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Athanasius, the Author of *Vita A* of Athanasius the Athonite, on Secular Education, Legal Theory, Mysticism and Asceticism

Abstract: Athanasius, the author of *Vita A* of Athanasius the Athonite, was a highly unusual figure in Byzantine hagiography. Unlike other hagiographers, he did not shrink from making explicit his views on a number of topics. His comments about the importance of learning and about the relationship between the emperor and the law point back to his past as a judge in the imperial bureaucracy. By contrast, his rejection of mysticism and extreme asceticism is in keeping with the Middle Byzantine monastic reform movement. Yet unlike the authors of monastic rules, he does not inveigh against mystics and ascetics but prefers to poke fun at them through elaborate wordplay.

As a rule, Byzantine hagiographers kept a low profile. They gave little or no information about themselves, and they did not openly set out their views about what constitutes saintly status and about other topics that might have interested them. One notable exception is Athanasius, the author of *Vita A* of Athanasius the Athonite, who flourished in the first quarter of the eleventh century. A member of the Constantinopolitan elite, he had become a monk only late in his life and never bowed to the dictates of humility. Thus he felt no qualms about adding a lengthy autobiographical excursus and even intruding into the narrative proper. Sometimes he speaks as if he were still a layman, as when he stresses the importance of learning and insists on the rule of law. In other instances, he passes judgement on different types of monasticism, rejecting mystical experiences and extreme asceticism. Here his views are influenced by the coenobitic reform movement that was gaining ground at the time. Yet this does not mean that he does not give his statements a personal note. Whereas other reformers engage in heavy-handed polemic he prefers wit and irony, the traditional weapons of lay intellectuals.

Vita A of Athanasius the Athonite is one of the most sophisticated hagiographical texts of the Byzantine era. As the editor Jacques Noret has already pointed out, it is written in almost flawless classical Greek.¹ Moreover, the manner in which the story is told shows great mastery. A typical example of the author's style is found in the narrative of Athanasius' pre-monastic life. We are told that the future saint took his education very seriously and that he was careful in choosing the right companions. The latter point is expressed in the following manner:

Ἀλλὰ μὴν καὶ ἐταίρων οὐ τὰ πολλὰ τοῖς πολλοῖς ὠμίλει, ἀλλὰ τοῖς τῶν πολλῶν ἑαυτοῦς ὡς ἐπίπαν χωρίζουσιν, οὐδὲ τοῖς εἰκῆ καὶ ἀπλῶς συνεφέρετο φερομένοις, ἀλλ' οἷς δέον ἦδει συμφέρεσθαι.²

But indeed most of the time he also did not converse with the many but with those who always separate themselves from the many nor was he carried along with those who are carried along at random and without purpose but with those with whom he knew it to be fitting to be carried along together.

¹ J. NORET, *Vitae duae antiquae sancti Athanasii (CCSG 9)*. Turnhout – Leuven 1982. In the introduction to his edition of the *Lives*, cxxxv–cxliv, Noret has given an excellent analysis of the style of *Vita A*.

² *Vita A* 12 (8, 9–12 NORET).

As Noret has indicated in the *apparatus fontium* of his edition, this passage has a close counterpart in Gregory of Nazianzus' Funeralary Oration for Basil the Great. There Gregory has the following to say about his and Basil's studies in Athens.

Ἐταίρων τε γὰρ ὠμιλοῦμεν οὐ τοῖς ἀσελγεστάτοις, ἀλλὰ τοῖς σωφρονεστάτοις, οὐδὲ τοῖς μαχιμωτάτοις, ἀλλὰ τοῖς εἰρηνικωτάτοις καὶ οἷς συνεῖναι λυσιτελέστατον.³

For we did not converse with the most licentious but with the most temperate nor with the most belligerent but with the most peaceable and with those with whom it is most profitable to be together.

The obvious similarity between the two passages leaves no doubt that the text in Vita A is based on Gregory's statement. Yet a closer look reveals that the author has borrowed from his source rather selectively.

Ἀλλὰ μὴν καὶ ἑταίρων οὐ τὰ πολλὰ τοῖς πολλοῖς ὠμίλει ἀλλὰ τοῖς τῶν πολλῶν ἑαυτοῦς ὡς ἐπίπαν χωρίζουσιν οὐδὲ τοῖς εἰκῆ καὶ ἀπλῶς συνεφέρετο φερομένοις ἀλλ' οἷς δέον ἦδει συμφέρεσθαι.

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The author has only taken over the syntactic structure but not the vocabulary, apart from the noun ἑταίρων and the verb ὠμιλεῖν. Yet this does not mean that Gregory of Nazianzus is no longer his source of inspiration, because the elements τὰ πολλὰ τοῖς πολλοῖς and συνεφέρετο φερομένοις have a counterpart in Gregory's speech *Farewell to Constantinople*. There Gregory compares the politicians of the city with children that in their games are 'carried along' (φερομένων) without purpose and avers that for a mature person like himself to act likewise would be shameful, concluding with the words: 'I am most of the time not carried along with the many' (οὐ τὰ πολλὰ συμφέρομαι τοῖς πολλοῖς).⁴ With the conflation of the two passages the author signals his intimate knowledge of the literary tradition to an audience who must have been equally well educated. It would, however, be wrong to think that it is an end in itself. The resulting statement differs subtly from the passage in the funeralary oration for Basil. Whereas Gregory juxtaposes the two passions lust and anger and thus gives his audience a concrete reason for the choices that Basil made, the author of Vita A makes no mention of a specific behaviour and only states that the multitude had no clear purpose. Moreover, *variatio* has given way to repetition, as is obvious in the sequences τὰ πολλὰ τοῖς πολλοῖς ... τῶν πολλῶν and συνεφέρετο φερομένοις ... συμφέρεσθαι. These features are characteristic of the author's personal style, which is highly abstract and often results in narratives that are drained of all colour.

Thanks to his inclination to speak at length about himself we are quite well informed about the author's life. In the proem he declares that he is ill equipped for writing a saint's life 'as I was judge

³ Gregory of Nazianzus, Oratio 43, 20, ed. J. BERNARDI, Grégoire de Nazianze, Discours 42–43 (SC 384). Paris 1992, 166, 19–21.

⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, Oratio 42, 22 (98, 14–23 BERNARDI).

before and practised legal speeches' (οἷα δὴ δικαστῆς τὸν ἔμπροσθεν χρόνον καὶ δικαστικοῖς ἐγγυμνασάμενος λόγοις).⁵ This leaves no doubt that he was a state official, most likely of a high rank, since he received an education of the highest quality.⁶ Indeed, he may be compared with another high-ranking judge, Michael Attaleiates, who states that he took up history-writing 'although I was weary from many activities concerning the army and always surrounded by legal conversations' (καίτοι μυρίαὶ ἀσχολίαις ἀλύοντι περὶ τὸ στρατόπεδον καὶ δικαστικοῖς διαλόγοις ἀεὶ περιδονουμένῳ).⁷

At some point the author ended his secular career and decided to become a monk. We are told that he had formed a close relationship with Anthony, the favourite disciple of Athanasius the Athonite. When after the saint's death, Anthony was ousted from the Lavra, the author invited him to Constantinople and became his spiritual son.⁸ He had then helped Anthony to found the monastery of Panagios, which became an important centre of monastic reform. Anthony was also the person who informed him about the exploits of the saint and thus enabled him to write the Life of Athanasius.⁹ How much the author was influenced by Anthony is evident from his ample borrowings from the rule of the Panagios monastery, which Anthony himself composed.¹⁰ These borrowings can be identified through comparison with the Petritzos Typikon, which we know to have been based on the lost Panagios Typikon.¹¹

Even after he had become a monk, the author did not wholly break with his past. The text of Vita A reveals that he was still keenly interested in secular learning and in secular law. Athanasius' career as a teacher in Constantinople is discussed in great detail, a boon for scholars who study the history of Byzantine education.¹² Even more interesting is a later episode. There we are informed that Athanasius left the monastery of Michael Maleinos, which he had entered a few years earlier, and that he moved to Mt Athos. On his arrival he approached a hermit whom he told that he was an illiterate sailor. When the hermit began to teach him the letters he pretended not to understand, thus showing his ineffable humility. At this point the author adds the following comment:

Πρᾶγμα τοῖς μὲν ἀμυήτοις καὶ παιδείας ἀγεύστοις οὐ μέγα ἴσως δοκοῦν, τοῖς δὲ μὴ οὕτως ἔχουσι καὶ σφόδρα μέγα καὶ ψυχῆς τῷ ὄντι νεανικῆς καὶ γενναίας, ὡς θᾶπτον ἄν τις τούτων – ἵνα τι καὶ παρατολήσω – καὶ παθεῖν τι τῶν ἀβουλήτων ἀνάσχοιτο ἢ καταπροδοῦναι τὰ φίλτατα.¹³

⁵ Vita A 2 (4, 11–12 NORET). The nominative δικαστῆς is my emendation. The manuscripts have the dative δικασταῖς.

⁶ Cf. J. LEROY, Les deux vies de saint Athanase l'Athonite. *AnBoll* 82 (1964) 409–430, esp. 423.

⁷ Michael Attaleiates, *History* (7, 18–20 BEKKER).

⁸ Vita A 213 (104, 41–49 NORET).

⁹ Vita A 213 (103, 19–26 NORET).

¹⁰ See D. KRAUSMÜLLER, An Ascetic Founder. The lost first Life of Athanasius the Athonite, in: *Founders and Refounders of Byzantine Monasteries. Papers of the fifth Belfast Byzantine International Colloquium*, ed. M. Mullett (*Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations* 6.3). Belfast 2007, 63–86.

¹¹ See D. KRAUSMÜLLER, On Contents and Structure of the Panagiou Typikon: A Contribution to the Early History of 'Extended' Monastic Rules. *BZ* 106 (2013) 39–64. In this article I have argued that both Vita A and Vita B of Athanasius the Athonite are based on a now lost Vita prima, which was written by Abbot Anthony. Unfortunately, the text of the Vita prima cannot be reconstructed with any certainty. I have therefore not used Vita B for comparison, only indicating in the footnotes where a statement in Vita A has a counterpart in Vita B.

¹² Vita A 16–17 (9–10 NORET). The corresponding passage in Vita B 7 (132–133 NORET) is much less detailed. Cf. P. LEMERLE, Le premier humanisme byzantine. Notes et remarques sur enseignement et culture à Byzance des origines au X^e siècle (*Bibliothèque byzantine. Études* 6). Paris 1971, 257–258.

¹³ Vita A 42 (21, 6–11 NORET). This passage has no counterpart in Vita B.

(sc. This is) a thing that to those who are uninitiated and who have not tasted education perhaps does not seem great but to those who are not like that (sc. is) both extraordinarily great and the sign of a truly valiant and courageous soul because one of these—to say even something daring—would rather suffer something of what one does not want than give up what is most dear.

As Noret has already pointed out, the author is clearly speaking about himself and his own education, which he valued highly.¹⁴ This does not, of course, mean that he imitated the saint. Although he turned from writing secular texts to composing a saint's life it is highly unlikely that he restrained himself when he became a hagiographer. Indeed, *Vita A* is such a sophisticated text that it is hard to imagine that anybody could write in a higher style.

The author's continuing interest in legal discourse is evident from an episode that describes how the saint acted as abbot of Lavra. When once, on a feast day, some monks ate dishes that he considered to be too delicate he punished them with excommunication. When the monks beseeched him to forgive them, he declared that they misunderstood his powers. He could not change his mind as he wished because 'it is necessary for all shepherds not to transgress the existing laws' (ἀνάγκην μέντοι γε πᾶσιν ἐπικεῖσθαι ποιμέσι τοὺς κειμένους μὴ παραβαίνειν νόμους).¹⁵ This statement has a counterpart in the *Petritzos Typikon* where it is explained that the word of the abbot is law for the monks but that the power of the abbot is not limitless, 'for it is necessary for all shepherds not to overstep the existing laws' (πᾶσι γὰρ ποιμέσιν ἀνάγκη ἐπικείται τοὺς τεθέντας ὅρους μὴ ὑπερβαίνειν).¹⁶ It must, therefore, go back to the lost rule of the Panagios monastery. With his quotation from the *Panagios Typikon*, the author signals his agreement with a central tenet of the coenobitic reform movement, that even charismatics should acknowledge the authority of canon law.¹⁷ Yet this is not all he has to say. He declares that abbots can only use their discretion in cases that are not covered by canon law and then adds:

Τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ τοῖς ἔξωθεν κεκανόνισται νόμοις, τότε νόμον εἶναι τὸ δόξαν βασιλεῖ, ὅτε μὴ ἐπ' ἀναίρεσει τι τῶν κειμένων θεσπίζει νόμων· ἀναγκάζεται γὰρ καὶ αὐτὸς κατ' αὐτοὺς πολιτεύεσθαι, εἰ καὶ οὐχ ὑπόκειται τούτοις.¹⁸

For this is also established through the secular laws, that what the emperor considers right is then law, when he legislates something that does not annul the existing laws, for he himself, too, is forced to act according to them, even if he is not subjected to them.

As Noret states it is very likely that the author adopted this point of view when he was still working as a judge.¹⁹ Comparison with other texts relating to the same topic shows that his position is highly unusual. Normally Byzantine writers are much more reluctant to put a limit on the emperor's powers.²⁰ It is even more significant when we consider that the emperor of the time, Basil II, pre-

¹⁴ See Noret, *Vitae duae*, introduction, cxlv.

¹⁵ *Vita A* 184 (89, 34–35 Noret).

¹⁶ *Petritzos-Typikon* 15, ed. P. Gautier, *Le typikon du sébaste Grégoire Pakourianos*. *REB* 42 (1984) 5–145, esp. 79, 1001–1003.

¹⁷ Cf. D. Krausmüller, 'Monks who are not priests do not have the power to bind and to loose': the debate about confession in eleventh- and twelfth-century Byzantium. *BZ* 109 (2016) 703–732. The quotation is also found in *Vita B* 50 (187, 3–35) and may therefore go back to the *Vita prima*.

¹⁸ *Vita A* 184 (89–90, 42–46 Noret). This passage has no counterpart in *Vita B*.

¹⁹ See Noret, *Vitae duae*, introduction cxxxiv.

²⁰ Cf. D. Simon, *Princeps legibus solutus*. Die Stellung des byzantinischen Kaisers zum Gesetz, in: *Gedächtnisschrift für Wolfgang Kunkel*, ed. D. Nörr – D. Simon. Frankfurt a. M. 1984, 449–492.

ferred an autocratic style of government.²¹ Thus one could argue that the author voices the opinion of the civil aristocracy, who were unhappy with this situation.²²

The episodes discussed so far cast light on the author's background as a highly educated state official. Other passages show that he also had firm opinions about what constitutes the proper monastic lifestyle. He is particularly interested in two questions: can saints have supernatural powers of perception; and should one engage in extreme ascetic practices? The first topic is broached in the narrative of the saint's encounter with the abbot Michael Maleinos. When Michael hears that Athanasius wishes to leave the world he reacts in the following manner:

Ὁ δὲ ἅμα τῷ λόγῳ μᾶλλον ἐκείνου θελχθείς, ὅλος γίνεται τοῦ ἀνδρὸς καὶ τοῦ πράγματος· καὶ πῶς γὰρ οὐκ ἔμελλεν, ἄνδρα τοιοῦτον, ἴν' εἶπω, καὶ τηλικούτον ἐντὸς ἔχων τῶν πνευματικῶν ἀρκύων; Πάντως δὲ μέγας ὢν καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν βλεπομένων τὰ μὴ βλεπόμενα τεκμηριῶσαι ταχύς, ἔγνω καὶ αὐτὸν τοιοῦτον ἐσόμενον· καὶ θαυμαστὸν οὐδέν· εἰ γὰρ τὸν Θεὸν αὐτὸν οἱ καθαροὶ φαντάζονται τῇ καρδίᾳ, πόσῳ γε μᾶλλον τοὺς τοῦ Θεοῦ χαρακτηρίζειν δύνανται;²³

At the very moment of his speech he became more bewitched than that one, and he was wholly taken by the man and the matter, for how should he not have been when he had a man of such qualities and such greatness, if I may say so, in his spiritual nets. Indeed, being great and quick to conjecture what is not visible from what is visible he knew that he, too, would be such a one. And this is not cause for wonder for if the pure of heart imagine God himself, how much more can they gain an understanding of those who belong to God?

According to the author, Michael Maleinos knew immediately that Athanasius would be an exemplary monk. Yet this does not mean that he is a prophet in the strict sense of the word. He neither gains his knowledge from the Holy Spirit nor can he see into the saint's mind.²⁴ Instead, he comes to his conclusion through reading outward signs. There is nothing miraculous about this ability. Otherwise Theodore of Stoudios, a paragon of humility, would never have said to his monks: 'I, too, infer that which is stored inside from the outside movements' (κάγὼ τεκμαίρομαι ἐκ τῶν ἔξωθεν κινήματων καὶ τὰ ἔνδοθεν ἀποκείμενα).²⁵ Such reticence is not uncommon in Byzantine hagiographical texts. In the Life of Euarestus of Kokorobion, which dates to the early tenth century, we are told that abbot Naucratius concluded from the outward appearance and the behaviour of the saint that he would be a valuable member of the community.²⁶ Yet the author goes one step further. In the following episode we learn that the general Nicephorus Phokas who was present at the encounter between Athanasius and Michael was able to assess Athanasius' character 'because he was highly capable of gaining an

²¹ See C. HOLMES, *Basil II and the Governance of Empire (976–1025)*. Oxford 2005.

²² See LEROY, *Deux vies*, 423, note 1.

²³ Vita A 20–21 (8–12, 10–15 NORET).

²⁴ Cf. D. KRAUSMÜLLER, *Diorasis Denied: Opposition to Clairvoyance in Byzantium from Late Antiquity to the Eleventh Century*. *JÖB* 65 (2015) 111–128, esp. 112–115. In Vita B 8 (134.21–23 NORET) we are only told that Michael knew that Athanasius would be a good monk. The source of this knowledge is not identified.

²⁵ Theodore of Stoudios, *Magna Catechesis* 42, ed. J. COZZA-LUZI, S. P. N., *Theodori Studitae Magna Catechesis (Nova Patrum Bibliotheca* 9.2). Rome 1888, 117, 17–19.

²⁶ Life of Euarestus of Kokorobion 8, ed. C. VAN DE VORST, *La vie de s. Évariste, higoumène à Constantinople*. *AnBoll* 41 (1923) 287–325, esp. 302, 22–33.

understanding of a person from his disposition and look and gait and from everything else about him' (δεινὸς ὢν ὡς μάλιστα ἦθος ἀνδρὸς καὶ βλέμμα καὶ βάδισμα καὶ τὴν ἄλλην ὅλην χαρακτηρίσαι κατάστασιν).²⁷ Thus the reader gets the impression that there is no difference between an ordinary layman and an abbot of saintly status, especially since in both cases the same verb χαρακτηρίζειν is used.

Even more surprising is the comparison between clairvoyance and mystical experiences which the author makes in the second part of his statement. Taking the form of an argument *a fortiori*, it seems to have a simple purpose, namely to remove any doubt about Michael's capabilities as a spiritual guide. Yet a closer look at the text reveals a radically different agenda. When he speaks about the vision of God the author quotes Matthew 5:8: 'Blessed are the pure of heart because they will see God' (μακάριοι οἱ καθαροὶ τῆ καρδία ὅτι αὐτοὶ τὸν θεὸν ὄψονται). He does, however, introduce one important modification: he replaces the noun ὁρᾶν with φαντάζεσθαι. A survey of Byzantine literature reveals that the two words do not have the same meaning. Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, states in the *Funerary Oration* for his brother Caesarius that the living only have an inkling of God, 'as far as one can imagine in mirrors and riddles' (ὅσον ἐν ἐσόπτροις φαντάζεσθαι καὶ αἰνίγμασιν), whereas the dead perceive him directly, 'seeing the pure truth with a pure mind' (καθαρῶ νῶ καθαρὰν τὴν ἀληθείαν ἐποπτεύοντες).²⁸ Even more significant is the fact that the author himself makes such a distinction. When Athanasius unexpectedly visits Nicephorus Phokas the general is said to have been dumbfounded 'when he saw what he had not even imagined in dreams' (ὡς εἶδεν ὃ μὴ δ' ἂν ὄναρ ἐφαντάσθη ποτέ).²⁹ Here we have a clear juxtaposition of seeing something that is present and imagining something that is absent. We can thus conclude that the author has turned the *a fortiori* argument on its head. By claiming that there can be no direct vision of God he underscores his contention that holy men can only ever make inferences from outward signs.

The manipulation of Matthew 5:8 is not only found in Vita A. We already encounter it in Late Antique texts. In one of his sermons John Chrysostom offers the following interpretation of Christ's words in Matthew 18:10: 'Their angels do always behold the face of my Father' (οἱ ἄγγελοι αὐτῶν ἐν οὐρανοῖς διὰ παντὸς βλέπουσι τὸ πρόσωπον τοῦ πατρὸς μου).

Ὡσπερ ὅταν λέγῃ· Μακάριοι οἱ καθαροὶ τῆ καρδία ὅτι αὐτοὶ τὸν θεὸν ὄψονται, τὴν κατὰ διάνοιαν ὄψιν φησὶ τὴν ἡμῖν δυνατὴν καὶ τὴν ἔννοιαν τὴν περὶ θεοῦ, οὕτω καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἀγγέλων εἰπεῖν ἐστίν, ὅτι διὰ τὴν καθαρὰν αὐτῶν καὶ ἄγρυπνον φύσιν οὐδὲν ἕτερον ἀλλ' ἢ τὸν θεὸν ἀεὶ φαντάζονται.³⁰

As when he says: 'Blessed are the pure of heart, because they will see God', he means the sight in the mind, the one that is possible to us, and the thought about God, so must one also say in the case of the angels, that because of their pure and sleepless nature they always imagine nothing else than God.

A few decades later a similar statement appeared in a hagiographical text, the Religious History of Theodoret of Cyrus. There we read that the abbot Agrippa was adorned 'with complete purity of the soul wherefore he continuously received the image of the divine beauty' (τῆ τῆς ψυχῆς καθαρότητι δι' ἣν καὶ τοῦ θεοῦ κάλλους διηνεκῶς τὴν φαντασίαν δεχόμενος).³¹

²⁷ Vita A 22 (12, 12–14 NORET).

²⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus, Oratio 7, 17, ed. and tr. M.-A. CALVET SEBASTI, Grégoire de Nazianze. Discours 6–12 (SC 405). Paris 1995, 222, 14–18.

²⁹ Vita A (32, 3–4 NORET).

³⁰ John Chrysostom, In Joannem homilia 15 (PG 59, 99A3–9).

³¹ Theodoret of Cyrus, Religious History 4, 8, ed. and tr. P. CANIVET and A. LEROY-MOLINGHEN, Théodoret de Cyr, L'histoire des moines de Syrie (SC 234). Paris 1977, I 310.

John Chrysostom and Theodoret belonged to the so-called Antiochene School, which emphasised the incomprehensibility of the divinity.³² Therefore, they were troubled by Matthew 5:8, which seemed to justify mystical experiences. Their solution was to claim that the verb ὁρᾶν should not be understood in the literal sense. It may well be that the author was inspired by these or similar Late Antique texts. This, however, does not yet explain why he felt the need to express an opinion that had not been voiced for centuries. Here the Panagios Typikon provides no clue because it makes no mention of mystical experiences. I would suggest that the author's stance is best understood as a reaction to the claim by his contemporary Symeon the New Theologian that everybody who applied himself was capable of seeing the divine glory.³³ In his writings Symeon complains that some people roundly rejected his teachings, and it seems likely that the author was one of them.³⁴ When one considers that Symeon had revived mysticism after a lapse of several hundred years one can understand that his opponents turned to the theological tradition in order to find counterarguments. It is impossible to say whether the author formed his opinion when he was still a layman or after he had become a monk. Yet it is perhaps wrong to distinguish too strictly between monastic and lay circles. It may be more correct to imagine an elite group that included lay intellectuals and learned monks. After all, we know that the persecution of mystics in the later eleventh and twelfth centuries was carried out by both church and state.³⁵

With his claim that even holy men could not have direct access to invisible beings such as God and the human soul, the author set himself against hagiographical convention. The same independence of mind can be seen in passages that discuss ascetic practice. This theme is already introduced in the preface to the text. There the author claims that his powers are not sufficient for such a task but that he will nevertheless embark on it because he trusts that God will lend his support.

Τί γὰρ τῶν ἀπίστων, εἰ ὁ τῶν σημείων καὶ τεράτων θεὸς ὡσπερ ἐκεῖνῳ τὸν βίον, οὕτως ἐμοὶ τὸν λόγον περιδέξιον ἀποφίνειε, καὶ τῇ καθ' ἑκάτερον τῶν ἄκρων ἐκκλίσει τοῦ μέσου κατατυγχάνοντα, τοῖς ζηλωταῖς δὲ τῶν καλῶν λυσιτελέστατόν τε ἅμα καὶ ζήλου παραίτιον ἀγαθοῦ προσάποφίνειε;³⁶

For how is it incredible if the God of signs and portents shows my speech to be ambidextrous in the same manner as that one's (sc. Athanasius') way of life was and, by attaining the medium through avoidance of the extremes on both sides, additionally shows it to be most beneficial and at the same time cause of good zeal for those who are zealous for the good?

Here the author expresses his hope that he will be able to steer the middle course between two opposite extremes so that his text can be both useful and engaging. Contemporary readers would have had

³² Cf. V. LOSSKY, *Schau Gottes (Bibliothek für orthodoxe Theologie und Kirche 2)*. Zürich 1964, 72–74; and more recently, G. FRANK, 'Taste and See': The Eucharist and the Eyes of Faith in the Fourth Century. *Church History* 70 (2001) 619–643, esp. 630–340.

³³ Cf. B. FRAIGNEAU-JULIEN, *Les sens spirituels et la vision de Dieu selon Syméon le Nouveau Théologien (Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale 30)*. Paris 1985.

³⁴ Symeon the New Theologian, *Ethical Treatise 5*, 1, ed. J. DARROUZÈS, *Syméon le Nouveau Théologien. Traités théologiques et éthiques (SC 129)*. Paris 1967, II 86, 88–97.

³⁵ Cf. J. GOUILLARD, *Quatre procès de mystiques à Byzance (vers 960–1143) Inspiration et autorité. REB 36 (1978) 5–81.*

³⁶ Vita A 3 (4, 7–12 NORET).

no difficulty in understanding this rather elliptic statement. They knew that the author appealed to the concept of the ‘golden mean’, an ideal state that is equally distant from excess and deficiency.³⁷ Applied to the specific case of writing, it meant that an author should avoid both exaggerated conciseness and excessive verbosity because the former would not give the readers an idea of the subject matter whereas the latter would tire them out and blunt their enthusiasm.

This *topos* is frequently encountered in Byzantine saints’ lives.³⁸ Yet it would be wrong to think that the author simply followed established literary convention because he adds one element that is without precedent in Byzantine hagiography. He creates a parallel between himself and the saint, contending that Athanasius’ life-style, too, conformed to the ‘golden mean’. This is a momentous statement because it amounts to the rejection of the traditional ideal of agonistic asceticism. Whereas earlier hagiographers had claimed that their heroes endured greater hardship than anybody else and therefore deserved to be venerated as saints, the author implies that Athanasius did everything in moderation and thus behaved little differently from other monks. This ideal of sainthood rarely surfaces in Byzantine hagiography.³⁹ It is more commonly found in normative texts, which were produced in coenobitic communities. One such text was the rule of the Panagios monastery with which the author was affiliated. This can be seen from the prologue of the Petritzos Typikon, which has the following to say about the author of its model:

Καὶ γὰρ ὁ προμνημονευθεὶς ἐν ἀοιδίμῳ τῇ λήξει κτήτωρ καὶ καθηγούμενος τῶν Παναγίου, σοφώτατος ὢν τὰ θεῖα, τὴν ὑπερβολὴν καὶ τὴν ἔλλειψιν τῆς βιοτεύσεως καταλελοιπῶς, κατὰ τὴν μέσην καὶ βασιλικωτάτην ὁδὸν τοῦς ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ μαθητευομένους βαδίζειν ἐθέσπισεν.⁴⁰

For the aforementioned founder and abbot of the Panagios monastery of venerable memory, being very wise in things divine, abandoned excess and deficiency in the way of life and decreed that those who were his disciples walk the middle and most royal road.

It is likely that this is a paraphrase of a programmatic statement from the preface of the Panagios Typikon. Since we have already seen that the author of Vita A quotes from this text we can be reasonably sure that he refers to it in this case, too. Significantly, the Panagios Typikon is the first text of its kind that makes open reference to the ideal of the ‘golden mean’. The authors of earlier rules permit the members of their communities to fast as much as they like as long as they ask their abbots for permission. The growing emphasis on moderation is a hallmark of the coenobitic reform movement, which started in Constantinople in the second half of the tenth century and of which the Panagios Typikon was an early expression.⁴¹ Thus one gets the impression that the author wished to present the life of Athanasius in such a way that it conformed to the tenets of monastic reform.

This raises the question: how are Athanasius’ exploits presented in the narrative proper? The author speaks of them in the part of the text that deals with the saint’s early days as a monk. Having narrated that the saint entered the community of Michael Maleinos he continues:

³⁷ Cf. S. M. GARDINER, *Aristotle and the Virtues*. Oxford 2012.

³⁸ See e.g. Peter of Argos, *Encomium of Athanasius of Methone 2*, ed. K. T. KYRIAKOPOULOS, *Ἁγίου Πέτρου ἐπισκόπου Ἄργους βίος καὶ λόγοι*. Athens 1976, 44, 46.

³⁹ A rare exception is Theodore of Stoudios, *Panegyric of Theophanes 7*, ed. S. EFTHYMIADES, *Le Panégyrique de S. Théophane le Confesseur par S. Théodore Stoudite (BHG 1792b)*. Édition du texte intégral. *AnBoll* 111 (1993) 268–284, esp. 274.

⁴⁰ *Petritzos-Typikon* (Prologue, 23, 56–60 GAUTIER).

⁴¹ On this topic see D. KRAUSMÜLLER, *From Competition to Conformity: Saints’ Lives, Typika, and the Byzantine Monastic Discourse of the Eleventh Century*, in: *Byzantium in the Eleventh Century: Being In-Between*, ed. M. D. Lauxtermann – M. Whittow (*Publications of the Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies* 19). Abingdon – New York 2017, 199–215.

Καὶ ἵνα τὰ κατὰ μέρος αὐτῷ παραδράμωμεν διηγωνισμένα, οἷον νηστείας, ἀγρυπνίας, χαμευνίας, στάσεις καὶ κλίσεις ὀλονύκτους γονάτων, καὶ συνόλως πανημερίους τε πόνους καὶ παννυχίους—ἵνα ταῦτα διὰ τὴν ἀμετρίαν συνέλωμεν καὶ γενικῶς, ὡς ἐν συνόψει τὸ πᾶν περιλάβωμεν, τοσοῦτον ἐν βραχεῖ πλοῦτον συνέλεξεν ἀρετῶν, ὡς μικροῦ καὶ ἄπιστον δόξαι τοῖς μὴ πάντῃ μεγαλοψύχοις τὸ ῥηθησόμενον.⁴²

And in order that we pass over the individual struggles which he had undertaken, such as fasting, vigils, sleeping on the ground, all-night standing and bowing of knees, and in one word all-day and all-night toils—in order that we summarise this because of a lack of measure and pull together the whole in general fashion as if in an overview, he collected in a short time such a great wealth of virtues that what will be said will seem almost unbelievable to those who are not completely high-spirited.

At first sight this passage seems to contradict the claim that the author made in the preface. Now he declares that Athanasius engaged in all the traditional forms of asceticism and in particular that he spent day and night falling down on his knees and then rising again, a behaviour that likens him to the extreme ascetics of Late Antiquity.⁴³ Yet it is noticeable that he contents himself with a list of Athanasius' different pursuits rather than illustrating them with narratives. He gives as a reason for this cursory treatment that it would go beyond the scope of his text to describe everything in detail. Such presentation of the material is not uncommon in Byzantine hagiography. Indeed, the author signals to his readers that he simply follows the lead of earlier authors. The phrase ἵνα ταῦτα διὰ τὴν ἀμετρίαν συνέλωμεν is inspired by Gregory of Nazianzus' Encomium of Cyprian of Carthage where we read: 'In order that I summarise this because of the lack of measure, I will end the speech with the end of his life' (ἵνα ταῦτα συνέλω διὰ τὴν ἀμετρίαν, τῆ τοῦ βίου καταλύσει συγκαταλύσω τὸν λόγον).⁴⁴ In Gregory's text this sentence concludes a checklist of the saint's achievements, his personal piety and his work as a bishop. It is meant to hide the fact that Gregory had virtually no knowledge of Cyprian's life. Thus one could argue that the author, too, had no further information and attempted to cover up this deficiency with the claim that discussing the matter in detail would take up too much space.⁴⁵ Yet this is not the only possible explanation. The term 'lack of measure' conjures up the concept of the 'golden mean', which we have already encountered in the preface. Since there a parallel is drawn between the author's text and the saint's life-style one can argue that the author creates such a nexus here, too, in particular since Gregory of Nazianzus also correlates the end of his speech with the end of Cyprian's life. Accordingly, the reason for keeping this passage short would be the 'lack of measure' that Athanasius showed in his ascetic endeavours. Such a reading is possible because τὴν ἀμετρίαν is not qualified by an attribute such as τοῦ λόγου, which would remove all ambiguity. This hypothesis can be substantiated when we consider how other hagiographers dealt with the topic. The Life of Nicon Metanoicite, which dates to the eleventh or twelfth century, has the following to say about this saint's activities:

⁴² Vita A 26 (14.1–11 Noret). The list of activities has a counterpart in Vita B 9 (136.27–31 Noret): Πᾶν εἶδος ἀγώνων διήνυσε δι' ἐγκρατείας διηνεκοῦς καὶ πολλῶν νηστειῶν, ἀγρυπνίας τε καὶ στάσεως καὶ ὀλονύκτων γονυκλισιῶν καὶ πόνων νυκτερινῶν καὶ ἰδρώτων ἡμερινῶν. If one accepts the hypothesis that both extant texts are based on a now lost Vita prima one can argue that the author of Vita A found this list in his model and then integrated it into a more complex syntactical structure.

⁴³ Cf. H. DELEHAYE, *Les saints stylites (Subsidia hagiographica 14)*. Paris 1923, xxviii.

⁴⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio 24*, 13, ed. and tr. J. MOSSAY – G. LAFONTAINE, *Grégoire de Nazianze. Discours 24–26. Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes (SC 284)*. Paris 1981, 70, 2–3.

⁴⁵ As I have already pointed out, he may have found this list in the Vita prima.

Οἷους δὲ τοὺς πόνους ἀνέτλη ἐν πανημερίοις καὶ ὀλονύκτοις στάσεσι καὶ πυκναῖς καὶ ἀμέτροις γονυκλισίαις, ὅσῃν τὴν ἀσιτίαν, ὅσῃν τὴν σκληραγωγίαν ἐν τῇ ἀμέτρῳ καὶ παντοδαπεῖ κακώσει ... ἀδυνατεῖ καὶ γλῶσσα εἰπεῖν καὶ ἀκοὴ παραδέξασθαι.⁴⁶

What kind of toils he endured in all-day and all-night standing and frequent and measureless genuflections, how great a lack of food, how great a hardship in the measureless and multifarious ill-treatment, the tongue is unable to say and the ear is unable to take in.

This passage is evidently very similar to its counterpart in Vita A. Here, too, we find a list of ascetic activities. There is, however, an important difference: the adjective ἄμετρος does not refer to the excessive length of the text but to the excessive behaviour of the saint. A similar statement can already be found in the ninth-century Life of John the Psichaite where we read: ‘Which mind would be capable of transmitting in writing the struggles of his contests that were without measure?’ (Τίς ἂν λόγος ἐξισχύσει ἐν γραφῇ παραδοῦναι τῶν ἀμέτρων ἀγώνων αὐτοῦ τὰ παλαίσματα).⁴⁷ This shows clearly that we are in the presence of a hagiographical *topos* of which contemporary readers of Vita A would undoubtedly have been aware. Thus the author could have been confident that they would recognise the ambiguity that he had created. We can conclude that the author sets himself against hagiographical convention and the traditional understanding of sainthood. By declaring that he summarised Athanasius’ ascetic practices because of a ‘lack of measure’, he indicates that he will not dwell on this topic because it does not conform to his understanding of holiness, which he had outlined in the preface.

This is a rather subtle correction of the traditional ideal of sainthood. Other elements in the passage are quite conventional and do not seem to be open to a similar interpretation. Yet this does not mean that the author is never explicit about his views. At this point we need to turn to a passage in which we are told how Athanasius dealt with hermits who came to the Lavra and wished to stay there.

Τί δαὶ οἱ ἄβιοι καὶ ἀνέστιοι, γυμνόποδες τε καὶ ἀνιπτόποδες, βάρη τε σιδήρων περιαυχένια φέρουτες καὶ ὅσα συγγενῆ τούτοις; ἐκάλει γὰρ ἡ φήμη καὶ ἀπὸ τούτων, ἡσυχίαν ἄγειν οὐ φέρουσα. Οὗς καὶ μεταρρυθμίζων ὁ σοφὸς τῶν ψυχῶν κυβερνήτης, ὡς τῆς ὀρθῆς ἀπαυχενίζοντας τρίβου, καὶ τὸ ἐτώσιον ἄχθος ἴν’ οὕτως εἶπω, τῶν ἀυχένων ἀποφορτίζων, κούφως ὑπερπλέειν τὴν τοῦ βίου θάλασσαν ἐπειθεν, οὐχ ὅτι κὰν τούτοις ἀμαθῶς ἔσχεν ἢ ἀγεννῶς ... ἀλλὰ μὴ ἀσυμφώνως ἐν μέσῃ διαθλεῖν συνοδία παιδεύων αὐτούς, μὴ δ’ ἀπεμφαίνοντι σχήματι καὶ ἀνομοίῳ τοῖς ἄλλοις, καὶ ἄλλως σφαλερὸν ἠγούμενος τὸ ἀβασανίστως, ὡς ἂν εἴποι τις, καὶ ἀνίπτοις ὥσπερ χερσίν, ὃ δὴ λέγεται, οὕτω δὲ καὶ ποσὶν ὑπὲρ τὰ ἐσκαμμένα πηδᾶν.⁴⁸

What about those without subsistence and without hearth, with naked feet and with unwashed feet, and those that are carrying weights of iron around their necks and all that is related to them? For fame called also from those, not letting them be at rest. The wise governor of the souls changed those, too, as men who turn away from the straight track and, so-to-speak, unburdened the unprofitable weight from their necks, persuading them to sail lightly over the sea of life, not because he was without instruction and valour in these things ... but teaching them not to struggle

⁴⁶ Life of Nikon Metanoite, ed. D. F. SULLIVAN, *The Life of Saint Nikon (The Archbishop Iakovos Library 14)*. Brookline, MA 1987, 50, 27–32.

⁴⁷ Life of John the Psichaite 4, ed. P. VAN DEN VEN, *La vie grecque de S. Jean le Psichaïte. Le Muséon*, N. S. 3 (1902) 103–125, esp. 110, 6–7.

⁴⁸ Vita A 159 (75–76, 1–16 NORET). In Vita B 43 (177, 24–27 NORET) we find at this point the simple mention that Athanasius admitted hermits into his community.

in the midst of the community in an inharmonious manner, nor in a guise that was divergent and unlike the others, regarding in any case as subject to error the leaping over the training ground without testing, as one might say, and as with unwashed hands, as it is said, so also (sc. with unwashed) feet.

This is quite a complex passage whose different elements need to be teased out with care. We are told how Athanasius behaved towards hermits who wished to join his community: he took their chains away and taught them to don the garb of coenobitic monks. Such behaviour was highly unusual in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Normally hermits were allowed to stay in cells outside the monastic compound and to continue with their more austere life-style.⁴⁹ It can, of course, not be ruled out that Athanasius acted in this way. Yet it seems more likely that the author's narrative reflects the views of the community of Panagios. Indeed, it can be shown that it is an elaboration of a passage in the Panagios Typikon. This passage is preserved in the Petritzos Typikon where it is part of an invective against extreme asceticism.

Περί ... τῶν ἄνευ βουλήσεως τῶν συμφωνούντων ἐγκρατευομένων καὶ ἄνευ παραινέσεως τοῦ καθηγουμένου καὶ ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ λαοῦ σχηματιζομένων πρὸς τὸ τοὺς ὀρῶντας πείθειν προφάσει τῆς προσευχῆς ὅτι ἄλλοις ἀνόμοιοί εἰσι.⁵⁰

About ... those who abstain against the will of those who are in harmony and without the exhortation of the abbot and who put on a show in the midst of the people so as to persuade the onlookers through the pretext of prayer that they are unlike others.

It is evident that ἄνευ βουλήσεως τῶν συμφωνούντων corresponds to ἀσυμφώνως, ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ λαοῦ to ἐν μέσῳ ... συνοδία, σχηματιζομένων to σχήματι, and ἄλλοις ἀνόμοιοι to ἀνομοίῳ τοῖς ἄλλοις. Changes are largely of a cosmetic nature. In the first case a more concise adverb is chosen and in the second case λαός is replaced with συνοδία because the latter word can also be read as συναφδία, which creates a wordplay with συμφωνία. Only in the third case do we encounter a shift in meaning. In the rule the verb σχηματίζεσθαι denotes the hypocritical behaviour of monks. By contrast, the noun σχῆμα in *Vita A* refers concretely to their outward appearance. This permits the author to link the passage in the rule to the main theme of his narrative, the outlandish garb of the hermits.

The text homes in on two aspects: iron chains, and naked and unwashed feet, which it is best to discuss separately. The practice of wearing chains is frequently mentioned in Late Antique texts and can still be encountered in the Lives of Byzantine holy men such as Stephen the Younger and Lazarus of Galesion.⁵¹ That hagiographers felt no need to defend it shows clearly that it was commonly regarded as a marker of sainthood. *Vita A* departs from this consensus. The Homeric formula ἄχθος ἐτώσιον makes it clear that in the eyes of its author this form of mortification has no spiritual significance. With the participle ἀποφορτίζων and the adverb κούφως the criticism acquires a Bib-

⁴⁹ Life of Nicephorus of Miletus 26, ed. H. DELEHAYE, *Vita S. Nicephori episcopi Milesii. AnBoll* 14 (1895) 129–166, esp. 148–149.

⁵⁰ Petritzos-Typikon 15 (81–83, 1042–1046 GAUTIER). The last part of the passage, ὅτι ἄλλοις ἀνόμοιοί εἰσι, is my emendation of the manuscript reading καὶ ἄλλοις ἀνόμοιοι οὗσι, which is evidently corrupt. This emendation can be supported through comparison with the Georgian version of the text, which has a subordinate clause at this point, introduced by the conjunction 'vit'armed' – 'that' (ყო), see A. SHANIDZE, *Kartvelta monasteri Bulgaretshi da misi tipikoni. Tipikonis kartuli redakcia*. Tblisi 1971, 95.

⁵¹ Cf. M. F. AUZÉPY, *La Vie d'Étienne le Jeune par Étienne le Diacre. Introduction, Édition et Traduction (Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Monographs 3)*. Aldershot – Brookfield, VT 1997, 206–207.

lical dimension. The two words allude to Matthew 11:28 where Christ invites the heavily laden to come to him ‘because my yoke is good and my burden is light’ (ὅτι ὁ ζυγός μου χρηστός ἐστὶ καὶ τὸ φορτίον μου ἐλαφρόν), thus turning Athanasius into a Christ-like figure. The use of such imagery in this context is startling because in hagiographical texts the heavy burden is normally identified as worldly possessions.⁵² The motif already appears in the Life of Anthony where Athanasius tells us that the saint cut such an impressive figure ‘that many ... of those who have many possessions put down the weights of this life and henceforth became monks’ (ὡς πολλοὺς ... τῶν τὰ πολλὰ κεκτημένων ἀποτίθεσθαι τὰ τοῦ βίου βάρη καὶ λοιπὸν γίνεσθαι μοναχοὺς).⁵³ It is then repeatedly used in Byzantine hagiography. Of Eustathius of Kios, for example, it is said that ‘he put down the world as a heavy burden and became monk’ (τὸν κόσμον ὡσπερ βαρὺ φορτίον ἐξ ἑαυτοῦ ἀποθέμενος γέγονε μοναχός).⁵⁴ The author further emphasises this point through the phrase κούφως ὑπερπλέειν τὴν τοῦ βίου θάλασσαν, which is adapted from Gregory of Nazianzus’ *Funerary Oration* for Basil of Caesarea where Gregory praises Basil’s lack of worldly possessions and then adds that ‘having acquiesced in the throwing overboard of all things that he once possessed he sailed lightly through the sea of life’ (πάντων ἐκβολὴν στέρξας ὧν ποτε εἶχε κούφως διέπλει τὴν τοῦ βίου θάλασσαν).⁵⁵ There can be no doubt that the author wished to be provocative. By insinuating that there was no difference between the chains of hermits and the material possessions of laymen he ridiculed all those who subscribed to the ideal of agonistic asceticism.

Further criticism is expressed through the phrase ὡς τῆς ὀρθῆς ἀπαυχενίζοντας τρίβου. This phrase is probably also inspired by the Panagios Typikon: in the Petritzos *Typikon* it is declared that a monk who indulges in extreme asceticism ‘disregards the limit that has been set by the holy fathers, ... the true and unerring and middle road’ (περιφρονῶν τὸν ὄρον τὸν τεθέντα παρὰ τῶν ἁγίων πατέρων ... τὴν ἀληθῆ καὶ ἀπλανῆ καὶ μέσην ὁδόν). Yet the author again adds a new twist. In Late Antique and Byzantine texts the notion of ‘turning away’ is usually expressed through verbs such as ἀποτρέπεσθαι, ἐκτρέπεσθαι or ἐκκλίνειν, all of them constructed with a separative genitive that is dependent on the prefixes ἀπο- or ἐκ-.⁵⁶ By contrast, the author uses the composite ἀπαυχενίζειν. This construction is highly contrived since the verb normally means ‘shake off from the neck’ and takes the accusative object ‘yoke’ (ζυγόν).⁵⁷ By forcing the two expressions together the author has elided this object.⁵⁸ However, there can be no doubt that he expected his readers to supply the word ‘yoke’ because it provides the counterpart to ‘burden’ that is expected in a passage based on Matthew 11:28. Despite this parallel the two terms are interpreted in radically different ways. Whereas it is Athanasius who takes burdens off the hermits it is the hermits themselves who throw off their yokes. This shift becomes possible because ‘yoke’ is not used in a concrete but in a metaphorical sense, just like ‘the straight path’ with which it is combined. This metaphor would have been known to contemporary audiences from other texts. Christodoulos of Patmos, for example, states in his Hypotyposis that monks should be allowed to live as hermits but that they should not then live ‘as if they had

⁵² Cf. e. g. Pseudo-Basil, *Sermo asceticus* (PG 31, 625CD), where Christ’s invitation to the heavily laden is quoted and the burden identified with either worldly possessions or sins.

⁵³ Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 87 (PG 26, 965A 4–5).

⁵⁴ Eustathius of Kios, *Synaxarium* (synaxaria selecta ad Mart. 29, Mc), ed. H. DELEHAYE, *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae e codice Sirmondiano nunc Berolinensi adiectis synaxariis selectis*, Propylaeum ad Acta Sanctorum Novembris. Brussels 1902, 569, 30–37.

⁵⁵ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 43, 61 (256, 26–28 BERNARDI).

⁵⁶ Cf. e.g. Nicephorus the Sacristan, *Encomium of Theodore of Sykeon* 28, ed. C. KIRCH – B. DE GAIFFIER, *Encomium in S. Theodorum Sikeotam*. *AnBoll* 20 (1901) 263, 8–10: τοὺς τῆς εὐθείας ἀποτραπένας τρίβου.

⁵⁷ *LSJ* s. v. ἀπαυχενίζω, III. shake off (sc. the yoke) from the neck, get free by struggling.

⁵⁸ Therefore, the proper translation must be ‘those who (sc. by) throwing (sc. the yoke) from the neck (sc. stray) from the straight path.

already thrown off the yoke of obedience from themselves and freed their own necks from the yoke of the abbot' (ὡς ἤδη τὸν τῆς ὑπακοῆς ζυγὸν ἀφ' ἑαυτῶν ἀπορρίψαντας καὶ τῆς τοῦ προεστῶτος ζεύγλης τοὺς ἰδίους ἀγένας ἐλευθερώσαντες).⁵⁹ With his use of the same image at the concrete and at the metaphorical level the author creates a paradoxical juxtaposition. Hanging burdens around the neck and being bowed down at the concrete level corresponds to rearing up and throwing off the yoke at the figurative level. The logic of the chosen imagery requires that this yoke be re-imposed by Athanasius when he prevents the monks from straying towards extremes. The author does not make this theme explicit here, no doubt because he has already stated in an earlier episode that the hermits 'subjected themselves to him and bowed their neck to him as if to a god' (ἑαυτοὺς αὐτῷ ὑπέταττον καὶ ὡς θεῷ τὸν ἀγένα ὑπέκλινον).⁶⁰ Accordingly the lifting of the 'outer' burden by Athanasius is complemented with the imposition by him of an 'inner' yoke of obedience and subjection.

The second theme, unwashed and naked feet, is treated by the author in a perhaps even more sophisticated manner. The phrase οἱ ἄβιοι καὶ ἀνεστίοι, γυμνόποδες τε καὶ ἀνιπτόποδες is inspired by a passage in Gregory of Nazianzus' invective *Against Julian* where the life-style of Christian monks is described in the following manner:

Ὅρθς τοὺς ἀβίους τούτους καὶ ἀνεστίους καὶ ἀσάρκους μικροῦ καὶ ἀναίμονας καὶ Θεῷ κατὰ τοῦτο πλησιάζοντας τοὺς ἀνιπτόποδας καὶ χαμαιεύνας, ὃ φησιν ὁ σὸς Ὅμηρος.⁶¹

Do you see these without sustenance and hearth and virtually without flesh and blood and in this respect coming near God, the ones who have unwashed feet and make their bed on the ground, as your Homer says?

When Gregory applied the Homeric ἀνιπτόποδες to contemporary Christian monks he did so in order to extol their life-style. Indeed, refusal to wash one's feet was regarded as a characteristic of holy men from the earliest days of monasticism.⁶² It already figures in the Life of Anthony where Athanasius declares that the saint 'never washed his feet at all' (μηδ' ὄλωσ τοὺς πόδας ἀπονίψας).⁶³ So it is not surprising that Gregory's words were adapted by Byzantine hagiographers. In the tenth-century Life of Euarestus of Kokorobion, for example, the saint is characterised as 'truly one who sleeps on the ground and does not wash his feet at all' (τὸν ἀληθῶς χαμιεύνην τοῦτον καὶ παντελῶς ἀνιπτόποδα).⁶⁴

In none of these texts is there any indication that the practice might be controversial. Thus it is all the more significant that the author deviates from this consensus. In the second part of the passage he tells his readers that it is dangerous to jump over the bounds of the training ground 'without testing, as one might say, and as with unwashed hands, as it is said, so also (sc. with unwashed) feet' (τὸ ἀβασανίστως, ὡς ἂν εἴποι τις, καὶ ἀνίπτοις ὥσπερ χερσίν, ὃ δὴ λέγεται, οὕτω δὲ καὶ ποσίν). It is immediately evident that ἀνίπτοις ... ποσίν corresponds to ἀνιπτόποδες in the description of the outward appearance of the hermits. Yet it has a completely different meaning. It is a metaphor that

⁵⁹ Christodoulos, Hypotyposis 23, ed. K. BOINES, *Ακολουθία ἱερὰ τοῦ ὁσίου καὶ θεοφόρου πατρὸς ἡμῶν Χριστοδοῦλου*. Chania 1913, 99.

⁶⁰ Vita A 157 (74, 21–22 NØRET).

⁶¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, Oratio 4, 71 (PG 35, 593A8–12), with reference to Iliad 16, 235. Cf. A. KURMANN, *Gregor von Nazianz, Oratio 4 Gegen Julian*. Ein Kommentar (*Schweizerische Beiträge zur Altertumswissenschaft* 19). Basel 1988, 234–236.

⁶² See also P. VISCUSO, Cleanliness, Not a Condition for Godliness. Alousia as a Canonical Requirement in Late Byzantium. *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 46 (2001) 75–88.

⁶³ Athanasius, Life of Anthony 47 (PG 26, 912D 1–2).

⁶⁴ Life of Euarestus of Kokorobion 21 (313, 17–19 VAN DE VORST).

is explained in Byzantine lexicography as being ‘unready and without some preparation’ (ἀνέτοιμοι καὶ χωρὶς τινος παρασκευῆς).⁶⁵ As before, the author has thus created a link between the concrete and the figurative level. Consequently, ‘unwashed feet’ becomes a sign for lack of preparation. The contrast is even more striking when we consider that the second statement is also adapted from Gregory of Nazianzus.⁶⁶ Thus one could argue that the author uses one passage in Gregory’s oeuvre in order to subvert the meaning of another.

The features on which we have focused so far are relatively easy to identify. Yet in a text as sophisticated as Vita A we also need to look for hidden messages. Here I will only mention one example. The subordinate clause ὡς ἂν εἴποι τις is evidently chosen because ἂν-εἴποι-τις sounds almost identical to the following ἀνίπτοις. This alerts the reader to the existence of another less obvious assonance relation, that between ἀβασανίστως and οἱ ἄβιοι καὶ ἀνέστιοι. Here we are clearly meant to understand ἀβασανίστως as ἄβιος-ἀνέστιος and to conclude that inexperience is causally linked to a lack of livelihood and abode.

With his rejection of extreme asceticism, the author followed the lead of his spiritual father, Anthony, who had inveighed against it in the Panagios Typikon. Yet it would again be wrong to put too much emphasis on the fact that he was a monk. Similar views were held by the secular clergy and by educated laymen. This is obvious from a comparison with the *Letter to John, Monk and Recluse* by the metropolitan Symeon of Euchaita, which dates to the same years.⁶⁷ In this letter Symeon chides his addressee for having skipped a proper preparatory period of subjection in a coenobium and then offers the following piece of advice:

Καὶ τὰς ὑπερβολὰς καὶ τὰς ἐλλείψεις τῶν ἀρετῶν φεῦγε διὰ παντός, τὸ δὲ τούτων μέσον ἐμπόνως ζῆται καιρῶ καὶ μέτρῳ ποιῶν· εἰσὶ δὲ ὑπερβολαὶ μὲν ἐπιτεταμένη νηστεία καὶ ἀγρυπνία καὶ γυμνότητες καὶ σιδηροφορίαι καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα, ἐλλείψεις δὲ ἀδηφαγία ἀναπαύσεις ἀδιαφορία καὶ τὰ λοιπά.⁶⁸

Always avoid both the excesses and the deficiencies of the virtues but diligently seek that which is in the middle between the two, acting at (sc. the proper) time and measure. And excesses are extended fasting and vigils and nakedness and chain-bearing and such things, whereas deficiencies are gluttony, respite, carelessness and the rest.

Symeon was a former deacon of St Sophia who exchanged letters with the general Nicephorus Ouranos.⁶⁹ Thus we can assume that he expressed the views of the educated elite of the capital to which the author would also have belonged. Yet there is an important difference between Symeon and the author. Whereas the former gave sober advice, the latter made fun of his targets through clever choice of words and expressions. This playful approach is characteristic of lay intellectuals. Indeed, the closest parallels are found in the writings of Comnenian literati such as John Tzetzes and Eustathius of Salonika.⁷⁰ Here one example may suffice. In his treatise *On Hypocrisy* Eustathius complains

⁶⁵ Suda, A 2477, ed. A. ADLER, *Suidae Lexicon (Lexicographi Graeci I 1)*. Leipzig 1928, 221, 12–13.

⁶⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 2, 8, ed. J. BERNARDI, Grégoire de Nazianze, Discours 1–3. Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes (*SC* 247). Paris 1978, 98, 4–6: ἀνίπτοις χερσίν, ὃ δὴ λέγεται, καὶ ἀμυήτοις ψυχαῖς τοῖς ἀγνωστάτοις ἑαυτοῦς ἐπεισάγουσι.

⁶⁷ On Symeon see J. GOUILLARD, Syméon d’Euchaïtes. *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* 14 (1941) 2939–2940.

⁶⁸ Symeon, *Letter to John* 9, ed. K. MITSAKIS, Symeon Metropolitan of Euchaita and the Byzantine Ascetic Ideals in the Eleventh Century. *Byzantina* 2 (1970) 301–334, esp. 325, 8–12.

⁶⁹ Nicephorus Ouranos, *Letter* 39, ed. J. DARROUZÈS, *Épistoliers Byzantins du Xe siècle*. Paris 1960, 238.

⁷⁰ See P. MAGDALINO, *The Byzantine Holy Man in the Twelfth Century*, in: *The Byzantine Saint*, ed. S. Hackel. London 1981, 51–66.

about fake holy men who deceive people with their unkempt appearance: ‘For they not only deliberately wander about with bare and unwashed feet and full of dirt from top to bottom but also contrive other afflictions of the feet’ (οὐ μόνον γὰρ ἐπίτηδες νήλιποι καὶ ἀνιπτόποδες περιέρχονται καὶ ρύπου γέμοντες ἀπὸ ἄνωθεν ἕως κάτωθεν ἀλλὰ καὶ λοιπὴν κάκωσιν τεχνῶνται περὶ τοὺς πόδας).⁷¹ It must, however, be stressed that Vita A predates these texts by more than a century and a half. Its author can thus be regarded as a very early representative of the ‘humanist’ current in Byzantium.

To conclude: Among Byzantine hagiographers, Athanasius, the author of Vita A of Athanasius the Athonite, stands out as an unusual figure. Although he had joined the community of Panagios and formed a close relationship with its abbot Anthony, he continued to think and behave like a member of the secular elite. As a highly educated former judge, he inserted into the text references to the importance of education and to a debate about the relation between the will of the emperor and written law. Even when he spoke about genuinely monastic topics such as the vision of God and ascetic practice, he did not simply follow the lead of his superior. His rejection of mystical experiences and of extreme forms of asceticism, while being influenced by the coenobitic reform movement, is expressed in a manner that would be more fitting to a layperson. Satire takes the place of invective. The text makes such demands on its audience that it would have been unsuitable for reading in the monastery. It seems more likely that it was addressed to the author’s former peers, civil servants working in the central administration, who would have enjoyed a good laugh.

⁷¹ Eustathius of Salonika, *De simulatione*, 27, ed. T. L. F. TAFEL, *Eustathii metropoliae Thessalocensis opuscula*. Frankfurt 1832, 94, 72–79.

