

Sixth-Century Asia Minor through the Lens of Hagiography: Ecclesiastical Power and Institutions in City and Countryside

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Asia Minor was one of the most extensively Christianised parts of the Roman world by the third century. It is also one of the cradles of hagiographic writing. In the surviving corpus of Greek hagiography, it has the lion's share, partly because the region remained under Byzantine control for most of the first millennium and its shrines and traditions remained alive into the post-Iconoclast Byzantine era, when the Byzantine Church systematically collected and recorded the hagiographic literature surviving from Late Antiquity. Thus the 'hagiographic voice' of late antique Asia Minor is rich and varied, including a large number of eponymous and dated works of a learned character and an even larger set of anonymous texts which are variously dated between the fourth and ninth centuries.

In hagiography, the cities, villages, mountains, valleys and coasts of Asia Minor become the theatres of a triumphal narrative recounting how the Christian faith reclaimed the world from demons, waging its struggle from the bastions of martyr shrines and cells of ascetics. This was a story of conquest through the suffering of Christian heroes, martyrs and monastics alike. Through their courage and perseverance they became the defenders of the country-folk against demonic powers which caused natural diseases and calamities and instigated invasions and crimes. Whereas martyrs performed miracles from their tombs, as a reward for their suffering and death, monastic holy men performed them during their lifetime, as a reward for their ascetic perseverance. The faithful received the fruit of this grace at shrines and monasteries where the saints often resided, and where their bodies rested.

These religious houses produced hagiographic legends which can be approached as narratives of origin, mirroring the character of the ecclesiastical foundations and institutions which they represented, their clientele and rivalries, and the stages of their development. In other words, hagiographic texts represent an invaluable literary voice for communities which, while recounting the stories of their heroes, talked about themselves, often revealing in a surprisingly vivid manner power dynamics and realities within themselves and their environment, in both the cities and the countryside.

This paper attempts to discuss the character and actors of ecclesiastical power and institutions in the long sixth century, based on the hagiographic texts which they produced. The first section concerns the character of urban-based episcopal power. By the sixth century, the bishops competed with civic and provincial officials, but were also challenged by non-urban ecclesiastical institutions in the form of shrines of martyrs and monasteries which are the subject of the second and third sections of this paper. Ecclesiastical institutions, leadership and wealth were not a prerogative of cities, but were very much present in villages, and it is precisely the rural realm where the value of hagiography as a historical source is unparalleled. Our archaeological knowledge about early Byzantine rural Asia Minor is currently at an incipient stage, but thanks to hagiography the literary footprint of the ecclesiastical institutions of the countryside is exceptionally rich. The late antique countryside of Asia Minor is by far better represented in the literary record than in any other earlier or later period. The sixth century witnessed the meteoric rise of monastic houses thanks to the activity of people like Nicholas of Sion in Lycia and Theodore of Sykeon in Galatia, both of whom were men of a rural background. The success of their enterprise, however, cannot be understood in isolation from the dynamism of rural shrines of martyrs, whose burgeoning material wealth and institutional autonomy during the fifth century became the backdrop of the development of monasticism in Asia Minor. Both martyr shrines and monasteries became influential institutions with broad autonomy from the city-based authorities and the bishops, reflecting the dynamism of the countryside. Their rise was continuous and undisrupted during the fifth and sixth centuries, and it is attested through a broad range of texts, most of which cannot be dated with precision. Both the source material and the nature of the subject of rural communities and institutions impose a chronologically broad approach.

Episcopal authority and secular administration

In the fourth-century hagiography of Asia Minor the wonder-working holy man was mainly portrayed as a bishop whose charisma supported his missionary activity and the expansion of Christianity. Such were the figures of Saints Polycarp of Smyrna (BHG¹ 1561; CSLA²-

¹ BHG = Halkin, F. (1957). *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca*. Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes.

² CSLA = *Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity*. Unless otherwise stated, entry numbers are by Efthymios Rizos.

E00453), Gregory the Miracle Worker (*Life* by Gregory of Nyssa, CPG³ 3184 = BHG 715; CSLA-E01878), and Athenogenes of Pedachthoe (BHG 197b; CSLA-E02993), all of whom had hagiographies (*vitae*) written in the fourth century. Unlike these three *vitae* which discussed missionary heroes of the persecuted pre-Constantinian church, the biographies of saintly bishops of the free post-Constantinian church are less numerous and appeared later. Cyprus seems to have been one of the first places to honour a fourth-century bishop, Spyridon of Trimythous, as a wonder-working holy man, already in the fourth century. At roughly the same time or slightly later, the cult of another fourth-century bishop, Nicholas of Myra, grew at the capital of Lycia. His festival is mentioned as the main feast of the city in the late sixth-century *Life of Saint Nicholas of Sion* (VNS⁴ 76; CSLA-E04955). The legend of Nicholas of Myra was not compiled into a full biography until the eighth century, up to which point it probably consisted of independent miracle accounts (known as *praxes* or *acta*), the earliest and most important of which is the *Miracle of Saint Nicholas (Praxis de Stratelatis)* which was written between the mid-fifth and late sixth centuries, very probably under Justinian (CSLA-E05107; Anrich 1917, 368-77).

According to the story, after an uprising of the Taifal Goths in Phrygia, the emperor Constantine sent against them troops under the generals (στρατηλάται) Nepotianos, Ourson, and Herpylion. While calling at the port of Myra, Andriake, some soldiers disembarked in order to requisition provisions, but they engaged in trouble with the locals, which soon led to a riot. Bishop Nicholas hastened to Andriake, in order to stop the violence. He was received with respect by the soldiers, and offered to provide them with all the supplies they needed. Then, people arrived from the city, reporting that three men had been unjustly arrested and condemned to death by the provincial governor. Joined by the three generals, Nicholas returned to Myra and prevented the execution at the last moment. Next, he stormed into the *praetorium* of governor Eustathius, who prostrated himself before the bishop and humbly listened to his reproaches. Nicholas threatened to report him to the emperor for ruining the province with his greed, for receiving bribes, and for sending innocent men to death. The governor had been bribed by two civic magistrates (πρωτοὶ τῆς πόλεως), in order to condemn the three men whose sentence Nicholas annulled. After happily settling the problem, the bishop dined with the three generals and gave them his blessing and provisions. They sailed

³ CPG = Geerard, M., Glorie, F., Winkelman, F., Desmet, J. (1974-1987). *Clavis Patrum Graecorum*. Turnhout: Brepols.

⁴ VNS = *The Life of Saint Nicholas of Sion* (BHG 1347) (text and English translation: Ševčenko and Ševčenko Patterson 1984; text, Italian translation, and commentary: Ruggieri 2013).

away to a successful campaign, but, when they returned to Constantinople, they were slandered and sentenced to death themselves, this time due to a bribe received by the Praetorian Prefect Ablabius. Thanks to the miraculous intervention of Nicholas, who appeared in dream visions to the emperor Constantine and the Praetorian Prefect, the three officers were saved from death.

Unlike holy bishops in earlier hagiography, Nicholas is not portrayed as a missionary, teacher of the Christian faith and ethics, miraculous healer, or distributor of alms, but rather as a defender of the populace against the reckless behaviour of the secular authorities. The negative figures of the story are not pagans, heretics, or Jews, but a greedy and corrupt provincial governor, civic magistrates and the praetorian prefect himself. The bishop exercises supreme judicial power, with the authority to cancel death sentences decided by the provincial governor, and to control the behaviour of corrupt local magistrates and the governor. He is an alternative source of power and justice, whose undisputed spiritual and moral superiority is the antidote to the amorality of the secular officials.

The story of Nicholas is a valuable hagiographic testimony to the nature of episcopal power and the dynamics between clerical and civil authority at the time of the text's composition. Corruption in civil administration and the conscription of bishops in the emperors' campaigns against it was a salient theme in the sixth century (Bacci 2009, 6-18; Bell 2013, 99-108). A fragmentary inscription from Korykos in Isauria records the answer of the emperor Anastasius to an appeal of the locals against the abuses of provincial tax collectors. Addressing the civic community of Korykos, which consisted of the bishop, clergy, landowners (κτήτορες) and commoners (οἰκήτορες), the emperor provided detailed instructions as to how malpractices by imperial functionaries were to be dealt with (Keil and Wilhelm 1931, Nr. 197). Corruption in the civil service was also the subject of Justinian's Novel 8, promulgated in April 535, which made a strict prohibition on bribery – an offence which is severely criticised also in the story of Saint Nicholas. Like any anti-corruption legislation, Justinian's law faced the challenge of implementation, namely how to ensure that the provincial governors would enforce the law, since they were apparently responsible for or aware of the abuses it addressed. Novel 8 was accompanied by a long appendix (*edictum*) which was addressed to the bishops requesting their help in monitoring and reporting abuses – which is what Saint Nicholas threatens to do against governor Eustathios. Yet, in a state whose provincial governors acted at the same time as administrators, tax collectors, and

judges, corruption was bound to grow. Since an independent judiciary was not part of the Roman constitution, Justinian's Novel 86 of the year 539 attempted to rectify the situation by strengthening the judicial powers of the bishops whom it appointed as appeal judges with jurisdiction over the provincial governors (Humfress 2005, 178-80).

The hostility of the *Miracle of Saint Nicholas* towards the provincial authorities extended to the civic magistrates of Myra as well, whom it accused of malicious greed. This resentment towards the local notables is present also in the *Lives* of Saints Nicholas of Sion and Theodore of Sykeon, both of whom served as bishops. Their conflicts with the notables of their sees (Pinara in Lycia and Anastasiopolis in Galatia respectively) dominate the accounts of their episcopate (*VNS* 68-69; *VTS*⁵ 75-78). Although portrayed as an incorrupt and morally superior authority, the bishops were not always appreciated by those who shared local power with them.

The abuses of civil officials were compounded by the burden of the army, the presence of which was particularly strong in south Asia Minor. The region had a major role in military supply already under the early Empire and underwent extensive militarisation in Late Antiquity due to the instability of the Taurus regions. The great Hadrianic *horrea* of Andriake were very probably built for the needs of the provisioning networks, and continued to be used for the gathering of the contributions of Lycia to the military *annona* down to the end of Antiquity (Rizos 2015, 288-93). Indeed, the first episode of the *Miracle of Saint Nicholas* unfolded at Andriake, recounting how the requisitioning of provisions by the soldiers of a campaigning regiment led to a riot between troopers and civilians. Military presence was a serious financial burden and challenge for social peace. The *Life of Saint Theodore of Sykeon* talks about the abduction of children by soldiers of the campaigning imperial army (*VTS* 19), while Chrysippus of Jerusalem's *Miracles of Saint Theodore the Recruit* mentions wandering soldiers who rob villagers and steal horses (*MTheod*⁶ 2, 9). The hagiographic sources acknowledge these troubles, but interestingly they outline the relations between the ecclesiastical and military leadership in a positive tone. Saint Nicholas of Myra and the three generals in his *Miracle* had a mutually supportive and cordial relationship, quite unlike the

⁵ *VTS* = Eleusios-Georgios of Sykeon, *The Life of Saint Theodore of Sykeon* (CPG 7973 = BHG 1748) (text and translation: Festugière 1970).

⁶ *MTheod* = Chrysippus of Jerusalem, *Encomium and Miracles of Saint Theodore the Recruit* (CPG 6706 = BHG 1765c; CSLA-E04625) (text edition: Sigalas 1921, 50-79; English translation and commentary: Haldon 2016, 58-82).

bishop's evidently tense relations with the local governor and the magistrates. Similarly, the late sixth-century abbot Theodore of Sykeon was on friendly terms with various military commanders (VTS 54, 120, 125, 153).

Saint Nicholas of Myra is said to have supplied provisions to the troops for their campaign, which implies an involvement in the logistics of the army and access to substantial material resources. The possibility that bishops played a role in this domain is indirectly suggested by inscriptions commemorating the construction of *horrea* by sixth-century bishops in Mesopotamia (*Les inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie* 2081; Greatrex and Lieu 2002, 240-243). The earlier mentioned inscription of Korykos (Keil and Wilhelm 1931, Nr. 197) and Saint Nicholas' *Miracle of the Grain Ships* (BHG 1352c; another text of the saint's hagiographical dossier) reveal that the bishops were involved in the acquisition of grain for the cities. Their role extended to the domain of taxation, as suggested by Saint Nicholas' *Miracle of the Tribute* (BHG 1351) which recounts how the bishop negotiated with the emperor a significant reduction of the taxes imposed on the province of Lycia, from 10,000 to a mere 100 *nomismata*. Whether undertaking fiscal work for the state or not, the bishops certainly managed estates and revenues belonging to their churches. The *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* informs us that entire villages belonged to the bishoprics of Juliopolis and Anastasiopolis, and that tributes were collected from them by lay notables of these cities, often in a heavy-handed manner (VTS 34, 139, 140). Justinian prohibited clerics (bishops, monks and deacons) from being involved in the violent business of tax collection, which suggests that some actually were (*Corpus Iuris Civilis* 3 [*Novellae Constitutiones*] 123.6; Humfress 2005, 179).

The rise of rural shrines

While the bishops were a mighty city-based source of power, their influence was challenged by new dynamic religious institutions in the countryside, which by the fifth century started to acquire significant material wealth and levels of autonomy. A distinctive feature of the cult of saints in Asia Minor is its association not only with major cities, but also with the rural world of villages and small towns. A great number, perhaps the majority, of the shrines of martyrs in Asia Minor, including some of the most popular ones, like the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, Theodore of Pontus, Athenogenes of Pedachthoe, Longinus of Cappadocia and many others, were based in villages rather than cities. The document known as the *Testament of the Forty*

Martyrs of Sebaste claims that the only legitimate place for the veneration of these martyrs was a village near Zela in Pontus (BHG 1203; CSLA-E00255). It finishes with a set of greetings purportedly addressed by the martyrs to their relatives and friends in five villages of Pontus and Cappadocia, thus reflecting a local network of communities, families, and lower clerics associated with the shrine. There must have been innumerable networks like this in the countryside of Asia Minor, and their role must have been instrumental in the processes of Christianisation and in the development of these shrines.

The *Lives* of Saints Nicholas of Sion and Theodore of Sykeon mention in several instances religious processions performed by the inhabitants of villages and towns through the countryside. Carrying their processional crosses, the peasants visited the numerous *martyria* dotting the countryside, where they held exuberant feasts. We are told that the people of Germia and Eudocias, two neighbouring cities in Galatia, used to meet in procession at the village of Mousge, in order to celebrate a feast of the Virgin Mary (VTS 71; also see Kaplan 1993a). In the aftermath of the Justinianic plague, Nicholas of Sion visited fifteen villages around his monastery, celebrating feasts at their churches (VNS 54-58; CSLA-E04957). It is possible that local paths of processions and pilgrimage are also indirectly reflected in the writing of some martyrdom accounts which take the form of an itinerary, and can be read as a celebration of entire sacral landscapes and community networks.

One of the finest examples of itinerant martyrdoms in Asia Minor is the account of the Bithynian martyr Codratus (BHG 359; CSLA-E02075). His trials and torments started at Nicomedia, but they continued at Nicaea, Apamea/Myrlea, and Apollonia, while his execution took place at the village of Seroukome. A similar case can be observed in the story of the Pontic martyr Basiliscus of Comana (BHG 241; CSLA-E02110). Basiliscus was arrested in Amasea in Pontus, but requested leave first to visit his family at the village of Choumiala, before being brought back to trial at Amasea. From Amasea he was taken to a village called Dakozara, while his martyrdom was finally performed outside Comana, where he was buried. In the course of their martyrdom journeys, Codratus and Basiliscus were associated with other local martyrs (Codratus with Saturninus and Rufinus, and Basiliscus with Eutropius and Cleonicus) whose bodies were also buried in villages. They were followed by crowds, performed various miracles and caused the destruction of pagan temples. All these motifs probably reflect aspects of these saints' cultic communities, their local

networks, routes of regular processions and pilgrimage. They constitute the schematic and distorted reflection of a densely inhabited, religiously active and generally busy countryside.

In the mid-fifth century, two of the most important martyr shrines of Asia Minor, that of Saint Thecla near Seleucia and that of Saint Theodore near Amasea in Pontus published the earliest known collections of miracle stories which thus constitute a major landmark in the history of both hagiographic writing and ecclesiastical institutions. For the first time, two Christian centres of pilgrimage of regional importance published collections of miracle accounts, thus inaugurating a new category of hagiographic writing, but also revealing aspects of their life and development as institutions. The *Miracles of Thecla* (*MThec*⁷) is a compilation of 46 stories, concerning various manifestations of the saint's interventions, which were written by a priest of the shrine around 470. A collection of miracles of Theodore the Recruit must have been published some twenty years earlier, but it has survived only in a partial summary composed by the presbyter Chrysippus of Jerusalem in the late 450s or 460s (*MTheod*). Both collections start with accounts of the foundation and origins of the two shrines, recounted in terms of conquest and triumph.

Thecla conquered the pagan shrines of Sarpedon, Athena, and Aphrodite in the countryside of Seleucia, and the temples of Zeus in Seleucia and Tarsus (*MThec* 1-4; CSLA-E05371; E05838 [J. Doroszewska]). Besides suppressing the traditional cults, it appears that these 'conquests' reflect the dissolution of these very wealthy pagan shrines as institutions, their replacement by monastic communities affiliated with the shrine of Thecla, and very probably the seizure of their conceivably extensive property by the Christian shrine and its daughter houses. The shrine of Thecla was not just an agglomeration of poor monastics, but very probably a wealthy institutional landowner and rapidly expanding monastic establishment (Kristensen 2016). The increasing splendour of its buildings corroborates this impression. The *Miracles* reflect the geographical growth of the shrine's influence and clientele. It was visited mostly by people from Isauria, Cilicia, and Cyprus, but we also hear about connections with Antioch, Constantinople and Iconium. After the publication of the *Miracles*, the shrine's influence culminated in a major benefaction by the Isaurian emperor Zeno in the 470s (Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.8; CSLA-E04494). The shrine became a repository of substantial wealth, targeted by brigands who are said to have been miraculously defeated

⁷ *MThec* = *The Miracles of Saint Thekla* (CPG 6675 = BHG 1717-1718n; CSLA-E05879 [J. Doroszewska]) (text and French translation: Dagron 1978; English translation: Johnson 2012).

by the saint. It is tempting to imagine that the shrine actively defended itself against these attacks, perhaps maintaining its own militia (*MThec* 28; CSLA-5646 [J. Doroszewska]).

Saint Theodore's first miracle likewise was the expulsion of demons from his resting place (CSLA-E04625). His shrine was gradually enriched by the beneficiaries of his miracles. A varied clientele of worshippers, including local notables, wandering soldiers, poor people, merchants, and even children, donated various goods. Animals were regularly slaughtered and consumed in honour of the martyr, while precious objects and other valuables like horses were kept at the shrine, where they were targeted by thieves. Miracles 4, 5 and 7 seem to suggest that money lending and safekeeping (*i.e.* forms of banking services) were practiced at the shrine. Although Chrysippus informs us that Saint Theodore performed cures and drove demons away, the miracles he recounts outline a very different and specialised miraculous activity, portraying Theodore as an avenger of theft and fraud, specialising in what we could define as justice-related miracles. Saint Theodore restored stolen property to victims, and revealed petty thefts, displaying leniency or severity, according to the motives and circumstances of the culprits. The saint uncovered but did not punish crimes committed under the pressure of poverty and need. In the few examples of his strictness, he was merciless only with wrongdoers driven by greed or persisting in their malice (*MTheod* 4 and 7). Like an invisible policeman or judge, Theodore restored security and administered justice with a sense of humanity and humour. Yet his social sensitivities did not reach radical levels. Besides stolen property, the saint was also happy to return fugitive slaves to their masters, *i.e.* living property which had removed itself from its owners (*MTheod* 11). The legitimacy of exploitative relationships in society was not questioned (Bell 2013, 51-118).

It thus appears that the shrine of Saint Theodore was an ecclesiastical institution of remarkable wealth and quite developed political views, which raises an important question: who ran it? Chrysippus' text refers to the clerics of the shrine in a very vague manner, but there should be no doubt that they had a central role in the activities described above, as recipients of the saint's oracles and managers of the gifts offered by the pilgrims. We hear about the head of the shrine, whose actual status is not given, and who, in most cases, was the recipient and interpreter of the saint's revelations concerning the punishment of thieves (*MTheod* 2, 4, 6, 9, 10). This would suggest that this man exercised some degree of judicial power, which was normally reserved for secular magistrates and bishops. Yet Chrysippus does not mention the local bishop at all nor does he name the location of the shrine, except

that it was in Pontus. It is probable that the collection he used came from the famous shrine of Euchaita which, down to the reign of Anastasius, was a village in the territory of Amasea, and it is plausible to assume that the head of Saint Theodore's shrine was an abbot/archimandrite. What was his relationship to the neighbouring metropolitan bishop of Amasea? Given the fact that the resting place and cult of Theodore was also claimed by the city of Amasea, we may assume that their coexistence was not necessarily smooth (see the *Life and Upbringing of the Holy Martyr Theodore the Recruit*, BHG 1765; English translation: Haldon 2016, 90-92; CSLA-E04690). Under Anastasius, Euchaita was raised to the status of a city and episcopal see, and the head/abbot of the shrine was probably promoted to the episcopate, thus breaking from the control of Amasea (CSLA-E00969 [P. Nowakowski]). There could hardly be a more successful outcome for a religious institution which, evolving from financial independence to full jurisdictional autonomy, drew its village to the prestige of civic status.

The success of the shrine of Euchaita was remarkable, but not unparalleled. Located in the peace of the countryside, and celebrating figures associated with suffering and with the fight against the pagan gods and the Devil, the shrines of the martyrs became the physical and spiritual home of Asia Minor's monastic movement already in the fourth century. The conquest of the countryside by Christianity was to a great extent carried out by monks living at shrines of martyrs and using their cult as a means of spreading the new religion among the pagans. As several shrines of martyrs became monastic centres, the development of martyr-related and monastic hagiography became closely related. Martyrs and their shrines are the backdrop of monastic narratives (in the *Lives* of Alypius the Stylite, Theodore of Sykeon, and Nicholas of Sion), and oftentimes even martyr-related hagiographies acquire a monastic dimension. Some martyrs are transformed into wonder-working ascetics, performing the typical routines of monastic life, as one can see for example in the case of the perhaps sixth- or seventh-century *Life of Saint Phokas of Pontus* (BHG 1535x, 1535z; CSLA-E01962). The popular martyr of Sinope is portrayed as an ascetic child who neglects his education in order to dedicate himself to fasting and prayer, and performs miracles as a teenager. The idea of asceticism in childhood is very prominent also in the legends of monastic saints like Nicholas of Sion, Theodore of Sykeon, and the stylites Daniel, Symeon the Younger, Alypius, and others. Similarly, the popular martyr Athenogenes, an early Christian missionary venerated at the village of Pedachthoe near Sebaste in Pontus, is presented as a miracle-working holy man and local bishop in the earlier version of his hagiography (*Life of Athenogenes of Pedachthoe*,

BHG 197b; CSLA-E02993), but his profile is transformed into that of an abbot and founder of the monastery of his shrine in the account of his later, perhaps sixth-century, *passion épique* (BHG 197; CSLA-E03171).

Dynamic monastic foundations: Holy Sion and Sykeon

The rise of the power of monastic houses is reflected in the thematic preferences of hagiography. As said above, the wonder-working holy man in fourth- and fifth-century hagiography of Asia Minor was without exception a bishop. By the late sixth century, however, this role was taken over by founders of monasteries – a clear shift of interest which must reflect an upgrading of monasticism and its institutions in the life and leadership of the Church.⁸ This category of writing comprises the three *vitae* of the late sixth and early seventh centuries. Their heroes were Nicholas of Sion (BHG 1347; CSLA-E04953), Theodore of Sykeon (BHG 1748; CSLA-E05291) and Alypius the Stylite (BHG 65; CSLA-E06497 [C. Kuper]). In the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* being a monk is defined as a dignity superior to the priesthood (VTS 21). Nicholas of Sion and Theodore of Sykeon also served as bishops, but their episcopate was remembered as a distraction from their monastic career, to which they eventually returned.

These texts are the foundation narratives of three local monastic centres in Lycia, Galatia, and Paphlagonia. Unlike the shrines of martyrs, whose transformation into powerful monastic houses was the subsequent consequence of an already flourishing cult, and hence hardly visible in their hagiographic narratives, in the case of these newly founded monasteries, the activities of their founders come to the forefront. The figures of the martyrs who are venerated at these shrines (Saint George at Sykeon, Saint Euphemia at Alypius' monastery in Hadrianopolis and the curious abstraction of Holy Sion at Nicholas' monastery in Lycia) are mentioned, but now the protagonist is the founder and his life which is inextricably tied into the development of the monastic house. The monastery of Sykeon is dedicated to Saint George and is visited by pilgrims who probably practice incubation and receive cures at it. This, however, is not associated with the presence of relics of the martyr – these are acquired

⁸ In a recent paper, Stephanos Efthymiadis (2012, 170) associates the rise of hagiographic interest in abbots with the crisis in urbanism during the seventh and eighth centuries. In my view, it reflects a strengthening of monastic power and institutions already in the sixth century, and not necessarily in direct association with a decline of cities and urban-based bishoprics. Nonetheless, it must be conceded that the three monastic *vitae* of Asia Minor were written after the Justinianic plague which was indeed a major blow for several cities.

much later (VTS 101) – but with the personal grace of the living holy man, Theodore, who performs miracles and cures in the name of Saint George and the other saints of his monastery (VTS 161).

The *Life of Nicholas of Sion*, written shortly after the death of its hero in 564, recounts the foundation of Holy Sion, a major monastic house on the mountains surrounding Myra in Lycia. The narrative revolves around two objects of special veneration, which are inextricably linked to one another: Holy Sion as a place of special divine grace, and Nicholas as a miracle-working person. Both were chosen by God; Holy Sion was founded when Nicholas was born; it was under construction while he was growing up; it finally hosted his relics. The opening section (VNS 1-13) implies that Holy Sion was the daughter house of a neighbouring monastery, Saint John's at Akalissos, whose abbots Sabbatios and Nikolaos conceived and inaugurated the construction of the church of Holy Sion at the village of Pharroa. Saint Nicholas of Sion was a nephew of Nikolaos of Akalissos, born at Pharroa at the same time as the church began to be built. He was ordained at the age of 19 and appointed head of the shrine, assisted by his two brothers. Thus Holy Sion started as a family enterprise, manned by the three young nephews of its founder. During the lifetime of Nicholas, the shrine became a very wealthy institution, with broad influence in the surrounding area, and with the ability to fund expensive building projects in the region and further afield.

The stages of Holy Sion's enrichment are indirectly reflected in Nicholas' life and activity which are outlined in five sets of miracle stories. In the first (VNS 14-26), Nicholas goes off to the villages of the area and helps the local communities (felling a haunted tree; finding a spring of water; delivering people from demons). In the rest, it is the people that visit the holy abbot at his monastery (VNS 39-46, 59-65, 70-75). Almost all of the visitors of Holy Sion come from neighbouring towns and villages, and none is said to have been a person of special offices or titles. The constant influx of this clientele, however, probably brought significant revenue to the house. The gradually growing wealth and power of Holy Sion feature prominently in two significant events which interrupt Nicholas' miracle accounts. The first is the plague of the 540s (VNS 47-58), and the second his election as bishop of Pinara (VNS 67-69).

Although succinct, the text's account of the plague is very instructive for our understanding of the effects of the calamity: not all areas were equally exposed to its consequences, nor did

all environments favour its spread (also see Horden 2005). Isolated from the ports and in their salubrious landscape, it seems that the villages of the Alacadağ were less accessible to the plague than the city of Myra with its busy port and marshy surroundings. While the city was scourged by the disease, the peasants kept away from it, which soon caused food shortages, compounding the effects of the pandemic (VNS 52). The bishop and governor of Myra held the abbot of Holy Sion responsible for preventing the peasants from coming to the town, suggesting that the monastery was thought to have influence in the villages (VNS 53). This influence is likely to have been both political and economic. After the end of the plague, Nicholas made a grand visitation of the villages, organising a series of feasts and repairing a church, in an ostensive expression of largess towards the peasants. The bill of the tour, carefully recorded by the author of the *Life*, amounted to 49 oxen, 170 measures of wine, 70 *modii* of bread/wheat, and an indefinite number of pieces of gold for the banquets, plus 80.5 pieces of gold for the rebuilding of a derelict church (VNS 54-58; Kaplan 1993b, 70). The connections of Holy Sion with these communities remain unclear. Nicholas' tour may be delineating the monastery's area of influence and property, which would suggest that it was a dominant landowner within the civic and ecclesiastical territory of Myra, and a financial competitor of its bishop.

After the plague, Nicholas was reconciled with his metropolitan. We are not told how that came to pass, but, at some point, the latter ordained the powerful abbot to the bishopric of Pinara (VNS 68). To a suspicious reader, this could appear like an attempt by the archbishop to remove a troublesome competitor from his jurisdiction. Although Nicholas would have been expected to step down as abbot, since Holy Sion was outside the episcopal jurisdiction of Pinara, he appears to have remained connected to his monastery, not only spiritually, but also financially. The only thing we hear about his episcopate at Pinara is a building project concerning a church for the Virgin Mary, which led to a protracted conflict between him and the locals. The text tells us that Nicholas clashed with his clergy and local notables, until he was compelled to buy the land for the church, which indicates that the locals did not participate in financing the project. After the church was finished, Nicholas went to Holy Sion and issued a statement of account, calculating the overall cost of his building project as 400 pieces of gold (VNS 69). Apparently Holy Sion was his sponsor, hence the need to submit a detailed statement of account to it.

A similar process is recorded by pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor with regard to the construction of Dara-Anastasiopolis in Mesopotamia. When the new town was finished, the bishop of Amida, Thomas, who was the manager of the construction project, sent a final statement of account to the emperor Anastasius, summing up the entire amount received from Constantinople and offering assurance by oath that the money had been appropriately and fully spent on the project (ps.-Zachariah Rhetor, *Chronicle*, 7.6 e-f). The meticulous recording of Nicholas of Sion's expenses (*VNS* 54-58, 69) suggests that Holy Sion kept a systematic archive and accounts to which the author, most probably a monk of Holy Sion, must have had access. Within the lifetime of Nicholas, *i.e.* between the 520s and 560s, what started as the undertaking of three young villagers had become a very wealthy and powerful foundation.

The development of Holy Sion and the role of Nicholas can be compared to the foundation story of the monastic centre of Sykeon, which took place in the second half of the sixth century, and is outlined in the mid-seventh-century *Life of Saint Theodore of Sykeon* (Kaplan 1993a). Like Nicholas of Sion, Theodore was ordained to the priesthood exceptionally young, at the age of 18, and settled at a chapel of Saint George near his native village of Sykeon, within the territory and episcopal jurisdiction of Anastasiopolis in Galatia. At the beginning of his ascetic career, Theodore's aunt and mother died and he inherited their property (*VTS* 25, 33). His first public miracles took place at neighbouring villages and towns of Galatia (Juliopolis, Mnezos). His first prodigy was to help the steward of the Church of Juliopolis find his son who had run away with the money of the ecclesiastical tribute (*VTS* 34). The clientele of the monastery soon started to grow to the point that Theodore had to build a second, larger church for the pilgrims. He also replaced the simple liturgical vessels of his monastery with precious ones of pure silver, purchased in Constantinople (*VTS* 39-42). Theodore's next miracles took place further afield, at the cities of Krateia and Heraclea of Honorias, and in Ancyra, where he was invited by local notables (κτήτορες and προτήκτορες) (*VTS* 43-45). In the early 580s, the saint met the future emperor Maurice who, after his accession in 582, endowed the monasteries of Sykeon with an annual provision of 200 *modii* of wheat and precious liturgical vessels (*VTS* 54). Upon that, Theodore undertook another enlargement of the churches, which, as the author informs us, he funded through the remaining part of his inherited private fortune (*VTS* 55-56).

Theodore was then elected bishop of Anastasiopolis, and reluctantly exercised his office for eleven years (c. 585-596) (VTS 57-80). Facing the burden of constant petty administrative cares, conflicts with the notables of Anastasiopolis, slander for mismanagement, and an attempt against his life, Theodore decided to step down (VTS 75-78). As his metropolitan declined to accept his resignation, the matter was referred to the Patriarch in Constantinople who allowed Theodore to retire from his see and return to his monastery, retaining his episcopal rank (in c. 596) (VTS 79). Theodore soon travelled to Constantinople and achieved some remarkable imperial privileges: Maurice awarded the right of sanctuary (ἀσυλία) to the monasteries of Sykeon, and exempted them from the jurisdiction of the bishop of Anastasiopolis, subjecting them directly to the Patriarch of Constantinople (VTS 82). In other words, after successive stages of expansion and economic growth and, having established powerful connections with the local and imperial elites, Theodore's monastic foundation became an enclave of political autonomy, with absolute independence from the local ecclesiastical and the secular authorities. Sykeon was not an isolated case with regard to these achievements. During the sixth century, there are several epigraphic attestations of the granting of the right of sanctuary by emperors (especially Justinian) to monasteries in Asia Minor (CSLA- E00929; E00965; E00976; E0977; E00984; E00996; E01011; E01025 [P. Nowakowski]).

After Theodore's resignation from the bishopric of Anastasiopolis, the *Life* does not mention the episcopate of Galatia any more, except for the bishops of Germia, a city which reportedly had a close and fond relationship with the holy man (VTS 100-101, 161, 167-69). Theodore remained a highly influential figure, roaming the villages, offering his mediation for the settling of disputes, defending the peasants against greedy and violent landowners, and delivering communities and individuals from pests, diseases, and calamities. At the same time, his privileged relationship with the imperial authorities endured two violent regime changes, in 602 and 610. During the turbulent reign of Phocas and the early years of Heraclius, Theodore played a stabilising role, protecting his region and various individuals from the violence of the time (e.g. the harshness of Bonosus [142]; the revolt of Comentiolus and the Persian invasion of 610 [152-53]). Throughout these events, the holy man of Sykeon appears to have acted on his own initiative or at the invitation of various influential people, with no interference by the local bishop of Anastasiopolis or the metropolitan of Galatia. By the end of his life, he was a true celebrity known by the name of his monastery, 'the Lord Sykeon' (ὁ κύρις Σικεῶν; VTS 156, 157).

The autonomous status granted to Theodore's monastery by the Patriarch of Constantinople was a jurisdictional irregularity with broader implications. The monastery of Sykeon with its bishop-abbot and patriarchal patronage became a monastic-based islet of direct Constantinopolitan jurisdiction within the ecclesiastical province of Galatia, reflecting a parallel upgrading of the role of monasteries and the ecclesiastical centre of Constantinople. Although the dioceses of Asia and Pontus had been assigned to the jurisdiction of Constantinople already by the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the Patriarch's involvement in their administration is very rarely attested until the late sixth century. Under Justinian, the intervention of Constantinople in local ecclesiastical disputes seems to have come directly from the emperor. Sixth-century Ephesian inscriptions concerning ecclesiastical disputes appear to be letters of Justinian and the local bishop (CSLA-E00708 [P. Nowakowski]). The *Life of Nicholas of Sion*, which refers to events under Justinian, also makes no reference to the role of Constantinople in the ecclesiastical life of the provinces. From the late sixth century, however, the evidence for patriarchal power rises exponentially. The title Ecumenical Patriarch was adopted by Patriarch John IV in 588, and it is possible that the institution of the so-called autocephalous archbishops was also established in the same period. The *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* mentions a meeting of three bishops at the shrine of Germia on the occasion of a visitation by the *protekdikos* of the Church of Constantinople (VTS 161.65). It is the first attestation of such a patriarchal embassy to the provinces, accompanied by a mini-council of the local episcopate. The ambitions of dynamic abbots and bishops like Theodore of Sykeon were probably instrumental in the Patriarchate's jurisdictional expansionism.

The rise of jurisdictional interference by Constantinople was paralleled by the spiritual prominence of Jerusalem and the monastic centres of the Judean Desert, which in the two texts emerge as the school which inspired or trained monastic leaders for Asia Minor. Both Nicholas of Sion and Theodore of Sykeon embarked on their monastic careers after a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Theodore was tonsured at the monastery of the Virgin at Chozeba, while the second enlargement of his monastery was preceded by another visit to the Holy Land (VTS 24, 50-51). During his episcopate, he spent some time at the Lavra of Saint Sabas (VTS 62-63), and his disciples visited Jerusalem, before embarking on their own careers as ascetics (VTS 47-48). In the *Life of Nicholas of Sion*, the prominence of Jerusalem is made evident not only in the dedication of the monastery to Holy Sion, but also by the fact

that the text dates the death of its hero by the name of the patriarch then incumbent at Jerusalem, Macarius II (544-552, 564-574) (VNS 80).

Landscapes and Lives of Asia Minor

The Cappadocian Fathers in their homilies often compared hagiographic narratives with paintings (e.g. Basil of Caesarea in his homilies on Saint Barlaam and the Forty Martyrs: CSLA-E00672; CSLA-E00718), and one may indeed approach them as a gallery of landscapes and portraits, reflecting the immensely diverse worlds of sixth-century Asia Minor. Unfolding in different parts of the region, echoing different geographical conditions, resources, and networks, the hagiographic legends provide a panorama of life conditions, worldviews, and power dynamics in society and its Christian institutions.

The story of Nicholas of Sion is placed in the densely populated and lively world of the villages of mountainous Lycia, a fine example of autarky in conditions of relative isolation imposed by the rough geography of the region. Up to the modern era, the landscape of Lycia offered very few options for communication with the world, except by sea. The port of Andriake was the gateway through which Nicholas of Sion set off on his pilgrimages to Jerusalem and it also defined the contact of bishop Nicholas of Myra with the military authorities and the emperor in Constantinople. The *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* unfolds in a much better connected region, thanks to the imperial roads which crossed Galatia. Theodore's very existence was a product of this connectivity, since his father was an imperial official travelling to the East, who slept with his mother while spending a night at the inn of Sykeon. The activity of Theodore included two visits to Constantinople, three pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and prolonged visits to Phrygia, Honorias, and Bithynia. Theodore met in person three emperors (Maurice, Phocas and Heraclius) and three Patriarchs of Constantinople (Kyriakos, Thomas and Sergios). His region and monastery received visits of local and imperial officials. Yet the roads and the sea also brought trouble such as the plague which nearly claimed the life of young Theodore of Sykeon, devastated the city of Myra, but probably had a limited impact in the marginal upland villages of Lycia. In the long term, recurrent calamities like this may have rendered marginal areas and mountains a safer option than well-connected but exposed towns.

The worldview of the *Life of Nicholas of Sion* pays little attention to expressions of social stratification, as opposed to the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* which is clearly more aware of hierarchies in society and space. Administrative divisions into civic territories and ecclesiastical jurisdictions define its landscape, with cities being the base of administration and landownership. The text remarks that, during an epidemic of demonic attacks at Germia, the wealthier free men (ἐλεύθεροι) of the town kept their possessed children hidden at home, fearing the disgrace of them being seen in public, whereas the poorer populace (λεπτὸς δῆμος) crowded the shrine of Saint Michael with its sick (VTS 161.10). The text mentions landowners (κτῆτορες) and officials (προτίκτορες, δομέστικοι, ἰλούστριοι) who were normally based at cities (Ancyra, Anastasiopolis, Heraclea Pontica, Amorium, Ephesus, Nicomedia, and Germia: VTS 44, 45, 58, 75, 76, 107, 110, 148, 161; one landowner is mentioned at the village of Sandos: 114, 149). The bishop's house at Anastasiopolis was the base from which the bishop ran the city and managed ecclesiastical revenue, with the assistance of local *ktetores*, recalling the Anastasian inscription of Korykos, where the civic community was referred to as the bishop, clergy, landowners, and commoners.

In hagiography, however, the portrayal of the society of Asia Minor extends beyond social categories which usually dominate historical narratives (bishops, abbots, landowners and officials). Before embarking on their monastic career, Nicholas of Sion and Theodore of Sykeon themselves were villagers of a relatively prosperous, but certainly not elite background. The mother and grandmother of Theodore of Sykeon ran an inn, where they worked as prostitutes. Later, they gave up prostitution and turned their hostel into a respectable establishment which now pleased its important customers with the fabulous food it offered, thanks to the services of the dedicated cook Stephen. Stephen the cook was a very pious man who became the first spiritual father of little Theodore of Sykeon (VTS 6).

The interest of hagiographers in childhood and education is also remarkable. Nicholas of Sion and Theodore of Sykeon were sent by their parents to be educated by local teachers (VNS 3; VTS 6). Education was offered at the villages and teaching was a distinctive profession. The *Life of Saint Phokas of Sinope* tells us that the popular martyr of Pontus and revered patron of sailors and shipwrights was sent to school by his parents at Heraclea of Pontus, in order to learn to read and write and to be trained as a seaman – an interestingly vocational dimension in education (BHG 1535y/z [ed. Van de Vorst, 1911], par. 2; CSLA-E01962). The *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* recounts the story of Philoumenos, a young man who worked as a

teacher at the village of Mossyna near Sykeon (VTS 26). He left his job, in order to join the monastery after his mother was healed by Saint Theodore. Good looking, genuinely nice, learned, and a very good singer, Philoumenos became number three in the hierarchy of the monastery. He ran the scriptorium, choir, and school – the three pillars of a monastic education. The monastery of Sykeon conceivably became an option for the schooling of children of local families. One of Philoumenos' pupils, Eleusios, later became a monk and abbot of Sykeon, under the name Georgios. Eleusios-Georgios is the author of the *Life of Theodore*, and talks about his teacher with moving words of affection and gratitude. There are many questions which have to stay unanswered. Did anyone replace Philoumenos at the village school of Mossyna, when he joined the monastery of Sykeon? How widely accessible was the education which was offered at such schools? Was the school run by the village community and its institutions? How did these interact with the higher echelons of power in the cities? Did the bishop have a say in their business?

Asia Minor had a long tradition of lively rural communities and non-urban institutional structures, going back to the Hellenistic and early imperial periods (Schuler 1998), of which the sixth-century village was a direct successor, even though it produced fewer and less informative inscriptions than its early Roman counterparts. In the pages of hagiography, it stands beside the cities with remarkable dynamism and confidence. As they had done for centuries, power structures in sixth-century Asia Minor were still heavily centred on the cities, with their powerful bishops and secular officials, but social leadership was by no means monopolised by them. The rural realm, with its resourceful village-based martyr-shrines, coenobitic monasteries, and enterprising abbots, was very much present, challenging the established city-based hierarchies of church and state, and offering alternative paths of success.

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