Niketas' work, anonymously and with some slight changes,¹⁰ in his own collection of saints' Lives, which later led to the assumption that Symeon was the author of the *Life* of Theoktiste.¹¹

Niketas' educational background is reflected in the elevated style of his composition, its elegant structure resembling a set of Chinese boxes, and his quotations of the church fathers and classical texts. His patristic citations include Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Cyril of Alexandria; he also quotes from or echoes Homer, Thucydides, Achilles Tatius, and Dio Chrysostom.

Despite the popularity of the *vita*, attested by the number of manuscripts that have preserved it,¹² no significant cult of Theoktiste is known to have developed. According to tradition, the saint's body was stolen by sailors from her native Lesbos, but was seized en route by the inhabitants of Ikaria, and it is on that Aegean island that the grave with her presumed relics is shown today.¹³ In the Paros cathedral, a small chapel is dedicated to her memory. However, both the chapel and the grave at its entrance, which the local people claim to be that of Theoktiste, date from the seventeenth century.¹⁴ Although she is the patron saint of Paros, only a small church has been erected there in

⁹ See Westerink, *Nicetas*, 27.

¹⁰ See Delehaye edition, *AASS*, Nov. 4:224–33. For other editions of the Metaphrastic *vita*, see *BHG* 1726.

¹¹ See Delehaye, "La Vie," 191–92.

¹² Citing only the most important, Delehaye lists twenty-seven manuscripts dating from the 11th to the 16th century; see *AASS*, Nov. 4:222.

¹³ It is in the church of a small monastery in the old municipality of Messaria (modern Frantato), whose inhabitants attribute miraculous powers to her remains. See Zerlentes, 164–65, and Korres, 44 n. 1.

¹⁴ See Korres, 80–81.

her honor¹⁵ and her cult did not spread to any other islands of the Aegean, with the exception of Ikaria and recently Lesbos.¹⁶ Her memory is celebrated on 9 November.

¹⁵ Built on the Hill of the Prophet Elias, this church dates from the mid-20th century; see Korres, 44 n. 1.

¹⁶ In 1960 some of her relics were transferred from Ikaria to Methymna, where a church was built in her honor; see I. Phountoules, Ἡ τιμὴ τῶν λειψάνων καὶ τῶν ταφῶν τῶν Λεσβίων ἁγίων (Mytilene, 1965), 27–28 (as quoted in Tsames, *Meterikon* 4:262 n. 51. Phountoules' book was unavailable to me.)

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[p. 224]

THE LIFE OF OUR BLESSED MOTHER THEOKTISTE OF LESBOS
WHO PRACTICED ASCETICISM AND DIED ON THE ISLAND
NAMED PAROS. WRITTEN BY NIKETAS THE MOST GLORIOUS
MAGISTROS.¹⁷

1.¹⁸ Praising that which is good and conducive to virtue and piety is a blessed <deed> and a trait of good and truly praiseworthy men. Eulogies arouse those who hear them and such a speech makes them strive for praise more than the ardor of athletes makes those who attend athletic contests <eager to emulate the contestants>. <Our> souls are, indeed, wont to develop and be trained by edifying discourse, just as our bodies by suitable exercise. For this reason a eulogy impels some to rise to bravery and, as if inspired by God, to seize their armor and seek their opponents; while others <it induces> to embrace justice and acclaim *fairness in distribution*¹⁹ <as justice> and devote their full attention to this matter and pursue the unjust. Others <it induces> to love moderation and exercise control over the pleasures <of the flesh> and strive to mortify <the part of the soul that is the seat of> desire. There are some whom emulation causes to turn eagerly to the religious life²⁰ [p. 225] and especially to the pursuit of asceticism,²¹ which trains and educates their character to walk *in the image of God*²² and be *like Him as much as is possible*²³ for human nature.

¹⁷ In the early 10th century fewer than twelve dignitaries bore this high-ranking title, which was above that of *anthypatos*. See R. Guiland, “Études sur l’histoire administrative de l’empire byzantin,” *EEBS* 39–40 (1972–73), 14–28.

¹⁸ The division into chapters is that of the translator, not the *AASS* edition.

¹⁹ In other words, “To each according to his deserts.” As already noted in Tsames, *Meterikon* 4:232 n. 2, Niketas is here quoting Basil of Caesarea, *Hom. 12*, In *Principium Proverborum* (PG 31:401D–404A): Ἐστὶ δὲ δικαιοσύνη, ἣ μὲν τις ἐν ἡμῖν στρεφομένη, ἢ τοῦ ἰσοῦ διανομή. *Ibid.*, 401B: Ἐπει οὖν ἐστὶ δικαιοσύνη ἐξίς ἀπονεμητικὴ τοῦ κατ’ ἀξίαν . . . On the same principle, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1131a.10–30.

²⁰ On this meaning of φιλοσοφία, see Lampe, *Lexicon*, s.v. 7.

²¹ On this meaning of πρακτική, see Lampe, *Lexicon*, s.v. 5.

²² Gen. 1:26.

²³ Cf. Plato, *Theaetetus*, 176b.

<Emulation encourages them> to scorn the transient; to *neglect the body*;²⁴ to rise above the earth and soar up to *heaven where our citizenship is*²⁵ and Christ, *the head of the entire body*.²⁶ For to be pious is first and foremost to worship God by an upright and blameless way of life, following the teachings of the blessed apostles and fathers in the hope of <attaining> the everlasting life and kingdom <of Heaven>. This is how speeches that praise the good and extol the noble move the audience to emulate those who are praised, just as on the other hand evil <talk> corrupts the ears <of the audience>, going through the body like a pestilence. For “*evil communications*,” says <the apostle>, “*corrupt good manners*.”²⁷

2. For this reason, I, too, came forward bringing to you the profit to be derived from the present story, which will be the cause of many benefits and will deserve to be remembered and written down. For both God will be honored *Who honors those who honor Him*,²⁸ as is written somewhere in the Holy Scriptures, and those who hear the story will deem blessed the person [i.e., Theoktiste] who performed this important deed and wish to emulate <this person>. For one of the great men says: “You should call blessed him who deserves to be called blessed that you may become like him by inclination and be called blessed without exertions and trials.”²⁹ Furthermore, we always seek to emulate those whom we praise, for it is evident that one desires what he praises while, on the contrary, he ridicules what he despises.

3. Since this is the case and what has been said proves the great benefit of edifying stories, I beg you, my devout <audience>, to incline your ears to the present topic and, setting aside your worldly cares, to listen with a pure heart to this grand tale. Still, I do not know how I forgot myself and proceeded to write such a story, seeing that by my words and deeds I am far removed from what I describe and am aware that such compositions befit other men whose exertions and lives rival those of the persons they praise. Nevertheless, since there is also a reward for obedience and obedience leads to salvation and is deemed blessed, I should reasonably be acquitted of the charge of arro-

²⁴ Cf. Col. 2:23.

²⁵ Phil. 3:20.

²⁶ Cf. Col. 1:18.

²⁷ 1 Cor. 15:33.

²⁸ 1 Ki. 2:30.

²⁹ As suggested in Tsames, *Meterikon* 4:234 n. 9, this is a paraphrase of Basil of Caesarea, *In sanctos quadraginta martyres*, PG 31:508B.

gance. For I am carrying out the command of a man who was dedicated to God from childhood and chose to dwell in the wilderness like the great <prophet> Elijah and John <the Baptist>, *the greatest of all men born of women*.³⁰ But let us start the story from the beginning. For it is now time to recount it to you, since you have been sufficiently prepared to hear it.

4. I was once on <the island of> Paros. I happened to land there while sailing to Crete, dispatched by the pious emperor³¹ of blessed memory, the truly fortunate <emperor> who took with him to the grave the <good> fortune of the Romans. I was being sent on a campaign with the renowned Himerios, the most excellent general and commander of the *dromos*³² and of the entire fleet and, to speak more truly, of the passions themselves. But lest I dishonor the man by making the account of his campaign, which deserves many praises, secondary to this <story>, after this brief reference to him here, I will pass over in silence his achievements, which are beyond words. For I will remember the general in due time, while now I will go on with the present story.

5. <As I was saying>, I was sent <with Himerios> partly to campaign with him and make progress in the exercise of command, skipping along, like a colt by the side of its mother, toward the <mastery> of the best strategies—for such was the intent of my late emperor—and partly to serve as an ambassador to the Arab conquerors of Crete. [p. 226] But as I was approaching the island of Ios, the onset of headwinds halted our advance and we sailed towards Paros, to observe incidentally the situation of the island and to see the church of our Lady the Mother of God,³³ which is there.

6. Having come to anchor in the harbor that faces toward <the island of> Naxos (this harbor gets deeper gently and gradually and naturally retreats from the waves, as if it were built for that purpose, being enclosed in the hollow of the mountain, so that ships can pass the winter or the summer there comfortably),³⁴ we disembarked and, after a short walk, arrived at the church. We

³⁰ Cf. Mt. 11:11; Lk. 7:28.

³¹ Leo VI the Wise (886–912).

³² Himerios held the office of *logothetes tou dromou*, whose duties in the 10th century were those of a minister of foreign affairs; see D. A. Miller, “The Logothete of the Drome in the Middle Byzantine Period,” *Byzantion* 36 (1966), 438–70. The *dromos* was the system of imperial post and transportation.

³³ For discussion of this church, see introduction, above, p. 97 and note 7.

³⁴ The harbor of the modern town of Paroikia (ancient city of Paros). As Zerlentes notes (p. 162), Niketas’ knowledge of geography is deficient in this instance, for the

burned incense, offered the customary prayers, and walked around the church in wonder. For it was indeed worth seeing and preserved vestiges of its old beauty. Built in perfect symmetry on all sides, it was supported by numerous columns of royal marble.³⁵ Every wall was covered with sawn marble similar to that of the columns. The artisan had carved (lit. “woven”) the marble so fine as to give the impression that the wall was dressed in cloth of fine linen.³⁶ The marble gleamed with such translucence and sparkle as to surpass even the luster of pearls. That is how superior was <the quality of> the marble or rather the zeal of the artisan who strove to bestow additional beauty on nature.

7. But when we saw the ciborium over the venerable and holy altar inside the gate <of the sanctuary>, we were astonished at the delightful <sight>.³⁷

harbor is situated on the west coast of the island and therefore does not face Naxos as he claims.

³⁵ βασιλικός λίθος, literally “royal stone.” The reference must be to Parian marble, the finest marble found in Greece. On λίθος meaning marble, especially when accompanied by such adjectives as λευκός, πολυτελής, πριστός, see Demetrakos, *Lexikon*, s.v. λίθος, πριστός. On the phrase τιμία λίθος meaning “Parian marble,” see Stephanus, *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, s.v. λίθος.

It should be noted that Cyril Mango translates βασιλικός λίθος in this passage as “imperial marble” (*The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312–1453* [Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1972], 104 and n. 238), thus assuming that both the columns and the veneer of the walls of the church were of porphyry. However, Niketas’ comparison of the marble’s “translucence and sparkle” to the “luster of pearls” (Chap. 6) indicates that the marble was white. In their exhaustive studies of the Paros cathedral, Jewell and Hasluck (pp. 4, 11) and Korres (p. 43) also share this view. Furthermore, the extant columns are of white marble. According to Jewell and Hasluck (pp. 10 and 35)—who do not question the fact that the present columns are the original ones—their shafts are of cipollino marble while the capitals are of Parian marble. Korres (p. 75) is more cautious in dating the columns, but he too agrees that on the south side of the nave arcade the original ones have been preserved. Of the marble veneer of the walls no trace has survived (Jewell and Hasluck, 11).

³⁶ Mango translates ἐξ ὑφασμάτων βυσσίνων as “purple fabric” instead of “fine linen.” βυσσίνος can indeed mean either “purple” or “linen”; I have adopted the latter meaning here, as being more appropriate for walls sheathed in marble.

³⁷ The Paros cathedral is known for its ciborium, a structure in the form of a canopy supported by columns and placed over the altar as a symbol of Christ’s tomb. One of the few and finest to survive from the Byzantine era, this ciborium was damaged either by an earthquake or, as Niketas and the local tradition claim, by an Arab raid. See Jewell and Hasluck, 42–43, and Korres, 88–91. On its recent restoration, see Korres, 90.

For the carving did not seem to be made of marble nor wrought by <human> hands with <tools of> iron and skill. <It looked>, instead, as if <it had been made> out of milk mixed with the juice of the fig tree <in order to thicken> and had been cast in the shape of a canopy. Made of such stone I saw once <a statue of> Selene [i.e., the goddess of the moon] driving a chariot drawn by bulls.³⁸ The <ciborium> lay broken in pieces and we ran up to it and stood before it, uttering all manner of curses and revilement at the man who smashed it, for it was surely a treasure and an heirloom and offering worthy of the house of God.

8. While we were standing there in amazement, crying out against the man who shattered it, all of a sudden we saw coming toward us a monk who had emerged from the wilderness and was stepping forward from the grove. His face was pale, his cheeks drawn, his feet bare, and he was all shriveled up. He was wearing a hair shirt, a cape and headcover similar to the shirt, and a leather belt around his waist. He was as hairy as a beast, as kind as an angel. For he did not look like a man who *lived on bread*,³⁹ but like someone without flesh, almost *without blood*,⁴⁰ in a word, like the *abode* of virtues or even of *God Himself*.⁴¹ As he approached, he greeted us and we greeted him in return and urged him to tell us who he was, about his homeland and family lineage, and whether he lived here alone. “I have nothing to say,” he answered, “about a homeland and family lineage and all the other things upon which city-dwellers pride themselves. Nor do I have any worldly concerns or find pleasure in things transient. God is my father and master for Whom alone I live and practice asceticism. For His sake I have persevered for more than thirty years, wandering alone in this wilderness. My name is Symeon and my rank is that of a lowly monk, priest, servant, and minister of the live⁴² and bloodless sacrifice.”

³⁸ Cf. *Achilles Tatius, Leucippe and Clitophon*, ed. E. Vilborg (Stockholm, 1955), I.4.3, p. 6.1–2 (hereafter, Achilles Tatius).

³⁹ σιτοφαγος, epithet used by Homer to describe Polyphemos the Cyclops; cf. *Od.* 9:191.

⁴⁰ Homer, *Il.* 5:342; “bloodless” is used here to describe the Olympian gods.

⁴¹ Cf. Constantinus Diaconus, *Laudatio omnium martyrum*, 39 (PG 88:524A).

⁴² I have tentatively translated ζωοθυτου θυσιας as “live sacrifice.” I am deeply grateful to Professor Demetrios Tsames of the University of Thessalonike who pointed out to me that the adjective ζωοθυτος, although unattested in the dictionaries, is found in the ninth Ode sung during matins on Easter Sunday, where Christ is called “the live victim” (Χριστος το ζωοθυτον θυμα). See Th. Sakellariou, “Η αγια και μεγαλη εβδομας

9. Out of respect for the man's virtue, his words, his appearance and <monastic> habit, as well as for his asceticism, but above all for the fact that he was a priest of God, we fell at his feet and begged him to pray <for us> and for the forgiveness <of our sins on the day> of judgment.⁴³ He both prayed and spoke words of comfort. He urged us to *take heed to ourselves*⁴⁴ and not to be discouraged, saying, "God is compassionate and long-suffering and receives into His arms those who return like the prodigal."⁴⁵ By these and other such words he comforted us and then he fell silent. I, however, being more inquisitive and anxious to know better the man's character, begged and implored the great man to instruct us about some of the things that are mysterious to us, for he seemed to me to be in communion with the Divinity. But he said, "Enough of this! I have not yet been deemed worthy of such <revelations>. I withdrew to this <wilderness> to mourn my <sins>, [p. 227] not to seek what is above me."

10. I cannot tell whether he was feigning or telling the truth when he said this. Nevertheless, he seized my hand and pressed it, as if he were an old acquaintance; this is what his simple disposition prompted him to do. For when the souls of great men are in communion with the highest power, they strive to become like it and, through communion with the Original Good, they become good in every way, pure, simple, removed from all our <affectations>, just like this great man who, by being gracious and good, appeared in his unaffected manner to be one of us. And then, on a sudden impulse, he asked me to sit down. There were some fallen blocks and columns as well as thick green grass and a spring gushing out fresh water and the whole place was filled with quiet and was *suitable for godly tales*.⁴⁶

11. Having sat down on the grass and seated me beside him, he seemed to be pleased with our chance encounter. So I looked at him and said, "Now is the time, father, for you to tell me anything good and deserving to be recounted that you may have witnessed here. But do start by telling me

(Thessalonike, n. d.), 304. On ζωοθυτεῖω meaning "to sacrifice live victims," see Liddell-Scott, *Lexicon*, s.v.

⁴³ I suspect that a phrase like ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ has fallen out before τῆς διαγνώσεως. For διαγνώσις with the meaning of "Last Judgment," cf. Lampe, *Lexicon*, s.v. I.2.

⁴⁴ Cf. Lk. 17:3.

⁴⁵ Cf. Lk. 15:11–25.

⁴⁶ Achilles Tatius, I.2.3, p. 4.12–13.

first⁴⁷ who was the man who broke the cover of the divine altar and what beastly soul dared to smash such a masterpiece.” (For I had in mind to lead him little by little to more exalted topics.)

12. He answered thus: “Have you heard of the notorious Nisiris,⁴⁸ the commander of the Cretan navy? He came here in person and, astonished at the beauty <of the ciborium>, planned to carry it off to Crete. He measured the doors <of the sanctuary>⁴⁹ and then this holy and divine ciborium and decided that the deed could be easily accomplished. He lowered <the ciborium> to the ground and was dragging it to the doors <of the sanctuary> to take it out, but <the ciborium> immediately grew in size. He dug through the wall and, after taking the measurements, he tried again to take it out. But <the ciborium> kept getting bigger and bigger and this happened many times until the Arab gave up. Since despite his efforts he failed to attain his objective—for it seems that the divine object did not deign to be defiled and become an instrument of foul sacrifices, for rumor has it that he was eager to dedicate it to the mosque of the Agarenes⁵⁰—he went into a frenzy and decided to smash it.” When I heard this, I railed at that murderous and thrice accursed <Arab>. But <the holy man> said, “Never mind! He was indeed punished for his insolence shortly thereafter. <His ship> was dashed to pieces against the cape of Euboea called Xylophagos⁵¹ and he perished beneath the sea.”

13. I then begged that holy man to partake of our food and to relieve our anxiety over the voyage and its progress. For we feared that we were wasting time because adverse winds were blowing against us. He partook <of our food> and without concealing anything, he said to me: “You will sail across to Naxos and after lying in harbor there for one day, you will sail away on the

⁴⁷ It should be noted that *κατάλεξον* is a favorite Homeric expression, used twenty-six times in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to introduce a tale; cf., e.g., *Il.* 10:384.

⁴⁸ Nisiris (a Hellenized form of the Arabic Nasr), who is also mentioned in Chap. 18, is otherwise unknown. As Westerink (p. 45) suggests, he was probably modeled on such historical figures as the early 10th-century Arab commanders Leo of Tripoli and Damian.

⁴⁹ Or possibly “<of the church>.”

⁵⁰ Presumably a mosque in Chandax on Crete. Virtually nothing is known of buildings constructed in Crete during the period of Muslim occupation; cf. Christides, *Conquest of Crete*, 121–22.

⁵¹ Literally, the “wood [i.e., ship] eater”; Cape Kaphereus, at the southeastern end of the island. On this incident, see Tsougarakis, *Byzantine Crete*, 45 and n. 89.

second day and reach Crete on the third, without having to fear any hardship. You will carry out your mission in accordance with your wish and the emperor's order, and when you return home you will be well received by him who sent you." All this was indeed fulfilled and accomplished later as he predicted. For, after praying and singing hymns at the church, we went down to the ships with the great old man, and early the next morning we crossed over to Naxos, the width of the strait being approximately ten *stadia*.⁵²

14. <The holy man> celebrated the divine liturgy, administered to us the holy sacraments, and partook of food with us. Then he began to speak to me <as follows>: "You may perhaps offer some excuses regarding a request that I wish to submit to you, my devout <friend>. You may claim the lack of literary training or your concern about your duties or the care of your wife and children and home, or you may find some other reason for evading my request. But I promise you happiness and prosperity [p. 228] and an abundance of everything and much leisure. And I implore you to remember my words at that time and write down what occurred here, for it deserves to be remembered and recounted so that our God may be magnified and glorified by those who hear this <story>. For <the psalmist> says, '*God is wonderful in His holy places*'.⁵³ Moreover, many will emulate those glorified for their virtue and obtain equal <rewards> and you yourself will be rewarded because of them."

15. After these exhortations, he began his tale: "A few years ago some hunters came here from Euboea,⁵⁴ for the island <of Paros> has an abundance of game, deer, and wild goats. One of the hunters, a pious man who was very much concerned with his <spiritual salvation>,⁵⁵ recounted an extraordinary story of the majesty of God Who performs at times *strange and wondrous*

⁵² The actual width of the strait is 2.8 nautical miles, i.e., 28 *stadia* and 4 feet. See Zerlentes, 163.

⁵³ Ps. 67 (68):35.

⁵⁴ Although Niketas' account contains no direct quotations from Dio Chrysostom's *Euboikos*—a well-known story about a family of hunters from Euboea—there can be no doubt that in choosing to portray the hunter as a native of Euboea Niketas was influenced by Dio. His quotations from Achilles Tatius (see nn. 37 and 45) suggest that he was familiar with the romances of late antiquity. On his library of classical authors, see Westerink, *Nicetas*, 33–34.

⁵⁵ Literally, "taking heed for himself"; cf. Lk. 17:3 and Basil of Caesarea, Προσεχε σεαυτῷ, PG 31:197c–217b.

works.⁵⁶ ‘Once upon a time,’ said <this hunter>, ‘I came here to hunt and, as was my custom always, I went up to worship and pray at the holy church of the Mother of God. Having said my prayers, I looked around and saw a few lupine <seeds>⁵⁷ soaking in water in a shallow hole in the ground—for they grow on this island, just as other plants grow on other islands. One island produces an abundance of fennel with its widely spreading shoots, while another produces only rue, and another savory or thyme or some other herb. But each island has its special product that grows and flourishes there better than anything else—as I was saying>, I saw the lupine <seeds> being softened and I reckoned that someone, no doubt, had placed them in that hole and that he must be a holy man to live in this wilderness. I was thinking of this as I hastened to catch up with my companions who had already advanced into the forest, and I was praying that I would come across this great quarry, *for I was hoping to gain therefrom something very important.*⁵⁸

16. ‘Having bagged a lot of game, we started our return to the ship. But while my companions walked in the direction of the sea, I turned aside to pursue <the object of> my prayer. I went into the church of our Lady and, as I was praying, I saw to the right of the church’s holy altar something that resembled a thread being blown by the wind. I thought at the moment that I was seeing a spider’s web, but when I decided to step forward and determine what was there, I heard a voice saying, “Stay, <my good> man! Do not go further, nor come closer! For *being a woman, I am ashamed to show myself to you in my nakedness.*”⁵⁹ When I heard this I was astounded by the unexpected <voice> and wished to flee. For the hairs rose on my flesh and were sharper than a thorn. For when something *unexpected* appears suddenly, *it enthralls the spirit <of a man>*,⁶⁰ and even if one thinks of himself as fearless, when taken

⁵⁶ Sir. 43:25.

⁵⁷ For a parallel to lupine seeds as a food for ascetics, cf. the *vita* of Symeon the Fool, ed. L. Ryden, *Das Leben des heiligen Narren Symeon von Leontios von Neapolis* (Uppsala, 1963), 146.13, 153.6.

⁵⁸ See *Vita Mariae Aegyptiae*, PG 87.3:3705B (hereafter, *Vita Mariae*). Italics indicate passages borrowed—albeit not verbatim—from the above work.

⁵⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 3705D.

⁶⁰ Cf. Thucydides, 2:61.3. The translation of this phrase is borrowed from *Thucydides. The Peloponnesian War*, trans. B. Jowett (New York, N. Y., 1960), 128.

by surprise, he stands with his mouth agape. When I recovered, I plucked up courage to ask who she was and how she came to be living in the wilderness. Again a voice reached me saying, “*Throw me a cloak*,⁶¹ I beg you, and when I have covered myself, I will not hesitate to tell all that God bids me <to say>.” Right away I took off my outer garment, left it and ran out the door. She took it, put it on, and when I returned after a while, I saw her standing in her original position.

17. ‘She had the shape of a woman but the appearance of a superhuman being. *Her hair was white; her face was black*⁶² with an underlying tinge of whiteness; the skin alone kept the bones in place, for there was hardly any flesh. She was almost a shadow, the shape alone resembling a human being. When I saw this (he said), I was afraid, I trembled, I reproached myself, I cursed the ill-timing <of this encounter>, for by being over-curious I was left behind by my companions. Trembling all over, I threw myself on the ground, begged for her prayers, and entreated her to bless me. She first turned towards the east, wishing perhaps to set my mind at ease so that *I would not suppose she was an apparition*,⁶³ and *stretching up her hands she prayed in a faint whisper*.⁶⁴ Then she turned to me and said, “May God have mercy on you, sir! But for what reason did you come to this wilderness? What necessity has brought you to an uninhabited island? [p. 229] But seeing that the divine will brought you here—*for the sake of my humility, I believe*⁶⁵—I will tell you all about my life, as you requested.”

18. *Again I prostrated myself on the ground*,⁶⁶ begging her to go on <with her story>, and she began to tell <me about herself> thus: “My homeland is Lesbos, the city of Methymna. My name is Theoktiste and I am a nun by profession. Having been orphaned while still a very young child, I was entrusted to a nunnery by my relatives and assumed the monastic habit. When I was nearly eighteen years of age, I went to a village near the city <of Methymna> to visit my sister during the Easter season, for she lived near that village with her husband. But one night, Arabs from Crete under their leader,

⁶¹ Cf. *Vita Mariae*, 3705D.

⁶² Cf. *ibid.*, 3705A.

⁶³ Cf. *ibid.*, 3709A.

⁶⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 3708D.

⁶⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 3708C.

⁶⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 3709A.

the notorious Nisiris,⁶⁷ raided <the village> and took everyone prisoner. At dawn, after chanting the song of victory, they set sail and came to anchor at this island <of Paros>. They brought out the prisoners, and started to assess and settle the price <of each prisoner>. But I made up an excuse and, going toward the forest, I fled running into the interior of the island. Indeed, I did not stop running until I had torn my feet to pieces, piercing them with stones and sharp twigs, and had stained the ground with my blood. Exhausted finally, I collapsed half-dead and spent the whole night in misery, unable to bear the pain from my wounds. But in the morning when I saw the abominable people sailing away, I was released from all pain and filled with so much joy as I cannot describe. And since that time—a little over thirty-five years already—I have lived here, subsisting on lupine <seeds> and *other herbs that grow in the wilderness*,⁶⁸ or rather on the word of God, keeping in mind the divine saying that *man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God*.⁶⁹ I am naked, of course, for the ragged habit in which I was taken prisoner *was torn to pieces*,⁷⁰ but I am dressed and *covered* by the hand of God which sustains the Universe.⁷¹ With these words, she raised her eyes to heaven and gave thanks. She stood at a distance for a while and then, as she saw me *staring at the ground very quietly*,⁷² not even daring to look at her, she started to speak again: “I have told you my story, sir. I ask you now to repay me with one favor for the Lord’s sake. Whenever in the coming year you are going to sail to this island for hunting (I know for sure that you will be back, God willing), *place in a clean vessel a portion of the most pure gifts, the body of our Lord Jesus Christ. For since I began to live in the wilderness I have not had the privilege of receiving this gift*.⁷³ Having said this and *enjoined me not to tell anyone at all about our <meeting>*,⁷⁴ she sent me back to my companions with her blessing. I agreed to fulfill all <her requests> and left rejoicing because God had satisfied my longing, finding me worthy to attain such treasure.

⁶⁷ Cf. note 48, above.

⁶⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 3717c.

⁶⁹ Deut. 8:3; Mt. 4:4.

⁷⁰ Cf. *Vita Mariae*, 3717c.

⁷¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 3717d.

⁷² Cf. *ibid.*, 3708d.

⁷³ Cf. *ibid.*, 3720bc.

⁷⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 3720b.

19. ‘In accordance with the command of the blessed woman, when I was again ready to go hunting with my companions for deer and wild goats—the latter are numerous on the island <of Paros> and grow bigger than on any other <island>,⁷⁵ a marvel to behold and describe. For their skin is almost like that of deer, but they are bigger in size than deer and their horn is up to *sixteen palms long*.⁷⁶ Unlike that of deer, it is not embellished with offshoots and branches, but the entire horn is straight and protrudes in one piece—as I was just saying, when I was about to sail away and go on a hunt, I took in a small box a portion of the divine flesh of the Lord⁷⁷ to bring to the blessed one. But when I reached the island and turned aside to the house of the Mother of God, I failed to find her. Whether she was there but hiding because some of my companions had come up with me <to the church>, or was not there I cannot tell; only that I did not find her. The others then hurried to the forest to start hunting, [p. 230] but I slipped away and returned to the church. Right away, the holy woman appeared wearing *the cloak which she received from me*⁷⁸ on my previous <visit>. As I threw myself on the ground, she ran <toward me> and in tears called to me from afar: “*Never do that, sir, when you are carrying the divine gift!*”⁷⁹ Do not burn me, wretched that I am, by dishonoring the divine <sacraments>.” Taking hold of my tunic, she helped me to my feet and I took from my bosom the small box with the Lord’s flesh. And she, falling to the ground, received the divine <eucharist> and lamenting and watering the earth with her tears, cried out, “*Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart <in peace according to Thy word>; for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation.*”⁸⁰ For I have received in my hands the forgiveness of my sins. Now I shall go wherever Thy power ordaineth.” Having said this, she stretched up her hands to heaven for a long time and sent me back to my companions with her blessing.

20. ‘We hunted for a few days, bagged an abundance of game, and started out on our return. My companions hurried down to the boat, but I ran to

⁷⁵ Or, “grow bigger than any other <goats>”?

⁷⁶ Cf. Homer, *Il.* 4:109.

⁷⁷ Cf. *Vita Mariae*, 3721A.

⁷⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 3725A.

⁷⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 3721B. Although this episode closely follows that in the *Life* of Mary of Egypt when Zosimas brings Mary the eucharist, there is a significant change in that Zosimas was a priest, whereas here it is a mere hunter who conveys the sacraments.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 3721C, quoting Lk. 2:29–30.

receive the blessing of the blessed one as a companion on my journey. When I came to the church and looked around for her, I saw her lying dead on the spot where I had previously seen her <standing>. Falling <to the ground>, I kissed her venerable *feet and watered them with my tears*,⁸¹ and <then> remained there speechless for a long time wondering what to do. It would have been sensible and expedient as well, if I had begged God with tears and implored the blessed woman and asked <them> how to dispose of this matter properly and, in accordance with <their decree>, ministered to the divine command. Had I failed to obtain this <divine guidance>, I should have done the *next best thing*,⁸² as they say, I should have told the story to my companions, and with their assistance placed in a grave the remains of the blessed one and sung the <burial> hymns as best we could. But it seems that prudence is not an easy prey. Hence I, too, failed to do what was right and proper. Out of boorishness and simple-mindedness—indeed, being a hunter and an ignorant man, I could not have thought of anything different—I did a foolhardy thing, because of faith, as I believed, but it seems that it was not pleasing to God. For I cut off her hand, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and went back to the ship.⁸³

21. ‘Late that evening, we put out from the land, set sail, and were on our way. Since favorable breezes were blowing, we were flying, so to speak, before a fair wind, and expected to reach Euboea by morning. But at daybreak we found ourselves back in the same harbor, as if the ship were held fast by an anchor or a sea monster. Fear and terror seized us all, and we looked at one another trembling, as we sought to determine the cause of this delay. We examined and questioned <one another> to find out whether we had committed an unforgivable <offense> and were held back for that reason. While one man said one thing and the other said another, being at a loss, I realized what a foolhardy thing I had done and, escaping the notice of all <my companions>, I ran up to the church, placed the hand by the saint’s [p. 231] body and returned to the boat. After giving <words of> encouragement, I started on my journey with my companions. When we were far out at sea—for the ship was flying like a bird, with the sail belling out with wind, on a straight and unimpeded course—I told my companions what had happened; how I had found the

⁸¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 3725A.

⁸² Apostolius, *Centuria*, 5:98 (Leutsch-Schneidewin, *Corpus*, 2:362).

⁸³ The hunter was evidently so overwhelmed by his desire to possess a relic of the holy woman that he neglected his duty to perform Christian burial of her corpse.

blessed one and how she had recounted the story of her life and about the holy communion and her death. I also told them that I had boarded the ship the <previous> evening with the saint's hand in my possession and that for this reason perhaps we were held back although we expected to sail away. And that now we were rightly proceeding on a straight course because I had put the relic back.

22. 'Having heard this, they reproached me a great deal and, putting the ship about at once, they hastened to return to Paros. All of us together went running up to the church. Fearful and trembling, but with the confidence of faith we approached and found that the place where she had been lying preserved <traces of> the shape of her body, so to speak, but her corpse had vanished. Dismay and terror seized us all and we ran hither and thither, looking round about carefully lest she had been moved or come back to life. We ran around the entire forest and the groves seeking to discover if that divine treasure was perhaps hiding somewhere. <We were> wretched and foolish and thick-skinned men, *running after what can never be captured*,⁸⁴ for we were altogether uninitiated into the miracles of God. We were not troubled by <thoughts of> the miracle of Elisha who, standing in the middle of the men sent by the Syrian king to arrest him, remained undetected, for he enveloped them in blindness and led them to Samaria and delivered them to the king.⁸⁵ Not to mention the great miracle-worker [Gregory the Wonderworker] who, by turning himself into a tree while he was praying on the mountain, escaped the men tracking him down to arrest him.⁸⁶ So (he said), having failed to find the remains of the blessed woman, we went back to the ship, weighed anchor and went home, glorifying and praising God Who works wonders and miracles always.'"

23. The blessed and great man [Symeon] recounted these things just as I related them above and received my sworn assurance that I would not cast them in the depth of oblivion nor would I make up excuses for keeping silent about the miracle, fearing both divine retribution and the wrath of the blessed one. When I inquired about the year and day of her death that it might be written down together with the miracle and that her commemoration might be celebrated, the holy man answered: "As you see, my friend, many details

⁸⁴ Homer, *Il.* 17:75.

⁸⁵ 4 Ki. 6:18.

⁸⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita S. Gregorii thaumaturgi*, PG 46:948c.

were left out of my account. For I should have discussed her lineage and all her ascetic exertions and suffering on the island [p. 232] and how she struggled against the assaults of <spiritual> enemies. But what can I do? The man who met the great <Theoktiste> was not like the great Zosimas⁸⁷ who knew how to investigate the lives and struggles and achievements <of saints>; on the contrary, he was a man of the mountains, obtuse and ignorant of such things. This alone he remembered, as he said, that <her death> occurred in the fall, around November.⁸⁸ Still it would be desirable to write down the Life of the blessed one and not bury it in the depth of oblivion. As for her commemoration, important people and zealous admirers <of the saint> will, no doubt, assign to it a feastday at the proper time, as they please. For what additional fame and glory can eulogies and celebrations bestow on those who have inherited the kingdom of heaven and the everlasting blessings, *which things* the hosts of *angels desire to look into*,⁸⁹ except, of course, that <eulogies can add> zeal to persons of understanding and glory to God and the blessing of those <saints> who are commemorated. For they whose life glorified them are rightly blessed and honored when their life is proclaimed.” With these instructions and gentle admonitions that great man sent us on our way. And since the winds were fair, we reached <the island of> Dia⁹⁰ on the following day.

24. This was the conspicuous profit of our visit to Paros, this was the unexpected gain of our Cretan expedition, that is, this Life of the blessed Theoktiste, this <story of> her ascetic discipline and her *contest* and battle *against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world*.⁹¹ As for me, I have come forward to honor obedience and to repay a debt. What will the benefits of this be? Many and various, but the following three will be the most important: <it will serve as> a hymn, thanksgiving, and praise of God *Who brings about and bestows*⁹² <these blessings>; the saint will be pronounced blessed as a result of this eulogy and her memory will be hon-

⁸⁷ Zosimas was the ordained monk who discovered St. Mary of Egypt in the desert; cf. *vita* 3 above, Chaps. 11–12.

⁸⁸ This suggests that the autumn was hunting season.

⁸⁹ 1 Pet. 1:12.

⁹⁰ Dia (modern Standia) is a small island just north of Crete; cf. E. Malamut, *Les îles de l'empire byzantin* (Paris, 1988), 554.

⁹¹ Eph. 6:12.

⁹² Cyril of Alexandria, *Explanatio in Ps. 6.11*, PG 69:748c.

ored and acclaimed every year; and Jesus Christ our munificent and great God will bestow on us who wrote it a lavish reward for our zeal, [p. 233] through the intercessions of His all-immaculate Mother, the Theotokos, the godlike angels and all the saints. For His is the glory together with the Father and the all-holy Spirit, now and unto everlasting generations. Amen.