
Høgel, Christian

Published in:
Speculum

DOI:
10.1086/698702

Publication date:
2018

Document version
Final published version

Document license
Other

Citation for published version (APA):

Terms of use
This work is brought to you by the University of Southern Denmark through the SDU Research Portal. Unless otherwise specified it has been shared according to the terms for self-archiving. If no other license is stated, these terms apply:

- You may download this work for personal use only.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying this open access version

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details and we will investigate your claim. Please direct all enquiries to puresupport@bib.sdu.dk

The novelty of approach in this book, which contains six texts from late tenth-century Byzantium, lies not only in offering well-constructed editions and parallel English translations of texts that have hitherto been deemed unworthy of such enterprise, but also in insisting on giving them a new generic label. The “novels” edited and translated in this wonderful volume from the Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library have for a long time lived a humble life as rhetorical redactions of old saints’ lives—in other words, as rewritten hagiography of no use to historians and of hardly more enjoyment for others.

However, this may now change simply by viewing these texts in a different context. By reading them as novels—and much supports such reading—and by listening to both the new tuning of old tales and their centuries’ long reception in Byzantium, we catch glimpses not only of a lived perception of ordinary life; of notions of gender, body, and sexuality; of imperial past and present, but also of literary brilliance.

The six texts chosen for this volume by its editor and translator, Stratis Papaioannou, all come from the *Menologion* of Symeon Metaphrastes, a ten-volume collection of saints’ lives written in Constantinople towards the end of the tenth century. Symeon was a high imperial official (with the title of *logothetes tou dromou*), and there was probably a team working to rewrite most of the 148 texts that ended up in his menologion (a commonly known liturgical book type in Eastern Christianity, containing full-size hagiographical texts presented according to the liturgical calendar). Symeon Metaphrastes’s *Menologion* became an immense success in subsequent centuries, and today we have around seven hundred manuscript and fragment copies of the collection or portions thereof.

The choices made by Papaioannou are clear throughout and are explained in the introduction. Representative texts have been consciously selected to support the title of the book (xvii), and a thematic unity created by opting for narratives with female protagonists. The Lives are then presented as “Christian novels,” and their marvelous narratives—with magicians, prostitutes, cross-dressers, marital jealousy, and gruesome torture—certainly support this characterization. One may, however, disagree slightly with the idea that these texts fall within Papaioannou’s twofold definition of “novel” (xiv). He defines “novel” as (1) presenting persons and events that are invented and imagined, and (2) having plots, narrative patterns, and a rhetorical form that recall those of the ancient Greek novel. While arguments would hardly arise regarding the latter point, the idea that much in the Metaphrastic texts is invented and imagined may seem true to a modern reader but is certainly not applicable to medieval authors and their audience (as the editor himself concedes a few pages later, on p. xviii). Then why insist on a modern approach? This choice seems related to the deliberations presented in the introduction on how to present these texts to a modern audience (viii–ix). Still, it is problematic to describe certain details in the texts as “pseudo-historical” (see, for example, the commentary to a passage in chapter 15 of the *Life of Barbara*, where some sheep are turned into beetles [303]), and for two reasons: first, this gives the impression that other details in the Lives may be historically more solid when there is absolutely no evidence to support this. The only reason passages such as the episode with the beetles and not others are declared “pseudo-historical” is that these narrate events run counter to natural laws. This choice, however, raises the second central difficulty of talking of “pseudo-historical” elements, namely that events in saints’ lives going against natural laws were in the past believed to be even more true, because they revealed divine intervention. No matter how novelistic, these are texts piously engaged with the miraculous. Nev-
ertheless, they do certainly include—in the most imaginative way—features from ancient novels.

The novelistic approach has contributed to a wonderful narrative tone in the translated English versions, which aim at retaining the rhetorical qualities of the Greek text (xxii). At the same time, they still follow the originals closely and retain their function as reading aid to students less familiar with Byzantine Greek. In general the English translation is a wonderful read and only minor quibbles can be brought up (for example, on p. 33, ἔκπληκμένος must mean “inducing” rather than “luring”; on p. 166, παρ’ ἀλπίδα probably means “against his hopes” rather than “unexpectedly”). The close collation of well-chosen manuscripts has led to excellent readings, like ἔδεπε against ἔδεψε of an earlier edition in chapter 17 of the Life of Kyprianos and Ioustina, which makes the conjuring of demons happen while (rather than after) Kyprianos—a Faustian character soon to become a saint—is still perusing his magic books.

All in all, this volume brings new texts to a thriving discussion on tenth- and eleventh-century Byzantine literature (to which Papaioannou has contributed substantially through several other publications, especially regarding the prolific author Michael Psellos). Saints’ lives may be repetitive, bound to institutional and political agendas, and simplistic in both thought and expression, but they may also be wonderful pieces of imagination and art (as well as faith), as are those carefully presented in this well-edited book.

Christian Høgel, Centre for Medieval Literature, University of Southern Denmark

doi:10.1086/698703

In his preface, Maurizio Perugi addresses the reviews of his 2000 edition of La Vie de saint Alexis (reviewed in Speculum 77/4 [2002]: 1380–81) and notes Tony Hunt’s 2005 review calling for further investigation of the manuscripts that transmit the “Greco-Syrian composite” (9). He then outlines the intellectual journey he has made into the Armenian-Greek life of Alexis and how the saint’s life came to be a significant work in the European West. In this volume, Perugi offers an updated text, with corrections to his 2000 edition he has already suggested in articles of 2004 and 2005, along with previously undiscovered emendations. Furthermore, he argues that the source of the Vie de saint Alexis is a Latin poem that he calls the Rythme (“rhythms” in Latin), which originates from the same (lost) source of the “rather neglected” (10) Latin life BHL 292.

Chapter 1 enters the history of the Alexis legend and its resemblances to those of the Homme de Dieu and Saint John Calybites. Perugi relates the Alexis legend to the history of the Syrian and Armenian churches in the fifth century and beyond and explains how the legend became important to western Christianity and was later embraced by exponents of the monastic reform movement, such as Peter Damien, who placed a more pronounced emphasis on asceticism.

Chapter 2 turns to the Greek archetype of the Alexis legend and the various traits that this archetype bequeathed to the Latin versions. Perugi studies a Spanish branch of the Latin tradition (Md), which is close to the Greek archetype (according to Mölk’s 1976 edition) and to Adalbert of Prague’s homily, which is important because Adalbert used a source close to a major manuscript (Ct, BHL 290) in the “migration” of the legend from the East to the West. Chapter 3 analyzes the BHL 292 Life, which Perugi considers central to the tradition but has been largely ignored. He provides a richly annotated edition based on R and S (Munich, Ba-

Speculum 93/3 (July 2018)