Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies Vol. 37 No. 2 (2013) 161–175

Biography as allegory

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Through comparison with Dante's Divine Comedy and with Late Antique allegorical interpretations of the Bible this article makes the case that Byzantine hagiographers encoded an allegorical dimension into their texts and that they did so in order to make value judgements that complement explicit evaluations of the behaviour of saints.

When in the early fourteenth century the Florentine exile Dante Alighieri wrote his *Divine Comedy* he started with a description of the situation in which he found himself before he embarked on the journey that would take him through hell, purgatory and heaven.

> *Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*
> *Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,*
> *Ché la diritta via era smarrita.*[1]
>
> Upon the journey of our life midway
> I came unto myself in a dark wood,
> For from the straight path I had gone astray.[2]

These opening lines set the scene for an elaborate narrative: Dante tells his audience how he spent the night wandering in this wood until at daybreak he arrived 'at the foot of a hill' (*al piè d'un colle*),[3] how after a brief rest he tried to climb this hill but was driven back by a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf,[4] and how he finally met the Roman poet Virgil who told him that he could not ascend to the top of the 'delectable mountain' (*il dilettoso monte*) but needed to take a different route.[5]

Although Dante gives the impression that he is recounting a real event, there can be no doubt that he never actually left a highway, got lost in a wood and tried to climb a mountain. Yet this does not mean that he is telling a lie: Dante did experience a crisis

1 Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy*, Inferno I.1–3, ed. T. Di Salvo, *La Divina Commedia di Dante Alighieri* (Milan 1987) 6–7.
2 *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, tr. J. Butler Fletcher (New York 1931) 3.
3 Dante, *Divine Comedy*, Inferno, I.4-27 ed. Di Salvo, 7–8.
4 Dante, *Divine Comedy*, Inferno, I.28-60, ed. Di Salvo, 9–11.
5 Dante, *Divine Comedy*, Inferno, I.61-136 ed. Di Salvo, 11–16.

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DOI: 10.1179/0307013113Z.00000000028

https://doi.org/10.1179/0307013113Z.00000000028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

at some point of his life and it is this crisis that is reflected in the narrative.[6] The text can convey this meaning because each of the features that I have mentioned has a metaphorical dimension and because taken together they add up to an account of the successive stages of Dante's troubles.

A closer look reveals that Dante does not leave his audience without indicators that he wishes his story to be understood in this way: in the very first line he employs the phrase 'journey of our life' (*cammin di nostra vita*) where the qualification 'of our life' leaves no doubt that 'journey' does not have a literal but a metaphorical meaning. In this way he signals to his audience that the following phrase 'straight road' (*diritta via*) where such qualification is missing should equally be regarded as a metaphor and that the other motifs such as night and mountain should then also be understood in the same way. It is evident that such a strategy could only be successful because Dante's audience was used to reading texts in this manner for otherwise they would have failed to take the hint. Moreover, Dante could be confident that they would decode the narrative correctly because he knew that they were familiar with the connotations of the different motifs.

The notion that narratives can have metaphorical dimensions did not first arise in the Middle Ages. Known as allegory, literally 'speaking otherwise', it had first been conceived in Antiquity by Homeric scholars,[7] and had later been adapted by Christian authors who used it as a method to gain a deeper insight into the biblical text.[8] A typical example of this approach is the *Life of Moses* by the fourth-century author Gregory of Nyssa.[9] This text consists of two parts, firstly a historical account based on information gleaned from the Old Testament, and secondly an allegorical interpretation of this data. Accordingly, each event is mentioned twice. For example, Gregory states in the first part that when God manifested himself on Mt Sinai the Israelites went down to the foot of the mountain whereas Moses stayed behind, which is a paraphrase of Exodus 19:10 – 24,[10] and then explains in the second part that Moses ascended 'to the mountain of the knowledge of God' (τῷ τῆς θεογνωσίας ὄρει),[11] and that 'the knowledge of God is a steep and almost inaccessible mountain of which the common people scarcely reach the base' (ὄρος γάρ ἐστιν ἄναντες καὶ δυσπρόσιτον ἡ θεολογία ἧς μόλις λεὼς τῆς ὑπωρείας φθάνει).[12]

6 Of course, one needs to be careful not to conceive of this crisis in 'psychological' terms. Dante's account is not so much concerned with a personal crisis as it is with the sinfulness that comes from man's fallen condition and that affects not only Dante but human beings in general: cf. the commentary in Di Salvo, *La Divina Commedia*, 6.

7 Cf. R. Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* [Transformation of the Classical Heritage] (Los Angeles 1986).

8 Cf. e.g. R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (London 1959).

9 Gregory of Nyssa, *De Vita Moysis*, ed. H. Musurillo [Gregorii Nysseni Opera VII.1] (Leiden 1991) 1–142.

10 Gregory of Nyssa, *De Vita Moysis*, I.45, ed. Musurillo, 20.1–13.

11 Gregory of Nyssa, *De Vita Moysis*, II.152, ed. Musurillo, 80.8.

12 Gregory of Nyssa, *De Vita Moysis*, II.158, ed. Musurillo, 82.1–2.

https://doi.org/10.1179/0307013113Z.00000000028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This approach to the Biblical text was bequeathed by Late Antiquity not only to Western Christianity but also to the Byzantine world. Given this shared legacy one can formulate the hypothesis that the Byzantines not only looked for an allegorical dimension in already existing texts but also encoded such a dimension into newly constructed narratives. It is true that Byzantine civilisation never gave rise to a Christian epic that could be compared with Dante's *Divine Comedy* but it did produce many narratives of a religious character in the form of *saints' lives* and *encomia* and it is on these texts that I will focus in the following.

Were Byzantine hagiographical texts meant to be read as allegories? This question is answered less easily than one might first think. Like Dante, Byzantine hagiographers refer to mountains, paths, forests and the like but this, of course, does not yet prove that the narratives in which these features are found had a metaphorical dimension. Indeed, a metaphorical reading seems to be ruled out because unlike Dante's *Divine Comedy* hagiographical texts give every impression of relating real events. In what follows I will attempt to demonstrate that it is nevertheless possible to detect the presence of an allegorical layer in Middle Byzantine *saints' lives*. In order to make my case I will focus on clusters of terms and phrases that are used in their literal sense but that are commonly employed as metaphors; and I will pay particular attention to passages where literal and figurative use of the same words appears side by side or at least in the same text.

Given the pervasive use of metaphorical language in Late Antique and Byzantine writings it comes as no surprise that such language is also found in the *Lives* of saints. Highly educated hagiographers such as Theodoret of Cyrus did not confine themselves to merely presenting facts but embellished their accounts with sometimes elaborate imagery. A typical example can be found in the biography of the Syrian ascetic Baradatus, which forms part of Theodoret's *Religious History*:

> ἐν αὐτῷ δὲ ὢν τῷ ὕψει τῆς ἀρετῆς οὐκ ἐᾷ συναναβῆναι τὸ φρόνημα, ἀλλὰ κάτω ἕρπειν κελεύει περὶ αὐτὰ τοῦ ὄρους τὰ κράσπεδα· οἶδε γὰρ ὅσην ἕλκει βλάβην φλεγμαίνουσα τῷ τύφῳ διάνοια.[13]
>
> Being in this very height of virtue he did not let his attitude ascend with him, but ordered it to crawl below around the very fringes of the mountain, for he knew what great harm is caused by a mind that is swollen with pride.

Here Theodoret makes the point that the saint had reached spiritual perfection by likening this state to the summit of a mountain; and he gives this image a further connotation by equating the saint's humility with the foothills of this mountain, a detail that undoubtedly suggested itself to him because the adjective ταπεινός does not only mean 'humble'

13 Theodoret of Cyrus, *L'histoire des moines de Syrie: 'Histoire Philothée'*, ed. P. Canivet and A. Leroy-Molinghen, 2 vols [*Sources chrétiennes* 234, 257] (Paris 1977–79) II, 222.4–7.

https://doi.org/10.1179/0307013113Z.00000000028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

but also has the literal sense of 'low' and is in this sense often used in conjunction with the noun φρόνημα, which appears in the text.[14]

In Theodoret's biography of Baradatus this elaborate image appears in the concluding section and is clearly distinguished from the preceding account of the life and achievements of this saint. However, not all authors kept the literal and metaphorical dimensions apart in their writings, as can be seen from a letter that the eleventh-century polymath Michael Psellos sent to his friend John Xiphilinos. There Psellos criticises Xiphilinos' rejection of Platonic philosophy in favour of Christian contemplation in the following manner:

> μὴ μέγα οἷου τὴν ἐπὶ τοῦ ὄρους ἀναστροφήν, μηδὲ τρυφᾷς ἐπὶ τῷ τῶν λόγων καταφρονῶν· ἀλλ' εἴ πού τις πεδιὰς ἢ βαθυτάτη κοιλάς, ἢ φάραγξ διερρωγυῖα ἢ μυχὸς γῆς ἄρρητος καὶ ἀπόρρητος, ἐκεῖσε καταβὰς ἐνδομύχησον, πᾶσιν μὲν ἐγκύπτων βιβλίοις ἡμετέροις τε καὶ τοῖς θύραθεν, καὶ τοῖς συλλογισμοῖς γυμνασθεὶς τὰ πρῶτα, οὕτως ἐπὶ τὰς ἀσυλλογίστους γνώσεις ἀνάβηθι· πᾶσα γὰρ ἀρετή, μεθ' ὑπερηφανίας, ἀδελφὲ φίλτατε, καὶ οἰήσεως, ἐσχάτη κακία καθέστηκε.[15]
>
> Do not consider the sojourn on the mountain to be a great thing, and do not revel in revelling against the speeches; but if there is anywhere a plain or a very deep hollow or a cleft ravine or an ineffable and secret hole of the earth, climb down there and hide in it, studying all our books and those of the pagans, and when you have first been trained in syllogisms, thus climb up to the types of knowledge that cannot be attained through syllogistic reasoning! For, most beloved friend, all virtue that is coupled with pride and arrogance is the worst evil.

In this passage Psellos reminds his addressee that it is impossible to achieve visions of God unless one has before engaged in philosophy and then advises him to go back to first principles. This point is made through use of the same metaphorical language that Theodoret had employed half a millennium earlier. Indeed, Xiphilinus is the negative counterpart to Baradatus: with his pride he has reached the summit whereas regarding his spiritual status he is still dwelling at the bottom. However, in this case a literal dimension is added because 'the mountain' mentioned by Psellos not only signifies Xiphilinos' inner qualities but also refers to Mt Olympus in Bithynia where Xiphilinos lived as a monk. Psellos exploits this fact to great effect when he asks his addressee to 'climb down' not only from his prideful attitude but also from the real mountain where he had his cell and to dwell in a low-lying place, such as a ravine or a cave, that corresponds to his spiritual status.

This raises the question: might Byzantine hagiographers not also have played with the literal and metaphorical dimensions? In order to find an answer I will turn to an episode in the eleventh-century *Life* of Lazarus of Galesion, a Byzantine holy man who

14 For ταπεινὸν φρόνημα and ταπεινοφροσύνη, cf. e.g. *Ὅσιος Λουκᾶς. Ὁ βίος τοῦ ὁσίου Λουκᾶ τοῦ Στειριώτη*, ed. D. Z. Sophianos (Athens 1989) 177: διὰ ταπεινοφροσύνης ὑπερβολήν.

15 Michael Psellos, *Epistola a Giovanni Xiphilino*, ed. U. Criscuolo [*Hellenica et byzantina neapolitana* 14.] (2nd ed., Naples 1990) 53.85–92.

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became the highly successful abbot of a group of monasteries in Western Asia Minor.[16] Before he rose to such prominence Lazarus had led a rather unsettled existence. His hagiographer Gregory tells us that he left his home village when he was still a boy and that he then drifted through Asia Minor where he visited famous religious shrines.[17] Such a way of life was not without its dangers: we are told that during his travels Lazarus met a monk who promised to take him to Jerusalem but in reality intended to sell him into slavery. When the saint was apprised of this plan he is said to have reacted in the following manner:

> εὐθέως ὡς εἶχε φυγὰς ᾤχετο καὶ τῆς εὐθείας ἐκκλίνας πρὸς τὸ παρακείμενον πλησίον ὄρος ἀνελθεῖν ἔσπευδεν· ἔτι δὲ παρὰ τοὺς πρόποδας τοῦ ὄρους ὄντα ἡ νὺξ τοῦτον καταλαμβάνει· ἀρξάμενος δὲ τοῦ ἀνέρχεσθαι διά τε τὸ σκότος τῆς νυκτὸς διά τε τὸ λίαν τοῦ ὄρους ἄναντες ἐποίησεν ὡς ἔλεγεν ὅλην τὴν νύκτα χερσὶ καὶ ποσὶ πυκτεύων καὶ μόλις ἤδη τῆς ἡμέρας ὑπαυγαζούσης ἠδυνήθη ἐπάνω αὐτοῦ ἀνελθεῖν.[18]
>
> He immediately without further ado fled and, having turned away from the straight (sc. road) to the nearby mountain, he hurried to climb it. And while he was still in the foothills night overtook him, and having begun to climb up he spent, as he said, the whole night struggling with hands and feet because of the darkness of the night and the extreme steepness of the mountain. And barely when the day was already breaking did he manage to climb over it.

This passage presents us with a much more elaborate scenario than the examples that we have discussed so far. Apart from references to a high and inaccessible mountain and its foothills, which have counterparts in Gregory of Nyssa and Theodoret of Cyrus, it contains two further motifs: deviation from a straight road, and nightfall at an inopportune time. These motifs are already familiar to us from the beginning of the *Divine Comedy* where they were given an allegorical meaning. Is this also the case in the *Life* of Lazarus? Here one could again raise several objections. Firstly, Lazarus' hagiographer purports to relate a 'real' event on the basis of information that was volunteered by the saint himself. Secondly, this event takes place in a specific geographical context, the area north of the city of Attalia in southern Asia Minor, which is indeed mountainous and thus could well have been the setting for the event described in the *Life*. And thirdly, the deviation from the road can be explained as a consequence of the situation Lazarus finds himself in: as we have seen he is on the run from his would-be slaver and would obviously have been in much greater danger of being captured if he had stayed on the road.

16 Gregorius Monachus, *Vita S. Lazari*, ed. H. Delehaye, *Acta Sanctorum Novembris* III (Brussels 1910) 508–88. On Lazarus cf. e.g. J. Thomas, 'Documentary evidence from the Byzantine monastic *typika* for the history of the Evergetine Reform Movement', in M. Mullett and A. Kirby (ed.), *The Theotokos Evergetis and eleventh-century monasticism* [Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations 6.1] (Belfast 1994) 246–73, esp. 249–51.

17 Cf. C. Foss, 'Pilgrimage in medieval Asia Minor', *DOP* 56 (2002) 129–51, esp. 147.

18 *Life* of Lazarus of Galesion 9, ed. Delehaye, 511F12–512A5.

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However, these objections can be overcome when we consider the context in which this passage appears. Before he describes the incident which we have been discussing so far, the hagiographer gives an account of Lazarus' travels in the company of the monk, which contains the following passage:

> ὁ δὲ μοναχὸς σκολιὸς ὤν, καὶ μὴ βουλόμενος ὀρθῶς πορεύεσθαι μᾶλλον δὲ μὴ δυνάμενος διὰ τὸ πονηρὸν ἔθος ὃ εἶχεν, ἐκκλίνων τῆς εὐθείας διήρχετο κυκλεύων τὰς κώμας, ἐπαιτῶν καὶ συλλέγων ἄρτα καὶ ἄλλο εἴ τι παρεῖχον αὐτῷ.[19]
>
> And the monk who was crooked, and who did not want to travel in a straight line or rather could not do so because of the evil habit that he had, turned away from the straight (sc. road) and circling traversed the villages, begging and collecting bread and whatever else they gave him.

It is evident that this passage has one feature in common with the following account of Lazarus' flight: like Lazarus, the vagrant monk deviates from the road on which he is travelling. As before, this behaviour can be explained through practical considerations: the monk leaves the highway because the villages where he begs are situated at some distance from it. However, in this case the statement that the monk 'strays from the straight road' is complemented by a reference to his character where 'not travelling in a straight line', here with the additional qualification 'crooked', clearly belongs to the metaphorical level. This characterisation, which is based on Proverbs 14:2: 'he who travels in a straight line fears the Lord whereas he who is crooked on his roads will be dishonoured' (ὁ πορευόμενος ὀρθῶς φοβεῖται τὸν κύριον· ὁ δὲ σκολιάζων ταῖς ὁδοῖς αὐτοῦ ἀτιμασθήσεται), is closely related to the life-style of the monk. The participle κυκλεύων, which literally means 'going round in a circle', points to the noun κυκλευτής or 'circler', a common term for vagrant monks whose manner of life was frowned upon in eleventh-century Byzantium.[20] Thus we can not only conclude that 'deviation from the straight road' has an allegorical dimension just as it does in Dante's account but also that it has the same – negative – meaning.

Given the fact that the two passages appear in close vicinity and that in both cases we find exactly the same phrase, ἐκκλίνειν τῆς εὐθείας, it seems inconceivable that Lazarus' straying from the road does not also have an allegorical dimension. This raises the question: does his behaviour also have a negative connotation and if so what does the criticism consist of? The answer is provided in the passage that immediately follows Lazarus' exertions in the mountains:

> ὡς δὲ ὑπερανέβη τὸ ὄρος ὁδόν τινα τετριμμένην εὑρὼν ἐπορεύετο· οὕτως δὲ αὐτῷ μόνῳ περιπατοῦντι συναντᾷ αὐτῷ τις μοναχὸς γηραιὸς ὃς στὰς καὶ ἐπερωτήσας

19 *Life* of Lazarus of Galesion 8, ed. Delehaye, 511D5–10.

20 Cf. E. Herman, 'La *stabilitas loci* nel monarchism bizantino', *OCP* 21 (1955) 115–42, with references to canonical prohibitions of such a life-style. On attitudes towards non-coenobitic monasticism in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, cf. P. Magdalino, 'The Byzantine holy man in the twelfth century', in S. Hackel (ed.) *The Byzantine Saint* [Studies supplementary to Sobornost 5] (London 1981) 51–66.

https://doi.org/10.1179/0307013113Z.00000000028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

αὐτὸν καὶ μαθὼν πάντα τὰ περὶ αὐτοῦ ἀπεῖργεν αὐτὸν τῆς πρὸς τὰ 'Ιεροσόλυμα ὁδοῦ διὰ τὸ νέον τῆς ἡλικίας· συνεβούλευε δὲ αὐτῷ τοῖς ἐκείνου λόγοις μᾶλλον εἶξαι καὶ μετ' αὐτοῦ εἰς τὴν αὐτοῦ μονὴν ἀπελθεῖν - ἦν γάρ τινος μικρᾶς ποίμνης ὁ γέρων προεστώς - κἀκεῖσε προσκαρτερῆσαι ἕως οὗ τὸ ἄφοβον ἐκ τῆς ἡλικίας αὐτῷ προσγένηται.

When he had climbed over the mountain he found a beaten track and travelled on it. And while he was thus wandering alone he met an old monk who stopped and asked him and when he had been apprised of his whole background prevented him from pursuing the road to Jerusalem because of his youthful age. And he advised him rather to yield to his words and to go with him to his monastery – for the elder was the superior of a small flock – and to remain there until he would be old enough not to have to fear for himself.

As before, the narrative seems straightforward: once he has got over the mountain Lazarus meets an abbot whose community he then enters. Again, however, this does not exclude the presence of an allegorical dimension. Indeed, when we compare the passage with Dante's narrative we can see that the abbot is given a role that is similar to that of Virgil. Fortunately for us, the passage can be easily decoded. The salient feature is that the meeting takes place on another road, which is called the 'beaten track' (τετριμμένη ὁδός). In hagiographical literature this expression is often used in a metaphorical sense: in the sixth-century *Life* of Patriarch Eutychius by Eustratius the Priest, for example, we read that this saint's 'feet were in all respects straight and firmly planted, and did not deviate to the right or to the left but walked the beaten and royal road' (τοὺς κατὰ πάντα ὀρθοὺς καὶ ἑδραίους πόδας μὴ ἐκκλίνοντας δεξιὰ ἢ ἀριστερά, βαδίζοντας δὲ τὴν τετριμμένην καὶ βασιλικὴν ὁδόν).[21] Such statements have a Biblical basis in Proverbs 4:27: 'do not stray to the right or to the left' (μὴ ἐκκλίνῃς εἰς τὰ δεξιὰ μηδὲ εἰς τὰ ἀριστερά), and Numeri 20:17: 'we will go by the royal road and will not stray to the right or the left' (ὁδῷ βασιλικῇ πορευσόμεθα, οὐκ ἐκκλινοῦμεν δεξιὰ οὐδὲ εὐώνυμα). However, the conceptual framework that they express is adopted from Greek philosophy: it is the Aristotelian definition of virtue as the happy 'medium' (μεσότης) between two equally negative extremes, 'shortcoming' (ἔλλειψις) and 'excess' (ὑπερβολή).[22] This notion was frequently appealed to in discussions about what constitutes proper monasticism and was usually linked to the coenobitic régime, which was presented as a life of moderate asceticism that avoided both laxity and excessive rigour.[23]

21 Eustratius Presbyter, *Vita Eutychii Patriarchae Constantinopolitani*, ed. C. Laga [Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca 25] (Turnhout 1992) 72.2232–5.

22 A. Lumpe, 'Königsweg', *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 16 (2006) 216–22, esp. 219, with references to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1103b26 and 1108b10).

23 Cf. Lumpe, 'Königsweg', 22–221, with references to Basil of Caesarea, John Cassian, John Climacus and Jerome, cf. also 221–2, on the use of the same framework in the dogmatic discourse. For a more detailed discussion cf. F. Taillez, 'βασιλικὴ ὁδός. Les valeurs d'un terme mystique et le prix de son histoire littérale', *OCP* 13 (1947) 299–354.

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A typical expression of this ideology can be found in the *Life* of Cyril of Philea where Proverbs 4:27 is conflated with Numeri 20:17 and is then interpreted as follows:

> μὴ ἐκκλίνῃς εἰς τὰ δεξιὰ μηδὲ εἰς τὰ ἀριστερά, ἀλλ' ὁδῷ βασιλικῇ πορεύου· ἡ γὰρ μετὰ λόγου εὐδιάκριτος ἔνδεια καὶ στενότης, βασιλική ἐστιν ὁδός· ὥστε ὁ ἀδιάκριτος ὑπωπιασμὸς ἢ ἄλογος συγκατάβασις ἀσύμφορά εἰσιν ὡς ἑκατέρωθεν παρὰ λόγον γινόμενα.[24]
>
> Do not stray to the right or to the left but go by the royal road for well-discerning and reasonable indigence and straightened conditions is a royal road. Accordingly undiscerning self-imposed hardships and unreasonable concessions [to the body] are unprofitable because they happen against reason on either side [of the royal road].

This passage, which is itself a quotation from an earlier text,[25] links the golden mean to the use of 'discretion' (διάκρισις) and 'reason' (λόγος), which determine what is suitable for human beings in general and for the specific needs of individuals.[26]

There can be no doubt that the narrative in the *Life* of Lazarus is meant to be understood in this way. The coenobitic life-style is represented by the abbot who as we have seen happens to stand on a 'beaten track'. And since the 'straight road' has the same connotations as the 'beaten track' one can argue that the vagrant monk and the young Lazarus both deviate from such a life-style but that they do so in opposite directions: the former is too lax and is therefore simply going round in circles whereas the latter is too fervent in his desire to ascend the 'mountain' of spiritual perfection.[27] That this behaviour may be linked to asceticism is suggested through the portrayal of the vagrant as a glutton and through the characterisation of Lazarus' struggles as πυκτεύειν, which literally means 'boxing' and refers to athletic contests but which was commonly used by Christian authors as a metaphor for ascetic endeavour.[28]

If we accept this interpretation we must consider the possibility that the other features in the account of Lazarus' flight also have allegorical meanings even if they are not made explicit, just as it is the case in the *Divine Comedy*. The hagiographer mentions two reasons why the ascent is so difficult, 'the exceeding steepness of the mountain' (τὸ λίαν τοῦ ὄρους ἄναντες), and 'the darkness of the night' (τὸ σκότος τῆς νυκτὸς). We have

24 Nicholas Kataskepenos, *La vie de saint Cyrille le Philéote, moine Byzantin († 1110)*, ed. É. Sargologos [Subsidia Hagiographica 39] (Brussels 1964) 86.

25 *Climax*, *Scholion ad gradum* 26.2, MPG 88, col. 1093A7–10.

26 There is a vast literature on the topic of discretion. Cf. e.g. E. Scholl, 'The Mother of Virtues: *Discretio*', *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 36 (2001) 389–401.

27 Cf. e.g. the criticism of 'unambitious' monks in Nicetas Stethatos, *Physicorum Capitum Centuria* II.83, MPG 120, col. 940D2–4: ὁ ἀεὶ περὶ τὸ αὐτὸ στρεφόμενος καὶ μὴ ῥᾳθυμότερόν κινηθῆναι βουλόμενος ἡμιόνῳ τῷ περὶ τὴν μηχανὴν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ κινουμένῳ ἔοικεν.

28 Cf. e.g. Evagrius Ponticus, *Tractatus ad Eulogium* 14, MPG 79, col. 1109D15: ὁ δὲ τὰ προσπεσόντα πάθη πυκτεύων ἐκκόψαι. This use of terms referring to athletic contests was, of course, inspired by the Apostle Paul who often uses them in his Letters, cf. e.g. I Corinthians 9:26: οὕτως πυκτεύω ὡς οὐκ ἀέρα δέρων.

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already come across the motif of the steep mountain in Gregory of Nyssa's allegorical interpretation of Mt Sinai. In itself it is, of course, not negative: it only becomes so if one is not ready for the task as is the case with Lazarus who overestimates his abilities.[29] I would suggest that this aspect of the story is alluded to in the reference to the dark night, which falls when Lazarus starts his climb and only lifts when he reaches the top. This detail has a counterpart in the *Divine Comedy* where Dante is also overtaken by darkness and there it has an evident negative connotation since it is closely linked to his going astray. In order to establish whether a similar reading is possible for the *Life* of Lazarus we need to turn to Greek texts where the metaphorical dimension is made explicit. An obvious starting point is Proverbs 2:13, a criticism of those 'who leave the straight ways, to walk in the ways of darkness' (οἱ ἐγκαταλιπόντες ὁδοὺς εὐθείας τοῦ πορευθῆναι ἐν ὁδοῖς σκότους). This passage was often quoted in Byzantine spiritual literature where it was conflated with Proverbs 4:27.[30] As a rule 'darkness' is there equated with 'lack of discretion' (ἀδιακρισία) just as 'discretion' (διάκρισις) is routinely linked to 'light' (φῶς).[31] This takes us back to the 'golden mean': we have already seen in the passage from the *Life* of Cyril of Philea that extreme asceticism is linked to a 'lack of discretion'. It is likely that these are not the only features in the passage that have an allegorical meaning.[32] However, the aim of this article is not to undertake an exhaustive analysis but rather to demonstrate that Byzantine saints' Lives can be read as allegories. Therefore I will instead turn to another text, the *Life* of Cyril of Philea, in order to show that the

29 Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, II.161, ed. Musurillo, 83–4.4–10, where Gregory says that those who try to climb the mountain 'unwashed' (ἄπλυτοι), i.e., without proper preparation, and through 'irrational sense perception' (τὴν ἄλογον αἴσθησιν), will be stoned and shot. Gregory infers this from Exodus 19:12–14 where God warns that beasts will be stoned if they approach Mt Sinai and has Moses tell the Israelites to wash their clothes.

30 Cf. e.g. Pseudo-Ephraem, *Sermones paraenetici ad monachos Aegypti* 40, ed. K.G. Phrantzoles, *Hosiou Ephraim tou Syrou erga* III (Salonica 1990) 164–5.1–12.

31 Cf. e.g. Pseudo-Athanasius, *Epistula II ad Castorem* 4, MPG 28, col. 888D6-7: τοὺς σωτηριώδεις ἀκτῖνας τῆς διακρίσεως, and 896C4-5: τοῦ γὰρ πνεύματος τῆς ὀργῆς σκοτίσαντος τὴν διάνοιαν οὔτε διακρίσεως φῶς ... ἐν ἡμῖν εὑρεθήσεται.

32 Here I will only mention the detail that Lazarus is struggling 'with his hands and feet' (χερσὶ καὶ ποσὶ). This information again seems straightforward: when one climbs a steep hill it is safest to go down on all fours as it affords one a better grip. However, again this does not exclude the presence of further connotations. Readers are reminded that for human beings such behaviour is anomalous – they usually only use their feet to move from one place to another – whereas it is the usual way of movement for animals. This observation, however, points to the framework of the 'golden mean'. In the quotation from the *Life* of Cyril of Philea want and excess are both explained as the result of a 'lack of discretion' (ἀδιακρισία), which is in turn caused by 'lack of reason' (ἀλογία). This state of affairs, however, reduces human beings to the state of animals since 'reason' was considered to be the quality that distinguished human beings from beasts. Therefore one could argue that the hagiographer added this feature in order to liken Lazarus to quadrupeds, which are often referred to as 'irrational beasts' (ἄλογα ζῷα). This is all the more likely as references to animals in Scripture are often interpreted as statements about the irrational parts of the soul, which human beings have in common with animals, cf. above note 28.

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author of the *Life* of Lazarus was not alone in encoding a metaphorical dimension into his narrative.

Cyril of Philea was a twelfth-century solitary in Byzantine Thrace who had a large following, including members of the ruling family and important religious figures such as the monk Nicholas Kataskepenos, who later became his hagiographer.[33] As is customary for a hagiographer Nicholas presents his audience with an account of Cyril's life from his birth until his old age when the following mishap befell the saint:

> ἐν δὲ τῷ ἐνενηκοστῷ αὐτοῦ πέμπτῳ ἔτει τῆς ἡλικίας ἦν σὺν τῷ γήρει καὶ τῷ σώματι μικρὸν νοσηλευόμενος· ἐξελθὼν οὖν ἐν ἀσελήνῳ νυκτὶ τῆς κέλλης τοῦ χῦσαι τὸ ὕδωρ αὐτοῦ - ἀπεῖχε δὲ ὁ τόπος ἐκ τῆς κέλλης ὡσεὶ λίθου βολήν - ἐν τῷ ὑποστρέφειν ὡδήγει ἑαυτὸν μετὰ τῆς ῥάβδου καὶ εὗρισκεν ἐν τῷ δεξιῷ μέρει τῆς τρίβου ἀκάνθας χονδράς, αἷς κατακολουθῶν ἀπώλεσε τὴν κέλλαν· καὶ πολλὰ κοπιάσας οὐκ ἠδυνήθη εὑρεῖν αὐτήν. τέλος δὲ ἐξακολουθῶν ταῖς ἀκάνθαις ἀνέβη εἰς τὴν κορυφὴν τοῦ ἀμπελῶνος καὶ εὑρὼν τὸν φραγμὸν αὐτοῦ ἐξεπλάγη· ἐξατονήσας δὲ καὶ μὴ δυνάμενός τι διαπράξασθαι προσερρύη ἐπ' αὐτῷ· καὶ ἵστατο ἕως οὗ ἔκρουσε τὸ ξύλον τῆς μονῆς· κατ' οἰκονομίαν δὲ θεοῦ ἀπῆλθεν ὁ μαθητὴς αὐτοῦ καὶ μὴ εὑρὼν αὐτὸν ἐν τῇ κέλλῃ ἐκάλεσε τοὺς ἀδελφούς· καὶ λαβόντες φῶτα μόλις ποτὲ εὗρον αὐτόν ἱστάμενον ἐν τῷ φραγμῷ καὶ ἐπιστηριζόμενον τῇ ῥάβδῳ αὐτοῦ καὶ μὴ δυνάμενον ὅλως φθέγξασθαι.[34]
>
> In the ninety-fifth year of his life he was, apart from being old, also somewhat infirm in his body. Having gone out, then, from his cell in a moonless night in order to pass water – the place was about a stone's throw away from the cell –, he guided himself with the staff on his way back and found on the right side of the path thick thorns, which he followed and thereby lost his cell. And despite much toil he could not find it. Finally following the thorns he ascended to the pinnacle of the vineyard, and having found its fence he took leave of his senses. Feeling weak and not being able to do anything he slumped on it. And he stood there until the board of the monastery was sounded. According to the dispensation of God his disciple went out and, when he did not find him in his cell, called the brethren and after they had grabbed lamps they finally found him standing on the fence and leaning on his staff and not able to make a sound at all.

On the 'historical' level this narrative is evidently quite different from the one that we have discussed so far. While Lazarus is a run-away adolescent *en route* to Jerusalem, Cyril is an ancient hermit who lives out his days in the monastery of his brother where he is being cared for. Moreover, whereas Lazarus runs away from a highway because he is in danger of being enslaved, the context in the *Life* of Cyril is much more mundane: the saint loses his bearings on his way to his cell after he has relieved himself in the nearby latrine of the monastery. Nevertheless, the two stories have several motifs in common: like

33 On Cyril cf. M. Kaplan, 'In search of St Cyril's Philea', in M. Mullett and A. Kirby (ed.), *Work and Worship at the Theotokos Evergetis* [Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations 6.2] (Belfast 1997) 213–21.
34 *Life* of Cyril of Philea 54.2, ed. Sargologos, 256–7.

https://doi.org/10.1179/0307013113Z.00000000028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Lazarus, Cyril strays from the path he is on and laboriously climbs up to the top of an incline in the middle of a dark night where he is eventually found by somebody else.

This suggests that this narrative, too, has an allegorical dimension and that this dimension again gives it a negative meaning. Fortunately for us, this hypothesis can be confirmed through comparison with a passage in an earlier part of the text where Cyril tells the following story to a visitor:

> δένδρον ἐφύτευσεν ὁ θεὸς παμμέγεθες φθάνον ἕως τοῦ οὐρανοῦ· κέκτηται δὲ τοὺς καρποὺς ἀειθαλεῖς καὶ παρηλλαγμένους· ἐν γὰρ τῷ δεξιῷ καὶ εὐωνύμῳ μέρει τῶν κάτω καὶ μέσων καρπῶν παραπεπήγασι ἄκανθαι.[35]
>
> God planted a huge tree that reached unto heaven. It possesses choice fruits that sprout forever. And on the right and left sides of the fruits of lower and middle levels thorns are affixed.

This passage shows marked similarities with the episode we have discussed so far: the phrase 'for in the right ... part ... of the fruits there are thorns' (ἐν γὰρ τῷ δεξιῷ ... μέρει τῶν ... καρπῶν παραπεπήγασι ἄκανθαι) that we find here has an almost literal parallel in the sentence 'in the right part of the path he found thick thorns' (εὕρισκεν ἐν τῷ δεξιῷ μέρει τῆς τρίβου ἀκάνθας χονδράς), which describes how the ancient saint loses his way. However, in this case it is clearly part of an allegory where the fruit-tree symbolises the ascent of the monk to perfection. This dimension is made explicit by Cyril when his visitor then asks what the allegory is supposed to signify. Cyril explains that the thorns, which grow to the right and the left of the fruits, are 'the excesses and shortcomings regarding the commandments of God' (αἱ ὑπερβολαὶ καὶ ἐλλείψεις ... τῶν ἐντολῶν τοῦ θεοῦ).[36] There can thus be no doubt that the later account of the saint's mishap also has a negative meaning and that it is linked to 'excessive behaviour'.

This raises the question: where did Cyril err? At first it appears that he has done nothing wrong because the author states that when he had recovered 'Cyril told us how the temptation had happened to him because of the molestation of demons and their great envy' (διηγήσατο ἡμῖν πῶς ἐκ δαιμονικῆς ἐπηρείας καὶ τοῦ πολλοῦ φθόνου αὐτῶν συμβέβηκεν αὐτῷ ὁ πειρασμός).[37] This gives the impression that the mishap was caused by outside interference, and Nicholas does not seem to disagree with this interpretation. However, a closer look suggests that the matter is not so straightforward and that the saint has brought this on himself. The first indication that this may be the case is found at the end of the episode that has been quoted above. There it is said that the saint was so badly affected 'because he was chilled from the great cold, wearing only one garment, and being old and infirm' (ἀπεπάγη γὰρ ὑπὸ τοῦ πολλοῦ ψύχους, μονοχίτων ὤν, καὶ γέρων καὶ ἀσθενής).[38] This establishes a close link between

35 *Life* of Cyril of Philea 46.5, ed. Sargologos, 215.
36 *Life* of Cyril of Philea 46.8, ed. Sargologos, 217.
37 *Life* of Cyril of Philea 54.2, ed. Sargologos, 257.
38 *Life* of Cyril of Philea 54.2, ed. Sargologos, 257.

https://doi.org/10.1179/0307013113Z.00000000028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the saint's condition and his insufficient clothing. A look at the wider context shows that this is a leitmotif in Nicholas' account of the last years of the saint. This account takes the form of a meticulous chronicle of Cyril's physical decline, into which longer episodes are inserted.[39] Right from the start this decline is said to be caused by two factors, 'by great old age and by unrelenting asceticism' (ὑπὸ τοῦ πολλοῦ γήρως καὶ τῆς ἀνενδότου ἀσκήσεως).[40] This theme is then taken up again in the following chapters. Before he narrates the mishap of the saint in the vineyard the author states how he visited Cyril 'and when I found him ailing and lying on an uncomfortable mattress, I entreated him to put hay on top of his cover, so as to have a little respite from the excessive harshness' (ὡς δὲ εὗρον ἀσθενοῦντα καὶ ἐν ἀπαρακλήτῳ στρωμνῇ κείμενον, παρεκάλεσα ἐπιθεῖναι ἐπάνω τοῦ ψιαθίου αὐτοῦ χόρτον, ὅπως μικράν τινα ἀνάπαυσιν ἔξει ἐκ τῆς ἄγαν σκληρότητος).[41] And immediately afterwards we hear that from then on Cyril was ill and that 'after long entreaties we barely persuaded him to moderate his fasting regime so as to eat fish and wine' (πολλὰ παρακαλέσαντες αὐτὸν μόλις ἐπείσαμεν καταλῦσαι εἰς ἰχθὺν καὶ οἶνον).[42]

The saint's dilemma is obvious: his old age no longer allows him to adhere to the rigorous asceticism without endangering his life. Byzantine audiences would have been familiar with this theme because it surfaced in a contemporary debate about whether or not monks should moderate their behaviour according to their age and health. In the *Life* of Cyril this debate is alluded to in a long speech of the saint to his disciple in which he explains that it is the intention that counts and not the actual practice.[43] This speech sits ill with Cyril's own behaviour and is without doubt a reflection of the views of the hagiographer and not of the saint himself.

Therefore one can argue that Nicholas uses the episode of the saint's mishap on his way back from the latrine in order to criticise his hero in a roundabout fashion.[44] By having him stray to the right of the path and then climb up an incline he could indicate that the saint's behaviour was excessive, and by letting this happen on a moonless night he could insinuate that Cyril suffered from a lack of discretion, which prevented him from seeing what was good for him.[45]

Accordingly, the nocturnal travails of the ancient Cyril can be regarded as the counterpart of the troubles of the young Lazarus: both saints adhere to an extreme

39 *Life* of Cyril of Philea 53–55, ed. Sargologos, 249–262. Two narratives are intercalated: the story under discussion and an elaborate account of a demonic vision, cf. *Life* of Cyril of Philea 53, ed. Sargologos, 249–55.

40 *Life* of Cyril of Philea 53.1, ed. Sargologos, 249.

41 *Life* of Cyril of Philea 54.1, ed. Sargologos, 255–6.

42 *Life* of Cyril of Philea 54.3, ed. Sargologos, 257–8.

43 *Life* of Cyril of Philea 54.1, ed. Sargologos, 256.

44 It may not be coincidental that the account of the saint's last years is immediately preceded by a cautionary tale about excessive asceticism, cf. *Life* of Cyril of Philea 52, ed. Sargologos, 245–8.

45 Cf. e.g. Maximus, *Gnostic Centuries* II.33, MPG 90, col. 1140C1-D2 where the moon is interpreted as a symbol of 'natural discretion' (φυσικὴ διάκρισις), which gives off a 'measured light' (φῶς σύμμετρον).

https://doi.org/10.1179/0307013113Z.00000000028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

life-style that is inappropriate for their age and their specific circumstances, which then accounts for the similarities between the two episodes.

At this point we can conclude that like the Italian poet Dante Byzantine hagiographers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries gave their writings an allegorical dimension. Moreover, it seems that both Dante and the hagiographers shared an allegorical language in which single features such as the 'straight road' have fixed positive and negative connotations that reflect a particular value system. However, at least for the Byzantine world this second conclusion needs to be considerably modified. As we have seen, the allegorical narrative about the tree of God, which Cyril of Philea tells his visitor, speaks of fruits to which thorns adhere both on the left and on the right sides, an image that clearly expresses the concept that virtue is to be found in the middle between two equally negative extremes. However, when we look closer, we find that Cyril speaks at this point only about the fruits that are found at the lower and middle branches of the tree. This is a reference to the stages of spiritual ascent, which lead from an introductory level to an advanced level and then finally to the level of perfection. Accordingly, this last level is described at the end of the speech:

> τῆς δὲ κορυφῆς οἱ καρποὶ οὐ κέκτηνταί τι λυποῦν ... ἵσταται δὲ <sc. τὸ δένδρον> ἐν τόπῳ ἔχοντι ἐν μὲν τῷ εὐωνύμῳ μέρει ζοφώδες χάος ἐν ᾧ εἰσιν πάντα τὰ ἰόβολα ζῷα, ἐν δὲ τῷ δεξιῷ μέρει στενήν τινα ὁδὸν καὶ τεθλιμμένην ἣν ὑπέδειξεν ὁ θεὸς τοῖς δούλοις αὐτοῦ.[46]
>
> The fruits of the top do not have anything distressful in them. ... And (sc. the tree) stands in a place that has in the right part dark chaos in which are all the venomous animals, and in the left part a narrow and difficult road, which God has shown to his servants.

In this passage we also find juxtaposition between the elements 'in the left part' (ἐν μὲν τῷ εὐωνύμῳ μέρει) and 'in the right part' (ἐν δὲ τῷ δεξιῷ μέρει), but the framework in which they appear is completely different: now only the left is described in negative terms whereas the right is considered positive and indeed more so than the tree itself, which takes the middle position. This reminds us that in the Byzantine monastic discourse the 'golden mean' was not a universally recognised value system and that many people regarded excessive asceticism as the true pinnacle of monastic life. In this alternative framework 'straying to the right' would be an entirely positive behaviour. Accordingly we find reinterpretations of the Biblical quotations on which the concept of the 'golden mean' was based. An example for such reinterpretation comes from the ninth-century *Life* of Theophanes Confessor by Patriarch Methodius: 'Praised be his turning to righteousness and his expansion on the right side, which no longer has Solomon's rebuke not to deviate to the right or to the left because the right is not a deceptive right but is the true right' (ὦ ἐπικλίσεως τῷ δικαίῳ καὶ ἐπὶ τῷ δεξιῷ προσθέσεως οὐκ ἐχούσης ἐπιτιμίαν ἔτι σολομώντειον τοῦ μὴ ἐκκλίνειν δεξιὰ ἢ εὐώνυμα διὰ τὸ μὴ ἐν

46 *Life* of Cyril of Philea 46.3, ed. Sargologos, 215.

https://doi.org/10.1179/0307013113Z.00000000028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ἀπάτῃ εἶναι δεξιὸν ἀλλ' ἐν ἀληθείᾳ πεφυκέναι δεξιόν).[47] Passages such as this suggest that Nicholas Kataskepenos tried to reconcile the two frameworks by limiting the validity of the concept of the 'golden mean' to the lower and middle stages of monastic life so as to ensure proper socialisation into monastic life and at the same time to create space for exceptional figures such as Cyril of Philea himself.[48]

That the same motifs can have negative and positive connotations, depending on the views of the hagiographer, is evident from the ninth-century *Life* of Euarestus of Kokorobion. There the nocturnal exploits of the saint and his companion Eubiotus are narrated in the following manner:

> μετὰ γὰρ τήνδε τὴν ὥραν κύκλῳ καὶ οὐ κατ' εὐθεῖαν τὴν καταγωγὴν περιήεσαν ἅμα· εἴ που δὲ καὶ στενωπός τις ὑπῆρξεν ἐγκάρσιος ἢ χωρίου κοίλωμα ἕτερον, ἐν τούτοις ἐφοίτων ἐκκλίνοντες, τὸν κόπον ἄγαν ἐπιτείνοντες τοῦ βαδίσματος.[49]
>
> For after this hour they went around together in the abode in a circle and not in a straight fashion; if there was somewhere a slanted lane or another depression of the place, they went into them, deviating, increasing very much the toil of the walking.

In this passage the saints' movements within the monastic compound are described in astonishing detail. Indeed, features such as the juxtaposition between circular movement and movement in a straight line seem to be redundant if we assume that the author had merely wished to give a straightforward account of events. However, this impression of redundancy disappears when we consider the metaphorical connotations of the various terms and phrases. Such connotations are particularly evident in the case of the verb ἐκκλίνειν, which is followed by ἄγαν ἐπιτείνειν, a phrase that brings to mind the formula 'extremely intensive asceticism' (ἄγαν ἐπιτεταμένη ἄσκησις), which often occurs in Byzantine texts.[50] But does this mean that such behaviour is seen in a critical light? Here one needs to extend the discussion to the places into which the two saints are said to have turned: they are identified as 'lane' (στενωπός) and 'depression' (κοίλωμα). Both of these terms have positive connotations: στενωπός conjures up the Biblical image of the 'narrow road' (στενὴ ὁδός) on which the chosen walk,[51] and κοίλωμα can

47 Methodius of Constantinople, *Vita S. Theophanis Confessoris*, ed. V. V. Latysev [Zapiski rossijkoj akademii nauk. viii. ser. po istoriko-filologičeskomu otdeleniju 13.4] (St Petersburg 1918) 7.14–19.

48 For similar attempts at reconciling the two models in Late Antiquity cf. Lumpe, 'Königsweg', 220. It needs to be said, however, that Nicholas seems to be confused for in the following interpretation of the narrow path on the 'right side' he again introduces the framework of the 'golden mean', cf. *Life* of Cyril of Philea 46.8, ed. Sargologos, 218.

49 C. Van de Vorst, 'La vie de s. Évariste, higoumène à Constantinople', *AB* 41 (1923) 287–325, esp. 304.30–3.

50 Cf. e.g. John Chrysostom, *Ad populum Antiochenum*, MPG 49, col. 19D: ὡς καὶ εἰς ἀσθένειαν ἐμπεσεῖν ἐκ τῆς ἄγαν σκληραγωγίας καὶ ἐπιτεταμένης νηστείας.

51 A passage where στενὴ ὁδός and στενωπός appear side by side can be found in John Chrysostom, *Eclogae*, MPG 63, col. 871.

https://doi.org/10.1179/0307013113Z.00000000028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

be understood as a reference to humility: as we have seen Michael Psellos states in his letter to John Xiphilinos that the addressee should come down from the lofty heights of Mt Olympus and hide away wherever there is 'a plain or a very deep depression, or a cleft ravine or a hole in the ground' (πεδιὰς ἢ βαθυτάτη κοιλάς, ἢ φάραγξ διερρωγυῖα ἢ μυχὸς γῆς) in order to rid himself of his overweening pride.[52] Thus one could argue that the 'deviation from the straight road' and the concept of extreme asceticism with which it is associated are given a positive meaning through appeal to the argument that the ideal of moderation only applies to the average monk and by insinuating that despite their hardships the saints remained humble, a point that had already been made explicitly in the immediately preceding sentence.[53]

Such a scenario is not as far-fetched as it might first seem: after all, exegetes of the Bible were used to interpreting the same features in both positive and negative ways,[54] and there is no reason to exclude off-hand that hagiographers did not anticipate such an approach from their readers and write their texts accordingly. It is evident that one would need to analyse a much wider range of texts in order to arrive at a better understanding of this 'subterranean' discourse and its relevance for the debate about the proper monastic life-style. The aim of this short article has been much more modest, namely to show that like Dante Byzantine hagiographers did encode an allegorical dimension into their texts and that they did so in order to make value judgements that complement explicit evaluations of the behaviour of saints.

52 See above note 15.

53 Cf. *Life* of Euarestus of Kokorobion 10, ed. Van de Vorst, 304.27–9: ἵνα μὴ φανερόν τινι γένηται τῆς αὐτῶν ἀγρυπνίας τὸ ἐπιτήδευμα κἀντεῦθεν κενοδοξίας βλάβην οὐκ ἀποφεύξωνται.

54 For allegorical interpretations *in bonam partem* and *in malam partem* cf. e.g. P. Lee Gauch and J. Whitman, *Interpretation and Allegory: antiquity to the modern period* (Leiden 2003) 393.

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