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Saint Antony: Deconstructing a Visionary

1.

The genre of the Saint's Life, the paramount Christian literary vehicle of propaganda, entertainment and edification, was created in the fourth century by Athanasius and Jerome out of different strands of pagan literary traditions, including martyrs' acts, biography, historiography, and paradoxography. Much scholarly attention has been devoted to the question of what the exact mix of these traditions was in each saint's life. As much attention has been given to the relationship between these literary constructions of the hagiographers and other informations about the saints, in order to reconstruct the historical realities underlying each *Life*; the results have not always been very convincing. But only recently, scholarship has begun the more rewarding task of studying these traditions in order to better understand the forces behind the hagiographic constructions.

A case in point is Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, the earliest Saint's Life in Greek that we possess. In addition to the highly influential text of Athanasius, soon translated into Latin and making converts in the West, two other literary traditions deal with Antony the Great, a small corpus of seven Coptic letters whose authenticity is often debated¹, and a corpus of thirty-eight short anecdotes, preserved in the fifth century Greek collection of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (*Apophthegmata Patrum*). The *Sayings* solidify a long tradition of Coptic oral story-telling about this Saint, as about a large number of other Egyptian desert fathers². These different traditions have been used most recently both by Michael A. Williams and by David Brakke: both contrast them with Athanasius in order to understand better his agenda in the *Life*. While Williams thinks that these traditions, especially the *Sayings*, are closer to historical reality than Athanasius' *Life*, David Brakke understands them as just another construct, no more and no less reliable than the other traditions; I would side with Brakke³.

¹ Translated by D.J. Chitty, *The Letters of Saint Antony the Great*, Oxford 1975 (repr. 1991).

² The *Sayings* are preserved in two traditions; one is arranged alphabetically and has been edited in PG 65. The other one is arranged in topics and is edited by J.-C. Guy, *Les Apophthegmes des Pères*. Collection systématique (SC 387. 474. 498), Paris 1993-2005.

³ M.A. Williams, *The Life of Antony and the Domestication of Charismatic Wisdom*, in: *Charisma and Sacred Biography*, Chico CA 1982, 23-45; D. Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Ascetism* (Oxford Early Christian Studies), Oxford u.a. 1995. – See also H. Doerries, *Die Vita Antonii als Geschichtsquelle*, *Wort und Stunde* 1 (1966)

In what follows, I shall concentrate on the tradition of the *Apophthegmata*. The letters contain spiritual admonitions addressed to early ascetic communities in Egypt and do not overlap much with Athanasius' *Life*, whereas the *Sayings* offer a more varied and, as will immediately become clear, a not altogether uniform picture that can be confronted with Athanasius' account.

2.

The aim of the *Apophthegmata* collection is to give examples of monastic life. The introduction to the alphabetic collection (A) makes this clear: the Desert Fathers were «eager followers and teachers of this blessed eremitic life», and stories about them «incite posterity to emulate them eagerly»⁴. The unknown collector chose the form of isolated apophthegms instead of the much more common series of individual biographies because «nobody is able to really describe their virtuous lives»⁵: this might well be aimed both at Athanasius' *Life* and at the unknown authors of the *Lives of Pachomius*. A considerable part of the sayings both of Antony and of the other Fathers concerns the ascetic life; these sayings are often reported as answers of the Saint to other monks or hermits, but also as his unsolicited maxims. Some concern problems of living together both as hermits and especially as monks; they implicitly assert the superiority of the hermit over the monk, a topic which continues being relevant up to the introduction of Benedict's *Monastic Rule*. Only one of Antony's sayings appears also in Athanasius' *Life*, the comparison of fish that survive only in the sea and anchorites who only survive in their cells⁶. Others are at least comparable but develop in different directions. *Life* 65 and *Apophth.* 1 are visions in which Antony sees himself from the outside, but the aim of the two stories is altogether different. *Life* 59 and *Apophth.* 2 address a problem of theodicy, but again, the stories take different turns. In *Apophth.* 2, Antony challenges God directly because he deems it unjust that some people die early and others very late, but he is brutally rebuked by God's voice: «Antony, care for your own affairs»; in *Life* 59, Antony is able to rescue only one of two travelers whom, in a fit of clairvoyance, he sees dying, and it is Athanasius in a powerful auctorial intrusion who asks the question of theodicy, and who underscores that Antony faithfully accepted God's decision and did not question it at all. Here, Athanasius must correct ideas about theodicy that were current in his time; Athanasius rejoins that God's justice should not be questioned by

145-224.

⁴ Introduction, p. 72A.

⁵ Ibid. p. 74A, reading τοῦτων instead of τοῦτον.

⁶ Athanas. *VA* 85; *Apophth. Ant.* 10 (p. 77 B); the comparison is widespread afterwards.

man. But there is an additional twist: in this scene, Athanasius portrays Antony as another Elijah, sitting in the top of his mountain and receiving a divine vision, while *Saying 2* relates an unmediated dialogue between Antony and God. This latter version is much stronger: even a human who has the same direct access to God as the prophets had, cannot derive from this the legitimacy to question God's will.

This brings me to the main topic of this contribution (and the occasion which tempted a historian of pagan religion to stray into the field of Christianity, to honor a former colleague and friend): the picture of Antony as a visionary.

Together with *Saying 2*, two other *Sayings* are relevant, *Sayings 26* and *30*. *Saying 26* tells how some brethren asked Antony to explain to them a difficult passage in Leviticus. Instead of answering immediately, Antony quietly walks into the desert and is secretly followed by one of the other anchorites. Far away from human observation (as he thinks), Antony takes up a prayer stance and calls out to God: «God, send me Moses who will explain this question». This was the last thing the hidden witness really understood: although he then heard two voices in an extended discussion, he could not understand one word, and not only because of the distance. Here, the story ends: we have to assume that Antony brought back the correct explanation, from the horse's mouth, so to speak⁷: his ability to have direct access to God makes him an inspired teacher in the most literal sense of the word.

Nothing like this is found in Athanasius. His Antony is not a learned authority, and he never had formal training (he was, as Athanasius writes, *agrámmatos*, that is he could neither write nor read Greek, but might well have read and written Coptic⁸). Nevertheless, he is able to shame even pagan philosophers on account of his innate intelligence. But Athanasius is at pains to stress that these interior gifts of his hero derive not from any special prophetic relationship to God, but simply from his firm faith in Jesus; there is no place for a prophetic or even ecstatic origin of Antony's wisdom, as happens in the *Sayings*⁹.

Even more revealing is *Saying 30*. «Some said that Saint Antony was a bearer of spirit (*pneumatophóros*), but that he did not wish to talk because of the people; and he was able to tell what was happening in the world and what would come in the future»¹⁰. The Greek term *pneumatophóros* is a current term to designate a prophet in Christian Greek, and it is applied among others

⁷ *Apophth. Ant.* 26, 84 C.

⁸ *VA* 1,2. 73,1. For the problem see R. Calderini, *Gli agrámmatoi nell'Egitto Greco-Romano*, *Aeg* 30 (1950) 14-41; H.C. Youtie, *Ἀγράμματος*. An aspect of Greek society in Egypt, *HSCP* 75 (1971) 161-176.

⁹ Athanas. *VA* 73. 74-80; the term σύνεσις in 73,3. 80,5.

¹⁰ *Apophth. Ant.* 30, 85 B.

to Pachomius and to John the Baptist¹¹. The term describes them as vessels of the Holy Spirit, that is as ecstasies; the two aspects of this gift which the *Saying* points to – clairvoyance or the perception of things that happen far away in space, and prophecy or the knowledge of things that will happen in the future – often go together. This is rather commonplace, however; the more puzzling aspect is Antony's aversion to show his gift in public.

This aversion points to a certain distrust of prophetic gifts on the part of the authors of the *Saying*. It finds its parallels in other *Sayings*, as in one that is attributed to Olympius of Skete: when visited by a pagan priest in whose world an ecstatic experience was the regular consequence of ritual practice, the visitor was surprised that the monks did not have visions. He could only understand it by assuming that they had impure thoughts that prevented them from contacts with the divine¹². This is a clear misunderstanding, based on the pagan assumption that every holy man had to have his prophetic gift.

Christian ascetics (as well as Christian theologians like Augustine) ground their distrust of visions in the belief that these visions might easily be caused by demons; a *Saying* attributed to Antony points this out, as does Athanasius in his *Life*¹³. For this reason, as Antony insists in the *Life*, it is better not to wish for prophetic gifts, because this opens the demons an entry; and if an ascetic possesses this gift, it has to go together with a pure mind: only an exceptionally pure ascetic could have visions without the danger of demoniac intrusions. Antony, of course, is this exceptional ascetic, and Athanasius has him experience clairvoyance and prophecy several times. Prophecy and clairvoyance belong to the standard characteristics of the charismatic already in the pagan tradition, and Athanasius could not do without them¹⁴.

But even here, one can discern a certain distance and caution on Athanasius' part. His Antony has not random visions, and they do not characterize his entire career. He has them only late in life, when his ascetic life style has moved him well outside the reach of the devil¹⁵; and they occur in very specific contexts: with the one exception of the vision which Athanasius turned into a problem of theodicy (see above), the visions that he recounts in the *Life of Antony* either inform about the fate of the soul after the death of the body, or predict the fate of the Arians. The former visions insert Antony into a standard tradition of Christian literature that Athanasius could not disregard. In

¹¹ According to Lampe s.v., the word is used for (A) «carriers of spirit», namely (1) Prophets, John the Baptist, Antony; (2) scriptural writers (the evangelists, Paul, the Psalmist); (3) doctors of the church; (4) monks (Pachomius); (5) false prophets.

¹² *Apophth. Olympii* 1, p. 313 C.

¹³ *Apophth. Ant.* 12, 77CD; Athanas. *VA* 31-34.

¹⁴ L. Bieler, ΘΕΙΟΣ ΑΝΗΡ. Das Bild des «göttlichen Menschen» in Spätantike und Frühchristentum, Wien 1935/36, 87-94.

¹⁵ Clairvoyance *VA* 59.60.62, prophecy 65.86.

a Christian context, eschatological visions begin with the dreams (*visiones*) of Perpetua but turn into the main vehicle of eschatological teaching during the fourth and fifth centuries both in Eastern and Western Christianity, not the least under the influence of Christian Platonism; in the West, the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great solidified the tradition for the Middle Ages¹⁶. The other context, the battle against Arianism, is Athanasius' very personal affair, and all the instances Athanasius recounts are prophecies *ex eventu*, made up by the bishop of Alexandria. Thus, Athanasius is making use of a topical narrative for his very own agenda: he makes Antony a prophet whose visions legitimize Athanasius' personal views on the Arians.

3.

This brings me to the larger background which is visible also behind Antony the ecstatic visionary of the *Sayings*. In some respects, this picture inscribes itself into contemporary preoccupations of late Antique Egypt. Both the theurgical rituals and the recipes in the so-called *Magical Papyri* are well acquainted with the technique of ecstatic ascent in order to obtain information from a god; Antony asking God for an interview with Moses fits perfectly well with the pagan magician asking for a meeting with a superior god to obtain otherwise hidden knowledge¹⁷. The same background holds true for clairvoyance and prophecy – as a magical papyrus has it: «If anyone asks you «What do I have in mind?», or «What has happened to me?» [that is, two instances of clairvoyance] or even «What is going to happen?» [an instance of prophecy], question the angel, and he will tell you in silence¹⁸.» Antony as portrayed in the *Sayings* conforms to this, as do other Fathers in the same collection; Peter Brown underlined how especially the gift of knowing «what one has in mind» was indispensable for the monastic leaders from Pachomius onwards¹⁹.

In many respects then, the *Life of Antony* can be read as a conscious correction of an altogether too traditionally non-Christian conception of the founder of Egyptian asceticism. This serves the bishop of Alexandria's agenda

¹⁶ See M.P. Ciccarese, La genesi letteraria della visione dell'aldilà. Gregorio Magno e le sue fonti, in: Sogni, Visioni e Profezie nell'Antico Cristianesimo, Aug 29 (1989) 435–449.

¹⁷ The most impressive example of these pagan rituals is the text that is customarily called the Mithras Liturgy (*Papyri Graecae Magicae* IV 475-820); see the edition, translation and commentary by H.D. Betz, The «Mithras Liturgy». Text, Translation, and Commentary (Studien zu Antike und Christentum 18), Tübingen 2003; on theurgy, see C. Van Liefferinge, La théurgie. Des Oracles Chaldaïques à Proclus, Kernos. Suppl. 9, Liège 1999.

¹⁸ *Papyri Graecae Magicae* I 175-177.

¹⁹ P. Brown, The Making of Late Antiquity, Cambridge/London 1978, chapter 4.

of moving Antony away from Egyptian traditions that he sees as being too native, and thus either too close to paganism or resisting the global mission of Christianity. This aim is most tangible in chapter 90 of the *Life*. Here, Antony as Athanasius' speaker²⁰, attacks the Coptic funerary practice of leaving the corpses of saints above ground for a long period of honor and veneration: he insists that this «illegitimate and unholy» practice contradicted the ways the Biblical patriarchs, the prophets, and Jesus himself were buried: the Bible is the over-regional standard for all religious behavior. At the same time, Athanasius wished to control the impact of a charismatic figure that belonged to rural Egyptian stock, and he did so to reinforce the position of the Alexandrian see opposite the more native traditions in the Nile valley: keeping a saint's body exposed inside a private building would have allowed the body to become a powerful focus of local cult²¹. Thus, Athanasius makes Antony provide also for his body to be buried secretly. The counter instance, of course, is the fate of Antony's pupil Hilarion whose body was snatched away from Cyprus shortly after his death and brought back to Gaza where it became the center of a cult²².

But behind all this, there is a larger perspective as well, and it again has to do with the Church's deep distrust of ecstasy per se; in the last instance, this helps to explain why visions were suspected of being sent by demons. Hostility towards ecstasy already characterized the Church's stance towards the Montanists, although there it was part and parcel of a larger problem. In the fourth century, attacks on (pagan) divination was widespread in the Imperial legislation; the respective laws begin with Constantine and continue up to Gratian, Valentinian and Theodosius, with variable degrees of severity according to the more or less pragmatism of the respective ruler. As especially Marie-Therese Fögen has shown²³, this opposition and hostility has its roots in the attempt of the Christian emperors and of the Church authorities to control access to divine wisdom: only the secular and ecclesiastical leaders, the Emperor and the bishops, could claim such an access. In itself, this is neither new nor Christian: it continues the political aim to limit access to the divine to the State and its high functionaries that is visible already in the Roman Republic. The conflict with individual charismatics or ecstatic groups is a constant of Roman politics, from the severe cracking-down on the Bacchanalia in 187 BC and the expulsion of «magicians» from 27 BC onwards to imperial legislation against private divination in the second and third centuries; if one

²⁰ Athanas. *VA* 90.3 «Often, Antony had even asked the bishops to teach the populace on this matter.»

²¹ On Athanasius' political agenda, see Brakke, Athanasius.

²² Hieron. *Vita Hilarionis* 32.6f.

²³ M.Th. Fögen, *Die Enteignung der Wahrsager. Studien zum kaiserlichen Wissensmonopol in der Spätantike*, Frankfurt 1993 (repr. 1997).

wished for an even larger prospective, one might also recall the edict of Ptolemy Philopator in order to control Bacchic, that is ecstatic, religious groups in Hellenistic Egypt²⁴. The political aim was the same over the centuries, what changes was the explanation: Christianization brought with it the easy dichotomies of pagan demons vs. the Christian God and his angels and saints. Athanasius is a contemporary of this movement. An especially severe law dates from January 25, 357, shortly before the *Life* was about to be written; it stipulates that «For everybody, the curiosity of divination shall be silent forever: *Sileat omnibus perpetuo divinandi curiositas*²⁵». The context points to pagan divination only; the law mentions haruspices, harioli, augures, vates, magi. But the argument was based on the necessity to restrict severely the access to the divine world; thus, it could easily be extended into the Christian world, and even the ascetics could turn into suspects: when the ascetic Martin was elected bishop of Tours by the city population, over the protest of the aristocratic bishops, we catch such an instance of contestation²⁶. Athanasius must have been aware of the problems into which all too uncontrolled ascetic ecstasy could lead the emperor's authority, and, even more importantly, his own as well; he carefully moved the exemplary Antony away from such dangers.

Abstract

Der Beitrag kontrastiert einige Anekdoten über den Proto-Eremiten Antonius aus den Apophthegmata Patrum mit der Vita des Athanasius; er setzt eine Diskussion über die historische Verlässlichkeit dieser Anekdoten fort, welche in der Forschung zu widersprüchlichen Resultaten geführt hat. Die vorliegende Untersuchung konzentriert sich auf drei Anekdoten, welche Antonius als Visionär darstellen. Sie zeigt auf, dass die Autoren der Apophthegmata ekstatisch-visionären Erlebnissen gegenüber skeptischer waren als Athanasius, und dies nicht bloss im Fall des Antonius. Diese Skepsis gründet in der Angst der

²⁴ The literature is large; see e.g. F.H. Cramer, Expulsion of Astrologers from Ancient Rome, *Classica & Mediaevalia* 12 (1951) 9-50; G.M. Parássoglou, Circular from a Prefect. «Sileat Omnibus Perpetuo Divinandi Curiositas,» in: *Collectanea Papyrologica. Texts Published in Honor of H.C. Youtie*, ed. A.E. Hanson, Bonn 1976, 262-78; L. Desanti, La repressione della scientia divinatoria in età del principato, in: *Idee vecchie e nuove sul diritto criminale Romano*, ed. A. Burdese, Padua 1988, 225-240; J.-M. Paillet, *Bacchanalia. La répression de 186 av. J.-C. à Rome et en Italie. Vestiges, images, traditions* (Bibliothèque des Écoles Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 270), Rom/Paris 1988. For a general account, see M. Beard, J. North, S. Price, *Religions of Rome. 1: A History*, Cambridge 1998, 211-244.

²⁵ *Cod. Theodos.* 9.16.4.

²⁶ Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini* 9.3.

Asketen, durch ein dämonisches Trugbild getäuscht zu werden, hat aber letztlich auch zu tun mit der Abwertung solcher Phänomene durch die institutionalisierte Kirche.

Fritz Graf, Columbus