

Chapter Eight

GNOMIC EPIGRAMS

The ninth-century nun Kassia, who allegedly took part in the bride-show organized in 830 to find a suitable bride for the emperor¹, is best known for her hymns, especially her splendid troparion *Κύριε, ἡ ἐν πολλαῖς ἀμαρτίαις...* But she also wrote a number of interesting gnomic epigrams, which summarize Byzantine ethics in a few, well-chosen vignettes. Kassia's epigrams go back to an old and venerated tradition of moralizing in verse, with famous names such as Theognis, Euripides, Menander, Gregory of Nazianzos and Palladas, followed in the fifth century by the so-called *Sayings of Aesop* and in the seventh century by a monastic corpus of gnomic epigrams attributed to John the Syrian, Gennadios and others. It would be incorrect, however, to play down Kassia's contribution to the gnomological tradition by presenting it merely as new wine in old bottles. What Kassia did was, in fact, quite innovative. She combined profane and religious maxims into a sparkling amalgam of her own – an osmosis of ancient wisdom and monastic truth that represents the very essence of Byzantine ethics. She also understood that the old becomes new again if it is given a twist, not by changing the words, but by giving them a brand-new meaning. Thus Kassia revived the genre and turned it into something the Byzantines could relate to within the context of their own experience.

Gnomic epigrams are of great relevance to anthropologists and social historians, not because they describe the actual comportment of *homo byzantinus*, but because they prescribe how the average Byzantine is supposed to behave. The precepts that are hammered out in these pithy maxims clearly evince the spiritual anxieties of Byzantine society and express its desire to pursue the Christian ideal as far as humanly possible. Byzantine morality is concerned with the hereafter; it is a doctrine in which right and wrong symbolize a fundamental choice between heaven and hell, blessed salvation and eternal damnation. It tends to be negative about the pleasures of this life, which are considered to be an impediment to the soul's realization of heavenly bliss. The rigid abnegation of worldly pleasures, the duty of every Byzantine, culminates in the ethical ideals of monasticism. It is not surprising, therefore, that the precepts of Byzantine morality are to be found mainly in gnomological litera-

¹ See ROCHOW 1967: 3–31 and LAUXTERMANN 1998a: 391–397.

ture of monastic provenance, such as the epigrams of Kassia. Despite the obvious monastic overtones of this kind of literature, however, one should not be oblivious to the fact that gnomic epigrams address all Byzantines. The ideas and ideals are obviously monastic, but the implementation of these ethical codes is an arduous task every Byzantine, whether living in the cloister or not, has to undertake.

Gnomic epigrams are intended to be memorized and learnt by heart. They consist of one or more lines, usually not more than four; the metre is the dodecasyllable and the metrical pattern is based upon the concatenation of perfectly balanced hemistichs and whole verses (enjambment is avoided); and the logico-syntactical structure of the verses is governed by the rules of parallelism and antithesis². See, for instance, Kassia:

Μέγα τὸ μικρόν,	ἄν ὁ φίλος εὐγνώμων·
τῷ δ' ἄγνώμονι	σικκρότατον τὸ μέγα.

“A little is the most, if the friend is grateful; but to the ungrateful, the most is the least”³. The epigram consists of two lines, which express two clearly opposed ideas based on the logical theorem: if a, then b; if not a, then not b. Each of the four parts of the theorem is compressed into a densely constructed hemistich, and thus we have four independent colons, with a parallel number of syllables: 5+7 and 5+7. Kassia, however, changes the order of the arguments and uses instead a chiasmic figure: b, if a; if not a, not b. She also uses the rhetorical figure of amplification: τὸ μικρόν is μέγα if the friend is grateful; but if the friend is not grateful, τὸ μέγα is σικκρότατον (notice the superlative and the additional sigma used to hammer out the message). She also makes use of etymology: εὐγνώμων versus ἄγνώμων, binary antipodes: μικρόν versus μέγα, and alliteration: all the buzzing m-sounds. An epigram as skilfully constructed as this is easy to learn by heart, to remember and to reproduce at any appropriate moment whenever the topic of “gratitude” comes up. In fact, Kassia’s epigram literally begs to be memorized. It not only appeals to the ear, the heart and the mind with all its rhetorical pyrotechnics and sound effects, but it also tells something about the virtue of gratitude that most people will immediately recognize.

Is a gnomic epigram an ἐπίγραμμα in the Byzantine sense of the word? If the *gnomae* of Kassia and others are texts that are primarily intended to be learnt by heart, are we entitled to refer to them as “epigrams”? This is a difficult question, to be sure, but I think that the answer should be affirmative. First of all, there are quite a number of verse inscriptions that doubtless fall into the category of the gnomic epigram: *memento mori*’s written on the walls

² See, especially, MAAS 1901. See also MAAS 1903: 278–285 and LAUXTERMANN 1999c: 80–86.

³ KRUMBACHER 1897a: 357 (A 5–6); translation: TRIPOLITIS 1992: 107.

of cemeteries and protreptic verses inscribed on the entrances to the church and the altar space (see below). Secondly, as I stated on pp. 65–66, the poetry book of Pisides is neatly divided into two: “epigrams” first and “poems” at the end. Since we find a moralizing maxim on the malicious power of Envy (St. 28) among the “epigrams”⁴, it is beyond any doubt that either Pisides himself or an anonymous editor responsible for Pisides’ poetry book considered *gnomae* to be epigrams. And thirdly, as I explained in chapter 4, only a few of the various types of epigrammatic poetry practised by the ancients survived after c. 600: epigrams on works of art, book epigrams, epitaphs and gnomic epigrams. Seeing that the literary tradition of the gnomic epigram continued without interruption, it makes no sense to put different labels on the *gnomae* of Palladas and the *gnomae* of Kassia. One of her gnomic epigrams (I persist in using the term) almost literally plagiarizes a famous epigram by Palladas, which can be found in many Byzantine sources, such as the gnomology of Georgides⁵. If Palladas’ epigram is rightly called a “gnomic epigram”, why should we not use the same term for Kassia’s imitation of this very same text?

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Memento Mori

In the catalogue of the 1997 exhibition in Thessalonica, *Treasures of the Holy Mountain*, one finds a picture of a beautiful peacock clutching an almost rectangular orb from which acanthus leaves shoot forth. It is a marble slab, probably dating from the late tenth century, and now immured in the exterior wall of the monastery of Xeropotamos. The relief has a verse inscription along the bottom: *μνήμη θανάτου χρησιμεύει τῷ βίῳ*, “the thought of death is useful to life”⁶. The concept of *mneme thanatou* was a key element in the philosophy of Byzantine monastic authors, such as John Klimax, who in his *Heavenly Ladder* devoted a whole chapter to the subject, and who even defined the monk as “a soul in great pain, contemplating death with unremitting attention, whether

⁴ Pisides’ gnomic epigram is imitated by Kassia: ed. KRUMBACHER 1897a: 359 (A 40–42).

⁵ Ed. KRUMBACHER 1897a: 359 (A 71–73); cf. Palladas, *AP* X, 73. For the Byzantine sources, other than the Greek Anthology, see BOISSONADE 1829–33: II, 475 (where Palladas’ epigram is attributed to Basil the Great), F. CUMONT, *Revue de Philologie*, n.s., 16 (1892) 161–166 (ascription to Emperor Julian), and version Δ of the gnomology of Georgides, ed. ODORICO 1986: 266.

⁶ For the marble slab and its inscription, see below, Appendix VIII: no. 97. The epigram is erroneously attributed to Kassia by TRIPOLITIS 1992: 138 (line 3); see ROCHOW 1967: 63.

awake or asleep”⁷. It is also a concept that recurs in many gnomic epigrams inscribed on the walls of cemeteries and other sites where monks were buried. It is for this reason that I suspect that the Xeropotamou marble slab was originally found in or near a monastic graveyard, either in Constantinople or somewhere else. The peacock was often represented in Byzantine funerary art, not only as a purely decorative element but also as a symbol of the life hereafter, for it conjured up images of luxurious, paradisiacal gardens, majestic splendour and heavenly beatitude⁸. In fact, the figure of the peacock and the inscription in Xeropotamou express exactly the same ideas, the former in solid marble and the latter in simple words. By remembering each day that his body is mortal and that the shadows of death are closing in, the true monk learns to disregard transient matters and to place his faith in things above, which will ultimately secure him a place in heaven, in the garden of Eden.

As stated above, there is ample evidence that it was common for monastic burial sites to have verse inscriptions bearing out the message of “*memento mori*”. Theodore of Stoudios, for instance, writes in epigram no. 105e: “Let this site, an enclosure of tombs, remind you of your own destiny, O friend”. In no. 109, “on a grave-yard” (in a monastery founded by a certain Leo), he tells us at the end: “For every good man, if he keeps death in mind, escapes from darkness and shall see the light”. And in no. 110, “on the same”, where he says that the insatiable Tomb devours all mortals to the bone, leaving nothing but the deeds that will be judged by God Almighty, he warns at the ending: “Therefore, O man, take heed of what awaits you”. In the narthex of Dervish Akin in Selime (s. XI), where monks are buried, there is a long, still unedited inscription in prose, but obviously based on dodecasyllabic patterns, such as τί μάτην τρέχεις, ἄνθρωπε, ἐν τῷ βίῳ· ὀλιγόβιός ἐστιν ὁ κόσμος οὗτος (“Why do you run in vain, O man, in this life? This world is of short duration”)⁹. In the Kale Kilisesi (s. X–XI) as well as the Eğri Taş Kilisesi (921–944), both in Cappadocia, we find the same gnomic verse inscription in the narthex, which served as burial site. The text can also be found on a marble slab (s. IX–XI) in Panion in Eastern Thrace. These three verse inscriptions offer many divergent readings which makes it impossible to reconstruct the “original” text. This is typical of gnomic epigrams. Since gnomic epigrams are meant to be learnt by heart and since all humans, including the Byzantines, are apt to make mistakes in the process of memorizing, subtle changes and variants unavoidably creep into the texts. The inscription in Panion begins as follows: μηδεὶς τυφλότῳ τῇ

⁷ *PG* 88: 793–801 (chapter 6) and 633.

⁸ See A. WEYL CARR, in: *ODB*, s.v. Peacocks.

⁹ See Y. ÖTÜKEN, in: Suut Kemal Yetkin’e Armağan. Ankara 1984, 293–316, plate 16, and N. THIERRY, in: *Εὐφρόσυνον. Ἀφιέρωμα στὸν Μανόλη Χατζηδάκη*. Athens 1991–1992, vol. II, 584, n. 14.

ὀρέξει τοῦ πλοῦτου· πολλοὺς λυμαίνει ἢ τοῦ κόσμου φιλία· ἢ σὰρξ γὰρ ταύτη χοῦς, πηλὸς, γῆ ὑπάρχει, “Let no one be blinded by the lust for riches. The love of worldly goods ruins many people. For this flesh of ours is dust, mud, soil”¹⁰. In the Cappadocian hermitage of Symeon the Stylite (s. X), who built his own tomb when he was still alive, there is a gnomic epigram that recurs twice (with slight variations): “Here the world is not welcome; the things of the world are over there. For (I know that) the fire of death catches us all and sends us naked to the next world”¹¹. The hermitage, the tomb and the various inscriptions we find there, all propagate the same message of mortification. Having said farewell to this world, Symeon the monk prepares himself for death by a daily regime of contemplation, prayer and abstinence, guided by the idea of *mneme thanatou*, which represents the quintessence of Byzantine monasticism.

In the cathedral of Bari, a Byzantine marble slab which already for many centuries is attached to the so-called “Throne of Archbishop Elias”, bears the following gnomic verse inscription (probably dating from the early eleventh century):

[Ἐκο]υσίως στέρξασα τὴν ἀγνωσίαν
καὶ γνῶθι σαυτὴν καὶ δίδασκε τὴν φύσιν
[ἄτ]υφον εἶναι, τῇ φθορᾷ συνημμένην
εἰ γὰρ τὰ λαμπρὰ καὶ τὰ σεμνὰ τοῦ βίου
[εἰς] χοῦν καταντᾶ καὶ τελευτᾶ πρὸς τέφραν,
πῶς ἐφρόνεις, τάλαινα, τῇ τέφρᾳ μέγα,
ᾧου δὲ σαυτὴν ὥσπερ οὐ θανουμένην;

“Since you have voluntarily embraced the knowledge-beyond-knowing, know yourself and admonish your nature not to take pride in itself, as it is bound to decay. For truly, if the splendour and glory of the world in the end turn to dust and ashes, how could you, wretched creature, think highly of a pile of ashes and regard yourself as if you would not die?”¹². Since an archbishop’s throne is hardly the proper place for a verse inscription addressing a woman (see all the feminine adjectives, pronouns and participles), it is beyond any doubt that this *memento mori* was originally inscribed somewhere else: according to Guillou, “dans un monastère de moniales grecques à Bari”. I fully agree

¹⁰ For the three inscriptions, see below, Appendix VIII: no. 99. Notice the medio-passive meaning of the active voice in τυφλούτω (the two other inscriptions have τυφλούσθω and τυφούσθω). Notice also the rare form λυμαίνω instead of the more usual λυμαίνωμαι (the two other inscriptions have ἀπόλεσε/ἀπέλεσε).

¹¹ Ed. JERPHANION 1925–42: I, 573 (no. 106) and 575 (no. 110).

¹² Ed. GUILLOU 1996: 160–161 (no. 144). The inscription is also found in two fifteenth-century manuscripts, Laur. LIX 45 and Ambros. B 39 sup.: see A. JACOB, *Quellen und Forschungen aus ital. Arch. und Bibl.* 73 (1993) 1–18.

(although I would not restrict the search for the original location to Bari), but I think that we can be a bit more precise. In the light of the evidence above, it is reasonable to assume that the epigram was inscribed in or near the cemetery of a convent. The first two lines of the epigram deserve some comment. First of all, here the famous Delphic saying γνῶθι σεαυτὸν unexpectedly turns up in a Christian context, as a piece of good advice to a nun. Secondly, the poet uses the word ἀγνοσία (literally, “ignorance”) in the Neoplatonic sense and appears to be familiar with the literary works of Ps. Dionysios the Areopagite, where contemplation of the ineffable and unknowable divinity is occasionally called an *agnosia*, transcending the knowledge of the human intellect¹³. Symeon the New Theologian, a contemporary of the Apulian poet, uses the adjective ἄγνωστος in the same sense: for instance, in *Hymn* 2, 94, where he calls the divine light “a light that is known without knowing” (φῶς ... γνωσκόμενον ἄγνώστω). God himself is unknowable, but a monk or a nun may acquire mystical knowledge by contemplating His divinity. In order to achieve the tranquillity of mind needed for contemplation, monks have to forsake the world and its turmoil. This is why the epigram states that the nuns of the convent where the text was inscribed must be aware that they are mortal and that it is detrimental to their spiritual ideals to think highly of themselves. What the text says is in fact an oxymoron: because the nuns strive to achieve the blessed state of not-knowing, they have to know who they are. Thus Delphi meets Dionysios the Areopagite. In this splendid *memento mori*, two fundamentally different philosophies coalesce into something new, something very Byzantine, a mixture of Apollonian wisdom and Dionysian mysticism.

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Protrepitic Verse Inscriptions

In the Basilica of St. John in Ephesus, next to the entrance to the south aisle, the following verse inscription dating from the ninth century can be found:

Φόβῳ πρόσελθε πύλην τοῦ Θεολόγου,
τρόμῳ λάμβανε τὴν θεῖαν κοινωνίαν·
πῦρ γὰρ ἐστὶ, φλέγει τοὺς ἀναξίους¹⁴.

¹³ See *Lampe*, s.v. ἀγνοσία, sub 4. On the theological concept of ἀγνοσία in patristic and Byzantine literature, see VASSIS 2002: 159–160.

¹⁴ Ed. C. Foss, *Ephesus after Antiquity: a Late Antique, Byzantine and Turkish City*. Cambridge 1979, 115.

“Approach the gate of [the church of] the Theologian in fear; receive Holy Communion tremblingly. For it is a fire, it burns the unworthy”. The last verse of this inscription recurs almost literally in an epigram by Theodore of Stoudios (44. 4): πῦρ γὰρ τὸ δῶρον τοὺς ἀναξίους φλέγων, “for the gift [the Eucharist] is a fire that burns the unworthy”. In this epigram, which was inscribed inside the church of the Stoudios monastery, Theodore warns his fellow monks that the βῆμα (the “altar space”, but also the “tribunal” of the Last Judgment) is a place of fear and dread, for only the chaste among them are entitled to participate in Holy Communion, whereas the rest, those who are not worthy, should not touch the Eucharist¹⁵. Both the verse inscription in Ephesus and Theodore’s epigram ultimately go back to a group of verses, entitled προτρεπτικοὶ στίχοι, which we find in the *Horologion*¹⁶. These “protreptic verses” are attributed to Symeon the Metaphrast, but given the ninth-century date of the inscription in Ephesus, this ascription is obviously incorrect. In the protreptic verses attributed to Symeon the Metaphrast we read: μέλλων φαγεῖν, ἄνθρωπε, σῶμα Δεσπότη, φόβῳ πρόσελθε, μὴ φλέγῃς· πῦρ τυγχάνει and πλαστοουργέ, μὴ φλέξῃς με τῆ μετουσίᾳ· πῦρ γὰρ ὑπάρχεις τοὺς ἀναξίους φλέγων. It is beyond doubt that the Ephesus inscription imitates these particular verses: see the text in italics and notice also that the hemistich πῦρ γὰρ ἐστὶ in the Ephesus inscription lacks one syllable, which strongly suggests that the poet originally had the phrase πῦρ γὰρ ὑπάρχει in mind.

Similar protreptic verse inscriptions can be found in many Byzantine and post-Byzantine churches, at the entrance to the narthex, above the main gate leading to the nave, or else near the altar space¹⁷. These verse inscriptions invariably emphasize that whoever goes to church and intends to take Holy Communion, should enter the sacred precincts of the church in awe and even in terror, should refrain from thinking of worldly matters and should be chaste at heart and pure of mind. They prescribe the proper conduct for churchgoers and the proper sentiments when attending Mass. Their function is similar to those public signs in churches warning people to dress properly, respect the decorum, keep quiet and not disrupt the liturgy. The difference is the Byzantine protreptic verses address an audience of faithful (and not tourists of all sorts) and particularly emphasize what people should feel (rather than how they should behave). Apart from these obvious differences, however, the mechanism is the same: it is a way of preserving the sanctity of the church.

¹⁵ See the commentary *ad locum* by SPECK 1968: 195–197.

¹⁶ Ὁρολόγιον τὸ μέγα. Venice 1856 (repr. Athens 1973), 433–434, 443–444 and 446 (also in: *PG* 114, 224–225).

¹⁷ See below, Appendix VIII, nos. 102–105; Theodore of Stoudios, nos. 42–46 (ed. SPECK 1968: 192–198); HÖRANDNER 1997: 435–442; and W. HÖRANDNER, in: *Philellen. Studies in Honour of Robert Browning*. Venice 1996, 109–111.

There is only one protreptic verse inscription with a totally different function. It is a famous palindrome which can be found in many Byzantine sources, among which the Greek Anthology:

νῖψον ἀνομήματα, μὴ μόναν ὄψιν (*APL* 387c, v. 5),

“Clean the outside, cleanse the inside” (literally: “Do not only wash your face, but also your sins”). In Σ^{π} , a collection of epigrams that derives from the anthology of Cephalas, the palindrome is attributed to a certain Stylianos; the same ascription occurs in a few Palaeologan collections of palindromes¹⁸. Since Cephalas is the only source to call Stylianos κῦρ, “sir”, which is obviously a sign of respect and deference, it is likely that Cephalas knew the author personally. The epigram of sir Stylianos is truly ingenious, firstly because it is the only Byzantine palindrome that makes some sense (the rest are totally nonsensical), and secondly because its palindromic shape is particularly suited for an inscription on a circular object, such as a cistern, a well or a water basin. In a number of Byzantine and post-Byzantine monasteries, such as the Blatadon monastery in Thessalonica, the palindrome is inscribed along the rim of the well in the courtyard¹⁹. According to some travellers who visited Constantinople under Ottoman rule²⁰, the palindrome was also inscribed on two majestic water vessels inside St. Sophia; but as the evidence is contradictory, we should not lend too much credence to these reports²¹. Whatever the case, it is reasonable to assume that Stylianos composed the palindrome as a verse inscription for a well or water basin, as is also suggested by the text itself and by its circular shape. The original setting of the palindrome must have been a church or monastery in ninth-century Constantinople (perhaps the church erected by Stylianos Zaoutzes, but this is mere speculation).

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Are Kassia's Epigrams the Work of Kassia?

It is not certain whether all the epigrams that go under the name of Kassia are actually hers. Let us look at the manuscript evidence: Krumbacher's edition of the epigrams of Kassia is based on three manuscripts: Brit. Mus.

¹⁸ See GALLAVOTTI 1989: 52–53, 57 and 64, and CAMERON 1993: 254–277, esp. p. 273.

¹⁹ See HUNGER 1978: II, 105, n. 26, and S. PÉTRIDÈS, *EO* 12 (1909) 88–89.

²⁰ See, for instance, G.-J. GRELOT, *Relation nouvelle d'un voyage de Constantinople*. Paris 1681, 160–161.

²¹ See MANGO 1951: 57.

Addit. 10072 (s. XV), Marc. gr. 408 (a. 1391–1404) and Laur. LXXXVII 16 (s. XIII ex.); Krumbacher calls these three collections A, B and C, respectively²². There are three more manuscripts: Par. Bibl. Mazarine P. 1231 (s. XV) [a copy of Laur. LXXXVII 16]²³, Sinait. 1699 (s. XIV)²⁴ and Metochion Panhagiou Taphou 303 (s. XVI)²⁵. The manuscript of the Metochion collection (once in Istanbul, nowadays in Athens) contains some additional material edited by Mystakidis: epigrams nos. M 1–9²⁶.

The epigrams attributed to Kassia can be divided into three categories. (1) Monostichs starting with the word $\mu\sigma\tilde{\omega}$: Marc. gr. 408 has nos. B 1–27, Brit. Mus. Addit. 10072 has nos. B 1–2, 4, 8–9, 18 and 22–23 [=A 85–92] and Sinait. 1699 has nos. B 1–4, 7 and 21–27. (2) Epigrams, mainly monostichs, on monastic virtues, inc. $\mu\upsilon\upsilon\alpha\chi\acute{o}\varsigma \xi\sigma\tau\iota$, $\mu\upsilon\upsilon\alpha\chi\omicron\upsilon \beta\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma$ or $\beta\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma \mu\upsilon\upsilon\alpha\sigma\tau\omicron\upsilon$: Laur. LXXXVII 16 has nos. C 74–94 and Metochion 303 has nos. C 74–78, 80–85, 90 and 92–94 as well as nos. M 1–9. (3) Various gnomic epigrams: Brit. Mus. Addit. 10072 has nos. A 1–84 and 93–160 and Laur. LXXXVII 16 has nos. C 1–73; these two collections have eight verses in common: A 134–135, 138–141 and 146–147 = C 23–24, 4–7 and 8–9.

It is surprising that no one has questioned the ascription of all these verses to Kassia, despite the obvious fact that the manuscripts, dating from the Palaeologan period and later, contain different collections of epigrams. The $\mu\sigma\tilde{\omega}$ series is found in three manuscripts, one of which offers 27 monostichs, whereas the other two have only 8 and 12 verses, respectively. Since the $\mu\sigma\tilde{\omega}$ category presents the same sequence of epigrams (albeit with substantial omissions) in the three manuscripts that contain it, it is reasonable to assume that these manuscripts ultimately go back to a common source; but we do not know whether this source contained all the $\mu\sigma\tilde{\omega}$ epigrams attributed to Kassia or merely a handful. The series of monastic epigrams is found in Laur. LXXXVII 16 and Metochion 303: the former manuscript contains 21 and the latter 24 epigrams; but Metochion 303, compared to the manuscript in Florence, omits six verses and adds nine others. Despite all these omissions and additions,

²² See KRUMBACHER 1897a: 357–368 and ROCHOW 1967: 60–61 and 62.

²³ See KRUMBACHER 1897a: 331 and ROCHOW 1967: 62.

²⁴ See ROCHOW 1967: 61.

²⁵ See ROCHOW 1967: 62.

²⁶ Ed. MYSTAKIDIS 1926: 317. His edition is rather confusing since he prints the epigrams in two columns, which should be read line by line, from the left to the right (and not column 1 from the top to the bottom and then column 2 again from the top to the bottom, as ROCHOW 1967: 64 understandably thought). The sequence of the epigrams is as follows: C 74–75, M 1–2, C 76–78, M 3, C 80–81, M 4, C 82, M 5–9, C 83–85, C 90 and C 92–94. The collection in Metochion 303 is introduced by a text consisting of ten verses and ends with a colophon text consisting of two verses [just like the collection in Laur. LXXXVII 16 concludes with three colophon verses, nos. C 95–97].

however, the two manuscripts appear to go back to a common source since they present the epigrams in the same order. But once again, we do not know whether this source contained all the monastic epigrams attributed to Kassia, or just the fifteen epigrams the two manuscripts have in common. As for the third category, that of the various gnomic epigrams, the manuscript evidence is hardly reliable, as the two manuscripts, Brit. Mus. Addit. 10072 (a collection of no less than 152 verses, A 1–84 and 93–160) and Laur. LXXXVII 16 (a collection of 73 verses, C 1–73), have only eight verses in common! The two manuscripts do not present these eight verses in the same order. Moreover, they also offer different readings: C 8–10 constitutes a better text than A 146–147, and the same is true for C 23–24 compared to A 134–135, but A 138–143 presents a more reliable text than C 4–7²⁷. Since the two manuscripts clearly do not go back to a common archetype, it is far from certain whether the ascription of all these gnomic epigrams to Kassia is justified or not.

In the margin of ms. Brit. Mus. Addit. 10072, next to epigrams A 33–34, 112–113 and 120–123, there are some references to a certain Michael: Μιχ(αήλ) and ὄρα Μιχ(αήλ). It is not clear whether this means that these verses were composed by Michael or derived from a gnomology compiled by Michael²⁸.

In a number of manuscripts we find a small collection of gnomic epigrams incorrectly attributed to Theodore of Stoudios²⁹, among which nos. A 54–55 and 71–73. The latter *gnome*, A 71–73, imitates a famous epigram by Palladas (*AP* X, 73), which can be found in many Byzantine sources. Seeing that the original text as well as its “translation” into Byzantine Greek were transmitted in many manuscripts under different names, it cannot be ruled out that the ascription of A 71–73 to Kassia is just as untrustworthy as the erroneous ascription to Theodore of Stoudios. The epigram may bear the name of Kassia simply because she was known to have composed similar *gnomae*. It is equally possible that some diligent scribe added the epigram in the margin to Kassia’s collection (perhaps even with an explicit ascription to another author) and that the epigram subsequently, in later manuscript copies, became incorporated into the main text as if it were the work of Kassia. In the collection of Kassia’s epigrams in Brit. Mus. Addit. 10072, for instance, a later hand added a gnomic epigram at the bottom of fol. 93^r. This epigram must have been quite popular, for it is not only quoted by Melissenos (Pseudo-Sphrantzes), but is also found on a wall in Apulia³⁰. It is reasonable to assume that if the texts of Brit. Mus.

²⁷ See A. LUDWICH, *Animadversiones ad Cassiae sententiarum excerpta*. Programm Königsberg 1898.

²⁸ See ROCHOW 1967: 60–61.

²⁹ Ed. C. GALLAVOTTI, *SBN* 4 (1935) 214–215. See SPECK 1968: 38–39.

³⁰ KRUMBACHER 1897a: 359 and 369. “Sphrantzes”, *Chronicon Maius*, ed. Bonn, 262. For the inscription, see GUILLOU 1996: 181 (no. 172) and HÖRANDNER 1998: 314.

Addit. 10072 had been copied in a later manuscript, the additional epigram would have become part of the collection of Kassia. And then no one would have seen the difference and no one would have guessed that the epigram is not the work of Kassia, but of another Byzantine author.

There is one epigram ascribed to Kassia, which is certainly not hers: no. C 1, φύσις πονηρὰ χρηστὸν ἦθος οὐ τίπτει, “an evil nature does not breed a righteous character”. This is the *epimythion* to a fable of Babrius, which is also found in the gnomology of Georgides. Whereas the Aesopic tradition offers a different reading, γνώμη πονηρὰ (...) οὐ τρέφει, Georgides and Kassia adhere more closely to the original, choliambic version of Babrius³¹. The source of “Kassia” is probably not Babrius himself, but rather Georgides or one of the many other Byzantine gnomologies.

Then there is the famous invective against the Armenians (C 33–42). Among the many epigrams attributed to Kassia, it is the only one that is definitely not gnomic – which perhaps indicates that she did write it, for why else should the invective have been ascribed to a poetess known to all and sundry for her *gnomae*? It is beyond any doubt, however, that Kassia, if she indeed held a grudge against the Armenians and inveighed against them in rather unpleasant terms, is only partially responsible for all the abuse in the invective. For the poem in its present state is clearly divided into two, namely, verses C 33–36 and C 37–42, without any organic link connecting the latter to the former part. The last six verses, C 37–42, constitute a later addition to the original invective. How much later, we can only guess, but as these verses clearly imitate an epigram found in the anthology of Cephalas (*AP* XI, 238)³², the second part of the invective cannot have been composed before the late ninth century. Credit where credit is due or, in this particular case, blame where blame is due. Kassia may or may not have written the truly appalling verses C 33–36, but she certainly cannot be blamed for all the abuse and scorn heaped on the poor Armenians in verses C 37–42.

Even when an epigram is found in two collections, it is not entirely certain whether it should be attributed to Kassia or not. See, for instance, verses 138–143 of collection A, the first four of which can also be found in collection C (verses 4–7). These verses are obviously modelled on the pattern of an epigram by Gregory of Nazianzos, no. I, 2, 22 (see the word δεινόν in the first verse, the rhetorical figure of climax, and the last verse which is almost the same in both texts). It is certainly possible that Kassia knew her Gregory of Nazianzos,

³¹ Georgides, ed. ODORICO 1986: no. 220. Babrii Mythiambi Aesopei, eds. M. J. LUZZATTO & A. LA PENNA. Leipzig 1986, pp. XLIII and LXXVI, n. 2.

³² See CAMERON 1993: 330–331. The epigram is also quoted by John the Lydian and the anonymous author of the treatise *De thematibus*: see CAMERON 1993: 295.

but seeing that this particular epigram of Gregory was imitated by many authors, such as Kallikles, Psellos and John Kamateros³³, we cannot be absolutely certain that poem A 138–143 (= C 4–7) goes back directly to Gregory’s epigram rather than to one of its many Byzantine imitations. Is Kassia the first to imitate Gregory of Nazianzos’ famous epigram and do authors like Kallikles and Kamateros follow her lead? Or is it the other way around? Is “Kassia” in fact an anonymous ghost-writer of the late Byzantine period, who imitates not Gregory of Nazianzos himself, but one of his many imitators? We simply do not know.

It is impossible to assess whether the epigrams that go under the name of Kassia are actually hers or not. Certain texts, such as the Babrian *epimythion* and the last six verses of the invective against the Armenians, are definitely not the work of Kassia; other texts, such as the literary imitations of Palladas and Gregory of Nazianzos, may or may not have been written by Kassia. The manuscript evidence is of very little help in sorting out what is Kassia’s and what is not, for the various collections that bear her name do not contain the same epigrams. If we search for more manuscripts and take a closer look at the gnomological tradition in Byzantium, we may perhaps detect a few more epigrams that are falsely attributed to Kassia. And yet, even if we manage to detect a number of false ascriptions, such an investigation into the wasteland of Byzantine gnomologies will not shed much light on the intricate and even insoluble problem of Kassia’s authorship. For I have the distinct impression that the name of “Kassia” is simply a label attached to a certain genre and that any gnomic epigram consisting of unprosodic dodecasyllables and encapsulating monastic wisdom in a few verses, whether hers or not, is attributed to Kassia. Of course, there must be a kernel of truth in all these various ascriptions to the legendary nun and there is no reason to doubt that Kassia wrote at least some of the gnomic epigrams attributed to her. But the problem is that we do not know which epigrams are hers and which are not. It should be borne in mind, therefore, that whenever I refer to Kassia in the following discussion, I only do so for the sake of convenience and not because I think that the problem of her authorship is by any means settled.

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³³ Some of these imitations go under the name of Gregory of Nazianzos himself: nos. I, 2, 20, 21 and 23, see H.M. WERHAHN, *Dubia und Spuria unter den Gedichten Gregors von Nazianz*, in: *Studia Patristica VII*, ed. F.L. CROSS, Berlin 1966, 342. Greg. Naz. I, 2, 21 is in fact the beginning of Kallikles’ poem no. 10, vv. 1–5: ed. ROMANO 1980: 85–86, and Greg. Naz. I, 2, 23 is attributed to Psellos in certain manuscripts: ed. WESTERINK 1992: 460 (no. 86). For the epigram of Kamateros, see WERHAHN, 342, n. 2.

Kassia and Aesop

The metre used by Kassia for the composition of her gnomic epigrams is the famous Byzantine dodecasyllable, a metre consisting of twelve syllables, with a strong caesura after the fifth or seventh syllable dividing the verse into two colons, an obligatory stress accent on the paenultima and less rigid rules of accentuation before the caesura. This metre, like almost all other Byzantine metres, adheres to the three following principles of versification: isosyllaby (the same number of syllables), stress regulation (at the verse ending and before the caesura) and isometry (avoidance of enjambment). The dodecasyllable is essentially an “accentual”, not a “prosodic” metre – although it ultimately derives from the ancient iambic trimeter. However, most Byzantine poets did their very best, with hardly any success in the end, to make their basically accentual dodecasyllables look like iambic trimeters by stubbornly clinging to the obsolete rules of prosody. The result is one of metrical ambiguity: the verses are seemingly prosodic on paper, but are actually accentual when one listens to them. The poets dutifully count their short and long syllables as if they were doing some tedious homework on algebraic formulas, but when it comes down to the essence of poetry, which is a matter of sense and sensibility, they know perfectly well how to measure their verses as regards syllables, colons and stress accents. Kassia is not a member of the club of classicizing versemongers. Her dodecasyllables are purely accentual and show complete disregard for prosody. Although the unprosodic type of the dodecasyllable represents the metre in its purest form, it is a verse form that is rarely encountered in Byzantine poetry before the year 1000. The unprosodic dodecasyllable can be found in a number of verse inscriptions (mostly dating from the dark ages) and a few religious poems (such as the *Hymns* of Symeon the New Theologian). Except for these rare instances, however, the unprosodic variant of the dodecasyllable is essentially a metre used for two genres only: gnomic epigrams, such as the ones by Kassia, and Aesopic fables “translated” into Byzantine Greek, such as the so-called *Metaphrases* and some of the *Tetrasticha* attributed to Ignatios the Deacon³⁴.

Gnomic epigrams and metrical fables are forms of Byzantine lowbrow literature. They make use of the “vulgar” unprosodic dodecasyllable. Their style is unpretentious, their language plain and unadorned. And their contents are easy to understand for any Byzantine with some breeding and a degree of literacy. Typical of lowbrow literature in the Middle Ages is the fact that texts are transmitted with so many variants and discordant readings that it is

³⁴ For the Babrian *Metaphrases* and the unprosodic *Tetrasticha* incorrectly attributed to Ignatios the Deacon, see the second volume of this book.

impossible to retrieve the “archetype”. There are no “originals”. There are only different “redactions” and different “versions”. In fact, each manuscript is unique in its own way and presents readings that cannot be found anywhere else. This phenomenon of an “open” text tradition (in contrast to the “closed” text tradition of highbrow literature, which is slavishly copied) is, of course, familiar to all who study Byzantine vernacular texts. However, the same phenomenon can be observed in a few literary texts written in more learned Greek, such as gnomic epigrams. There, too, we see that there are as many different versions as there are manuscripts and that the “original” texts, whatever they may have been like, are lost beyond retrieval. When we talk about “the epigrams of Kassia”, we are, in fact, referring to various manuscript collections containing different epigrams with different readings. The same holds true for the various fables transmitted in Byzantine manuscripts, where we notice that the text tradition is open to all sorts of alterations, additions and omissions.

These two genres, namely fables and gnomic epigrams, have a lot in common. They both express forms of popular wisdom, moral admonitions and every-day ethics. Fables are short, amusing stories that point out what is right and wrong by sketching the characteristic behaviour of animals and human beings; they usually end with an *epimythion*, the concise “moral” of the story. When these *epimythia* are put into verse, they are actually quite similar to gnomic epigrams – so similar, in fact, that the “moral” to a Babrian fable came to be attributed to Kassia (epigram no. C 1), without anyone noticing the error until the twentieth century. The ascription to Kassia is a mistake, of course, but there are few mistakes as understandable as this one, because the text of the Babrian *epimythion* differs little from the epigrams that go under her name. It is worth noting that some of the epigrams attributed to Kassia are more or less anecdotic, relating a short story about painful aspects of life: for instance, A 120–123, “a poor devil found some gold and grabbed it, but his life was at stake ever after; a lucky bastard, however, makes a profit and a lucrative business of anything he finds, even if it is a live snake”³⁵. Though it is debatable whether Kassia had a specific fable in mind when she wrote these lines, it is beyond doubt that both the pattern of thought and the narrative structure of the epigram demonstrate Kassia’s acquaintance with the Aesopic genre.

Further proof of this is the following epigram, which marvellously illustrates the curious peregrinations of Aesop and his fables throughout the centuries:

Ἄνηρ φαλακρὸς καὶ κωφὸς καὶ μονόχειρ,
 μογγίλαλός τε καὶ κολοβὸς καὶ μέλας,
 λοξὸς τοῖς ποσὶ καὶ τοῖς ὄμμασιν ἅμα

³⁵ For the second verse of this epigram, see MAAS 1901: 55.

ὕβρισθεις παρὰ τινος μοιχοῦ καὶ πόρνου,
 μεθυστοῦ, κλέπτου καὶ ψεύστου καὶ φονέως
 περὶ τῶν αὐτῷ συμβεβηκότων ἔφη·
 ἐγὼ μὲν οὐκ αἴτιος τῶν συμβαμάτων·
 οὐ γὰρ θέλων πέφυκα τοιοῦτος ὅλως·
 σὺ δὲ τῶν σαντοῦ παραίτιος πταισμάτων·
 ἅπερ γὰρ οὐκ ἔλαβες παρὰ τοῦ πλάστου,
 ταῦτα καὶ ποιεῖς καὶ φέρεις καὶ βαστάζεις.

“A man bald, dumb, and with only one hand, short, swarthy, and with a speech impediment, bowed legged and with crossed eyes, when he was insulted by a certain adulterer and fornicator, drunk, thief, liar, and murderer, remarked on the accidents of fortune: “I am not responsible for my mishaps, for in no way did I want to be like this. But you are to blame for your shortcomings, for the things you did not get from the creator are the very things you do and bear and cling to”³⁶. In a postscript to his edition Krumbacher published some comments by Kurtz, one of which reads: “S. 360, 93 ff.: Offenbar Aesop”. Anyone familiar with the *Life of Aesop*, a text that was extremely popular throughout the Middle Ages, will immediately understand that Kurtz was right: the ugly but clever person whom Kassia describes is most certainly none other than the famous Aesop³⁷. True enough, the story told by Kassia is recorded nowhere else, but it is very similar to a number of anecdotic tales about Aesop we find in the *Life of Aesop* and other sources. For instance, in the *Life of Aesop* the hero tells the inhabitants of Samos who jeer at him because of his ugliness, that it is not his fault that he was born ugly and that they should consider not his appearance, but his prudent counsels. In the *Apophthegms of Aesop* we read: “When he was mocked for his deformities he said: “Do not mind my looks, but look at my mind” (μή μου τὸ εἶδος, ἀλλ’ εἰς τὸν νοῦν πρόσσεχε – a Byzantine dodecasyllable). And one of the metrical *Sayings of Aesop* has this to say: “Whoever laughs at a disfigurement, is a disgrace himself; for it is not a flaw of character, but a fault of fortune”³⁸. Whereas in the *Life of Aesop* the people laughing at him are respectable citizens, Kassia portrays the crook who makes fun of Aesop as a “fornicator, drunk, thief, liar and murderer”, a person who is hideous not because of his outward appearance, but on account of his evil nature. He alone is to blame for his horrible sins, for God created him, like the rest of mankind, in His image and likeness

³⁶ KRUMBACHER 1897a: 360–361 (A 93–103). Translation of vv. 1–5: TRIPOLITIS 1992: 117.

³⁷ See, for instance, the prologue to version G of the *Life of Aesop* edited by PERRY 1952: 34.

³⁸ *Life* and *Apophthegms*: ed. PERRY 1952: 62–63 and 248. *Sayings*: ed. MAAS 1903: 306 and ODORICO 1986: 190 (G 640).

and thus endowed him with an innate spiritual beauty, which he wilfully defiled by his evil deeds. By presenting Aesop's opponent like this, Kassia obviously tried to christianize an Aesopic tale, which originally had absolutely nothing to do with spirituality, creationism, free will or the fall of man. Kassia's epigram is a remarkable metamorphosis of the ancient Aesop: through a veil of Christian morality one perceives a glimpse of that mythical figure, the down-to-earth philosopher whose fables had a lasting impact on the imaginative mind of both the ancients and the Byzantines.

That we find traces of Aesop in the gnomic epigrams of Kassia is hardly surprising in the light of the so-called *Sayings of Aesop* (Αἰσώπου λόγοι), a collection of proverbs accompanied by explanations in verse. These explanatory distichs (ἐξιμηναῖα) are actually a sort of gnomic epigram. The collection can be found in a manuscript dating from the fourteenth century; it comprises 143 proverbs, but as the manuscript has a considerable lacuna, the collection must originally have consisted of more proverbs than it does nowadays³⁹. The collection of the *Sayings of Aesop* was already known to Georgides (c. 900), whose gnomology provides two of the proverbs, no less than twenty-three of the explanatory distichs, and a conflated version of a proverb and its explanation⁴⁰. The so-called *Florilegium Marcianum* (c. 850) has one proverb and one explanatory distich, and the *Corpus Parisinum* (8th C.), a gnomology of which only a small part has been edited so far, offers at least three distichs, but probably many more⁴¹. How old is the collection of the *Sayings of Aesop*? One of its proverbs is not a true proverb, but a literary quote from a homily of

³⁹ The manuscript is divided between two libraries: Dresden, Da 35, fol. 20 (ed. V. JERNSTEDT, *VV* 8 (1901) 115–130) and Mosqu. 239, fols. 227–233 (ed. K. KRUMBACHER, *Sitzungsberichte der königlichen Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*. Munich 1900, 399–465). The most complete edition of the Αἰσώπου λόγοι is PERRY 1952: 265–286 (with useful references to Georgides on pp. 254–258; but add Georgides no. 640 [Αἰσώπου] and no. 887 [anonymous, but metrically and stylistically similar to the *Sayings of Aesop*]).

⁴⁰ Ed. ODORICO 1986 (G = Georgides). Proverbs: G 430 and 1018. Explanatory distichs: G 220, 313, 393–394, 396, 398, 419, 467, 519, 578–579, 581, 616, 638 and 1081–1082; plus nos. G 193, 238, 580 (cf. no. 958), 640, 886–887 and 1109, epigrams that cannot be found in the Dresden/Moscow manuscript. The explanatory distich no. G 519 belongs to proverb no. G 430. G 421 is a conflated version of a proverb and its explanation: PERRY 1952: 266, no. 9.

⁴¹ *Florilegium Marcianum* nos. 323 (= G 1018) and 103 (= G 313), ed. ODORICO 1986: 99 and 75. For the *Corpus Parisinum* see L. STERNBACH, Photii patriarchae opusculum paraeneticum. Appendix gnomica. Excerpta Parisina. Cracow 1893. On p. 80 of this edition we find Corp. Par. 16 = Flor. Marc. 103 = Georg. 313 = Sayings, PERRY 1952: no. 7; Corp. Par. 17 = Georg. 467 = Sayings, PERRY 1952: no. 10; and Corp. Par. 21, nowhere else attested (πολλοὶ θανάτῳ ἀμείβουσι τοῖς τάφοις, / οὐς τῷ φθόνῳ πρότερον ἤλγυναν ζῶντας). In the *Corpus Parisinum* these three distichs are attributed to Socrates, not to Aesop.

Gregory of Nazianzos⁴², which means the collection must have been compiled after c. 400 at the earliest. This is confirmed by the metre adopted for the composition of the explanatory verses, about which I shall say a few words. The metre is an unprosodic dodecasyllable, consisting of two colons divided by a strong caesura and perfectly isometric (enjambment is avoided). Of course, this is the same metre as used by Kassia and other writers of gnomic epigrams, but there is a fundamental difference between the verses of Kassia and those of “Aesop”: whereas Kassia’s verses, like all other Byzantine dodecasyllables after c. 600, invariably end with a stress accent on the penultimate, the *Sayings of Aesop* do not show any tendency to regulate the position of the stress accent at the end of the verse. Although there is no parallel for this particular verse form in other specimens of early Byzantine poetry⁴³, it does not come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the rapid developments of Greek metre in the period of Late Antiquity. When prosody could no longer be heard by the public, it was replaced by isosyllaby: instead of measuring short and long, poets started to count syllables. The hexameter becomes holodaetylic, the anacreontic turns into the octosyllable and the iambic trimeter, of course, evolves into a metre consisting of twelve syllables (resolutions are generally avoided). What you get when you read such a “dodecasyllabic” iambic trimeter without taking any notice of prosody, is precisely the sort of metre used by “Aesop”: neither prosodic nor accentual, but only isosyllabic. As this metre does not yet observe the rule of stress regulation at the verse ending, the *Sayings of Aesop* will have been composed long before the year 600, probably in the fifth or the early sixth century⁴⁴.

As we have seen, some of the metrical *Sayings of Aesop* can be found in Georgides and other Byzantine gnomologies, where they obviously serve an entirely different purpose from the original one since they are separated from the proverbs they are supposed to accompany. Detached from their original context, the metrical *Sayings* no longer serve as explanations to the proverbs,

⁴² *Sayings*, ed. PERRY 1952: 280 (no. 103) = Greg. Naz., Or. 2, PG 35, 1229B. The maxim is to be found in Flor. Marc. (no. 323) and Georgides (no. 1018), ed. ODORICO 1986: 99 and 234; also in the *Sacra Parallela* attributed to John of Damascus, PG 96, 397D [the source used by John of Damascus is not “Aesop”, but Gregory of Nazianzos himself]. See also C.E. GLEYE, *Philologus* 74 (1917) 473–474, who points out that Saying no. 4 (ed. PERRY 1952: 264) imitates Greg. Naz. I, 2, 32, v. 66 (PG 37, 921B).

⁴³ The iambic trimeters in the alchemistic corpus of Heliodoros, Theophrastos, Hierotheos and Archelaos (5th, 6th or 7th C.?) and in the poems of Dioskoros of Aphrodito (6th C.) are often as unprosodic as those of “Aesop”. But these authors at least intend to write prosodic iambs (admittedly, with little success); “Aesop”, however, does not. See MAAS 1903: 285–286, n. 3.

⁴⁴ See MAAS 1903: 280–286 and LAUXTERMANN 1999c: 69–86.

but assume a different role and obtain an autonomy of their own. In other words, they become gnomic epigrams – the *gnomae* of Aesop. And here we have the link with Kassia. For Kassia and her fellow Byzantines, Aesop was not only the author of amusing fables, but also of highly complex and highly interesting gnomic epigrams, which encapsulated the essence of human existence in two neatly wrought verses. The wisdom of Aesop was ancient wisdom, of course, but it had a direct bearing on the sentiments of the Byzantines. It was something they could relate to. That is why they copied Aesop’s sayings in their gnomologies and that is why Kassia imitated Aesop and used him as a character in one of her own epigrams. Here are some examples of Aesop’s profound wisdom:

ἤθρος τὸ πρᾶον	καὶ τὸ προσηνὲς ῥήμα
μαλάττειν οἶδε	καὶ τοὺς ἄγαν λιθώδεις.

“A gentle character and a kind word know how to appease even a heart of stone”.

Βροτησίαν κακίαν	οὐ θῆρες κακοί,
ἀλλ’ ἄνδρες νικήσουσιν	οἱ μᾶλλον κακοί.

“It is not cruel beasts, but even crueller humans that surpass the excesses of human cruelty”.

Ἐράσιμον ἄνθρωπος	καὶ ζῶον θεῖον·
αἰφνίδιον δ’ ὄλλυται	θανάτῳ δοθεῖς.

“A living creature lovely and divine, that is what man is; but he suddenly perishes, a victim of death”⁴⁵. In the *Sayings of Aesop* there is really not a single thing that would have sounded peculiar to Kassia and her contemporaries, although the texts were written centuries earlier. Kind words and acts of gentleness perform miracles. People are even crueller than the cruellest animals. And life is a blessing, but it ends all too soon. If it were not for the rather unusual metre, these distichs could very well have been the work of Kassia or another Byzantine author of *gnomae*. What Aesop says, Kassia says. Style, diction, metre are entirely her own; but the ethical ideas she expresses in her epigrams usually are not.

Aesop appears to have been quite popular among Byzantine monks, to judge from the great number of manuscripts of fables or other texts attributed to Aesop that were copied in monastic scriptoria. Since each of the manuscripts contains a somewhat different version of this Aesopic material, the scribes

⁴⁵ PERRY 1952: nos. 10 (p. 266), 193 (p. 291) and 142 (p. 286); ODORICO 1986: Georgides nos. 467, 193 and 393.

should not be seen as slavish copyists, but rather as authors in their own right. They are all Aesop. But these Aesops live in monasteries, address an audience of monks and cling to moral values and philosophical ideas that are typical of Byzantine monasticism. In a rock-cut chamber above the narthex at Eski Gümüş, a monastic complex dating from the early eleventh century, we find seven depictions of Aesopic fables. These paintings are accompanied by texts: written above each depiction, the text of the corresponding fable; and written below each depiction, the text of the moral. Unfortunately, only a few fragments of these texts have so far been published: an *epimythion* to the tale of the Man bitten by the Ungrateful Snake (κακούς μὴ εὖ ποιεῖν, “do not do good to bad people”) and one line of the fable of the Wolf mocked by the Lamb on a Tower⁴⁶. In this fragment the offended wolf says to the lamb that jeers at him from high up: πύργος δ', [δ]ς ὀπλίζει σε πρὸς μέγα θράσος, “(you are not the one insulting me), but the tower, which arms you with great insolence”⁴⁷. Both this line and the *epimythion* mentioned above originate from the metrical metaphor of Babrian fables by Ignatios the Deacon⁴⁸. However, far more interesting than the literary source itself is the fact that metrical fables were inscribed in a Byzantine monastery. For it obviously implies that the secular wisdom of Aesop not only appealed to Byzantine monks, but was also interpreted in terms, ideas and values compatible with the monastic doctrine.

The Aesop mania in Byzantine monastic circles manifests itself not only in the poetry of Kassia, but also in many other sources⁴⁹. Nicholas the Patrician (c. 950), for instance, is the author of two metrical gnomes: the first of these two epigrams expressly addresses an audience of monks; the second one is an “Aesopic” fable⁵⁰. The fable relates how a donkey runs at full speed because he wants to become a horse. When he finally collapses, totally exhausted, a raven cries out mockingly: “now you know that it is bad to have pretensions”, at which the donkey replies: “indeed, of all good qualities *συμμετρία* is the best” (cf. the ancient saying πᾶν μέτρον ἄριστον and Kassia A 83, μέγα τὸ κέρδος τῆς καλῆς συμμετρίας). The fable ends with a personal note: “so, my friend, do not

⁴⁶ Ed. M. GOUGH, *Anatolian Studies* 15 (1965) 164 and n. 18.

⁴⁷ GOUGH (see footnote above) prints: πύργος δ[ε] σ' ὀπλίζει (sic) πρὸς μέγα θράσος.

⁴⁸ Ed. MÜLLER 1897: 276 (no. 31, v. 4) and 271 (no. 17, *epimythion*).

⁴⁹ See, for instance, ms. Iviron 28 (s. XI ex.), fol. 269^r, where we find a gnomic epigram elaborating on the Aesopic fable of the Donkey donning a Lion's Skin; ed. P. SOTIROUDIS, *Ἰερά Μονὴ Ἰβήρων. Κατάλογος ἐλληνικῶν χειρογράφων. Τόμος Α' (1–100)*. Hagion Oros 1998, 53.

⁵⁰ Ed. STERNBACH 1900: 303–304. The author, Νικόλαος πατρίκιος καὶ κοιαιστωρ, can be identified with Nicholas the Patrician who wrote an official rapport on the rights of *paroikoi* in the reign of Constantine VII (*Peira*, XV, 3). In a later stage of his career he became eparch (*Peira*, LI, 31).

think too highly of yourself, lest you, lapsing into ἀμετρία like the donkey, learn the hard way what is good for you and what not; for you do not give in and you do not listen to reason". The other epigram by Nicholas the Patrician is not a fable, but a short anecdote. There he tells us about a racing accident he once witnessed: one day at the races, when everyone was having a good time, all of a sudden one of the Hippodrome staff⁵¹ slipped and fell down. His tragic death was a reminder to all those present that life is all too short and that worldly pleasures do not last: "therefore, brethren, let us be prepared for the unexpected end, lest we suddenly slide away from life and then cry in vain for not having saved our souls". This last sentence is once again an *epimythion*: it is the "moral" of Nicholas' story about the Hippodrome accident. Although the story is not a fable in the literal sense of the word, its narrative structure and its moralizing ending doubtless point in the direction of Aesop as the most likely literary source of inspiration for the epigram. In fact, the objective of this particular epigram is to cast a personal experience in the mould of Aesop's fables, to transform it into a moralizing story and to present it as a general lesson from which other people may benefit. In short, Nicholas the Patrician "aesopizes". And he is certainly not the only Byzantine author to do so. In the genre of the gnomic epigram we meet the mythical figure of Aesop time and again, usually without an explicit reference to him or his fables. But once we recognize the pattern, we cannot fail to see that in Byzantium "moralizing" is more often than not tantamount to "aesopizing".

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Monastic Wisdom

The epigrams of Kassia form a mixture of profane and monastic wisdom. On the one hand, there are epigrams that have nothing to do with monastic life, such as A 56–57:

Πλουτῶν πλήθυνον τοὺς φίλους ἐκ τοῦ πλούτου
ἵνα σου πτωχεύσαντος μὴ ἐκσπασθῶσιν.

"When you become wealthy, increase your friends with your wealth, so that if you become poor, they may not fall away". On the other hand, some of her epigrams are definitely Christian, such as C 25–27:

⁵¹ The epigram calls this member of the Hippodrome staff τὸν ἐπὶ σχοίνου: I am not familiar with this function. He fell down from the τροχῶ of the Hippodrome. For this term, see Herodianus, *Partitiones*, ed. J. BOISSONADE. London 1819, 234: τροχῶ δὲ ἡ σχοίνος.

Καὶ μοὶ δοίη γε Χριστὸς συγκακουχεῖσθαι
 φρονίμοις ἀνδράσι τε καὶ σοφωτάτοις
 ἥπερ συνευφραίνεσθαι μωροῖς ἀλόγοις.

“May Christ grant that I endure adversity together with sensible and prudent men, rather than enjoy the company of irrational fools”⁵². In many respects the collection of Kassia’s epigrams resembles the so-called “sacro-profane” gnomologies, such as the one compiled by Georgides, where we find not only quotes from the Bible and the church fathers, but also sayings and maxims of pagan authors⁵³. Looking at the sources of Kassia, we can distinguish two categories, profane and religious: (a) some Menander, Palladas, a few verses by Euripides and Theognis (which she probably culled from a gnomology), and the Aesopic material treated above; (b) the Bible, Gregory of Nazianzos as well as a number of monastic epigrams (see below)⁵⁴. It is worth noticing that Georgides made use of almost the same range of sources⁵⁵. Georgides was a monk, just as Kassia was a nun. And like her, he will have composed his gnomology primarily for the monastic milieu he was living in. However, the large number of manuscripts that have come down to us also bears testimony to its rapid dissemination among laymen. The same can be said about most “sacro-profane” gnomologies, a genre that flourished in the ninth and tenth centuries: the authors are monks writing for monks, but their gnomologies are read by laics as well. The reason for this remarkable success is the fact that these compilations provide all sorts of *gnomae*, not only religious ones, but also texts that are of interest to people living outside the cloister.

Given the mixed character of these “sacro-profane” gnomologies, it is often difficult to establish whether a particular gnome should be interpreted in a Christian sense or not. In the poetry of Kassia, for instance, it is not always clear what the concept of φιλία stands for. Friendship, obviously, but what sort of friendship? Let us look at the following three epigrams:

Φῖλον γνήσιον ἢ περίστας δειξεί
 οὐ γὰρ ἀποστήσεται τοῦ φιλουμένου.

“A crisis will reveal a true friend; for he will not desert the one he loves”.

Δύο φιλούντων τὴν ἐν Χριστῷ φιλίαν
 ἰσαμὸς οὐκ ἔνεστιν, ἀλλ’ ἕρις μᾶλλον.

⁵² Ed. KRUMBACHER 1897a: 359 and 365; translation (with some minor adjustments): TRIPOLITIS 1992: 118 and 126.

⁵³ See ODORICO 1986: 3–11.

⁵⁴ For the sources used by Kassia see KRUMBACHER 1897a: 341–344 and ROCHOW 1967: 240, n. 648, 649 and 652.

⁵⁵ See ODORICO 1986: 31–33 and 293–297 (the *index auctorum*).

“Between two people sharing a friendship in Christ, there is no equality but rather rivalry”.

Κρεῖσσον δὲ πάντως καὶ χρυσοῦ καὶ μαργάρων
ἔσμός φιλοῦντων πρὸς φιλοῦντας γνησίως.

“For true friends a swarm of friends is truly more valuable than gold and pearls”⁵⁶. The first epigram expresses a sentiment that is neither typically Christian nor typically Byzantine: in times of hardship one discovers who is truly a friend and who is not. The second epigram, however, obviously deals with the topic of monastic friendship. People living together in a secluded environment, such as a monastery, develop ties of friendship, especially when they strive to reach a common goal. However, if this common goal is more important than their being together, there is necessarily an element of competition, even among the best of friends, all of them trying to achieve the perfect life in Christ. The fact that monks share the same ideals and experience the same monastic regime, quite naturally creates a bond between them, but since men are not born equal, there are always different levels of saintliness. Only a few monks arrive at the top of the *heavenly ladder*; most drop out somewhere halfway up and some may not even reach the bottom rung. Monastic friendship is, by its very nature, competitive and not based on equality, as Kassia rightly observed⁵⁷. The third epigram is difficult to interpret. Does it simply mean that friendship is more precious than gold and pearls? Or does it have a more specific meaning? Does it refer to monastic friendship? If Kassia is referring to ordinary friendship, it is a trite maxim which we all understand and approve of, but which sounds clichéd. However, if the epigram held a particular significance for her fellow nuns, the text definitely becomes more interesting. Then it would refer to the fact that monks and nuns have to abstain from worldly possessions (“gold and pearls”) and try to achieve a level of spiritual love among themselves (the “swarm of friends”). The problem is that we do not always know what Kassia means by *φιλία*, a concept which in her poetry sometimes refers to friendship in general and sometimes to the bonds of friendship among monks. Since the poetry of Kassia is of a “sacro-profane” character and wavers between ancient wisdom and Christian experience, the concept of friendship is often rather ambiguous (as in the case of the third epigram).

⁵⁶ Ed. KRUMBACHER 1897a: 357 (nos. A 23–24, 1–2 and 16–17). For the translation of the first epigram, A 23–24, see TRIPOLITIS 1992: 109 (her translations of A 1–2 and 16–17 are incorrect).

⁵⁷ See also epigram A 49–51, where she prays to God that her fellow nuns may envy her for her piety (cf. Gregory of Nazianzos, I, 2, 30, v. 27).

The best way to understand Kassia and the ambiguities of her poetry is to look at the various sources she used and to see the metamorphosis of sacred and profane wisdom into something new and original. In the end, what really matters are not the sources themselves, but how she transformed these sources into something of her own. In the section above, where I treated the Aesopic material used by Kassia, I tried to make clear that she turned Aesop into a figure of Christian wisdom. However, she also made use of a monastic source which, as far as I know, is totally unknown to the scholarly world, despite the fact that most Byzantinists will be familiar with the gnomology of Georgides where these epigrams are to be found. Aesop and the monastic epigrams are not the only two sources Kassia imitated, of course; but they are most certainly the two sources least known to scholars interested in the poetry of Kassia and, if only for this reason, they deserve our full attention.

The gnomology of Georgides contains a number of gnomic epigrams reminiscent of monastic life: G 59, 108, 110, 137–141, 166, 177, 194, 415, 417, 445, 500, 529, 569–72, 631–32, 694, 729, 768, 798–99, 888, 1006–1007, 1009, 1017, 1030, 1032, 1034, 1037, 1089, 1091, 1111–1114, 1134–1135, 1159–60, 1165, 1205 and 1213⁵⁸. These epigrams are found nowhere else. They appear to date from the seventh century, firstly because some of the epigrams are literary imitations of monastic precepts found in the *Heavenly Ladder* of John Klimax⁵⁹, and secondly because the metre used for the composition of these epigrams is very similar to that of Pisides: prosodic dodecasyllables that display a marked tendency toward stress accent on the penultimate. The epigrams are attributed to a wide range of authors, namely John, Gennadios, George of Pisidia, Iosipos, Sextus, Menander and Babrius. The last three names, Sextus Empiricus, Menander and Babrius, are obviously incorrect. The verses attributed to Pisides (G 108, 110 and 194) could be fragments of panegyrics that have been lost, but it cannot be ruled out that we are dealing once again with a false ascription. Iosipos (Ἰώσηπος) cannot be the famous Jewish historian Josephus. Iosipos is probably none other than Aesop, whose name in Syriac is Iosip. The “fables of Iosip” were translated back into Greek by Michael Andreopoulos in the late eleventh century, but earlier translations may have existed, of which the epigram attributed to Iosipos, G 1009, is probably an example⁶⁰. Gennadios is the author of a number of epigrams dealing with the subject of excessive eating and drinking; he is otherwise unknown. John must have been an indus-

⁵⁸ Ed. ODORICO 1986. I have not taken into account monostichs because there is always a possibility that they happen to be sentences in prose which only by pure chance consist of twelve syllables with a pause in the middle; but see nos. G 11, 168, 232–234, 244, 483, 520, 639, 697, 700, 714, 726, 731, 796, 927, 1008, 1027, 1033, 1106, and O 25.

⁵⁹ See ODORICO 1986: 32.

⁶⁰ See H.G. BECK, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Volksliteratur*. Munich 1971, 30.

trious and prolific writer, seeing that at least a third of all epigrams bear his name. He is variously identified as “John”, “John the Monk” or “John the Syrian”. The corpus of monastic epigrams was probably compiled in a monastery somewhere in Palestine or Syria, not only because John, the major contributor, is expressly identified as a Syrian, but also because of the Syriac rendering of the name of Aesop. What is more, all the gnomologies of the seventh and eighth centuries, such as the *Pandektes* by Antiochos of St. Sabas and the *Sacra Parallela* attributed to John of Damascus, were produced in monastic centres in the former eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire.

Georgides did not have access to the original, seventh-century collection of monastic gnomes, but used an enlarged version of it, which also contained a number of epigrams composed in unprosodic dodecasyllable: nos. G 185, 617, 910, 960, 1133, 1214–1215 and 1218. G 910 is attributed to John, G 960 to Gennadios; but since these two poets make use of the prosodic dodecasyllable, these ascriptions are obviously incorrect (as are the ascriptions to Menander, Diadochos of Photike and Aristotle in 185, 617 and 1133)⁶¹. Like the epigrams in the original collection, the unprosodic verses clearly treat monastic themes. See, for instance, G 910 (ascribed to John):

ῥαινόμενα δάκρυα	δι' ἁμαρτίας
τὸν οἰκτίζονα Θεὸν	πρὸς οἴκτον ἄγει.

“Tears that are shed on account of sins move the merciful God to mercy”. In monastic literature, such as the *Heavenly Ladder*, monks are advised to constantly consider their lapses into mortal sin and weep tears of contrition: lamentation befits the good monk⁶². It is almost impossible to date the additions to the original collection of monastic epigrams, but seeing that the eternal *lux ex oriente*, in this case the wisdom of eastern monasticism, moved to Constantinople around the year 800 along with a number of refugees from Palestinian monasteries, I would suggest that the enlarged version of the collection reached the Byzantine territory in approximately the same period – in which case the additions would date from the late seventh or the eighth century. Whatever the case, there are three decisive moments in the text tradition to take into consideration: the compilation of the original collection of monastic gnomes in the seventh century, the addition of a number of unprosodic epigrams (before the year 800?), and the selection of sixty-odd

⁶¹ According to MAAS 1903: 281–282 and 309, these unprosodic gnomonic epigrams belong to the corpus of the *Sayings of Aesop*. I do not think he is right. In contrast to the *Sayings*, the epigrams treat monastic themes and have an obligatory stress accent on the penultimate.

⁶² See K.-H. UTHEMANN, *ODB*, s.v. Contrition.

gnomes, prosodic and unprosodic, by Georgides, which we find in his gnomology.

The monastic epigrams appear to address an audience of beginners, neophytes making their first tottering steps on the spiritual ladder which leads to heaven, young monks eager to ascend but prone to fall. Everyday problems are tackled. Petty vices are treated with great verve and portrayed in the darkest of colours. Do not eat too much. Do not drink too much. Do not talk too much. Pride is bad. Gossip is bad. Envy is bad. Taking oaths is bad. Sex is bad. And so on and so forth. In a paraenetic poem attributed to John Nesteutes monks are even warned not to cough in front of others, not to enter a cell without first knocking on the door and not to yawn ostentatiously⁶³. What these down-to-earth instructions teach us is that, despite the lofty theories about the ideal life in Christ put forward in Byzantine monastic treatises, most monks will have had little talent for the rigorous regime of the St. Anthonies and a healthy appetite for the pleasures of life they had forsworn on entering the monastery⁶⁴. Let me quote a few examples from the corpus of monastic epigrams:

Οἴνου κορεσθεῖς	καὶ τροφῶν ἀμετρίας
οὐκ ἂν κρατήσῃς	ἡδονῶν κακοσχόλων (G 799).

“When you’re sated with wine and too much food, you’ll not be able to resist frivolous desires”.

Πληρῶν ἀπαύστως	τὴν σεαυτοῦ γαστέρα
ῥῆλας παρέξῃς	ἰατροῖς αἰεὶ φάγοις (G 888).

“By stuffing your stomach without ever stopping you’ll just feed the doctors who are always hungry”.

Ῥὸς σίδηρον	δαπανᾷ καθ’ ἡμέραν
καὶ μνησικακόν	ἢ πονηρία πλέον (G 529) ⁶⁵ .

“Rust eats into iron day after day; but not as much as malice eats up the spiteful”

Ἄνηρ φρόνιμος	οὐκ ἔχει πολλοὺς λόγους·
τὸ γὰρ λαλεῖν περισσὰ	τῆς ἀγροικίας (G 141).

⁶³ Ed. PITRA 1864–68: II, 235–236.

⁶⁴ See also the five gnomic epigrams by Eustathios of Ikonion (late eleventh century) in Laur. LXX 20: ed. BANDINI 1763–70: II, 679–680 and COUGNY 1890: IV, no. 116 [the first of these epigrams is also found in a manuscript of the *Little Catechesis* by Theodore of Stoudios, Marc. II 60 (a. 1586), fol. 240].

⁶⁵ Cf. Antisthenes as quoted by Laert. Diog. VI 5: ὥσπερ ὑπὸ τοῦ ἰοῦ τὸ σίδηρον, οὕτως ἔλεγε τοὺς φθονεροὺς ὑπὸ τοῦ ἰδίου ἥθους κατεσθίεσθαι.

“A prudent man does not use many words, for it is a sign of boorishness to chatter unduly”

Τὰ μικρὰ δαίμων	σμικρύνει τῶν πταισμάτων,
ὄπως κακούργως	εἰς τὰ μείζω προσβάλλη (G 1006).

“Just a minor error, says the devil when we err, for he wickedly aims at a major target”.

Χυμός, χολή καὶ φλέγμα	σὺν τῷ αἵματι
ψυχῆς ἔχουσιν δεσμὸν	ἀρορήτω λόγῳ (G 1112).

“Humour, bile, phlegm and blood mysteriously keep the soul imprisoned”.

In the last epigram of this series, an epigram remarkable for its explicit reference to the four bodily fluids of ancient medicine, we clearly see that body and soul are two opposite forces, which are constantly at odds with each other. It is up to human beings to decide which side they choose: the body and its material pleasures, or the soul and its spiritual bliss. But because of the frailties of human nature it is an unequal fight and therefore usually results in the soul’s defeat: its entrapment by the diabolic ruses of the body, its capture mid-air as it is about to ascend to heaven, and its final imprisonment in the gaol of human existence. There is, however, a way-out for the soul: if man leads the perfect life in Christ and follows the ethical rules of monasticism, his soul may exit this human existence and transcend to the spheres of heavenly beatitude. The soul is confined to the body, to be sure; but it is no Alcatraz, the door is open if the soul tries hard enough to escape. It is strange, says the poet, that the soul remains imprisoned, for despite all those bodily fluids that keep it back, it can surely transcend the confines of human existence. In this “prison” epigram, as in all other monastic epigrams, there is a strong dichotomy between body and soul, which is an Evagrius concept typical of mainstream Byzantine monasticism. This dichotomy is neatly expressed in a superb epigram by a certain Niketas the Philosopher, who, I think, is none other than the famous tenth-century hagiographer and exegete Niketas David Paphlagon⁶⁶. This epigram, εἰς τὸ κοινὸν σῶμα καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν (“on the vile body and the soul”), visualizes the abstract concepts of gluttony and abstinence as active combatants in the cosmic struggle between good and evil:

⁶⁶ For the vicissitudinous life of Niketas David Paphlagon, see R.J.H. JENKINS, *DOP* 19 (1965) 241–247 (repr. in: idem, *Studies on Byzantine history of the 9th and 10th centuries*. London 1970, no. IX). STERNBACH 1902: 83–85, equates Niketas the Philosopher with the subject of poem 100 by Christopher Mitylenaios (whom he believes to be the same person as Niketas of Synada celebrated in Chr. Mityl. nos. 27 and 43). See also KOMINIS 1966: 142–143.

Ἐρᾷ τροφῆς τὸ σῶμα·	τοῦτο καὶ κύνες·
ἀσιτίας τὸ πνεῦμα·	τοῦτο καὶ νόες.
ἔλοῦ τὸ κρεῖττον·	καὶ συναφθῆς ἀγγέλοις·
καὶ μὴ τὸ χεῖρον·	καὶ καταχθῆς εἰς κύνας.

“The body loves food, and so do dogs; the spirit loves abstinence, and so do angels. Choose what is better, for then you shall join the angels; and not what is worse, for then you shall go to the dogs”⁶⁷.

To return to Kassia, there can be little doubt that she was familiar with the corpus of monastic epigrams. See, for instance, A 156–158:

Ἀπαιδευσίας μήτηρ	ἡ παρρησία·
παρρησία λέγεται	παρὰ τὸ ἴσον·
πέρα γὰρ ἔστι	τοῦ ἴσου καὶ τοῦ μέτρου

“Freedom of speech (*parisia*) is the mother of rudeness. *Parisia* derives from *para to ison* (more than is right), for it exceeds the limits of what is right and proper”. Παρρησία, the right to speak, is a privilege granted by God Almighty to people of saintly stature, but it is a forbidden fruit for those who have just started their career in the monastery, for it easily leads to impertinence and wantonness. To warn her nuns of the dangerous pitfalls of παρρησία, Kassia makes use of a false *figura etymologica*: the word derives from *para to ison* (note the iotacism), because in an abusive sense it may constitute a licence to say things that are not allowed. In one of the monastic gnomes quoted above we find a similar warning to speak only when necessary: ἀνὴρ φρόνιμος οὐκ ἔχει πολλοὺς λόγους· τὸ γὰρ λαλεῖν περισσὰ τῆς ἀγροικίας (G 141). The word *περισσὰ* in this epigram must surely have been what Kassia had in mind when she provided her own fanciful etymology of the word παρρησία, which according to her indicates that it is *πέρα τοῦ ἴσου* to speak frankly. She felt the need to make one minor adjustment, however. Whereas the monastic gnome states that “it is a sign of boorishness (*ἀγροικία*) to chatter unduly”, Kassia is of the opinion that “freedom of speech is the mother of rudeness (*ἀπαιδευσία*)”. The terms *ἀγροικία* and *ἀπαιδευσία* have more or less the same meaning. According to Kassia, however, παρρησία is not the product, but the cause of boorish impertinence.

Thus we see that Kassia does not imitate the corpus of monastic epigrams slavishly, but introduces interpretations of her own whenever she feels that the source she is using presents the ethical concepts of Byzantine monasticism incorrectly or at least insufficiently. Her gnomes occasionally read as a learned commentary on the text of the monastic epigrams. In A 54–55, for instance, she explains how one should interpret the word *μνησίκακος* in one of the

⁶⁷ Ed. STERNBACH 1902: 85. In Laur. XXXII 19 the poem is incorrectly attributed to Theodore Prodromos: see MILLER 1855–57: vol. I, 449, no. CCLIII.

epigrams I quoted above: ἰὸς σίδηρον δαπανᾷ καθ' ἡμέραν καὶ μνησίκακον ἢ πονηρία πλέον (G 529). In ancient and Byzantine epigrams dealing with the topic of envy one often reads that φθόνος is an evil force that is self-destructive: envy harms the person who envies, not the person who is envied⁶⁸. Although the monastic epigram no. G 529 expresses the very same idea, it does not make use of the word φθόνος or cognate terms like φθονερός or φθονέω, but instead uses the term μνησίκακος. Kassia's epigram (A 54–55) runs as follows:

Πᾶς μνησίκακος	καὶ φθονερός προδήλως·
γεννήτρια γὰρ	μνησικακία φθόνου

“All who bear malice are clearly envious as well, for spitefulness is the begetter of envy”. In this gnome Kassia explains that μνησικακία (malice, spitefulness) bears more or less the same meaning as φθόνος (envy), for one thing leads to another. If you bear a grudge against someone else because he has done you wrong, you want to hurt him out of spite; but this desire to retaliate inevitably leads to the less honourable feeling of envy. As Kassia rightly noted, envy is malicious and vindictive: it is the sentiment one feels when everything is lost beyond repair. It is pure bitterness. And as the ancients already knew, bitterness is far more harmful to the embittered themselves than to the objects of their bitter resentment.

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Byzantine Folly, Modern Folly

It is well known that many epigrams attributed to Kassia express a strong dislike of μωρία – a word that Krumbacher incorrectly translated as “Dummheit”, thus creating another myth about Kassia: that of the highly intelligent nun who scorned stupidity⁶⁹. But the word μωρία means “folly” – foolishness in the biblical sense of the word (cf. *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, *Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach* and many other texts in the Septuagint). See, for instance, the following epigram ascribed to Kassia:

Γνωσὶς ἐν μωροῦ	πάλιν ἄλλη μωρία·
γνωσὶς ἐν μωροῦ	κώδων ἐν ὀνὶ χοίρου (A 136–137),

⁶⁸ See, for instance, *AP* XI, 193 (also found *in situ*: GRÉGOIRE 1922: no. 473); *AP* X, 111; *AP* I, 103; Greg. Naz. II. I. 68, vv. 8–9; and GRÉGOIRE 1922: no. 281 bis. See above, footnote 65.

⁶⁹ KRUMBACHER 1897a: 334–336.

“Wisdom in a fool is another form of folly; wisdom in a fool is a bell on a pig’s snout”. The word γνῶσις is another biblical term. It denotes spiritual wisdom. Γνῶσις is the exact opposite of μωγία, not only in the Bible, but also in Kassia. Whoever lacks divine *gnosis* is a fool. Even if the fool has access to the sources of *gnosis*, he still remains a fool with no insights and his supposed wisdom boils down to nothing: it is simply “another form of folly”, a worthless ornament “on a pig’s snout”. Reading this epigram one is reminded of the words of St. Paul (1 Cor. 3: 19): “the wisdom of this world is folly (μωγία) in God’s sight”.

There can be absolutely no doubt as to what Kassia meant by the word μωγία. It has nothing to do with intellect, but with spiritual wisdom or rather the lack of it. And yet, the blatantly erroneous interpretation of the term, Krumbacher’s *Dummheit*, is repeated time and again by generations of scholars as the sort of accepted wisdom that needs no further discussion. This is what Kassia would doubtless call “another form of folly”. Tripolitis translates the verses quoted above as follows: “Knowledge in a stupid person is further stupidity; knowledge in a stupid person is a bell on a pig’s nose”⁷⁰. Lipšić assumes that the epigrams on the topic of “stupidity” are all autobiographical and that they refer to the fact that Emperor Theophilos was so stupid as to turn Kassia down at the bride show⁷¹. Kazhdan first admits that μωγία should be interpreted in the biblical sense of the word, but then continues by speculating that Kassia is referring to the stupidity of the iconoclasts⁷². What these three cases of misinterpretation clearly demonstrate is that it is high time we discard all the romantic myths that obscure our picture of Kassia. She is a fairy-tale figure in the Byzantine chronicles, an author as elusive as Aesop in the manuscript tradition, and an almost mythical character in modern historiography. She deserves a better fate than this. Like any other Byzantine author, Kassia must be studied within the context of her time, her social milieu and the literary tradition to which she belongs. In order to redeem Kassia from the ghastly limbo of fiction and turn her into a figure of flesh and blood, we need to know more about her life, her literary works and her place in time. What we need are plain, simple, down-to-earth facts.

What are these facts? Fact number one: we actually know very little about the life of Kassia. What we read are mostly legendary accounts, romantic ramblings, feminist theories or orthodox mumbo-jumbo – and sometimes an unsavoury combination of all of the above. Kassia was born around 800 and died before 867. She was actively involved in the controversy over the cult of

⁷⁰ TRIPOLITIS 1992: 125 (in a section appropriately entitled: “Stupidity”).

⁷¹ E. LIPŠIĆ, *VV* 4 (1951) 135–148.

⁷² KAZHDAN 1999: 324; see also the last lines at the bottom of this page: “The interpretation of beauty/ugliness and *stupidity* in Kassia’s *gnomai* ...”.

the icons in her youth, but assumed a more moderate stance in the 820s. She founded a monastery during the iconoclast reign of Theophilos. She wrote many hymns and a number of gnomic epigrams. So much for the life of Kassia. Everything else is speculation. Fact number two: we should question the manuscript tradition. Not all epigrams that go under her name are hers. The problem is that we do not know which epigrams are hers and which are not. Let us not take for granted the ascription of certain epigrams to Kassia. For instance, rather than thinking of feminine self-hatred, we should consider whether the misogynist epigrams attributed to her (C 43–62) may have been written by a male author pretending to be Kassia. Fact number three: Kassia was a nun and practically everything gnomological in the middle Byzantine period was composed by monks for monks. What we find in Kassia and other gnomologies is monastic wisdom. The sources used by Kassia and other gnomic authors are sometimes monastic, sometimes biblical or patristic, and sometimes profane. But what Kassia and other authors try to do is to christianize the whole lot and turn it into something compatible with the ethical codes of Byzantine monasticism. And fact number four: despite the monastic provenance of most gnomologies, including Kassia's, it is reasonable to assume that these sources of monastic wisdom also appealed to ordinary Byzantines living outside the cloister. But these laics will have interpreted Kassia's gnomic epigrams in a different way than the nuns for whom she wrote her poetry. The concept of friendship, for instance, does not bear the same meaning for laics as it does for monks: the former think in terms of larger social networks, the latter look upon friendship from the viewpoint of their secluded environment. Since the interpretation of Kassia's epigrams is a matter of societal context, we need to address the question of readership when we try to interpret her poetry.