

## Domestic violence against women as a reason to sanctification in Byzantine hagiography

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Fecha de recepción: 15/09/2018  
Fecha de aceptación: 29/11/2018

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### 1. Introduction

Domestic violence against women represents one of the major issues of modern civilization regarding social relationships between men and women. Traditionally, women have been observed as being inferior to men in terms of physical strength and intelligence, and were considered a mere belonging on the hands of a male authority: firstly, her father, then her husband, and when widowed, eventually her confessor. This need of guardianship must be interpreted in a broader conception which has its roots in the Classical world and is highly developed in Early Christian literature, where women are said to pass through three different states along their lives: virgin, wife-mother and widow (Giannarelli, 1980: 10-14). These three stages (girlhood, marriage and motherhood, and widowhood and old age) will be maintained in Late Antiquity and Byzantine times (Talbot, 1997: 119-129), where mixed conceptions about social life and religion, inherited from both Graeco-Roman world and Christianity, will persist.

Early Christian thought has incorporated most of the social values of Graeco-Roman society, adapting and modelling them in some cases according to its own doctrine. In the case of gender differences, the physical

and intellectual weakness (ἀσθένεια) of women, based on both biological and philosophical presumptions (Mattioli, 1983: 228-229), is considered one of the main features of female sex, as it appears in *IPet.* 3,7 where women are compared to a fragile glass (ἀσενεστέρῳ σκεύει). In addition, misogynistic beliefs on their natural wickedness strengthen the need of male control over women. In this ideological framework Paul's letters state that wives must submit to their own husbands –repeated in *IPet.* 3,1–, as to the lord (ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ), since he must be considered the head of the wife (κεφαλὴ τῆς γυναικὸς), as Christ is the head of the church (*Eph.* 5, 22-24; *Col.* 3,18). By this simile, Paul establishes a hierarchy in which women are submitted to their husband's criteria, as it was customary in ancient world.

Marriage in Early Christianity, however, is regarded as a sacred union in which two individuals set a pious association to consecrate themselves to religious life and chastity (Sfameni Gasparro – Magazzù – Spada, 1991: 75-89), which could be only broken to procreate (*ICor.* 7). Even if chastity is preferred by most of first centuries' Christian theologians and becomes an obsession in some communities of that times as montanists or encratites<sup>1</sup>, marriage is portrayed as the origin of life and as a social institution to be cared and protected. Mutual respect and love is recommended to husbands in *Col.* 3,19, but religious doctrine could not avoid domestic violence. In fact, the Early Christian period is an anxious time in which violence masters political and religious debate. In this context, violence against women is particularly cruel and in literary sources some cases of sexual assaults against them are reported.

Among the different passions of martyrs of the first centuries and in the stories about women contained on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, the two main hagiographical genres of that time, violence against women can be seen from two complementary points of view. The first one is the general persecutions of Christians by Roman authorities, the second, the special fury and the presence of an important sexual component in the tortures against women because of gender condition. The link between both

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, a moderate encratism was imposed as the official position of the Church concerning sex, marriage and procreation among most of the early Christian communities (Sfameni Gasparro, 1984).

elements can be observed in the scene of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* in which Alexander, a Syrian leading member of the city of Antioch, tries to embrace Thecla and she resists and knocks the crown of Alexander from his head, which dishonors him before the rest of the antiochenes (*APTh.* 26). Besides the symbolic value of the scene, interpreted as a sort of loss of dignity (Barrier, 2006: 141), the reaction of Thecla facing a clear sexual assault will bring her to her second martyrdom.

Precisely, in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles the so-called women's stories describe a kind of obsessive control of the husband over his wife, when she becomes Christian and endangers the stability of such a capital social institution as marriage<sup>2</sup>. Following these statements, some authors such as Davies (1983: 105-107) or Burrus (1987: 95-99) have intuited a resentment against men on these texts, based on the presence of a «sympathetic sensitivity to the difficulties of women in their relationships with Christian men» or a «graphic portrayal of sexual sadism» (Davies, 1983: 106). Even if the main goal of this kind of statements is addressed to demonstrate or rather to pose the option of an eventual female authorship of the texts integrating the five major Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, such an approach emphasizes the marital tension between wife and husband portrayed on these stories. The context of the spread of Christian doctrine permitted the apparition of this kind of scenes, in which a woman renounced to her husband to follow a Christian preacher and, by doing so, shook the foundations of her marriage and the stability of traditional social and familiar values of the Graeco-Roman world (Jacobs, 2006: 18-24). Thus, these women's stories, even if placed in a very different social context, could be interpreted as a remote antecedent of the domestic violence described on later female lives of saints.

On the other hand, among the many female passions of martyrs of Early Christian and Late Antique times some tortures with a sexual component are featured. In different passions of female martyrs such as Agatha of Sicily (*BHG* 36-37), Barbara and Juliana (*BHG* 213-214) or Susanna (*BHG* 1673), the judge decrees the cut of the breasts of these women, which clearly shows the cruel intention of the torturers by mutilating one

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<sup>2</sup> On social connotations of sexual renunciation in Early Christianity see Brown (1988).

of the most notorious physical attributes of womanhood. The attitude either of Alexander provoking the second martyrdom of Thecla or of the men torturing these women in early passions obeys, in any case, to religious and political motivations and has no implications regarding domestic violence, since it does not exist any familiar or marital link between the aggressor and the attacked woman. However, the story of the wife of the emperor Maxentius referred in the Greek passion of Catherine of Alexandria (*BHG* 30-32) represents a novelty, inasmuch as the Roman ruler ordains to cut off the breasts and behead her own wife, because she has been previously converted to Christianity. Even if one must agree on interpreting the cut off breasts of a woman as a novelistic motif related to martyrial literature, a testimony of this sort represents an interesting antecedent of the topic of the domestic violence used as a justification of sanctity, which will be developed in Late Antique and namely in Middle Byzantine Hagiography.

## 2. Female saints in Byzantine Hagiography

From the fourth century onwards, once finished the Roman persecutions, the Byzantine hagiographic literature primarily focuses on monks and bishops as holy men, and nuns as holy women. In this new context in which martyrdom ceases to be a recurrent source of new saints, other attitudes such as persistent asceticism or virtues such as philanthropy, piety, modesty or charity are highlighted in the lives of Byzantine saints. The evolution of female hagiography in Byzantium, nevertheless, progresses separately from the one consecrated to male saints (Delierneux, 2014). Actually, as Talbot (2001: 1) points out «holy women were often grouped together in a single category, with gender being the overriding criterion»<sup>3</sup>.

The total amount of female saints until the collapse of Byzantine Empire in 15<sup>th</sup> century is extremely lower in comparison with their male counterparts (Talbot, 1996a: VIII-X). In any case, different typologies of female saints can be distinguished along the different periods in which Byzantine History has been traditionally divided. Late Antique hagiographers continue to exploit the typology of the martyr, but, at the same

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<sup>3</sup> Female constructions of sanctity are deeply analyzed by Constantinou (2005).

time, new categories of female saint such as nuns<sup>4</sup>, matrons<sup>5</sup>, repentant harlots<sup>6</sup> or women disguised as monks<sup>7</sup> are portrayed (Talbot, 2001: 2-3). In Middle and Late Byzantine periods, even if the number of female saints declines, maybe because of the establishment of official canonization processes (Talbot, 1991: 372), and the lesser participation of women in monastic life (Talbot, 1985), four principal categories are particularly described in Hagiography: defenders of Orthodoxy, nuns and abbesses, pious matrons, and hermitesses and nuns disguised as monks (Talbot, 2001: 4-14). The first type is created as a logical consequence of the two iconoclastic periods (726-787 and 815-842) and the triumph of Iconodule postulates. It generally features a holy woman married to an iconoclast emperor such as Irene, the Athenian (*BHG* 2205)<sup>8</sup>, wife of Leo IV (775-

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<sup>4</sup> Synkletika (*BHG* 1694) or Makrina (*BHG* 1012), the elder sister of Gregory of Nyssa might be placed into this category.

<sup>5</sup> Two significant examples would be Gorgonia (*BHG* 704), sister of Gregory of Nazianzos and Matriona of Perge (*BHG* 1221), one of the women experiencing domestic violence at the hands of her abusive husband who will be further discussed in the following pages.

<sup>6</sup> The figure of the repentant harlot has its roots in the account of Mary Magdalene as sinful person who repents. All these saints were former prostitutes or women leading a licentious life who converted to Christianity and started a pious and ascetic life such as Mary of Egypt (*BHG* 1042) or Pelagia (*BHG* 1478). Many of these stories can be read in English translation in Ward (1987).

<sup>7</sup> Nuns disguised as monks to embrace monastic life are featured in fourteen lives of saints from 5<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century. They normally cut their hair, changed their clothes and even their name for a male one to enter into a monastic community and live as a monk until their death, even if in some cases travestism is just temporary. The very first antecedent of this motif can be observed in the story of Thecla, who did this to freely move and follow Paul to Antioch. The list of these Byzantine cross-dresser saints is headed by the aforementioned Pelagia (Pelagio) (*BHG* 1478) and completed by Euphrosyne (Smaragdus) (*BHG* 625), Mary (Marinos) (*BHG* 1163), Theodora (Theodore) of Alexandria (*BHG* 1729), Matriona (Babylas) of Perge (*BHG* 1221), Apollinaria (Dorotheos) (*BHG* 148), Anastasia the Patrician (*BHG* 79-80), Athanasia (Athanasios), wife of Andronicus (*BHG* 122), Anna (Euphemianos) (*BHG* 2027), Susanna (John) (*BHG* 1673), Eugenia (Eugenios) (*BHG* 608), Marina (Marinos) of Sicily (*BHG* 1170) and Euphrosyne the Younger (*BHG* 627). Although it exists many difficulties to establish a precise dating of some of these texts, all of them would belong to Late Antiquity, but the *vitae* of Eugenia, Marina and Euphrosyne the Younger. The phenomenon was deeply analyzed by Patlagean (1976).

<sup>8</sup> The edition of the Greek text and an English translation can be read on Treadgold (1982).

780), or Theodora (*BHG* 1731)<sup>9</sup>, wife of Theophilos (829-842). Nuns and abbesses represent the female counterparts of monks and male founders of monasteries, the most widespread typology of holy men in later Byzantine periods. Women as Theodora of Thessalonike (*BHG* 1740; 1737-1739)<sup>10</sup> and Irene, abbess of the Chrysobalanton monastery in Constantinople (*BHG* 952)<sup>11</sup>, are the most significant examples, both dated on ninth-tenth centuries. Hermitesses were rare compared with male saints. Anyway, the *vita* of Theoktiste of Lesbos (*BHG* 1723-1724)<sup>12</sup>, largely based on the story of Mary of Egypt (*BHG* 1042)<sup>13</sup>, demonstrates the continuation of previous female hagiographic trends at this time. In addition, a similar phenomenon is observed in the cases of later nuns disguised as monks (Eugenia, Marina of Sicily and Euphrosyne the Younger).

Finally, pious matrons represent a new category of female sanctity, developed in Middle Byzantine Era (9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries) as a new model of conduct for married laywomen. The two examples found in Hagiography are the *vitae* of Mary of Byzie, also known as Mary the Younger (*BHG* 1164), and Thomaïs of Lesbos (*BHG* 2454). Both are dated in late ninth or tenth century and reflect local and popular cults in the Armenian region of Byzie and in the island of Lesbos. The pious matron shares some common features with other holy figures of that time as the empresses venerated as saints because of their belligerent attitude towards Iconoclasm, such as the aforementioned Irene the Athenian and Theodora, and also because of their engaging in asceticism, determination facing diverse struggles or pious life, such as Theophano (*BHG* 1794-1795)<sup>14</sup>, wife of

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<sup>9</sup> For the Greek text see Markopoulos (1983). An English translation is available on Vinson (1998).

<sup>10</sup> On Theodora's life and the text of the translation of her relics narrating some post-humous miracles see Kurtz (1902) and Paschalidis (1991). For an English translation see Talbot (1996b). For further information, see also Patlagean (1984).

<sup>11</sup> For her life see Rosenqvist (1986).

<sup>12</sup> For an English translation, see Hero (1996).

<sup>13</sup> On the dependency on the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* and the divergences from it, see Jazdzewska (2009) and Kazhdan (1985). For an English translation of the life of St Mary of Egypt, see Kouli (1996).

<sup>14</sup> Theophano is specially known because of her asceticism and for having retired to a monastery in Blachernae district, after being replaced by Zoe Zautzaina, with whom the emperor has been falling in love. The texts of the two versions of her life are preserved in

Leo VI (886-912), or Irene-Xene (*BHG* 2206)<sup>15</sup>, consort of John II Komnenos (1118-1143). Even if in the last two cases, both Theophano and Irene developed an intense monastic career and, accordingly, they could be differently considered and integrated within the category of nuns or abbesses, all these women, including Mary and Thomaïs, have in common a married life and a noble origin, much more significant in the case of holy empresses.

The presence of marriage in all these female lives of saints, and in many others<sup>16</sup>, «demonstrates that in Byzantium marriage was not viewed as an impediment to future sanctity» (Sherry, 1996: 137), though virginity will be always preferred and recommended to women. Anyway, among the many married women saints, pious matrons distinguish from the rest since they remain married throughout their lifetime, never embrace monastic life, but nevertheless were venerated as saints, and also since they are described to suffer constant abuses and violent aggressions from their husbands, a motif which connects both Mary and Thomaïs with Matrona of Perge, the first holy woman, in whose story struggles of this sort are explicitly expressed.

### 3. Marriage and domestic violence in female Byzantine Hagiography

Marriage is seen as ambivalent in the biographies of these two pious matrons of Byzantine Hagiography. As mentioned above, after a reading of both *vitae* one comes to the conclusion that marriage is not considered as an impediment to attain sanctity, but this general conclusion does not

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Kurtz (1898). Together with the lives of both Mary of Byzie and Thomaïs of Lesbos, the *Life of Theophano* has been examined as a cluster of married saints in Byzantium (Laiou, 1989: 237-251).

<sup>15</sup> Her *vita* is only preserved in an addition to the *Synaxarion of Constantinople*: (Halkin, 1948: 29). Irene is venerated for having founded a coenobitic female monastery in Constantinople funded by her Husband.

<sup>16</sup> In all periods of Byzantine hagiography one can find examples of this kind. A few of them must suffice. Xanthippe, converted into Christianity by the apostle Paul in the novelesque *Acts of Xanthippe and Polixena* (1877), was married, as she was also the aforementioned Athanasia, wife of Andronicus (*BHG* 122) and Theodora of Alexandria (*BHG* 1740), or Athanasia of Egina (*BHG* 180), a founder of female monasteries and constructor of churches that might have lived at the early Arab raids on the Aegeum sea by the first half of the ninth century.

exclude a much more complex assessment of marriage either as a social basic institution, even holy and virtuous in some cases, or as an earthly hell, even though it would become precisely a reason to justify the saint's future veneration.

As Garland points out, «marriage, not religious life, was the normal career for most girls of the upper class», while «middle class families also considered it desirable that their daughters should marry and help to perpetuate the family» (Garland, 1988: 366). However, renunciation to marriage has great importance in the stories of pagan noblewomen appearing in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles and from Early Christian literature onwards. It will become a recurring motif of female Hagiography as it appears, for example, in the *life* of Makrina, the sister of Gregory of Nyssa –in this case after her fiancé's premature death–, and especially in the lives of nuns disguised as monks.

Among the fourteen *vitae* listed above, this motif is shared by the narrations of Euphrosyne (Smaragdus), Apolinaria (Dorotheos), Susana (John), Eugenia (Eugenios), Marina of Sicily and Euphrosyne the Younger. In most cases, hagiographers merely mention the saint's desire to remain virgin in opposition to her parents, who wanted her to choose a nobleman to marry, but it can also be found interesting reactions to parental intentions, such as the one of Marina of Sicily. Where the saint's parents ask her to be married, she thinks of a ruse to avoid it and pretends to be mad, until, years later, their parents change their mind, after having observed her consecration to divine mysteries and asceticism<sup>17</sup>.

In most *vitae*, nevertheless, the young woman has no choice and, even if she often shows an initial reluctance to marriage, finally obeys her parents' will and takes a husband. Within Christian doctrine, this attitude

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<sup>17</sup> The hagiographer narrates how Marina tells her parents that she has become mad (παραιλήξιος) and lunatic (σεληνιαζομένη) after a dream in which a bunch of Ethiopian terrified and hit her. The plot, appearing in chapters 5-8 of this *life*, is particularly interesting since it combines a typical motif of female hagiography such as the renunciation to marriage, with a central topic on the biographies of the so-called «fool-for-Christ» saints Andrew (*BHG* 115z-117b) and Symeon (*BHG* 1677), such as the fake madness. On this topic see Ivanov (2006). In addition, the description of the Ethiopian men attacking Marine fits with prototypical descriptions of demons in Late Antique and Byzantine religious literature (Brakke, 2001). For the Greek text of the *Life of Marina of Sicily* with Italian translation, see Rossi Taibbi (1959).



would be a logical behavior since girls should be controlled by their parents, and wives by their husbands. Hagiographers, instead, underline the desire of the woman to remain unmarried, and this attitude becomes also a motif widely developed in hagiographic texts on women. In any case, it belongs to a broader system of ideas, inherited from Early Christian theology, in which virginity is considered the most perfect state for women, since it is thought to be the closest way of earthly life to the one of angels. Thus, the so-called βίος ἀγγελικός represents this belief on the superiority of virginity<sup>18</sup>, within the traditional tripartite division of the states of women (virgin, mother and widow), and differs from the identic notion displayed in lives of monks and hermits, especially the Fathers of the Deserts, since in these cases the «angelic life» describes images of the lost paradise to which solitary and spiritual life-style leads the ascetic<sup>19</sup>.

Marriage, however, is in this context a natural step for a woman. The husband must take care of his wife, but, when he is precisely who outrages and hurts his own wife, the household becomes the scenario of a cruel nightmare and the physical domination of the man over the woman provokes dramatic and even fatal consequences. Thus, domestic violence must be understood as the one «which occurs within the context of marriage or cohabitation» (Smith, 1989: 1). It embodies the harshest and cruelest type of abuse against women within such a belief system as Christian one, where the husband is supposed to care his spouse and children by both legal and divine command. This kind of situations, far for being rare until present day, has been anyhow downplayed and ignored in literature with the exception of few testimonies. In my opinion, it has always been a taboo topic which is perceived as a familiar or domestic problem to be solved privately at home. It must be important to admit that this kind of violence is perceived as natural in societies in which men develop a preponderant role and women are constantly subjugated to a male authority and violence occurs as a common response to either modify a certain behavior in someone else or simply to punish her. For these

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<sup>18</sup> This idea is especially developed by Gregory of Nyssa in his *Life of Makrina* as Giannarelli (1988: 36-38) points out.

<sup>19</sup> This principle would be represented sometimes through the communion between monks and wild animals or idyllic visions stimulated by the tranquility and purity of the soul focused only on prayer. On this topic, see Frank (1964).

reasons, though no frequently, it is possible to track scenes of this sort in Greek literature from Homer to the novel<sup>20</sup>.

In *Iliad* 1, 560-589 Zeus threatens to beat Hera as in 15, 12-23, where he also recalls how he had previously tortured his wife by hanging her mid-air and slinging two heavy anvils down from her feet (Llewellyn-Jones, 2011: 242-244). In Aristophanes wife beating is observed from a comic point of view (*Lys.* 160-166 and 507-520; *Clouds* 1443-1446) as in Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans* (*Dial.* 8). A later similar example could be found in the first book of Chariton's *Callirhoe* where Chaereas, who has experienced an intense jealousy, kicks his wife, who lays half-dead right after their marriage. This situation indeed initiates the adventures of the couple of lovers, since Callirhoe seems to be dead and Chaereas decides to bury her wife in a lavish tomb. The pirate Teron, who observes the scene, plunders the tomb and, when finding Calhirroe alive, kidnaps and sells her as a slave.

In Early Christian literature it is difficult to find such cases, since Christian moral principles could have probably help to hide domestic violence against women as it would be unlawful and would attack sacred statements. Thus, in Byzantine times social thoughts inherited from Graeco-Roman society would aid to preserve domestic violence as a natural resource of control over women in a familiar context and Christian beliefs, for its part, would contribute to silence debate on these situations and to turn domestic violence into a taboo topic. Precisely for these reasons, the episodes of domestic violence referred in the *vitae* of Matrona of Perge, Mary the Younger and Thomaïs of Lesbos offer an unparalleled opportunity to deal with such a social matter. These three biographies have been chosen, since they are the three only hagiographical texts in which violent scenes against a woman in the domestic context are featured. In any case, it must be made clear that, although domestic violence is a major trait of the lives of these three women and become a reason to achieve sanctity, it represents just another merit of the saint among many more, like charitable activity or ascetic life-style, especially in the case of Matrona of Perge. Actually, the holy status of these saints, once the wom-

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<sup>20</sup> Representative cases can be observed in Llewellyn-Jones (2011), whereas the more specific scene of the uxoricide in pregnancy is analyzed by Deacy and McHardy (2013).

an is dead and miraculous activity starts to manifest around her tomb or relics, is used to be strongly questioned by ordinary people, and even by monks or priests, as described in the *Life* of Mary the Younger.

Chapters 19-20 of this life reports how a group of monks casts doubt upon the thaumaturgic capacity of the relics of the saint and how Stephen, the bishop of Vrysis, is also afflicted «by the sickness of doubt» (τῆς ἀπιστίας τὸ πάθος). The latter would repent after having observed a possessed woman healed by kissing the right hand of the uncorrupted body of the saint placed inside her coffin. This deep examination on the activities of the saint is particularly intense in lives of both Mary and Thomaïs, the two pious laywomen without strong ties to religious communities, since Matrona devoted most of her life to monastic activity. In this cases, hagiographers seem to be forced to defend and justify time and again the holy status of the woman through other characters of the story defending the authenticity of the healings of the saint, on the basis of her pious virtues. In fact, as Laiou points out the ironic and paradoxical tone found in some passages in the *Life* of Mary the Younger is owed «possibly to the fact that the author himself found the story a little far-fetched, and that he too had his doubts about the process that had made St. Mary a saint» (Laiou, 1996: 251). This skepticism is not very usual in Hagiography, but shows a most critical attitude towards sainthood and miracles attributed to saints<sup>21</sup>.

However, domestic violence becomes precisely one of the reasons to consider Mary as a saint, and, even if it is a motif appearing in three female lives of saints, its treatment in each case differs and demonstrates how it must be regarded as a social reality reflected and adapted in hagiographic literature, rather than just one of those literary motifs constantly shaped and almost mechanically repeated in lives of saints. Actually, it exists a main difference between the role of domestic violence in the story of Matrona of Perge, and both Mary's and Thomaïs *vitae* with regard to the attainment of a holy status. In the first case, domestic violence is secondary, since Matrona will develop an intense monastic career, whereas in the other two texts, it is a central element to achieve sanctity since they were laywomen and were married throughout their lifetime.

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<sup>21</sup> On skepticism in Byzantine Hagiography see Kaldellis (2014).

#### 4. Matrona of Perge

In the sixth century *Life of Matrona of Perge* domestic violence emerges when this woman starts to care for the poor secretly from her husband Dometianos, engages in ascetic practices and trains herself to embrace monastic life-style. Violence is depicted as the way to show male superiority and control over woman when she starts to disobey her espouse. The detonating element, instead, will be her attendance at all-night vigils, since her jealous espouse «thought that the blessed one was leading the life of a courtesan» (Feathersome – Mango, 1996: 20) (chap. 3: οἰόμενον τὴν μακαρίαν ἐταρίζεσθαι) (chap. 3). As a result, Dometianos forbid her to go to the church and, even if it is expressed that she finally won over him, this must be considered the first dispute between them. Actually, the jealousy of Dometianos grows at the same speed as the progression on ascetic practices and interest in monastic life of Matrona, who manifests fear towards her husband, who might cause troubles for the convent which receives her (chap. 4). By that means, the violent and obsessive behavior of Dometianos is clearly underlined and the only solution to Matrona –who is inspired, in addition, by a providential nocturnal vision– to escape and complete her salvation seems to be transvestism. By doing so, she will be able to enter a male monastery, where she will be safe. Nonetheless, when her real identity is discovered, she must leave the male monastery. Precisely in this context, in the conversation with the abbot Bassianos, Matrona explains to him why she planned such a strategy and how Dometianos used to insult and even strike her:

Ἐγώ, δέομαι τῆς ἀγιωσύνης σου, ἐγενόμην ἐνὸς ἀνδρὸς γυνὴ καὶ μιᾶς παιδὸς μήτηρ· δουλεύειν δὲ Θεῷ μᾶλλον ἢ γάμῳ καὶ ἀμαρτία βουλομένη εἰς τὰς παννυχίδας τῶν ἁγίων μαρτύρων ἀπῆειν· ὁ δὲ ἀνὴρ μου ἐκόλυέν με ποτὲ μὲν ὑβρίζων, ποτὲ δὲ μαχόμενος καὶ τύπτων, ἔστι δὲ ὅτε καὶ ἀπειλῶν. Ταῦτα ὀρῶσα καὶ πάσχουσα ἐφ’ ἐκάστης ἡμέρας ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ, ἠθύμουν, ἐστέναζον καὶ ἔκλαιον, παρακαλοῦσα τὸν Θεὸν νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας τούτου τοῦ μὲν τὴν καρδίαν μαλάξαι, ἐμοῦ δὲ τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν πληρῶσαι.

«If it please your Holiness, I had become the wife of a man and the mother of a child. But, wishing to serve God rather than marriage and sin, I would go to the all-night vigils of the holy martyrs. However, my husband would prevent me, now insulting me, now quarreling and striking me; at times he even threatened me. Seeing this and suffering from him on every occasion,

I lost heart, I moaned, I cried and besought God night and day He might soften his heart and satisfy my desire» (Feathersome – Mango, 1996: 27)

The hagiographer uses the verbs ὑβρίζω («to insult»), μάχομαι («to quarrel») and τύπτω («to strike, to beat») to gradually define the abuses committed by Matrona's husband. From this moment onwards, after her expulsion from the male monastery, domestic violence will become a reason forcing Matrona to run away from the different monasteries in which she enters, in order to escape from her husband and continue her monastic career. From this point of view, the hagiographer's description of the persecution of the husband of Matrona might be interpreted as a novelistic motif to explain the passage of the saint from one place to another by performing an opposition between a holy woman and a cruel man, a peaceful saint and a violent persecutor, thus, a heroine and her antihero. Love, travel and adventure were three capital elements of the Greek novel appearing in the plot of this story and demonstrating that the hagiographer would have featured them to make more attractive and novelized the *vita* of Matrona. Narrative strategies of this sort were common in Byzantine Hagiography, where a deeper connection between Novel and Hagiography could be established in some cases<sup>22</sup>. Furthermore, a scene of domestic violence against a woman as the starting point of the plot is also observed in Chariton's *Callirrhoe*, where the female heroine is beaten by her husband, believed dead and buried in a tomb.

Thus, the violent attitude of Dometianos becomes a novelistic theme, and he is even compared to a wild beast (θῆρ ἄγριος) persecuting its victim when arriving at the monastery of Bassianos (chap. 10):

[...] ἔδραμεν ὡς θῆρ ἄγριος εἰς τὸ τοῦ μακαρίου Βασιανοῦ μοναστήριον μετὰ τὸ καὶ ἄλλα μοναστήρια περιελθεῖν, βίαια κράζων καὶ μεγάλα βοῶν καὶ τὰς θύρας λίθοις κόπτων καὶ λέγων· Δότε μοι τὴν γυναῖκά μου, δότε μοι τὴν ἐλπίδα μου, δότε μοι τὴν παραμυθίαν μου·

«[...] he came running like a wild beast to the monastery of the blessed Bassianos, shrieking with violence and shouting loudly and beating at the

<sup>22</sup> On the presence of novelistic elements in Byzantine Hagiography, see Messis (2014: 316-320).

doors with stones, saying: ‘Give me my wife. Give me my hope. Give me my consolation.» (Feathersome – Mango, 1996: 29)

His aggressive profile is highlighted after being informed about his wife’s flight from the monastery of Bassianos, where Dometianos is defined as being «all the more stirred with anger and fired with rage» (Feathersome – Mango, 1996: 29) (chap. 10: πλέον μὲν τῷ θυμῷ ἐκεντεῖτο καὶ τῇ ὀργῇ ἐξεκαίετο). This negative feeling impels Dometianos to follow Matrona to Emessa, where she manages to escape as well, then to the region of Beirut. At this point of the narration, the hagiographer uses anew a similar expression to describe how Dometianos was «seeking traces of her, like a Lacedaemonian dog trained in the hunt» (Feathersome – Mango, 1996: 34) (chap. 14: καταζητῶν τὰ ἕχνη αὐτῆς ὡσπερ τις κύων λακωνικὸς καὶ εἰς θήραν δεδιδαγμένος)<sup>23</sup>. In both cases, the aforementioned simile to a wild beast, and the one to a Lacedaemonian dog, the hagiographer displays a rhetorical strategy to create a clearer image of the fierceness of Matrona’s husband on his readers’ minds. Anyway, when Matrona leaves Beirut to go to Constantinople, Dometianos disappears altogether and the hagiographer focuses only on Matrona’s monastic career. By doing so, it is confirmed how domestic violence has been used as a novelistic motif to make Matrona’s first steps on religious life more heroic and dramatic. Accordingly, it must be considered a secondary motif within this story, since the most remarkable element of her holy profile is her monastic activities and domestic violence would have represented just another trouble to be overcome.

### 5. Mary the Younger

A different analysis of these scenes in which domestic violence against women is depicted should be applied concerning both Mary the Younger and Thomaïs of Lesbos, as their biographies lack a traditional reason to sanctify these women such as martyrdom, an intensive life of asceticism

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<sup>23</sup> Featherstone and Mango (1996: 34) indicate a parallel to the expression «Lacedaemonian in the Late Antique novel *Historia Alexandri Magni* (recensio α and β) 2,7. It also appears in the versified paraphrasis of this text (2982). The lacedaemonian dog is mentioned by Aristotle in his *Historia animalium* (574a), but this proverbial use is not attested elsewhere.

or a relationship with a monastic institution. It is true that their cults were minor and located in a very precise geographical context, but their appearance among the huge production of hagiographic literary works of that time deserves further attention to observe the whole panorama of Middle Byzantine cult of saints. In these cases, violence suffered from the hands of their husbands acquires a major role and, though it has to be interpreted together with other virtues and religious practices, it becomes a main reason to attain sanctity.

The prologue of the *Life of Mary the Younger*, whose date of composition has been largely debated, but concentrated between the beginning of the tenth and the first half of eleventh century<sup>24</sup>, consists of a clear defense on Mary's sanctity and it can be read as a sort of manifest to defend female sainthood. As Constantinou (2004) points out, concerning the consideration of a sainthood it exists a «sexual discrimination», since «in order to ascend to holiness lay women have to perform more deeds than their male counterparts». This accumulation of merits is sometimes accompanied by an explicit defense of the sanctity of the woman, as in this precise case.

The hagiographer features a metaphor comparing secular (τῶν ἔξωθεν ἀγώνων) and spiritual contests «of the arena of virtue» (τὸ δὲ τῆς ἀρετῆς στάδιον), thereby echoing a topic very widespread in Christian literature on martyrs, which he even reinforces when claiming for gender equality before God, since he «generously grants the rewards and victory crowns to both sexes equally» (Laiou, 1996: 254) (chap. 1: κοινὰ τὰ γέρα καὶ τοὺς στεφάνους ἐκατέρῳ τῷ γένει φιλοτίμως ἀποχαρίζεται). This allusion to the «crown» must be interpreted as an author's intention to link the portrait of Mary to the one of Early Christian martyrs, as she suffered a daily martyrdom, because of the rage and jealousy of her abusive husband, and actually died at his hands. Anyway, he is perfectly conscious about the many difficulties to accept the sanctity of Mary, since she has not been a nun, nor a hermit, but a married laywoman, who even gives birth to four children. Nevertheless, he defends the aforementioned compatibility between marriage, even motherhood, and sanctity. In fact, he considers

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<sup>24</sup> On the debate around the date of composition, see Laiou (1996: 242-243).

these elements the reasons to lead her to a sacred state, by alluding to the proverbial weakness of women as well (chap. 1):

καὶ γυναῖκα οὕσαν καὶ ἀνδρὶ συζευχθεῖσαν καὶ τέκνα σχοῦσαν οὐδὲν οὐδαμοῦ διεκώλυσεν εὐδοκιμῆσαι παρὰ Θεῶ, οὐκ ἀσθένεια φύσεως, οὐ τὰ τοῦ γάμου δυσχερῆ, οὐ παιδοτροφίας ἀνάγκη καὶ μέριμνα, ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μᾶλλον καὶ ἀφορμὴν αὕτη ἔσχεν εὐδοκιμήσεως,

«Although she was a woman, although she was married and bore children, nothing hindered her in any way from finding favor with God: neither weakness of <female> nature, nor the annoyances of wedlock, nor the needs and cares of child-rearing. To the contrary, it was these things which gave her the occasion to find favor <with God>» (Laiou, 1996: 254)

Such an assessment anticipates the domestic violence suffered by Mary at the hands of Nikephoros, her husband, who will be depicted as a violent and raging man, whereas his wife «was the image of meekness, the pillar of moderation, the exemplar of love of God, the model of charity, the paradigm of piety for everyone» (Laiou, 1996: 257) (chap. 3: τὰ σεμνολογήματα εἰκῶν ἦν τῆς πραότητος, στήλη τῆς σωφροσύνης, φιλοθείας ὑπόδειγμα, τύπος ἐλεημοσύνης, τῆς εἰς πάντας εὐλαβείας παράδειγμα). In her description, moderation (σωφροσύνη) plays a very important role, since it will become a precious virtue to bear the death of her two first children, as described on chapters 4 and 6, and the struggles provoked by the abuses of her husband. Actually, the hagiographer tries to prevent readers from thinking that Nikephoros could have any reason to behave violently towards his wife.

Before the explicit violence, Nikephoros' attitude matches with the one observed on the husband of Matrona. Like in her *life*, Mary's acts of charity on behalf of the poor were common, but in this case she is said to «never touch any of her husband's property, so that her actions not occasion opprobrium, and that she not gives cause for accusations of squandering <his property>» (Laiou, 1996: 261) (chap. 5: τῶν γε μὴν τοῦ ἀνδρὸς οὐχ ἤψατό τί ποτε, ἵνα μὴ τὰ κατ' αὐτὴν ἔκπτυστα γένηται καὶ ὡς εἰκῆ σπαθῶσαν αὐτὴν αἰτιάσεται). In addition, Mary is also falsely accused. In the former *vita*, Matrona was directly accused by her husband. In Mary's, instead, the accusers are some relatives of her husband who denounced that she had had sex with one of her slaves. After Mary denied



the accusation, Nikephoros starts to despise his wife and comes close to the accusers. This matter, far from being solved, triggers the violent reaction of Nikephoros against a handmaiden of Mary, who has confirmed that Mary had not any relation with her slave. The image of Nikephoros filled with rage (ὀργῆς [...] ἐπλήσθη), stretching the servant out on the ground (τὴν δούλην ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἐκταθεῖσαν) and ordering to beaten her mightily (ἰσχυρῶς ἐκέλευε τύπτεσθαι) (chap. 8) (Laiou, 1996: 264), shows an increasing aggressive behavior, but a second false accusation is needed to react in this way against his own wife.

A certain Drosos is commanded to guard on Mary's activities. While she was dining with some of her relatives, she spoke to the women who were with her that the hostility of Nikephoros towards her was the work of Satan. Once informed Drosos, he distorted Mary's words and reported to Nikephoros that she has openly called him Satan. At these words, Nikephoros explodes and the violent reaction against Mary is dramatically narrated. The contrast between Mary and her husband, as it has been previously marked in the text, features prominently in the description of the violent scene which leads Mary to death. Thus, the peaceful image of Mary looking at the icon of the Virgin, who is depicted lying on the bed and holding Jesus in her arms, is unexpectedly interrupted by Nikephoros arrival (chap. 9):

καὶ τῆς κόμης αὐτῆς δραξάμενος εἴλκε καὶ ἔτυπτεν ἀφειδῶς, ἕως τις τῶν παρεστώτων παιδῶν δραμῶν τοῖς ἔξω μὴνύει, καὶ τινες εἰσιόντες μόλις αὐτὸν ἐξ αὐτῆς ἀπέσπασαν.

«Grabbing her by the hair, he dragged her and beat her mercilessly, until one of the servants who was present ran and told those outside; some of them came in and, with difficulty, managed to tear him away from her». (Laiou, 1996: 265)

The fatal aggression is described as merciless (ἀφειδῶς), and the hagiographer displays, besides the participle δραξάμενος («to grab»), two verbs belonging to the field of violence such as ἔλκω («to drag»), and τύπτω («to strike, to beat»). The injuries caused by this attack will lead Mary to die. The hagiographer gets the climax of his narration by constructing little by little the violent profile of Nikephoros. It all starts with a false accusation, then continues with setting aside Mary, then trusting

the slanderers and beating the servant who has defended the truth, and it finishes when violence reaches its peak and fury triggers Nikephoros to bodily attack her wife.

Anyway, she still remains alive for ten days and after her death she asks her husband to come to talk with her in order to beg him to keep safe their children. At that moment, Mary denies anew the false rumor accepted by Nikephoros, but does not forgive him. His goodness had some limits, and her husband had crossed all of them. In fact, a certain hostility towards Nikephoros and his relatives will be manifested in the text. Accordingly, the hagiographer, when narrating her posthumous miracles, points out that they couldn't escape the eye of justice (ὁ τῆς δίκης ὀφθαλμὸς) (chap. 21), and reports the deaths of Helena, Nikephoros' sister, Drosos, the prosecutor recruited by Nikephoros to watch over his wife, and Nikephoros himself. In addition, he has previously received in a dream the visit of his wife, who urged him to build a church for her and to transfer her relics into the cathedral of Byzie. As he disregarded the commands of the saint, he suffered an eye disease, which ceased once the work of the church was ended.

## 6. Thomaïs of Lesbos

The second example of pious laywomen in which domestic violence plays a major role, Thomaïs of Lesbos, suffers a more constant abuse from her husband. Her *vita* has been traditionally dated in tenth century, but it was possibly written at that time and revised later (Halsall, 1996: 292)<sup>25</sup>. In the story of Mary the Younger, the physical aggression of Nikephoros against his wife is narrated as a result of an increasing rage stimulated by rumors and slanderers rather than a general behavior of that man. Actually, Nikephoros is not depicted from the very beginning of the story as a cruel and choleric man, as Stephen will so in that of Thomaïs. Anyway, both lives have many narrative elements in common<sup>26</sup>, though they presented a different structure and different attitudes towards domestic violence.

<sup>25</sup> On doubts about the tenth-century date, see Kazhdan (1991).

<sup>26</sup> Halsall (1996: 292-294) indicates different similarities between both lives such as the portrait of the saints, the issue of domestic violence or their charitable activities.

With regard to marriage, the *Life of Thomaïs of Lesbos* presents a great contrast. On the one hand, it portrays an idealized image of spouses while introducing Thomaïs' parents, Michael and Kale, as a «golden team, a team thrice happy and blessed, vigorously bearing the evangelical yoke and observing the divine precepts» (Halsall, 1996: 299) (chap. 3: καὶ ζεῦγος [...] χρυσοῦν, ζεῦγος τρισεύδαιμον καὶ μακάριον, τὸν εὐαγγελικὸν εὐτόνωσ ἔλκον ζυγὸν καὶ φυλάττον τὰ θεῖα θεσπίσματα), and told to emulate «the supplications of the righteous Anna and Joachim, the parents of the Mother of God» (Halsall, 1996: 301) (chap. 5: τὰς τῶν δικαίων ἐζήλουν λιτὰς Ἰωακείμ καὶ Ἄννης, τῶν προγόνων τῆς θεομήτορος). Thomaïs' parents indeed have many common features with Anna and Joachim, since both have an ideal marital relationship, are aged and childless and will have a pious daughter. This couple represents the image of a perfect Christian marriage based on unity, mutual respect, and piety. First virtue is explicitly highlighted by the hagiographer referring to them as being of «one mind and accord» (Halsall, 1996: 299) (chap. 3: ὁμονοῦντας, συμπνέοντας), and also implicitly through recounting their troubles and constant prayers for a child (chap. 4-5). On the other hand, the marriage of Thomaïs is an earthly hell because of the abuses of her husband. Actually, Thomaïs, who seems to anticipate her misfortune, is said to be «forced by her parents to take a husband, even though she preferred to remain virgin» (Halsall, 1996: 302) (chap. 6: παρὰ τῶν αὐτῆς γεννητόρων ἀνδρὶ συζευχθῆναι κατηναγκάζετο, κὰν παρθενεύειν ἤθελε μᾶλλον), at the age of twenty-four, an unusual age to have been remained unmarried at that time<sup>27</sup>.

As noted above, the hagiographer of the *vita* of Mary the Younger alluded subtly to a comparison between the struggles of the saint and that of martyrs by mentioning a symbolic element as the «crown» (στέφανος). In the *Life of Thomaïs of Lesbos*, by contrast, domestic violence will be explicitly compared to martyrdom, as it is an unfair punishment on the aftermath of an abusive and violent conduct from Stephen, her husband (Delierneux, 2014: 375). The description of the marriage, in fact, anticipates a life full of struggles and pain and greatly differs from the consid-

<sup>27</sup> Maturity was reached over twelve. Afterwards, women were used to be married soon after (Laiou, 1981: 236, n. 16; 1996: 241).

eration of the couple formed by Thomaïs' parents, akin to Anna and Joachim. The hagiographer, as the author of Mary's life did, uses a metaphor in which the crown is mentioned. In this case, it exists a double wordplay with regard to this term, since her husband was Stephen (Στέφανος) by name (chap. 6):

Πειθαρχεῖ τοῖς τοκεῦσι, πρὸς γάμον ἐκκλίνει, στεφάνῳ κλίνει τὴν κεφαλὴν, ἀνδρὶ νομίμῳ συζεύγνυται· ὁ δέ, Στέφανος τὴν κλῆσιν, οὐ τὴν προαίρεσιν, οὐδὶδίδοται συνεργὸς κατ' αὐτὴν ἀλλὰ μαχητῆς, οὐ συνέθριος ἀλλὰ μάλα πολέμιος·

«Agreeing to marriage, she bowed her head to the <marriage> crown and took a lawful husband. But he, who was Stephen by name, but not by <his> lifestyle, did not devote himself to her as a companion but as opponent, not as a helpmate but rather as an enemy» (Halsall, 1996: 303)

Stephen's hostility is clearly highlighted by the use of two terms related to the semantic field of war such as μαχητῆς and πολέμιος, which contrasts with Thomaïs' pious activities, described a few lines below giving thanks to God, spending her time in churches and taking care of the poor. This negative consideration of Stephen with regard to the religious virtues of Thomaïs leads the hagiographer to compare him to Satan, as it is clearly expressed in chapter 7. Precisely in this section of the text, the first allusion to Stephen's violence against his wife comes up. The difference regarding the story of Mary the Younger, as noted above, is the frequency of these abuses, and the insistence of the hagiographer on them. They openly appear three times all along the story. In chapter 7 the author of this *vita* asserts that «he [Stephen] used to strike the noble <Thomaïs> frequently, mocking greatly and sneering <at her>» (Halsall, 1996: 305) (ἔπαιε συχνῶς τὴν γενναίαν, διεχλεύαζεν, ἐμυκτήριζεν). In chapter 9 a similar affirmation is made when he says that he «did not stop striking with unbearable blows his good helpmate» (Halsall, 1996: 307) (ὁ Στέφανος οὐκ ἐπαύσατο τὴν καλὴν συνεργόν, [...] ταῖς ἀφορητοῖς παίειν πληγαῖς). Finally, in chapter 15 the hagiographer consecrates a little passage to recount her husband's treatment and affirms that «she suffered terrible beatings, she bore unmerciful torments, she endured chastisements by virtue of her noble thoughts, maintaining continually a

conduct in accordance» (Halsall, 1996: 313) (ἡσχαλλε παιομένη δεινῶς, ἔφερεν αἰκίζομένη ἀνηλεῶς· τὰς κολάσεις ὑπέμενε γενναίῳ φρονήματι, τῆς κατὰ Θεὸν πολιτείας ἐχομένη διηνεκῶς).

This narration in detail of the violence suffered by Thomaïs is completed by a negative assessment of Stephen, who has been previously compared to Satan and represents a major barrier to practicing virtue and religious life to Thomaïs. In this way, he is regarded as «a worldly man similar to senseless beasts» (Halsall, 1996: 306) (chap. 8: κοσμικὸς ἀνὴρ ἀλόγοις παρόμοιος κτήνεσι), as «the odious coppersmith» (Halsall, 1996: 307) (τῷ βδελυρῷ χαλκεῖ) appearing in Paul's letters (chap. 9)<sup>28</sup>, and also as «a violent tyrant» (Halsall, 1996: 313) (chap. 15: τις βιαστικὸς τύραννος). With regard to this negative description of Stephen's attitude, the marital life of Thomaïs is perceived as equal to that of martyrs. This link between domestic violence and martyrdom seems to be, in the hagiographer's opinion, the key to understand the sanctity of Thomaïs, a pious laywoman without any special link with virginity, martyrdom, at least in its traditional conception, or monastic life.

For this reason, the initial wordplay on the marriage crown acquires major significance, since Thomaïs will be constantly compared to Christian martyrs. Actually, the hagiographer defends her status of martyr on the basis of the violence suffered at the hands of her husband (chap. 8):

Ἀλλά μοι τὰς ἀκοὰς ἀνατείνετε καὶ τῷ τῆς ὀσιομάρτυρος θείῳ βίῳ προσέχετε· οὐδὲ γὰρ τοῦ χοροῦ τῶν μαρτύρων χωρίσαι ταύτην ὁ λόγος θέλει, τὴν πληγὰς οὐκ ὀλίγας λαβοῦσαν, τὴν μαστιγθεῖσαν ἀφόρητα διὰ τὰ δεσποτικά καὶ θεῖα θεσπίσματα, οὐ παρὰ τυράννου καθυβρισθεῖσαν, οὐ καταπέλταις κολασθεῖσαν δεινῶς, οὐκ ἐξ ἄλλοφύλων μαστιγθεῖσαν δεινῶς (ἧ γὰρ ἂν ἦν οὕτωσι φορητόν), ἀλλὰ παρὰ τοῦ ῥηθέντος συζύγου τυραννικῶς ἐγκειμένου καὶ θεαρέστως ζῆν ὄλαις χερσὶ ταύτην ἀπείργοντος·

«But lift up your ears to me and turn your mind to the divine life of the blessed martyr. For our account has no intention of separating her from the company of martyrs, since she <also> received many beatings, <and> was scourged unbearably for the sake of the divine revelations of our Lord. She was not wantonly outraged by a tyrant, nor punished terribly by

<sup>28</sup> On the coppersmith Alexander, an opponent to St. Paul, see *2Tim.* 4,14 and *1Tim.* 1,20.

instruments of torture, nor scourged horribly by foreigners (for truly such would be bearable), but by her aforementioned husband who tyrannically oppressed her and violently prevented her from living in a God-pleasing manner». (Halsall, 1996: 305-306)

The hagiographer focuses on the consideration of Thomaïs as a «blessed martyr» (ὁσιομάρτυς), compares her trials to those of the martyrs and stresses the idea that Stephen represented an obstacle to «live in a God-pleasing manner» and to attain sanctity, which agrees with the initial will of Thomaïs of remaining virgin instead of taking a husband (chap. 6), as has already been pointed out. In this way, besides other virtues, domestic violence represents a major reason to regard Thomaïs as a saint, since it is compared to martyrdom. An evidence of her sanctity is manifested while she is still alive, when she is able to perform some miracles, as she was praised to do so posthumously. Even so, the thaumaturgical ability of Thomaïs can be interpreted from two different points of view as either a cause of her sanctity or rather a consequence of it, and, in this precise case, in which capital merits to attain sanctity lack, both hypothesis would be valid, since miracles represent a double-edged aspect of the cult of the saints.

Whereas Mary dies because of the injuries provoked by the choleric attack of her husband, information on the cause of Thomaïs' death lacks in her *vita*. However, the hagiographer insists in her premature depart – she dies at the age of thirty-eight– and in the violence and abuses endured owing to her husband. In fact, one might have the impression that the author of this *vita* tries to consciously veil the real cause of her death, perhaps a sickness, and focuses only on the pain and harmful effects of domestic aggressions on the saint's health. By that means, though not in a direct manner, Stephen's constant abuses would also provoke the death of Thomaïs, as did so the strikes of Nikephoros against Mary the Younger.

## 7. Final remarks

After having reviewed the three Byzantine lives of saints in which domestic violence is depicted, the first conclusion must be that it represents an important topic of female hagiography, especially in a very specific type of holy women such as that of pious laywomen. The historical and religious circumstances may help a model of sanctity of this sort to be developed,

since the only two ways to attain sanctity have been martyrdom or monastic life, and, among female saints, virginity has been repeatedly considered the most precious virtue. From this point of view, the lives of Mary the Younger and Thomaïs of Lesbos break the traditional canons of sanctity, since these women are not neither virgins nor nuns. For this reason, the case of Matrona of Perge must be observed differently from those of both Mary and Thomaïs, since in the first *vita* is used as a novelistic motif and does not represent one of the main reasons to sanctify the woman.

Domestic violence is a reason to leave the marital household and embrace monastic life, as it was in Late Antique Hagiography or as it also was the simple conversion to become Christian in the stories about women on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostle. The most important novelty with regard to the latter would be the clear expression of the domestic violence suffered by women. Gender violence, as said above, was particularly cruel in martyrdom scenes, but in this type of stories in which a husband was outraged by the abandonment of his wife, the general reaction depicted was some kind of abusive punishment rather than an explicit violent attack. In any case, the sixth century *Life of Matrona* creates a new motif to be used in female Hagiography, which has been silenced for long ago such as the domestic violence against women. And the antecedent will be recalled centuries later, during the most intense period of creation of hagiographic literature<sup>29</sup>.

From the mid eight to the end of the tenth century, Byzantine Hagiography reaches its peak of production and this mass creation of pious and edifying stories is made on the basis of imitation, repetition and reshape of both rhetorical and narrative motifs<sup>30</sup>, and a deep re-examination on the phenomenon of sainthood, which leads the hagiographers to explore and report new models of saints, besides the traditional models of martyrs, bishops, hermits or monks, for male, and of virgins, martyrs or nuns, for female saints. A clear evidence of the emergence of new hagiographic models is represented by the neo-martyrs related to the Iconoclastic Era or by the holy

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<sup>29</sup> See Paschalidis (2011: 143-71). The opening sentence of this essay is illuminating (Paschalidis, 2011: 143): «Scholarly opinion generally recognizes the period from the end of Iconoclasm to the end of the tenth century as the high point of Byzantine hagiography».

<sup>30</sup> On the use of recurrent rhetorical patterns and narrative motifs in Middle Byzantine lives of saints, see Pratsch (2005).

fools, two minor categories of Byzantine saints in terms of global impact, but extremely interesting to a better understanding of the cult of the saints in Byzantine, namely during the Middle Byzantine period.

This search of new models of holy men and women would ease the requirements to accept the sanctification of pious laywomen, though in local contexts and even in few cases. Having the antecedent of Matrona of Perge, domestic violence is exploited at that time as a major trait to consider saints both Mary of Byzie and Thomaïs of Lesbos. Their lack of connection to virginity or monastic life is palliated by the sufferings provoked by an abusive and violent husband, and, from this point of view, they are also regarded as new martyrs, in their cases, not in retaliation for their defense of images or their opposition to external aggressors, but because of the cruelty of their husbands and misinterpretation of the pious religious life of married women. As examined above, the connection with the status of martyrs is subtly suggested by the author of Mary's *vita* and much more clearly expressed by that of Thomaïs'. Thus, since Thomaïs is repeatedly aggressed and outraged by her spouse, she becomes a martyr; and, together with other virtues such as charity and piety, all these traits drive her to sainthood.

The double goal of hagiographic narrations, as a praise of a holy man or woman and as an edifying story in which not only entertainment, but also an example to imitate is described, encourages hagiographers to focus on relevant biographic episodes of the saints venerated when composing their *vitae*. With regard to women, from Late Antiquity to Middle, and even Late Byzantine society, a more open-minded and philanthropic social conscience raises. This new sensitivity towards minorities would be a major reason explaining the apparition of the typology of the pious laywoman. Nevertheless, it is mandatory to recognize the minor importance of this typology of saints in Byzantium, since, as Nikolaou points out (Νικόλαου, 2003: 112-113), they never acquire a major cult and their lives were neither imitated nor largely transmitted, since both of them are preserved in an only manuscript.

Anyway, in the lives of these women a recurrent presence of values as charity, assistance for needy or almsgiving can be observed. It suggests how such an issue was perceived, at least, in some spheres, as an important social matter and even as a religious duty. Even if it is always



problematic to identify fiction with reality, one can assume that domestic violence against women may be common at this time, as far as it was so, unfortunately, from Antiquity until the present day. The description of this violence is a major role in the lives of Mary the Younger and Tomais of Lesbos, and the comparison with martyrs must be interpreted as a result of a new sympathetic sensitivity to the sufferings of women at the hands of their husbands. And this violence, thus, must be regarded as a way of sanctification for these women, for whom the acquisition of sainthood would be a reward for their outstandingly pious, but tough and troubled lives.

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NARRO, Ángel, «Domestic violence against women as a reason to sanctification in Byzantine Hagiography», *SPhV* 20 (2018), pp. 111-140.

## ABSTRACT

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Domestic violence against women is a taboo topic, normally silenced or ignored in literature, though socially accepted as a common way of male control over woman in the familiar context. The lives of Matrona of Perge, Mary the Younger and Thomaïs of Lesbos are rare examples

of how domestic violence against women could be also interpreted as a reason to sanctify the woman suffered abuses of this sort. This article is aimed at analyzing this phenomenon into the context of Byzantine Hagiography.

**KEYWORDS:** Byzantine Hagiography, Female Saints, Domestic Violence, Gender Studies