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6. LIFE OF ST. ATHANASIA OF AEGINA

translated by Lee Francis Sherry

Introduction

In contrast to the virginal St. Elisabeth who became a nun at a youthful age, after successfully resisting her father's efforts to marry her off, Athanasia entered a convent following a period of married life. Her *vita*, like that of Matrona, Theodora of Thessalonike, and several other holy women in this volume, demonstrates that in Byzantium marriage was not viewed as an impediment to future sanctity. Indeed, Athanasia was married not once but twice, although involuntarily in both instances according to her hagiographer. After she and her second husband reached a mutual agreement of separation in order to adopt the monastic habit, her saintly qualities were manifested in her leadership of her convent; in her teaching, asceticism, and visions; and by the miraculous cures effected by her relics.

The daughter of Niketas and Irene, Christian nobles on the Greek island of Aegina, Athanasia received a standard education consisting of readings in the psalter and Holy Scripture. Her parents forced her into a marriage that proved to be short-lived, as her husband soon fell victim to an Arab raid against the island. Subsequently, an imperial edict was issued ordering unmarried women and widows to marry foreigners, and for a second time her parents forced her to wed. After some years of married life she persuaded her husband that they should withdraw from the world and take monastic vows. Her second husband died in this holy state. Meanwhile Athanasia assembled a group of pious women of the island, and they were tonsured by a presbyter who provided them a convent. After about four years she reluctantly accepted the office of mother superior, but continued to maintain an ascetic way of life with regard to food, sleep, and dress. Four years later the superior of a local monastery, with the permission of the bishop, offered the women a new site for their convent called Timia, where there was an ancient church of Stephen the Protomartyr.

Athanasia's future sanctity was manifested in heavenly visions of a man

gleaming in a cloud and a voice which told her to pursue humility and meekness. Her ascent to the heights of virtue was proved by the only healing miracle of her lifetime, the cure of a man with an eye disease, an affliction from which she herself had also suffered previously.

Athanasia built three churches on Aegina: one to the Theotokos, one to John the Baptist, and one to Nicholas of Myra. This construction activity provides evidence of a flourishing economy on the island before its eventual abandonment sometime in the second half of the ninth century as a consequence of Arab raids.

At an unspecified date Athanasia went on business to Constantinople, where she stayed in a monastery for nearly seven years.¹ A dream sent her back to Aegina and she fell ill shortly after arriving home. She died within twelve days on the feast of the Dormition of the Virgin, 15 August, which was to become her original day of commemoration. Her tomb was thereafter the source of many healing miracles. One year after her death her relics were exhumed and transferred to a coffin in open view. It is possible that there was yet another transfer of the holy relics, originally commemorated on 13 April.²

Athanasia is known only from this *vita*, which is preserved in a single manuscript, Vaticanus Graecus 1660, of A.D. 916.³ Her exact dates remain un-

¹ L. Carras ("The Life of St. Athanasia of Aegina," *Maistor* [Canberra, 1984], 199–200) suggests that she may have had a connection to the Stoudios monastery in Constantinople, because the surviving manuscript of the *vita* is a menologion of that monastery.

² The text of her *vita* is preserved in a menologion for the month of April. The date of 13 April was later moved in the Orthodox calendar to 18 April; in the West she was commemorated on 14 August, as the result of a misunderstanding of the actual day of her death.

³ The date is fairly secure from the colophon at the end of the manuscript: τετέλεσται ἡ παρούσα βιβλος μηνι μαρτιῳ κα' ἰνδ. δ' ετος κοσμου ςυκδ' γραφεῖσα δια χειρος Ἰωαννου ταπεινοῦ και ἐλαχιστου μοναχοῦ, ἐπι Ἀνατολιου τοῦ ὀσιωτατου ἡγουμενου τῶν Στουδίου ("This present book was completed on the twenty-first of March in the fourth indiction of the *annus mundi* 6424 [A.D. 916] by the hand of John the humble and least <of> monk<s>, in the abbotship of the most holy Anatolios of the monastery of Stoudios"). The manuscript reading of the world year 6424 is correct, and does indeed correspond with the fourth indiction. The editor of the *vita* of Niketas of Medikion (the last *vita* in the manuscript) mistakenly read the indiction date as alpha (i.e., first indiction), which has caused others to erroneously emend the delta of the world date to alpha to make the *annus mundi* and indiction dates coincide. The date is also corroborated by the beginning date of Anatolios' second abbotship in 916 (or more likely the first abbotship of a different Anatolios).

certain, but based on the internal evidence of the *Life* she must have lived at the time of the early Arab raids on the Aegean islands in the first half of the ninth century.⁴ The famous monk Ioannikios⁵ (752/4 or 762–846) had passed through Aegina before the beginning of Athanasia’s monastic career and had predicted that a place on the island called Timia (worthy of honor) would be honored (τιμηθῆναι) by a future burial in it of some holy corpses⁶ (presumably Athanasia and some of her companions).⁷ This chronology also coincides with the first allusions in Byzantine sources to the Athinganoi (heretics to whom Athanasia gave assistance during a famine on Aegina) during the reigns of Nikephoros I (802–811), under whom they were in favor, and Michael I Rangabe (811–813), under whom they were persecuted.⁸ The imperial edict which forced Greeks to marry foreigners may have been promulgated by Theophilos (829–842).⁹

The anonymous male¹⁰ hagiographer apologizes for his mundane style, calling himself “entirely devoid of lofty expression” (Chap. 19). Indeed his writing is quite conventional, and his citations are limited to the Holy Scriptures. The author was an eyewitness to the posthumous miracles of the saint and verified other events with nuns who had lived with Athanasia for her entire monastic career (Chap. 19). It is likely that he wrote within a short period after her death, and certainly before 916, the date of the Vatican manuscript.

⁴ See Christides, *Conquest of Crete*, 158–63, who attempts to distinguish between raids by Arabs from North Africa and by Arabs from Crete. He postulates (p. 158) that the attack on Aegina described in Chap. 1 was made by Arabs from Africa and occurred between ca. 805 and 830. He also argues (p. 166) that the evidence of other saints’ Lives suggests that the island was completely abandoned around 830; this date seems too early, however, judging from the evidence of Athanasia’s *vita*, since she built three churches there during her career and returned to the island and her monastery at the end of her life after six or seven years in Constantinople. Aegina was definitely deserted by the time the *vita* of St. Theodora of Thessalonike was written by Gregory the Cleric ca. 894; see below, *Life* of Theodora, Chap. 3.

⁵ See below Chap. 11, note 53.

⁶ See the end of Chap. 11, note 54.

⁷ The hagiographer states that Athanasia’s fellow nuns also deserved their own *vitae* because of their virtuous lives, but that he will let others compose their encomia; see end of Chap. 19.

⁸ See below Chap. 2, note 23.

⁹ See below Chap. 2, note 22.

¹⁰ See Chap. 19, note 79.

Curiously, the hagiographer makes no mention of iconoclasm,¹¹ although one would expect some reference to it in the *vita* of a saint who supposedly lived in the first half of the ninth century. This suggests that the question of image veneration was not as fiercely disputed on Aegean islands as in Constantinople and Bithynia.¹²

Virtually nothing is known of the cult of Athanasia, but one can assume that she continued to be venerated locally on Aegina. She is absent from the tenth-century version of the *Synaxarion of Constantinople*, but a notice on her is included in the version of 1301 (Paris, Coislin. gr. 223) for 18 April, her feastday.¹³

¹¹ Iconoclasm (lit., “breaking of images”) was the imperial policy that prevailed between 730 and 787, and again between 815 and 843, of prohibiting the depiction and veneration of the images of Christ, the Virgin, and the saints.

¹² Cf. the remarks of C. Mango, “Historical Introduction,” in *Iconoclasm*, ed. A. Bryer and J. Herrin (Birmingham, 1977), 5–6.

¹³ *SynaxCP* 611–14.

*Bibliography**Edition Used for Translation*

(BHG 180) F. Halkin, “Vie de sainte Athanasie d’Egine,” in *Six inédits d’hagiologie byzantine* [=SubsHag, 74] (Brussels, 1987), 179–95.

Other Editions

L. Carras, “The Life of St. Athanasia of Aegina,” *Maistor* (Canberra, 1984), 199–224.

Translations

(Latin) Surius, *AASS*, Aug. 3:170–75.

(modern Greek) A. Lete in Tsames, *Meterikon* 2:97–123.

Related Texts

SynaxCP 611–14.

[p. 180]

THE LIFE AND CONDUCT OF OUR BLESSED MOTHER,
ATHANASIA, AND A PARTIAL NARRATION OF HER
MIRACLES¹⁴

1. Participating in the commemoration of the saints is an apostolic precept.¹⁵ It is also very laudable and an act of salvation to compile their Lives and set them forth as a common benefit for any who wish <to read them>.¹⁶ So then I will try to compile the Life of the blessed Athanasia, narrating in my discourse a few facts about her, so that these not be consigned to the depths of oblivion by time and thereby harm very many people. So then this praiseworthy woman, who bears the name of immortality,¹⁷ who lived her life admirably and showed herself to be a handmaiden of the Lord of all, was born of a father named Niketas, and a mother named Irene. They were of noble family¹⁸ and very God-fearing people who resided on the island of Aegina.¹⁹ Being born of and reared by these <parents>, she truly earned her designation as a *useful vessel*²⁰ of the all-holy Spirit. When she was seven years old, she learned the psalter in a short time and eagerly studied all the Holy Scriptures.

One day while sitting and weaving at the loom by herself, she saw a shining star descend as far as her chest. It shed abundant light on her and then

¹⁴ The title shows that the author has consciously added the posthumous miracles to the end of the *vita*. Accounts of the ceremonial transfer of a saint's relics and his/her posthumous miracles were sometimes preserved in separate works apart from the *vita* proper, as in the *vita* of Theodora of Thessalonike, which follows (*Life* no. 7, in this volume).

¹⁵ A punning variation on Rom. 12:13.

¹⁶ The Greek phrase τῶν λιαν ἐπαινετον και σωτηριον poses difficulties of interpretation. Carras ("Athanasia," 212) suggests an emendation to ἐπαινετῶν και σωτηριων, "of very praiseworthy and salvific acts," but the predicate genitive does not work well with σωτηριων, and I suggest the reading was αὐτο λιαν (for τῶν λιαν) as the Latin translation of Surius seems to construe.

¹⁷ Athanasia in Greek means "immortality."

¹⁸ *Eupatridai*, i.e., the local aristocracy or, less specifically, "well-born."

¹⁹ Aegina is an island in the Saronic Gulf southwest of Athens.

²⁰ 2 Tim. 2:21.

disappeared from her sight. By this <light>, therefore, she was abundantly enlightened in her soul and came into an absolute hatred for the vanity of life.

She intended to enter into the monastic way of life, but her parents very forcibly joined her to a husband, though she was unwilling and adamantly refused. After living with him for only sixteen days, she suddenly came into <the state of> widowhood. [p. 181] For, when the barbarian Maurousioi²¹ swept into those parts, her husband went out to join battle and (by the judgments that <only> God knows) became a casualty of war.

2. After considerable time had passed and Athanasia was struggling within herself and directing her mind toward the monastic life, suddenly an imperial edict was issued that unmarried women and widows should be given in marriage to foreign men.²² So because of this, her parents drove Athanasia into a second marriage, since she had not yet attained <her goal of> monastic life. But even after this had happened, she maintained her habitual concern for her own salvation, applying herself tirelessly to the chanting of the psalms and devoting herself with assiduity to reading <Scripture>, and accepting no change in her <previous> good <ways>, but adorned with meekness she shone in a blessed fashion with humility of heart. Wherefore this praiseworthy woman was much loved by all who knew her good ways. She so distinguished herself in almsgiving that her household goods did not suffice, even though they were very abundant, for the generous distribution <to the poor> from her hand. She graciously received monks visiting from all over, and she plentifully provided widows and orphans and all the needy with the necessities of life.

Once after a famine arose and everyone was reduced to destitution, she generously donated food not only to her fellow believers, but also compassion-

²¹ Specifically North African Moors or Berbers, but here by a Byzantine literary metonymy Spanish or African Muslims. The raid probably occurred within a few years of the conquest of Crete by the Arabs under Abu Hafs, ca. 823–828. The earliest possible dating for the raid on Aegina is 805–807; see Christides, *Conquest of Crete*, 158.

²² A. Kazhdan has suggested a connection with the edict of Theophilus that is mentioned in the *Acts of the Forty-two Martyrs of Amorion*, ed. V. Vasil'evskij and P. Nikitin, *Skazanija o 42 amorijskich mucenikach* (St. Petersburg, 1905), p. 27.5–7 [= *Reg I*, no. 422]. The ἔθνηκοι could be Christian non-Greeks, pagans or other foreigners. Since Athanasia's second husband eventually entered a monastery, he must have been a Christian from birth or as the result of conversion. The purpose of the edict may have been to encourage the assimilation of foreigners.

ately distributed <food> to the so-called Athinganoi,²³ who were then hard-pressed by the famine and approached her. For she fulfilled that saying of the Lord which states, “*Be ye merciful as your heavenly Father, for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.*”²⁴ Not only did she provide them food, but also clothed them with garments and comforted them with other gifts. On the Lord’s day and [p. 182] on feast days, she lovingly assembled all the neighbor women²⁵ <in her presence> and read them the Holy Scriptures, gradually opening their minds and in a godly way directing them into a fear and desire of the Lord.

3. In this way, advancing according to God and blooming with virtues, just like a flower-laden meadow, she persuaded her spouse, who yielded to her many exhortations after some years of cohabitation, to withdraw from the world and everything in it and to enter into the sacred way of life of the monks. After <becoming a monk> and distinguishing himself in a blessed manner, he fell asleep in the Lord.

So the blessed woman, taking advantage of her freedom,²⁶ totally dedicated her entire self to God. For finding other very pious women, who had the same aim and were ardent in spirit, and joining with them in full unanimity, she very soon withdrew from worldly confusion.²⁷ Distributing to the poor all that she possessed according to the commandment of the Lord,²⁸ along with the aforementioned honorable women she changed her worldly garb together with her way <of life>. And abiding quietly in one place at the invitation of a virtuous and blessed man who tonsured them, after three or four years

²³ Literally, “untouchables.” They were heretics from Asia Minor who adopted a number of Jewish practices; see *ODB* 1:223 and J. Starr, “An Eastern Christian Sect: The Athinganoi,” *HTHR* 29 (1936), 93–106.

²⁴ Lk. 6:36 and Mt. 5:45.

²⁵ This may include the Athinganoi who at that time were close to her, since the text seems to imply that she was introducing them to the Christian scriptures.

²⁶ Athanasia, now liberated from the bonds of marriage, is manumitted again before her death by the vision of angels who hand her papers of manumission from the slavery of this world; see Chap. 12.

²⁷ A reference to Athanasia’s taking monastic vows and her formal founding of a female monastic community.

²⁸ Mk. 10:21.

she unwillingly accepted the leadership of the assembled women,²⁹ called first by them but in her mind considering herself the last, and fulfilling that saying of the Lord which states, “*Let the one wishing to be first among you be the last of all and the servant of all.*”³⁰

4. So what account could explain, what tongue could present the loftiness of her great humility? For she would never allow <herself> to be served by anyone of them nor <allow> water to be poured over her hands <by anyone> during her entire lifetime, as all her fellow <nuns> assured everyone following her holy dormition [p. 183], after making inquiry of each other. Considering herself unworthy to be with them, let alone be served by them (even though she was mother superior) and engaging in great abstinence, she used to partake of a little bread and a modest amount of water after the ninth hour,³¹ refraining entirely from cheese and fish, but only on the feast of Easter tasting them with thanksgiving; and during the holy days of Lent, she used to eat every other day, subsisting on raw greens alone, not partaking of any drink whatsoever during all those sacred days. And for her rest, she partook of little sleep, not on her side, but leaning on a rock that was prepared for this purpose. Not only during the holy and great Lent did she practice this discipline but also during the other two <Lents>, I mean that of the Holy Apostles and that of Christmas.³² Her bedding set on the ground was of fairly large stones, covered above with a small goathair <cloth>,³³ and leaning on this at the time of rest *she watered it every night with tears*, in the words of the prophet.³⁴ For since the love of God abundantly inflamed her from within, she also used to shed abundant tears both in chanting the psalms and in prayers, so that one would be more likely to see a spring without streams of water than <to see> without tears her holy eyes, which continually looked to Christ.

5. Her inner garment was a goathair <shirt>, which irritated her flesh with its roughness, and her outer <clothing> was a ragged garment of sheep

²⁹ Athanasia accepts the office of mother superior.

³⁰ Cf. Mk. 9:35.

³¹ After 3 p.m.

³² The fasting period before the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul on 29 June and the fasting period before Christmas.

³³ Or “goatskin”?

³⁴ The “prophet” is David with reference to Ps. 6:6.

wool; and this <former garment> was the unseen one and was covering her sacred body.³⁵ She kept solitary vigils and studied the Psalms of David, during each one of the *kathismata*³⁶ making a prayer with the greatest attentiveness.³⁷ Then during the day, sometimes by herself and sometimes with her companions, she used to recite the Psalms, striving <to ensure> that she would spend every hour in glorifying God with her lips or mind, in accordance with the verse of the sacred psalmist David, “*I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall be continually in my mouth.*”³⁸

From the day she became a nun until [p. 184] her departure to God, she never tasted any fruit whatsoever. Although enduring many tribulations, inasmuch as she was the leader of her sisters and was concerned about them, she never upbraided any of them because of the great humility she had attained. No abuse emerged from her venerable mouth, neither against the small, nor the great, neither against a slave, nor a free person, and all this even though she was often disobeyed <by her subordinates> through diabolical influence. But she was tolerant of everyone in meekness of opinion and in rectitude of heart, continually *looking forward to her future reward.*³⁹

6. After spending four years with her female companions, she persuaded them to depart from the place where they were living and withdraw to a secluded and completely isolated mountain where they would be able to devote themselves to God in solitude and be separated from all human intercourse. So, after distributing to the poor all that they had acquired for personal use, with fervent hearts they prepared themselves to achieve their goal. And then they encountered a very virtuous and God-loving man called Matthias, who was honored with the rank of priest and was superior of an ascetic sheepfold.⁴⁰ And this venerable man, observing the fervor of their purpose, said to the

³⁵ Her inner garment was “unknown” to anyone else, since its existence was a private act of mortification. Or emend ἀγνωσμενον “unknown” (i.e., “unseen”) to ἀγνεομενον, “chaste,” and construe as “this garment covered her chaste and sacred body.” Lete (Tsames, *Meterikon* 2:103) suggests yet a third translation, “. . . garment of sheep wool which also covered her neglected and holy body.”

³⁶ One of the twenty sections into which the psalter is divided for liturgical use.

³⁷ Literally, “sobriety,” but here to be construed as a monastic virtue.

³⁸ Ps. 33 (34):1.

³⁹ Cf. Heb. 11:26.

⁴⁰ I.e., the superior of a monastery.

blessed Athanasia, “Your aim and that of your companions is good and very laudable. But since I see you so exhausted by ascetic discipline and completely lacking in strength, I exhort you not to commit yourselves to an extremely harsh lifestyle; but if you accept my advice, I will move you to a place where you will be able to install yourselves comfortably and take care of yourselves. You will have me to render assistance to your weakness and to serve you with all <my> strength and will in whatever way you require.” With these words he persuaded the blessed woman and the other <nuns> to follow him very enthusiastically.

And then when they <Matthias and the nuns> drew near and the blessed woman observed the place, <Athanasia> began to speak joyfully, “A long time ago I saw this place in my mind’s eye. And so I think we will live here from now on and here we will die.”⁴¹ [p. 185]

7. There was in this same spot a very famous and very old church of the holy protomartyr Stephen.⁴² So the blessed Matthias, with the approval of the bishop of the district, established these women in residence there and took every care for them, practicing himself as well the greatest ascetic discipline, both abstinence and many vigils. For reciting by heart all night long the divine psalter and saying as many prayers as possible, he fulfilled his need of sleep, by sleeping not on his side but in a sitting position. So great was his contrition in chanting the Psalms and in his attendance at the divine and bloodless sacrifice,⁴³ that those watching him reaped a great benefit. By being content with one robe of goathair⁴⁴ worn with the rough side on the inside <i.e., next to his flesh>,⁴⁵ he subdued his flesh in an awesome way.

He had a great devotion to John, the bosom friend of the Lord. On his holy commemoration day,⁴⁶ when <Matthias> was about to partake of the bloodless liturgy, he was filled with great and ineffable contrition. And he said to one of his companions, “Is there a man today who would be worthy to

⁴¹ The place was called Timia; cf. Chap. 11, note 51.

⁴² I.e., Stephen the Deacon, the first Christian martyr, who was stoned to death ca. A.D. 35; cf. Acts 7:54–60.

⁴³ I.e., the eucharist.

⁴⁴ Reading τριχίνου (“goathair”) for τραχίνου (“roughness”).

⁴⁵ Cf. Chap. 5.

⁴⁶ The dates of the commemoration of John the Apostle (also called John the Evangelist) are 26 September and 8 May.

arrive in Ephesus and see the holy apostle John?" And saying these things, he gushed out streams of tears from his eyes and sent up a groan from his heart. And then occurred an event worthy of his faith and his love for the disciple of the Lord. For from the beginning of the divine rite up until its sacred completion he saw the holy apostle standing together with him in the holy sanctuary. Not only did <Matthias> observe him but so did two others present with him during the celebration of the bloodless sacrifice. So he spent three days indulging in such contrition that he was not able to partake of human food.⁴⁷ [p. 186]

8. A man who was paralyzed in all the joints of his body approached this blessed Matthias. Taking pity on him, the blessed man took off the cloak that covered him and placed it around the man's shoulders. After this happened, his joints made a loud creaking and the man immediately became healthy.

He also granted healing to another man whose face was twisted by a diabolical power by making the sign <of the cross> with his honored hand.

But also to an old woman, who was possessed by an unclean spirit and who approached the blessed Matthias, God granted health within a few days because of his constant prayers.

And another woman, cloaked in the monastic garb and afflicted with an unclean spirit, came into the nunnery. When the blessed man suddenly entered and saw her suffering alone in the church, he took pity on her, and stretching his hands up to heaven and praying for a sufficient time and turning <toward her>, three times he made the sign of the cross over her. After this, the wicked demon fled. The nun then stayed healthy for the rest <of her life>.

We have narrated these tales to demonstrate the loftiness of the man's conduct and to make very clear to all the gift of miracles granted to him by God.

9. But, alas, I don't know how to recount what follows. It happened (by the judgments that only God knows) that this very holy man, who was dedicated to God, after boarding a ship and sailing to the royal megalopolis [Constantinople], was drowned in the waves of the sea along with his fellow passengers. Thus we were deprived of his holy body and do not have in reliquaries <his> sacred and blessed remains, which would benefit us very much. For as long as he survived in the flesh, he enriched all <of us> in the activity of his

⁴⁷ In contrast to the eucharistic bread, "spiritual food."

healings; and after his death he would have provided much more <healing power> to pilgrims through contact with his relics.⁴⁸

Another priest took over his duties, a eunuch by nature and Ignatios by name. And he, distinguishing himself in ways similar to the aforementioned blessed man, [p. 187] fell asleep in the Lord in a holy manner, burning up the phalanxes of demons with lightning emanating from his healing tomb. But let us return to the sequence of the story, narrating the deeds of our blessed mother, Athanasia.

10. So then this blessed woman obtained, as we have said, both much humility and great and incomparable meekness. Now often when she prayed and stared into the heavens, she would be filled with ecstasy and awe; for she would see a shining cloud emitting rays of sunlight, and in the middle of it a beautiful man, brilliant in form, so that his beauty was incomparable. Now often while seeing this and being amazed at the vision of the man, she would say to herself, "I wonder, who bestowed so much grace on this man? What sort of virtue produced one so illustrious and very beautiful?" Speaking and pondering these things, she seemed to hear a voice telling her, "Humility and meekness have rendered this man upon whom you look with amazement so illustrious that if you imitate <these virtues> it is evident that you will be outstandingly enlightened." So day by day when she perceived this, she so embellished herself with these two virtues that there could not be found in her any trace of anger or pride. So it is not strange if God adorned her with incredible miracles, since she had ascended to a spectacular height of such virtue and had seen in the purity of her heart visions in heaven.

11. For one day when she was sitting and contemplating God, a certain man who was seriously diseased in his eyes approached her and entreated her to address a prayer to God on his behalf. But she, demonstrating humility, said to him in consolation, "This disease has afflicted me as well; [p. 188] so have patience and the Lord will be able to heal you." Then after he did not withdraw but asked in faith to gain healing, the blessed one, placing her holy

⁴⁸ Chaps. 6 to 9 represent the motif of a *vita* within a *vita* frequently met in hagiography; cf., for example, a similar digression in the *vita* of Theodora of Thessalonike (Chaps. 10–18) about the iconodule confessor Antony. Matthias should have ranked as a saint for his asceticism, his mystical vision of John, and his miracles, but, since he was lost at sea, he left no relics which could become the object of cult veneration.

hand on his eyes, said, “May Christ Who healed *the man blind from birth*⁴⁹ grant to you, brother, a complete cure of your affliction.” After he had heard these things and received the words with sure faith, straightway and on the spot he gained the healing which he desired.

After the blessed woman had built three other <churches> in addition to the aforementioned church of <Stephen> the Protomartyr, <namely the church> of our much praised mistress, the Theotokos, <the church> of John the Baptist, and <the church> of Nicholas <of Myra>⁵⁰ the herald of God, on account of some business she departed to the Queen of Cities [Constantinople] and resided in a monastery there six or seven years. But she was sad and would say, “I have become an exile from the church of the Theotokos by abandoning it and spending time here.” So after a divine vision appeared to her, she confidently told the <nuns> who were with her, “The time has at last come for us to depart to the place where we resided previously; for while in a trance I saw the doors of the church of our mistress, the all-hallowed Theotokos, opened and inviting us to enter therein.” With these words, she departed from the Queen of Cities. And so this truly honored vessel of God arrived at Timia,⁵¹ for so the place was named. For it was appropriate, <wholly> appropriate⁵² that Timia be honored through her and have its name verified by fact, as had been foreseen many years previously by a most clairvoyant father. Now this <father> was the celebrated Ioannikios,⁵³ whose fame reaches throughout all creation. For this inspired man, while once passing through that place, uttered prophetically, “It is appropriate that this place be honored through the burial <here> of some holy bodies.”⁵⁴ And thus it came to pass.

12. So then living on <there> a few days after her arrival, she was over-

⁴⁹ Cf. Jn. 9:1.

⁵⁰ Nicholas of Myra was a legendary saint who came into prominence in the 9th century; his *vita* is attributed to patriarch Methodios I (d. 847).

⁵¹ Timia means “<place> worthy of honor.” The verbal play is continued into the next sentences.

⁵² The gemination of the verb is for emphasis. For a parallel in 9th-century hagiography, cf. the *vita* of Theodore of Stoudios by Michael the Monk (PG 99:260A).

⁵³ The iconodule Ioannikios is one of the most ubiquitous saints of the 9th century. His *vita* exists in two similar versions by different authors (*BHG* 935–36). A translation of the *vita* by Peter will appear in vol. 2 of the Dumbarton Oaks series of saints’ Lives.

⁵⁴ Or, “through the establishment <here> of some holy individuals.”

come by a very serious illness. In fact she was forewarned <by a vision> that she would depart from <this> life within twelve days. For she had seen [p. 189] <in a vision> two men clad in white⁵⁵ coming toward her and presenting her a piece of paper with writing. They said, “Behold your liberation.⁵⁶ Take it and rejoice.” When the blessed <woman> recovered <from the trance>, she summoned one of the sisters and narrated to her everything word for word. Then for those entire twelve days she remained in continuous meditation and refrained from food and drink. She said nothing other than, “Chant <the psalter>, my sisters, chant; and praise God continuously so that He may <look> kindly on our sins.” When the twelfth day arrived, the blessed woman said to the <nuns>, “Please assist me in my weakened condition by entering into the church and rendering up to God my <remaining> verses of the psalter; for I am now unable to finish <chanting> the psalter, since my strength has entirely left me.” Then they answered her with cries and tears, “So which psalm, our mistress, did you reach and from which <psalm> shall we start the remaining ones?” She calmly answered them and said, “I have the ninetieth psalm on my lips, but due to my weakness I cannot progress further.” After hearing these <words>, they entered <the church> as quickly as possible and finished the remaining <verses of the psalter>. When they came out <from the church>, they fell on their faces <in prostration> and started a great lamentation, begging to receive a benediction from the blessed woman. She made a benediction upon them all equally, but she embraced Marina and Eupraxia in her honored arms and said, “Behold, my beloved sisters, from this very day we will be separated from one another, but the Lord will unite us again in the eternity to come. May He grant to both of you peace, love, and harmony; may He fill <you> with all His good <blessings>.” After she had said these and a few other <words>, *her face did shine as a light*⁵⁷ so that those who came to see her were amazed and awestruck.

⁵⁵ This is the standard description of the appearance of angels. It stems from the episode of the women at the tomb, when on the morning after Christ’s resurrection they are variously reported to have met: an angel whose garb was white as snow (Mt. 28:3); a youth dressed in a white gown (Mk. 16:5); two men in shining robes (Lk. 24:4); and two angels in white (Jn. 20:12). These last references to the two men in shiny white robes were conflated to become the common expression for the appearance of angels in later Christian literature, including hagiography.

⁵⁶ The document represents her manumission papers from the slavery of this world.

⁵⁷ Cf. Mt. 17:2.

13. And when the feast of the Dormition of the all-hallowed Theotokos⁵⁸ was at hand, she exhorted all <the nuns>, saying, “See to it that you do not leave undone any of the rituals for the feast. And pay special attention to the service of the psalmody and to fulfilling your ministry to the needy as best you can. Then after the divine liturgy commit this humble [p. 190] body of mine to the ground.” So then after giving these instructions and embracing the two aforementioned sisters, at that moment *she fell asleep in <eternal> peace and was so reposed*⁵⁹ that those who looked upon her thought she was taking her rest in ordinary sleep. For she shut her mouth and eyes in a natural fashion and did not need anyone to arrange them in a seemly way.⁶⁰

So falling down <in prostration> before her holy corpse, they wept at their orphanhood, saying, “So where have you gone, our blessed mother who bears the name of immortality? How could you have left us orphaned in this way, disappearing from our very eyes? Where evermore shall we look upon your angelic face? Where shall we hear your voice that delights our hearts and prompts us to good deeds? The last flicker of our good hope is extinguished. You have gone to your rest and we are benumbed with listlessness. We will no longer have you associating with us, since the Lord has selected you for His immortal mansions.”

14. After uttering these and similar lamentations and after singing the accustomed hymn⁶¹ over her after the eucharistic service, they placed her sacred body in a coffin and committed her to the ground in the appropriate manner. Then the new mother superior maintained a vigil next to the tomb and would not leave it day or night, shedding tears and mourning the loss⁶² of the blessed woman. <Athanasia> then appeared to her in a dream and said, “Take heart and know this accurately, that at the completion of the forty days from my death⁶³ I will obtain what I am going to receive from God.” After

⁵⁸ 15 August.

⁵⁹ Cf. Ps. 4:8.

⁶⁰ This is an allusion to the custom of closing the eyes of the dead.

⁶¹ Literally, “kanon,” a set of nine odes that was sung in three sections; cf. *ODB* 2:1102.

⁶² Reading στερησιν (as in Carras ed.) for στειρησιν, which is evidently a typographical error in Halkin. στειροσιν would mean “barrenness.”

⁶³ On the fortieth day after death a special service was held in commemoration of the deceased, food was distributed to the poor, and a reception banquet was held.

seeing these things <in her dream>, <the mother superior> awoke and was perplexed by her vision and the words of the blessed woman.

When the fortieth day arrived, the women who lived in the nunnery forgot it, as is often wont to happen, thinking that it was two days later. Thereupon when evening arrived, the blessed Athanasia <again> appeared to the aforementioned sister [i.e., the mother superior] and said, “Why did you utterly neglect my fortieth-day commemoration, preparing nothing for distribution to the poor or for a banquet for my friends?” She was amazed by this vision; [p. 191] and when she came to her senses and counted again precisely the number of days, she realized that this was the evening during which the sacred psalmody for the fortieth-day commemoration should be performed.

When it was already morning and the divine liturgy had begun, two of the leaders of that sacred group of nuns,⁶⁴ whose eyes of the heart the Lord opened for such an awesome vision, observed two men, awe-inspiring in appearance and with flashing bright robes; and they had the blessed Athanasia between them. And leading her and making her stand in front of the holy sanctuary, they brought out a purple robe decorated with gems and pearls. They dressed her like an empress and crowned her head with a crown that had crosses in the front and back. They placed in her hand a jewel-studded staff and escorted her into the divine sanctuary. After the occurrence of this vision during the fortieth-day commemoration, the coffin in which the relics of the blessed woman were deposited under ground began to creak continuously for an entire year.⁶⁵

15. When the all-venerable <anniversary> day of her dormition arrived, behold, two men and a tormented woman, <all> possessed by wicked spirits, were caught frantically dancing above the holy relics of the blessed woman. They then removed the overlying soil with their hands and dragged the coffin

⁶⁴ These two are probably Marina and Eupraxia whom Athanasia embraced as she died. Marina may also have been the new mother superior. She is singled out in Chap. 18 as being healed from a stomach disease by the laurel that decorated the coffin of Athanasia on her commemoration day.

⁶⁵ Cf. Chaps. 2–3 of the *Translation and Miracles* of Theodora of Thessalonike, where marble slabs pop off of her tomb to indicate her displeasure with the burial site and her wish for the transfer of her relics. A common stage in the development of a saint’s cult was the transfer or “translation” of the holy individual’s remains from their original place of burial, usually an underground tomb, to an above-ground coffin or reliquary more accessible to pilgrims.

from the tomb. After this happened, the afflicted woman immediately was restored to health.

Some holy men,⁶⁶ who happened to be nearby, observing the coffin, found it dripping streams of fragrant oil⁶⁷ on all sides. Hastily opening it they saw her so gracefully laid out that they thought she had died recently. For her shining eyes, her holy lips, that entire blessed body appeared sound, intact, and unharmed; her flesh was soft and her arms could be manipulated and were not hindered in any movement. After venerating her and shedding many springs of tears, [p. 192] they secured the coffin⁶⁸ and properly decided that it should be placed in the view of all.

After she was transferred into another coffin, in which the blessed woman even now resides in a blessed fashion, the nuns, taking off her robes, then tried to drape her in another one made of silk thread that was gray in color.⁶⁹ But she did not cooperate at all, keeping her hands fixed <firmly> on her chest and utterly resisting this <change of robe>.⁷⁰

Then one nun of this sacred group, who was distinguished in every virtue and was truly a treasure chest of the Holy Spirit,⁷¹ knelt down and beseeched the saint with these words, “O mistress, as when associating with us you possessed unwavering obedience, so now please obey us and put on this cheap tunic that we have brought to you.” She heard this as if alive and immediately relaxed her arms and received the covering of the tunic. Then in this way she was laid out in her sacred coffin.

16. It would be a good thing to recall a few of the miracles that occurred

⁶⁶ The adjective ἱεροί (“sacred”) implies that they were priests (ιερεῖς).

⁶⁷ *Myron*, a perfumed oil that often miraculously exudes from the relics, coffin, or icon of a saint.

⁶⁸ Cf. the locks attached to the coffin of Theodora of Thessalonike; see Chap. 4 of her *Translation and Miracles*, below.

⁶⁹ The word φατός, commonly applied to ecclesiastical garb, seems to include a chromatic range from dusky gray-black (salt and pepper) to pure black.

⁷⁰ Athanasia may have resisted a change in her burial garments because she objected to the silken material, much more luxurious than her habitual garb of wool and goat-hair. Cf. a similar incident during the translation of the corpse of Theodora of Thessalonike, when her daughter insisted that she be covered with a simple woolen shroud instead of one made of more elegant fabric (Chap. 6 of the *Translation and Miracles*).

⁷¹ Perhaps again Marina.

after this, and then in this way end the account. For not many days had yet passed when a girl about twelve years old, who was possessed by an unclean spirit, and kept falling down and foaming at the mouth, rushed up to the tomb of the blessed woman. And after spending forty days there, she departed in good health through the grace of the Lord.

And there was another child around eight years old who had a demon in his hand. For he would see a black sparrow coming and sitting on his hand, whereupon the hand would go into a spasm and hurt pitiably. Remaining at the divine relics of the blessed woman for seven whole days, he became healthy with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit.

Then a man, a slave by fate but free by faith, who had an internal demon and by this <demon> was bloated like a wineskin in his whole body by dropsy, arrived at the nunnery and prayed to gain healing. The blessed Athanasia appeared to him in a dream and said, "Stay a short while, brother, and I, with the cooperation of God, will provide you a cure. For I will send out to you a part of my body through which you will be entirely delivered from the disease that afflicts you." The man heard this [p. 193] and took heart. And a month later at nightfall, the man fell into a sort of trance and saw himself getting soaked from all sides by water coming down from the roof of the church. When all the lamps were extinguished, he ran to the holy relics of the blessed woman. There was a loud creaking in the coffin and the man thought he heard a voice coming out to him, "Open your mouth quickly, open it!" The man did this and happily received what was proffered to him. As soon as he received it, he recovered his health.

When morning came, he informed all the women in the nunnery, shouting out the good news of his healing. And when all the women assembled at the same moment and wanted to know the cause <of his healing>, he brought out the gift from the fold of his garment. Now this was the nail from the big toe of the blessed woman's foot, wrapped in a small cloth. So the man departed in good health, glorifying God and proclaiming the miracles of the blessed woman.

17. Another time when her holy commemoration day was being celebrated⁷² and a great crowd of people had assembled, a woman by the name of Theodote, who had a paralyzed hand, made entreaties to gain healing. So one

⁷² 15 August.

of the sisters grabbed her hand and placed it under the armpit of the blessed woman in the coffin. By the grace of God she removed it healed and wholly sound.

There was another woman with an internal spirit, who, although she visited <the coffin> for quite a few days, still sadly returned to her house without success. Then she saw in her sleep the saint saying words of this sort to her, “You have committed a deceit against your husband⁷³ and have bitterly condemned to death your own soul. Therefore, depart and confess your transgression, and I will free you from the vexation of the wicked demon.” After the woman heard these <instructions> and carried them out, she became healthy with the help of the Lord.

There was a woman who brought <to the coffin> a nursing infant who was blind in the right eye and whose <right> hand and leg were paralyzed and useless. [p. 194] She cast him upon the healing coffin of the blessed woman. A few days later she took him back healthy, and returned to her house rejoicing.

18. There was another woman who suffered a very great inflamed swelling of the eyes so that they drooped <from the sockets> like apples <from a tree branch>. Standing at the coffin of the saint and placing her head on the holy relics, she made supplication to receive healing. After remaining <there> for two or three days, she became healthy with the help of the Lord, and her eyes returned to their former <healthy> condition.

There was <also> a child about twelve years old with hands and legs that were <totally> numb, who dragged himself to the tomb of the blessed woman. After a few days had passed in this way, the boy was deemed worthy of a divine visitation and returned home walking on his own two feet. Everyone was amazed at the very great miracle worked on him by the blessed woman.⁷⁴

A girl called Mary who lived in the nunnery suffered a painful affliction in her neck. The blessed woman appeared to her in a dream and said, “Take my goathair *sticharion*⁷⁵ and place it on the affected area.” After the girl awoke and did this, straightway she miraculously gained healing.

⁷³ Probably adultery.

⁷⁴ Athanasia is awarded the epithet thaumaturge (“miracle-worker”) by the Orthodox church.

⁷⁵ Vestment of clerical office that indicates Athanasia was a deaconess; cf. *ODB* 3:1956. It was a tunic with long sleeves.

Marina, who was mentioned above,⁷⁶ had been afflicted for many years with a terrible disease in her stomach.⁷⁷ So then taking one of the laurel leaves from those laid at that time on top of the coffin⁷⁸ and placing it for three days on the diseased <area>, she reaped the fruits of a complete healing.

19. I have now narrated in moderation just enough things to provide you pious <people> a mere reminder <of the saint>. For not only would it have been impossible for me to narrate everything verbatim, but <impossible> as well for those who have far surpassed me in <the years of> their lives and who possess the <power of> speech equal to it. But I,⁷⁹ who am very spare <in speech> and entirely devoid of lofty expression, have devoted myself to this small service, not depending at all on fictitious accounts,⁸⁰ but trusting in those events which I observed with my own eyes and on blessed women who utter the words of truth and lived in an outstanding manner⁸¹ with the all-blessed mother for her entire life and who really knew everything about her. We will leave to others in due time to write about their lives and virtuous careers, which are very great and sources of benefit.

20. Now you, O blessed one and bearer of the name of immortality and dweller with the divinely formed angels, you who really embraced poverty for the sake of Christ but were enriched by divine gifts, you who mourned continuously but found comfort therein, you who were beautified with meekness and gained the earth of the meek, you who lived a life in hunger and thirst but who found nourishment⁸² that does not flow away, you who possessed a merciful heart and were shown great mercy by God, you who received in purity of heart the radiance of the Holy Spirit, you who pacified your soul from passions⁸³ and were proved to be a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, you who

⁷⁶ See Chaps. 12 and 14, and note 64.

⁷⁷ Or “womb.”

⁷⁸ Evidently placed on the coffin for her commemoration day.

⁷⁹ The masculine endings show the narrator was male.

⁸⁰ Cf. 2 Pet. 1:16.

⁸¹ Carras (p. 224) suggests the emendation of *συνδιαπρεψάσαις* to *συνδιατριψάσαις*, but this is probably unnecessary.

⁸² Reading *τροφήν* for *τρύφην*.

⁸³ “You who really embraced poverty . . . you who pacified your soul from passions”: a paraphrase of the Beatitudes (Mt. 5:3–9).

became, so to speak, the treasure house of all blessings and thereby were deemed worthy of the ineffable light, you who congregate with the herds of the blessed and cheerfully dance with the choruses of the just,⁸⁴ remember us who are adorned in you, remember. Guide your flock which you established with your own sweat,⁸⁵ watch over our lives that have been battered by the many flood waves of life.⁸⁶ Just as we lived in a blessed manner through your prayers and were proved superior to the snares of the devil, may we be deemed worthy along with you of eternal blessings through the grace and benevolence of our Lord Jesus Christ, together with whose Father and the Holy Spirit <may there be> glory, honor, and veneration now and to the ages of ages. Amen.

⁸⁴ Compare Athanasios, *de Virginitate*, 24–25 (PG 28:281A): χορεύσει καὶ μετὰ ἁγίων προφητῶν and χορευτρια Χριστοῦ (“He will dance with the holy prophets” and “dancer of Christ”).

⁸⁵ She was the founder of the monastic community.

⁸⁶ Although this is a standard metaphor, it may be an allusion to further raids by the Arabs before the abandonment of Aegina.