

DE MONACHO SUPERBO:

BHG 1450x

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As every handbook of Byzantine Civilisation is quick to point out, the literature of the East Roman Empire was notoriously unoriginal. It is a fact of life with which Byzantinists have to learn to live, and so, somewhat paradoxically, must those who concern themselves with Byzantine hagiography; for whilst hagiography alone can claim the distinction of being a Byzantine creation amongst literary genres, it must also accept the stigma of being amongst the least creative areas of Byzantine literary activity.

That is not to say that there are no occasional flashes of originality in Greek hagiography. Such, though rare, there undoubtedly are, but they are usually to be found in the third of the successive (though to a certain extent overlapping) phases which it is customary to distinguish.

First, there are the Acts and Passions of the martyrs, the literature of the era of persecutions which terminated with the death of Licinius in 320; secondly, there is the literature of the *Patrum Vitae*; and lastly, there are the quasi-biographical full-length *Vitae*, of which, though not of course the creator, Leontius of Neapolis (590-668) was an early and highly influential exponent. It would not be inaccurate to say that of these three phases the second is the least likely to produce passages of original literary value, still less so of dramatic narrative.

For this reason, if for no other, it seems worthwhile to draw attention to the existence of a rather remarkable piece of writing which may be original, is certainly dramatic, and which, ostensibly at least, forms part of the literature associated with the second and least creative phase of hagiography.

The *Patrum Vitae* have no equivalent in the West, where in fact they were very little known until the post-Reformation period.¹ They were characteristically an eastern tradition because they were the product of a characteristically eastern institution, that anchoritic monachism which flourished in the deserts of Egypt and Syria during the centuries which separated the legalisation of Christianity and the irruption of Islam. Not that the Desert Fathers were given to literary pursuits; on the contrary. *Patrum Vitae* represent an oral lore which might well have perished together with the desert monachism to which it pertained, had certain determined visitors to the monastic communities, such as Palladius and John Moschus, not set themselves the task of collecting as much of it as they could and of recording it for posterity. What has survived we owe to them. There are, basically, five major collections: *The History of the Egyptian Monks*,² *The Lausiac History* of Palladius,³ *Philotheos Historia* of Pseudo-Theodoret,⁴ *Pratum Spirituale* of John Moschus,⁵ and a vast, unstable tradition of *Apophthegmata Patrum* stretching far beyond the familiar text in Migne.⁶ There are also a few smaller collections and some single items which rightly belong to this tradition.⁷

Patrum Vitae is an unfortunate misnomer, since whilst the literature of the desert may tell us a great deal about the life (or rather about the *politeia*, the way of life,) of the Desert Fathers, not even in the limited sense of the true *Vitae* is it biographical matter. For the most part, it consists of episodes, brief narratives rarely more than a paragraph in length, recalling a single event, or, more commonly, a particular saying (apophthegm) of one of the monks concerning some aspect (e.g., some virtue or danger) of eremitical life.

The text with which this paper is concerned, *De Monacho Superbo*, (BHG 1450x) undoubtedly comes down to us with credentials which seem to confirm it as a legitimate item of the tradition of the *Patrum Vitae*. Of the fourteen codices in which it is known to have survived,⁸ four

date from the eleventh century, and one of those four may even be a century older, the venerable Coislín 126. In most of the codices the document in question is firmly embedded in a collection of *apophthegmata*, many of which have long been available in print and are considered to be undoubtedly genuine. It is therefore the more remarkable that this text alone should have been denied publication. Yet the very fact that this text was left unedited by the religious editors of the past who lavished so much care on the *Patrum Vitae* may in itself be indicative of a certain disquiet on their part concerning its legitimacy, and even its moral value. It is a story about a solitary monk, and about the most serious of eremitical sins, spiritual pride; that much it has in common with the mass of monastic literature. But there are certain considerations which tend to isolate it from, rather than identify it with, the *Patrum Vitae*.

First, 1450x is a singularly anonymous story. One striking characteristic of the genuine episode is that it almost invariably contains some authenticating statement. Names are named, either the name of the *abba* who told the story, or whom it was about, or where it happened, or where the monk came from to whom it happened or who told it, or any combination of these data.⁹ Nothing whatsoever of the kind is to be found in this document. On the contrary, all is vague and inexplicit: "Somebody once told a story about a certain monk," the narrative begins; no names, no places, only "another country," "the city," and so forth.

Secondly, this is a very arresting story. Now there are many complimentary things which could be said about the *Patrum Vitae*, but that they are arresting would hardly be one of them, for they preserve the lore of the grim ascetic struggle against the powers of darkness and evil, the utterances of men engaged in that struggle and not in the telling of tales produced for the benefit of other such men. Accordingly, it is a sober, restrained literature, almost devoid of those flashes of colour with which later hagiographers occasionally sought to engage the attention of their secular audiences. But the document with which we are now concerned is very different. Sex, crime, violence, the turmoil of the world and the business of courts come rapidly on each other's heels, as the narrative proceeds with a certain grim

humour and an enthusiasm on the part of the narrator, which makes us more than a little suspicious of his claim scarcely to be able to restrain his tears under the emotional impact of his burden.

Thirdly, this is a sustained narrative, three or four times as long as the average episode; and whilst the usual episodes give the impression of being more or less accurate records of the discourse of persons used to expressing themselves with the greatest possible economy of words, 1450x is a protracted tale which marches along when one might have expected it to draw to a close, the sort of story which might have been invented to entertain rather than to instruct. And there is a further indication that what we have here might possibly be only a truncated version of a longer tale, or the précis of a story which could be spun out at length with a wealth of detail, for it is liberally endowed with titillating details which cry out for amplification. Nor is it a simple story of a bad man getting his deserts or of a fallen one being brought back to grace; it is the ground-plan of a grand psychological study of a man with a tragic flaw who was ground down to perdition through a series of reciprocating circumstances.

Lastly, there is the extraordinary unlikeliness of the story. It is not that what is unlikely by modern standards is rare in the *Patrum Vitae*, for such is certainly not the case. The disguise and devices of the Devil to lead the poor monk astray are quite authentic features, but the chance human encounters and coincidences "in this world" on which the story turns, are not. Indeed, these betray an interest in human, worldly affairs which is quite uncharacteristic of the lore of those who have turned their backs on the world.

All this seems to suggest that 1450x emerged, not from the desert experience of the fourth to the seventh centuries, but from the imagination of some popular preacher or storyteller some time in the seventh to tenth centuries. Now *pseudepigrapha* are nothing uncommon in hagiography. We have a host of Passions and Acts of Martyrs which have virtually no foundation in reality, and also some full-scale *Vitae*; but they all have in common that, as literature, they are sadly inferior to that which they try to imitate.¹⁰ In a word, if hagiographers were somewhat lacking in imagination, pseudo-hagiographers seem to have been

almost devoid of it. In this case, the opposite seems to be true. By employing the form, but neglecting to imitate the content of the *Patrum Vitae*, whoever put this story together was able to create something of considerably greater literary appeal than the original, and in doing so, to demonstrate a degree of imagination which is rare indeed in the hagiography, if not in the whole field of mediaeval Greek literature.

Should a Shakespeare or a Marlowe have chosen to make a play of the drama of the Proud Monk, he would have found part of his work already done for him; the story falls naturally into five acts. The first act is located in some remote region where the monk had his hermitage.¹¹ We discover him at prayer, and he prays at great length, but it is a sinful prayer. First he prays to be made worthy as was Isaac of old, but is refused. So he prays to be like Job, and is told, somewhat enigmatically, "If you can wrestle with the Devil as he did, you shall be able to be as he was; now, begone to your cell." Our author seems only to have had a superficial acquaintance with the Old Testament, for whatever the worthiness of Isaac may have been, Job's struggle against progressive deprivation was a very different *agôn* from that which lies in store for the monk.

Act 2, scene 1: before the monk's cell:

Now some days later the Devil disguised himself as an officer, and he came to the monk, saying: "Father, I beg you, for your piety's sake, be merciful to me, for I am being sought after by my emperor. I have here two hundred pounds in gold, my maid-servant and my house-boy; please keep all these by you in some hidden place, for I am going away to another country."

There is no end to the disguises which the Devil assumes in mediaeval literature. Here it is that of a *stratitotês*, which originally meant "soldier," but came to mean in mediaeval Greek (as did *miles* in later Latin) a ranking soldier, and, by extension, an officer of the crown, in which sense it eventually lost its military connotation. "Official" might be the meaning here.¹² (Incidentally, the story is not wholly consistent; later the *stratitotês* claims that some enemies were pursuing

him.) The monk was probably as distressed at the disturbance of his solitude as he was alarmed at the prospect of taking possession of unaccustomed riches. "Child" he said, "I cannot take possession of them; I am a person of no social standing, and could not ensure their safety." At all events, the officer prevailed upon him and went off to another country, leaving the monk in possession of the servants and the gold, 1440 sovereigns' worth.

Act 2, scene 2: the same location: The poor monk was only human; the presence of the maiden disturbed him. Here, too, as in much hagiographical literature, it was not the love of money but the desire of the flesh which was the root of all evil. Driven to distraction, "plagued by thoughts of the maiden," he raped the poor child, and then one thing led to another in rapid succession. In remorse, he slew the girl. Then, to prevent news of his crime leaking out, he killed the boy too. Knowing that a disturbance was bound to ensue (evidently his retreat was not too far distant from human habitation), he took the gold and fled. End of Act. To rape and kill a girl, slay a boy, and decamp with about \$90,000 worth of gold is a horrendous list of crimes, any one of which might be paralleled elsewhere in the *Patrum Vitae* but surely never a combination of so many at one time. Usually the crime would almost invariably be followed by repentance, whereas here there is none.

Act 3: "Another country," an inhabited region as it emerges, strange surroundings for a monk. Here, thinking himself to be far enough away from the scene of his crimes to escape detection, the monk used some of the gold to build himself, not a cell as one might suppose, but a chapel, by which means, perhaps, he managed to ingratiate himself with the local population. Yet no sooner was the work completed than the mysterious officer re-appeared, demanding restitution of his property: "'Oh, lend me your strength! That monk has put up this building with the money that I entrusted to him!'" This would have been an obvious point at which to round off the tale with an act of contrition, but the story takes an unexpected twist: "The local inhabitants gathered round the spurious officer and drove him off with all kinds of abuse," to which he replied with all kinds of threats against the monk, not in vain. The monk was shaken, for he was exposed: "'Now my evil deeds have

come to light', he said, 'I will take what is left of the money and go away to a distant city where that officer will not be able to come.'" So the monk moved on, leaving behind the people who had shown themselves well-disposed to him.

The fourth act takes place in the city, seat of a provincial governor.¹³ The hero abandoned his monastic profession (though it was no secret to the citizens that he had once been a monk) and took a wife. It is in his marrying, yet another surrender to the desires of the flesh, that the monk precipitated an ever worsening fate for himself, for the woman of his choice was no simple peasant girl nor the daughter of an honest citizen. By taking this particular woman for his wife, he gained for a father-in-law the public executioner of that city, who discharged the twin duties of torturer and hangman. A timely death soon rid him of the embarrassment of his grisly relative, but it did so only to open up a more terrible future for the ever-falling monk. A new governor arrived, and discovered that the vacancy created by the death of the executioner had not yet been filled. "'What do you do in a case like this?'" he enquired.

The officials replied: "With us it is customary for the man who marries the wife or daughter of the deceased executioner to perform this service, even against his will." The governor said: "Is there such a one amongst you?" They replied that there was, a man who seemed to have been connected with the monastic order, whereupon he said: "Go and bring him to me," so they brought him to the governor against his will, and he was appointed to serve as executioner.¹⁴

There is nothing extraordinary about this; ever since the time of the reforms of Diocletian and of Constantine the Great, many trades and professions, and especially civic offices, were compulsorily hereditary within the Roman Empire; and there are a number of instances in which succession even to the imperial throne itself passed, not by direct descent, but through an empress to a second (even a third) spouse, or to a son-in-law.

Before long, conceivably even on the same day, the newly-appointed officer was called upon to perform his hideous task. The scene was probably some great judgement hall, with the governor seated on the *bêma* (tribunal), thronged about with those who sought to press their cases upon him, a noisy, disturbing scene, rendered no less so by the anguished cries of those whom the ex-monk had been summoned to examine, "by applying hot pitch or some other torture." ("Believe me," interjects the narrator, "I am so overcome by this story that I cannot tell it through dry eyes.") Amidst this confused hurly-burly,

Satan came by disguised as an officer, and began to shout out things which attracted quite a large crowd at the sound of his voice, calling upon the governor to avenge one who had suffered an injustice. The governor replied, saying to the officer: "Calm down, man, and pull yourself together; spell out in an orderly manner what has happened to you, and stop this sounding-off like a barking dog."

The officer then told the whole story of the boy, the girl, and the two hundred pounds of gold; and "the governor heard this account of the affair gladly, hoping for a reward," -- a sad, but, alas, all too accurate comment on the greed and partiality of Byzantine provincial administrators. For the monk, this was the end; he broke down and confessed all. "When the governor realised that there was nothing to be got out of him, he ordered the wretched executioner to be taken away to be executed."

The fifth and final act is heavy melodrama, somehow conjuring up that lugubrious atmosphere which swirls around when men march to the gallows. For the last time in this world, the "officer" confronts the condemned criminal, and taunts him with a question to which, it appears, the ex-monk has still not even begun to suspect the answer, in spite of his prayer at the beginning of the story:

"Do you know who I am, father?" He replied: "I think you are the officer with whom it was my misfortune to become acquainted, and who entrusted to me the boy, the girl and the

gold." The other retorted: "I am Satan, who deceived Adam, the first-made man, who wage war against men, and insofar as I am able, allow no man to be saved, nor to become like Isaac or like Job. Rather do I endeavour to make them all like Achitophel, like Judas Iscariot, like Cain and the elders of Babylon. Be on your way now, you who have fallen victim to my guile, and have not learnt how to fight the unseen warfare" The poor wretch suffered death by hanging, brought to derision by the Devil, because of his own high-mindedness.

There is the briefest of epilogues, and the drama is over.

It will now be clear that *De Monacho Superbo* is a document which has very little in common with the austere observations of the *Patrum Vitae*; nor does it bear very much relationship to any other genre of mediaeval Greek literature. It does, however, present a certain similarity to the *exempla* beloved of western mediaeval preachers, though nothing quite like it has yet come to light either amongst the Latin or the Rabbinic *exempla*. This of course is scarcely surprising, for with its *terminus ante quem* of c. A.D. 1000 (the date of Coislin 126) *De Monacho Superbo* was already in existence well before the heyday of the *exempla* elsewhere. This is not to say that the *exemplum* was unknown in the Greek tradition; but the term must be used cautiously when applied to the East, to the literature of an earlier age and of a different culture. Certainly, there is no identifiable and separate class of *exempla* in the East as there was later in the West; no Greek Jacques de Vitry, no Byzantine Caesar of Heisterbach.¹⁵ There are, however, here and there, thinly distributed through hagiographical literature (less thinly in later versions of the *Synaxaria*) stories which in a sense prefigure the *exemplum*. Such texts may be found in that mixed bag of *paraleipomena* which the Bollandists have labelled (sometimes for no apparent reason) *narrationes animae utiles*, amongst which some of the *Narrationes* of Paul of Monemvasia bear the closest resemblance to *exempla*. 1450x cannot be associated with these other Greek documents, though, because it is lacking in one of their most striking characteristics. They consist, for the most part, of two unequal portions: a very short narrative, and a

disproportionately long moralising discourse, in which the lesson (or lessons) of the narrative is (or are) laboriously emphasised;¹⁶ whereas this consists of a long narrative to which the moralising element is decidedly subordinate, perhaps even an afterthought.

This raises the question of whether *De Monacho Superbo* as it now stands is an original creation, or the adaptation of a pre-existent story. The extraordinary brevity of the conclusion, with its pious aphorisms so remote from the remorseless advance of the story, seems to be a somewhat unequal attempt to rescue a point which was in danger of being lost amidst the alarums and excursions of the drama:

So now may we be protected from asking of God that which is beyond us, and from undertaking to perform that which it is beyond our strength to achieve. It is better to travel the imperial road by which we will be able (falling away neither to right nor to left) to be saved from this "present wicked world," having humility in all things.

Could it be that what we have here is a valiant attempt to adapt a secular story to pious purposes? In its inexorable march forward, our story has much in common with the folk-tale rather than any other genre (though here, too, nothing comparable has yet come to light), and, as previously indicated, it has the marks of a story made for telling rather than for reading. But if there were a pre-existent folk-tale behind the present story, would it have been about a monk? Folk-tales, certainly in the Greek tradition, rarely trespass on the Church's preserve, or, for that matter, even show much awareness of the existence of Christianity. Is it possible to imagine a non-Christian version of *De Monacho Superbo*? Probably so: the betrayed trust, the inadvertent inheritance of the executioner's appointment, the return of the offended party are the cardinal points of the story, and none of them requires that the hero be a monk. Although no such or similar story seems to have survived in the secular tradition, this could be easily explained: for it would rather lose its point once compulsory inheritance of appointments became a thing of the past. The most that can be said is

that there might have been a pre-existent story which could have been set in a secular context. What is beyond doubt is that, whether he worked from something he had picked up elsewhere, or produced it from his own imagination, the author of the *De Monacho Superbo* chose deliberately to write about a monk, and this in itself raises some rather interesting questions.

Was the author himself a monk? He was certainly an ecclesiastic, for he has some, though no great, knowledge of the Scriptures. But whether he was a monk or not is not so obvious. It may be argued that in failing to provide for the repentance and restoration of the hero of the story, the author has demonstrated a lack of awareness of what the monastic life was all about, though, of course, if he were using an inherited story, he could hardly be blamed for that. Or it might be argued that the author was antipathetic to the monastic order, and set himself deliberately to write a piece which would do it little credit and some harm. Nor is this so unlikely as it may seem, for antipathy to the monks there certainly was in the mediaeval Greek world. Twice it built up to epidemic proportions (or so the monastic Chronographers would have us believe), once during the iconoclastic controversy, when there was active persecution, and again in the tenth century. In fact much of middle Byzantine history was played out against a background of anti-monastic sentiment, as the monks became increasingly responsible for the agrarian problems of the Empire.

It is certainly possible that *De Monacho Superbo* was produced as a piece of anti-monastic propaganda. But, on the whole, that is unlikely, for the reason that as such it could have been rendered much more effective than it actually is, even by a writer less sophisticated than the author of the surviving text. Greed the Proud Monk was certainly guilty of, and of this the monks of the Byzantine world stand condemned. But it was his desire for the consolations of female company which twice hastened his path to perdition, a failing which is rarely named by the enemies of the monks in the middle Byzantine period. His principal and initial failing, however, was to have aimed at too great holiness, and of this, whatever else their failings, they were never accused. I am therefore inclined to set aside all suspicion of insidious intent and

to accept *De Monacho Superbo* as no more and no less than what the classification assigned to it by the Bollandists implies, *narratio animae utilis*, though with the suspicion that the author may unwittingly have been in the same condition as the man who led out a tiger to demonstrate the properties of the domestic cat.

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NOTES

¹ Some of this literature began to circulate in the West as early as the thirteenth century, but it was not until the invention of printing that it became widely known, significantly with the appearance of Heribert Rosweyde's *Vitae Patrum* (Antwerp 1615), "la pierre fondamentale des *Acta Sanctorum*;" see Hippolyte Delehaye, *L'Oeuvre des Bollandistes à travers trois siècles, 1615-1915* (2nd éd. Brussels 1959) 17-19.

² PG 65. 441-456.

³ *Historia Lausiaca* (composed c. 420), PG 34. 995-1260, and ed. E.C. Butler, *Texts and Studies*, VI. 2 (Cambridge 1904) 3-169.

⁴ PG 82. 1283-1496; Theodoret, whose collection this probably is not, lived between c. 393 and c. 458.

⁵ This, the most popular of the collections, was not completed until the beginning of the seventh century; PG 87. iii. 2847-3112.

⁶ PG 65. 76-440 (fourth and fifth centuries). Another collection which should probably be included here is the fifth-century *Lives of the Palestinian Monks* of Cyril of Scythopolis, ed. Eduard Schwartz, *Kyryllos von Skythopolis, Texte und Untersuchungen*, 42.2 (Leipzig 1939).

⁷ For the full extent of this literature see François Halkin, *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca* (BHG), 3 vols. (3rd ed., Brussels 1957) esp. appendix vi. (vol. 3. 191-214); and *Auctarium* (Brussels 1969) 287-313.

⁸ Cod. Paris. Coislin 126 (10th-11th cent., two collections of *apophthegmata*) ff. 339-341v; Cod. Paris. Coislin 232 (11th cent., *apophthegmata anonyma*) ff. 288-290. (This paper is based on a text prepared on the basis of the two above MSS.) Cod. Paris. Coislin. 283 (11th cent., excerpts from *Pratum Spirituale* followed by *apophthegmata series anonyma*) ff. 182-184v. Cod. Paris. graec. 1596 (11th cent., *monachorum historiae et apophthegmata*) pp. 638-641. Cod. Oxon. Cromwell 18 (13th cent.). Cod. Paris. Coislin 378 (14th-15th cent., *apophthegmata*). Cod. Paris. graec. 1036 (15th cent., inc. *apophthegmatum collectio*, ff. 204v-307) ff. 294v-297v. Cod. Venet. Marc. II.101 (A.D. 1592) ff. 166v-169. Cod. Leiden. 73B (A.D. 1616) ff. 364-366. Also in Codd. Athen. 2467; Berolin. Phill. 1624; Vatic. graec. 1701; S. Petri. C. 149; and Venet. Marc. II. 70.

⁹ The great collection of *Apophthegmata* published in *Patrologia Graeca* (vol. 65) is actually organised alphabetically according to the name of the chief person involved in each episode. To have included 1450x in such a collection would have been impossible.

¹⁰ The tenth-century *Vita Sancti Andreae Sali* (PG 111. 628-888) might in some ways be considered an exception, but many of its best stories have been borrowed from other *Vitae*, and it notoriously fails as the very thing which it sets out to be, an *apologia* for feigned madness as a legitimate form of Christian asceticism.

¹¹ Some barren place is hinted at by the monk's first suggestion to the officer: "'My son, go and hide your possessions behind that rock over there.'"

¹² Plentiful though the disguises of the Devil were, there is something unusual about this one. Of the human (as opposed to the animal and supernatural) forms which he assumes in Greek hagiography, three are characteristic: an old woman, a young woman and a black male adult (*aethiops*). The Devil as a non-black male is not characteristic, I think, unless as a pretty young man.

¹³ There was no legal impediment to monks entering a city; a short-lived attempt to deny them this privilege in 390 was rescinded two years later (*CTh* 16.3.1, 2).

¹⁴ The third canon of the Fourth Ecumenical Council (451) expressly

forbade monks from taking up any worldly employment. But having forfeited his monastic status by marrying, this monk could no longer demand its privileges.

¹⁵ J.-Th. Welter, *L'exemplum dans la littérature religieuse et didactique du moyen âge* (Paris 1927) 25-26 conceded that the *Vitae Patrum* made a significant contribution to the development of the *exemplum*, but held that no true specimen of that genre was to be found there, "où domine exclusivement le type du récit dévot."

¹⁶ A typical example is BHG 1449p, *De Sacerdote Indigno*, found only in Cod. Paris. graec. 1632, ff. 247-251v.; the narrative concerns a secular priest who fell into adultery through drunkenness.