

*Child or monk? An unpublished story
attributed to John Moschos in MS Coislin
257*

Article

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Child or Monk? An Unpublished Story Attributed to John Moschos in MS Coislin 257

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Abstract

This article presents an as yet unpublished edifying tale from the 11th-century manuscript Coislin 257 of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, which contains among other works a collection of stories from the *Spiritual Meadow* by John Moschos. To illustrate the monastic virtues of humility and obedience, the tale uses the motif of the separation between parents and their child, albeit in an unusual way, since contrary to most early monastic accounts, it is the child who finds the strength to break with its parents. The text also reflects the practice of transferring the legal authority over a child from the parents to the monastic community, which in the late sixth century was becoming widespread enough to be officially regulated.

The manuscript Coislin 257 of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (of the 11th century) contains one of several collections of edifying tales attributed to John Moschos. These collections are never identical, and some manuscripts contain stories that seem unique. This is the case with a short text found on foll. 76v-77r of this manuscript, which has not been included in the extant edition of John Moschos' *Spiritual Meadow* or in the supplementary material published since.¹ It is inventoried in the *Bibliotheca hagiographica graeca* (BHG)

¹ The text used today is still the one in PG 87.2851-3116; several additional tales were published by E. Mioni, "Il Pratum Spirituale di Giovanni Mosco: Gli episodi inediti del Cod. Marciano greco II.21," *OCP* 17 (1951) 61-94, and by Th. Nissen, "Unbekannte Erzählungen aus dem Pratum Spirituale," *BZ* 38 (1938) 351-76. These are all translated in J. Wortley, *John Moschos, The Spiritual Meadow (Pratum Spirituale)* (Kalamazoo 1992). For an introduction to John Moschos and his collection, see H. Chadwick, "John

under number 1440x with the title “De puero monacho,” and an English summary is given by John Wortley in his online *Repertoire of Byzantine Beneficial Tales*.² Despite its brevity and simplicity, it raises some interesting questions and deserves to be dug out of its hiding place.

Παῖς τις ἐδόθη εἰς κοινόβιον ὑπὸ τῶν γονέων αὐτοῦ. Καὶ μετ’ ὀλίγον ἦλθον οἱ γονεῖς αὐτοῦ ἰδεῖν αὐτόν. Καὶ λέγουσιν τῷ ἀββᾶ· κέλευσον ἵνα ἔλθῃ ὁ μικρὸς καὶ ἴδωμεν αὐτόν. Ὁ δὲ γέρων εἶπεν τινὰ τῶν ἀδελφῶν καλέσαι τὸν μικρόν. Ὡς δὲ ἤγγισεν τῷ ἀββᾶ, λέγει αὐτῷ· τίς σε ἐκάλεσεν; Καὶ δίδωσιν αὐτῷ κόσσον, λέγων· ὕπαγε εἰς τὸ κελλίον σου. Ἐθλίβησαν δὲ οἱ γονεῖς αὐτοῦ, καὶ πάλιν μετ’ ὀλίγον λέγουσιν τῷ ἀββᾶ· κέλεύσεις ἵνα ἔλθῃ ὁ μικρὸς καὶ ἴδωμεν αὐτόν. Καὶ καλέσας ὁ ἀββᾶς ἀδελφόν, λέγει αὐτῷ· κάλεσον τὸν μικρόν. Ὡς δὲ πάλιν ἐπλησίασεν τῷ γέροντι, δίδει αὐτῷ κόσσον, λέγων· τίς σε ἐκάλεσεν; ὕπαγε εἰς τὸ κελλίον σου. Πάλιν δὲ ἐθλίβησαν οἱ γονεῖς αὐτοῦ, λέγοντες καθ’ ἑαυτούς· εἶθε μὴ ἦλθωμεν ὧδε. Μετ’ ὀλίγον δὲ ὑπὸ τῆς φύσεως κινούμενοι λέγουσιν τῷ ἀββᾶ· κέλεύσεις ἔλθῃ ὁ μικρὸς. Καὶ εἶπεν ἀδελφῷ· κάλεσον αὐτόν. Ὡς δὲ πάλιν ἐπλησίασεν τῷ γέροντι, δίδωσιν αὐτῷ κόσσον, καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ· τίς σε ἐκάλεσεν; ὕπαγε εἰς τὸ κελλίον σου. Καὶ ὡς ἀπῆλθεν ὀλίγον, ἐκάλεσεν αὐτόν ὁ ἀββᾶς καὶ κρατήσας αὐτοῦ τῆς χειρὸς ἔδωκεν αὐτόν τοῖς γονεῦσιν αὐτοῦ, λέγων· ἰδοῦ, γέγονεν ὁ υἱὸς ὑμῶν μοναχός. Τότε οἱ γονεῖς αὐτοῦ οἰκοδομηθέντες ἠγαπήθησαν τῷ θεῷ ἐπὶ τῇ προκοπῇ τοῦ νεωτέρου καὶ τῇ μαρτυρίᾳ τοῦ ἀββᾶ. Εὐξώμεθα καὶ ἡμεῖς φθάσαι εἰς τοιαύτην ταπεινώσιν.

4 ἤγγισεν: ἤγγησεν cod. 6, 10 γονεῖς: γωνεῖς cod. 12 κινούμενοι: κηνούμενοι cod. 16 γονεῦσιν: γωνεῦσιν cod.

A child was given to a community by his parents. After some time, the parents came to see him. And they said to the abba, “Give orders for the little one to come, that we may see him.” The elder told one of the brothers, “Call the little one!” When he approached the abba, he told him, “Who called you?” And he gave him a slap, saying, “Go to your cell!” His parents were saddened, and after a while they again told the abba, “Give orders for the little one to come, that we may see him.” And the abba called a monk and told him, “Call the little one!”

Moschus and his Friend Sophronius the Sophist,” *JThS* 25 (1974) 41-74, and the introduction to Wortley’s translation.

² See <http://home.cc.umanitoba.ca/~wortley/main900-999.html>, no. W923.

But as he approached the elder again, he gave him a slap, saying, “Who called you? Go to your cell!” Once again, his parents were saddened, saying to themselves, “We wish we had not come here.” But after a while, driven by nature, they told the abba, “Give orders for the little one to come.” And he told a brother, “Call him!” But as he approached the elder again, he gave him a slap and said to him, “Who called you? Go to your cell!” And as he departed a little, the abba called him, and holding him by the hand, he gave him to his parents, saying, “Here, your son has become a monk.” Thereupon his edified parents thanked God for the achievement of the young one and the testimony of the abba. Let us pray that we might also attain to such humility.

The text conforms admirably to the model of the “tale beneficial to the soul” (διήγημα ψυχωφέλης), which reproduces the narration-cum-moral structure of the fable. In the monastic world those tales were used to illustrate various monastic virtues, in this case explicitly humility (ταπείνωσις), but also secondarily obedience (ὕπακοή), self-mastery (ἐγκράτεια), and the elimination of “worldly” feelings (ἀπάθεια). These are among the most highly valued in monastic literature.

The trope found here of the unexplained and unfair, yet uncontested punishment is a classic *topos* used to exemplify humility. Being a monk is thus constructed as finding the inner force to resist anger and indignation at what mainstream social norms would regard as forms of injustice. It also entails, in this model, total submission to the will and orders of a figure who holds unquestioned spiritual authority.

The punishment through which this submission and humility are made manifest is described by the word κόσσος, used repeatedly in the text to describe the slap given to the boy by the abba. The term is rare enough to be glossed both in Latin and in Greek by the Pseudo-Zonaras, whose definition for κόσσος reads: ῥωμαῖσι μαξίλλα, γραικιστὶ δὲ ῥάπισμα.³ In the Suda it simply appears as τὸ ῥάπισμα.⁴ Outside the two lexica the term only appears in Palladios,⁵ and in a number of sixth- and early seventh-century texts by authors who had certainly read Palladios, but must also have known each other’s works. Unsurprisingly we find in this group Leontios of Neapolis, who uses it

³ Pseudo-Zonaras, *Lexicon* 1234, in J.A.H. Tittmann, *Iohannis Zonarae lexicon ex tribus codicibus manuscriptoris*, vol. 2 (Leipzig 1808) 1234.

⁴ Suda, K 2149, in A. Adler, *Suidae lexicon*, vol. 3 (Leipzig 1933) 164.

⁵ Palladios, *Lausiaca History* 23.5, in G.J.M. Bartelink, *Palladio, La storia lausiaca* (Verona 1974) 130: an Ethiopian woman comes to tempt Apa Pachon, who later recounts, ἀπομανεῖς οὖν ἔδωκα αὐτῇ κόσσον καὶ γέγονεν ἄφαντος.

both in the *Life of Symeon the Fool*⁶ and in the *Life of John the Almsgiver*.⁷ John Moschos, who had also written a *Life of John the Almsgiver* with Sophronios of Jerusalem, uses the verb κοσσιζω,⁸ also found in Palladios.⁹

The term also surfaces in monastic texts from Gaza, once in the correspondence of Barsanuphios and John in the context of the relations between master and slave, used as a metaphor for those between spiritual guide and disciple.¹⁰ The closest parallel to the Coislin 257 text, however, is to be found in the *Life of Dositheos*, attributed to his teacher Dorotheos but written by another of his disciples. It is worth quoting in full:¹¹

Another time, he came to question <Dorotheos> concerning a passage of the Holy Scripture. Indeed, he was beginning to understand some of the Scripture because of his purity. Dorotheos did not yet want him to study those things, but rather to be guarded through humility. So when he asked him, he told him, “I don’t know.” Dositheos understood nothing, and came back with a question about another chapter. So he told him, “I don’t know, but go, ask the abba.” Dositheos went, having seen nothing. But Dorotheos had told the abba beforehand, unbeknown to him, “If Dositheos comes to find you so as to question you on something scriptural, correct and belittle him.” So when he went and asked him, he started correcting him and saying, “Won’t you stay put, you who know nothing? You dare ask things like that, and do not worry about your impurity?” And having told him several things to the same effect, he dismissed him, having also given him two slaps (κόσσους). He returned to the abba Dorotheos showing him his

⁶ Leontios of Neapolis, *Life of Symeon the Fool*, in A.-J. Festugière and L. Rydén, *Léontios de Néapolis, Vie de Syméon le Fou et Vie de Jean de Chypre* (Paris 1974) 87.10 and 90.18; transl. in D. Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius’s Life and the Late Antique City* (Berkeley 1996) 153 and 156.

⁷ Leontios of Neapolis, *Life of John the Almsgiver* 38, in Festugière and Rydén (n. 6) 389-391.

⁸ John Moschos, *The Spiritual Meadow* 105, PG 87.2964.

⁹ Palladios, *Lausiac History* 21.17, in Bartelink (n. 5) 116, where Eulogios tells a story about Anthony, who was fighting against souls flying like birds around him: ὄσαι δὲ παρὰ τῶν χειρῶν αὐτοῦ ἐκοσσιζοντο ἐνέπιπτον εἰς τὴν λίμνην, we are told.

¹⁰ Barsanuphios and John of Gaza, *Questions and answers* 93, in F. Neyt and P. de Angelis-Noah, *Barsanuphe et Jean de Gaza, Correspondance*, 1.2 (Paris 1998) 394: ἀντὶ τοῦ δοῦναι αὐτῷ καθ’ ἡμέραν ἓνα κόσσον λέγων αὐτῷ τὰ σφάλματα αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἰδοῦ εἰρήνη, μακροθυμεῖς πολλὰς ἡμέρας.

¹¹ *Life of Dositheos* 12, in L. Regnault and J. de Préville, *Dorothee de Gaza. Œuvres spirituelles* (Paris 1963) 142.

cheeks still red from the slaps, and said, “Got them, and solid!” And he did not ask him, “Why did you not correct me <yourself> but sent me to the abba?” He said nothing of the sort, but accepted everything from him with faith and accomplished it unquestioningly. And when he questioned him concerning a thought, he accepted what he heard with such satisfaction and observed it so well that he never had to come back on the same thought.

This is a more sophisticated tale than the one in the Moschos collection, incorporating as it does some reflection on the master-disciple relationship, as well as on the relation between humility and knowledge. However, the resonance between the two texts is striking, if not very surprising. Indeed, Moschos was familiar with the monastic groups at Gaza, which were offshoots of Sketiote monasticism and had kept close links with it.¹² He tells the story of Eirenaios, who left Skete for “the laura” in Gaza. There he received a βιβλίον γεροντικόν, a copy of the Sayings of the Elders, which is likely to have included the work of Palladios.¹³ In another story, Moschos even explicitly mentions the community of Dorotheos (κοινόβιον τοῦ ἀββᾶ Δωροθέου, πλησίον Γάζης).¹⁴

The connection of this term with the monastic centres of Gaza is also indicated by its use in Leontios’s *Life of John the Almsgiver*. It appears in the chapter concerning abba Vitalios, a monk in the monastery of Seridos in Gaza who comes to Alexandria to test John’s judgement. He goes to see prostitutes and spends the night with them secretly trying to convert them, creating a scandal among those who imagine what they might when they see him. Κόσσος is repeated several times in the chapter, and takes on symbolic value. One night, abba Vitalios meets someone as he is leaving a prostitute’s house.

As soon as he saw him, I mean abba Vitalios, coming out from the woman’s house, he slapped him saying, “Until when, miserable deceiver of Christ, will you not give in to your impulses?” And <abba Vitalios> answered, “Believe me, you will receive a κόσσος, abject man, such that the whole of Alexandria will gather at your cries.”

When abba Vitalios dies, a demon of Ethiopian aspect rises out of nowhere next to the man who had slapped the monk and slaps him, saying, “Receive the slap that abba Vitalios has sent to you.” The story ends with the man’s con-

¹² On monasticism in Gaza see now B. Bitton-Ashkelony and A. Kofsky, *The Monastic School of Gaza* (Leiden 2006).

¹³ John Moschos, *The Spiritual Meadow* 55, PG 87.2909.

¹⁴ John Moschos, *The Spiritual Meadow* 166, PG 87.3033.

version to the monastic life and his departure for the monastery of Seridos in Gaza, where he settles in the cell of abba Vitalios.¹⁵

Thus the use of κόσσος as well as the insistence on this specific form of humility clearly indicate that this text belongs to the wider circle of sixth- and early seventh-century monastic writing centred around Alexandria, Skete, Gaza, and Cyprus, and make its inclusion in the original collection of the *Spiritual Meadow* more than plausible.

Early monastic literature made use of another unmistakable sign that one has achieved the monastic ideal, namely the strength to relinquish family bonds and to give the “love of God” priority over the love between parent and child. From the earliest narratives, the potent image of the mother leaving her children was used to mark the strength of her commitment to God. Among the most poignant passages is the one where Jerome describes Paula’s departure for the Holy Land, leaving her children behind at the port of Rome:¹⁶

Disregarding her house, her children, her servants, her property, and in a word everything connected with the world, she was eager ... to go to the desert made famous by its Pauls and by its Antonys. And at last when the winter was over and the sea was open, and when the bishops were returning to their churches, she also sailed with them in her prayers and desires. Not to prolong the story, she went down to Portus accompanied by her brother, her kinsfolk and above all her own children eager by their demonstrations of affection to overcome their loving mother. At last the sails were set and the strokes of the rowers carried the vessel into the deep. On the shore the little Toxotius stretched forth his hands in entreaty, while Rufina, now grown up, with silent sobs besought her mother to wait till she should be married. But still Paula’s eyes were dry as she turned them heavenwards; and she overcame her love for her children by her love for God. She knew herself no more as a mother, that she might approve herself a handmaid of Christ. Yet her heart was rent within her, and she wrestled with her grief, as though she were being forcibly separated from parts of herself. The greatness of the affection she had to overcome made all admire her victory the more. Among the cruel hardships which attend prisoners of war in the hands of their enemies, there is none more severe than the separation of parents from their children. Though it is against the

¹⁵ Leontios of Neapolis, *Life of John the Almsgiver* 38, in Festugière and Rydén (n. 6) 389-391.

¹⁶ Jerome, *Letter 108*, to Eustochium, 6.

laws of nature, she endured this trial with unabated faith; nay more she sought it with a joyful heart: and overcoming her devotion to her children by her greater devotion to God, she concentrated herself quietly upon Eustochium alone, the partner alike of her vows and of her voyage. Meantime the vessel ploughed onwards and all her fellow-passengers looked back to the shore. But she turned away her eyes that she might not see what she could not behold without agony. No mother, it must be confessed, ever loved her children so dearly. Before setting out she gave them all that she had, disinheriting herself upon earth that she might find an inheritance in heaven.

The heart-rending tone of this narrative is intended to bring out the size of the sacrifice made by those who chose the path of asceticism. As Gillian Clark has put it, “the pleading children are stage props enhancing the effect.”¹⁷ It is one of the longest passages of this type, but far from the only one to use this motif. Often however, the element of *pathos* is limited and the message is conveyed much more economically.

In the *Life of Saint Matrona of Perge*, for example, the motif of the child is handled quite differently. Matrona decides to leave her young daughter with a trusted friend when she enters monastic life. When later she has to leave the monastery, she finds refuge at that friend’s house.¹⁸

Thus, the blessed Matrona departed from the monastery, conducted by the deacon Markellos, and was once again received in the abode of Susannah. But before the blessed one departed from the monastery, God, *Who fulfilleth the will of them that fear Him*¹⁹ and assists in every way to the good of them that love Him, had taken her child Theodote unto Himself, lest she should add despair to despair and might, out of concern for the child, somehow slacken in her purpose. Wherefore, finding that she had died, <the blessed one> felt joy rather than grief, for she was thus set free of concern for <the child>, and the latter, also set free, had departed hence before experiencing the evils of this life. As greatly as she grieved over her separation from the monastery, even so great was the consolation she found in her rejection of the child: for

¹⁷ G. Clark, “The Fathers and the Children,” in D. Wood (ed.), *The Church and Childhood* (Oxford 1994) 3.

¹⁸ S. *Matronae Vita Prima* 10, in H. Delehaye, *Acta SS.*, Nov. III, cols. 795B-C; transl. by J. Featherstone and C. Mango in A.-M. Talbot (ed.), *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints’ Lives in English Translation* (Washington 1996) 28-29.

¹⁹ Ps. 144(145).19.

this, too, was God's doing, to assuage in one part the suffering she felt in another.

Evoking the death of a child is an image strong enough to allow the author to dispense with melodrama; and saying that the mother "felt joy" about it is the sort of paradox used by monastic literature to signify the ascetic's complete reversal of worldly values. A story from the *Apophthegmata Patrum* goes even further, combining this theme with that of total obedience, in accordance with the biblical model of the sacrifice of Isaac:²⁰

One of the Thebans once came to abba Sisoës, wanting to become a monk. The old man asked him whether he had anyone in the world. He said, "I have a son." The old man said to him, "Go, throw him into the river, and then you shall be a monk." As he went off to throw him in, the old man sent a brother to stop him. The brother said, "Stop, what are you doing?" He said, "The abba told me to throw him in." So the brother said, "But now he has told you not to." And leaving him, he went to the old man; and he became a proven monk because of his obedience.

Such stories seem to imply that the complete acquisition of one of the great monastic virtues is the secret to becoming a certified monk. Parting, sometimes in extreme ways, with one's children served as a powerful, and all in all sparingly used, *exemplum*.

However, in the story from Coislin 257, the usual terms of this *topos* are reversed. The parents, we are told, are still subject to "nature," and want to see their child, even showing some irritation at the way in which he is treated by the abba. Contrary to most other narratives, here it is the child who has achieved both humility and detachment. This is quite rare in the early monastic literature, which on the contrary, insists on the fact that children have by nature the exact opposite qualities to those required for monastic life. In the Moschos collection itself, there is one episode describing how during a sea voyage, the children on board used up all the available water, so that it ran out before the end of the journey.²¹ Another story shows a group of children tampering with sacred ritual during their thoughtless play and provoking the transubstantia-

²⁰ *Apophthegmata Patrum*, alphabetical collection, Sisoës 10, PG 65.393-396; transl. from Clark (n. 17) 1, with modifications.

²¹ *Spiritual Meadow* 174, PG 87.3041.

tion followed by a manifestation of God's displeasure without realising what they have done.²²

Yet in a further and very similar tale there is a subtle shift in the paradigm. The great Athanasios of Alexandria is shown playing at liturgy on the beach as a child. The baptisms he performs, however, are considered valid by the then archbishop of Alexandria, because the little Athanasios did everything according to the rules.²³ The two stories follow each other in the Moschos collection, and evidently the second one complements the first one, serving as a counterpoint to it by claiming that contrary to ordinary children, "holy" children do not "play" at ritual, but actually perform it like adults ahead of their time. This *topos* becomes very prominent in later Greek hagiography, which hails the "precociousness" of children destined to become saints – a form of *imitatio Christi* that culminates in the model of the *puer senex*, itself based on the story of Jesus teaching in the Temple (*Luke* 2.39-52).²⁴ In more mundane terms perhaps, what we are dealing with is the retrospective "hagiographization" of the childhood of great religious figures. Once again, the text presented here does not conform to the norm, since it attributes this form of precocious holiness to a child that remains anonymous.

This could be in great part because it is one of the earliest stories to construct this new *topos* of "holy childhood." It is also, in a way, an ideal-type of this theme, in that it illustrates precisely the incompatibility of childhood and holiness. Indeed, as the tale advances, the vocabulary used to describe the child changes. He is called *παῖς* and *μικρός* until the abba proclaims he has "become a monk." After that, he is described as *ὁ νεώτερος*. These terms usually describe two successive states, "the child" and "the young man." For instance, in the prescriptions given in the Apostolic Constitutions about the place of the various age-groups in a church, the *νεώτεροι* are expected to seat themselves, while the *παιδία* are taken along by their parents.²⁵ Thus, like a mini-initiation tale, this text charts with very economical means the symbolic passage from

²² *Spiritual Meadow* 196, PG 87.3081. See J. Duffy, "Playing at Ritual: Variations on a Theme in Byzantine Religious Tales," in D. Yatromanolakis and P. Roilos (eds.), *Greek Ritual Poetics* (Washington 2004) 199-209.

²³ *Spiritual Meadow* 197, PG 87.3084.

²⁴ On the pervasiveness of this theme in Middle Byzantine hagiography, see B. Caeseau, "Childhood in Byzantine Saints' Lives," in A. Papaconstantinou and A.-M. Talbot (eds.), *Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium* (Washington 2009, in press).

²⁵ *Apost. Const.* 2.57, in B.M. Metzger, *Les constitutions apostoliques*, vol. 1 (Paris 1985) 316.

childhood to a different stage: having “become a monk,” the boy is no longer a “child,” irrespective of his age.

A final question that arises is what to make of the term ἐδόθη. What did “giving” one’s offspring to a monastery actually involve? This is an issue that goes well beyond the scope of commenting on this specific text, and this is not the place to treat it exhaustively. Some preliminary remarks can be made, however, leading on from the only historical study of childhood that to my knowledge has quoted this passage. In *The Kindness of Strangers*, his impressively wide-ranging, if controversial, book on the abandonment of children from antiquity to the Renaissance, John Boswell mentions this tale in a footnote with the comment that the parents “come to see him and are surprised – but delighted – that he has become a monk, which they had apparently not intended or authorized.”²⁶ Obviously such a text will not be realistic about the parents’ feelings: it will inevitably insist on their “delight.” However, the fact that this development was neither intended nor authorised by them comes through quite clearly, and reflects what seems to have been a widespread reality.

From the very beginnings of monasticism, it is possible to discern a tension between the parents and the monastic communities to which their children were entrusted. Children were given to monasteries for their education, but the impression given by the surviving sources is that the monastic communities wanted to keep them and raise them as monks, which was not the initial intention. In his Canon 9, the famous fifth-century abbot Shenoute implied that the decision to keep or send away the children lay with the community.²⁷

The men who were entrusted with the supervision of little boys and who do not take care of them because they play around and do funny things with them, or joke with them, let them be relieved of this charge, and never receive it again. Similarly the women who have been entrusted with little girls. If little boys who have grown up have fulfilled judgement, we will do with them what is written; if they do not obey and do not learn to be men of the heart, we will chase them away from us.

²⁶ J. Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York 1988) 238, n. 36.

²⁷ É. Amélineau, *Œuvres de Schénoudi*, vol. 2 (Paris 1914) 215, fr. XIII; the same passage in J. Leipoldt, *Sinuthii archimandritae vita et opera omnia*, vol 4 (Paris 1913) 105-106.

One may object that the children in Shenoute's monastery could have been given to the community by their parents expressly in order to become monks, and this is indeed impossible to verify. Yet even though edifying and hagiographical literature invariably considers that becoming a monk is the most positive and universally acclaimed outcome of an education in a monastic school, there are reasons to doubt that this was always the case. In his *Asketikon*, Basil treats of this question at some length:²⁸

Children bereft of parents we take in of our own accord, thus becoming fathers of orphans after the example of Job's zeal (*Job* 29.12). But children who are under their parents' authority and are brought by them in person we receive before several witnesses, so as to give no pretext to those on the look-out for one, and to stop every unjust mouth uttering blasphemy against us. Therefore they ought to be received in accordance with this principle, but it is not fitting that they be immediately numbered and enrolled with the body of the brothers – so that if they fail, no reproaches are brought against the life of piety.

These precautions clearly indicate that things were not as straightforward as hagiographers would have us believe. The question of the parents' wishes is closely linked to that of the age at which children could independently consent to the monastic life, a subject also tackled by Basil, whose answer was, "The profession of virginity, however, will only be firm from the time adult age has already begun, or that age which is usually considered appropriate and ripe for marriage."²⁹ This would normally have been twelve for girls and fourteen for boys,³⁰ although in one of his letters Basil suggests that a girl should not make any decision about virginity until she is master of her senses, which according to him is around sixteen or seventeen.³¹

There seems to have been much abuse concerning this matter throughout the Christian world. In the sixth-century West, the transfer of children to a

²⁸ Basil of Caesarea, *Asketikon mega* 15, PG 31.952: ἐπὶ πολλῶν μαρτύρων δεχόμενοι, ὥστε μὴ δοῦναι ἀφορμὴν τοῖς θέλουσιν ἀφορμὴν· ἀλλὰ πᾶν ἄδικον στόμα τῶν λαλούντων καθ' ἡμῶν βλασφημίαν ἐπισχεθῆναι. Transl. in A. Silvas, *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great* (Oxford 2005) 200-201.

²⁹ *Regula Basili* 7.3, transl. Silvas (n. 28) 199-200 and n. 238: *firma tamen tunc erit professio virginitatis, ex quo adulta iam aetas esse coeperit et ea quae solet nuptiis apta deputari ac perfecta.*

³⁰ G. Prinzing, "Observations on the Legal Status of Children and the Stages of Childhood in Byzantium," in Papaconstantinou and Talbot (n. 24).

³¹ Basil of Caesarea, *Letter* 199, *To Amphiloichios on the Canons* 18, in Y. Courtonne, *Saint Basile, Lettres*, vol. 2 (Paris 1961) 156.

monastery by their parents was strictly regulated by Benedict, and transformed into a ritualised act with a specific document attached to it:³²

Regarding the sons of nobles and of the poor who are offered. If a noble person offers his son to God in the monastery, if the child is still young, let his parents draw up the document we have already discussed, and enfold the hand of the boy in the altar-cloth together with the offering and offer him in this manner. As far as their possessions are concerned, the document in question should contain the solemn oath never to possess anything – either themselves, or through an intermediary, or in any other way (...) Thus let all roads back be cut off, so that the boy has nothing further to look forward to that might, as we know from experience, tempt him and – God preserve us! – lead him to damnation. (...) Let poorer people do likewise. But those who have no possessions at all should simply draw up the document and offer their son with the offering in the presence of witnesses.

Here, it is clear that from the start the intention is for the child to enter monastic life. There is clearly a strong concern that the child will not be “tempted” to leave the community at a later stage. Benedict does not mention a second stage when the oblate would have to consent to the decision made on his behalf by his parents: oblation is presented as an irrevocable decision. Yet contemporary and later evidence show the question of consent to have been an important matter of debate, especially the irrevocability of the oblation of children under a certain age, whose vows could not be considered valid. The fact that church councils in the sixth and seventh centuries repeatedly stated that parental vows could not be revoked indicates that there was a high degree of resistance to that principle. Only with the Council of Aachen in 817 was a clear rule given on the question of consent, stating that a boy given by his parents should confirm his parents’ vow “once he has attained the age of understanding.”³³ This opened the door for monks who were given as children and later changed their minds to argue legally against the monastery by questioning the validity of the vows

³² *Rule of Saint Benedict* 59, PL 66.839-40; transl. in M. de Jong, *In Samuel's Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Leiden 1996) 26.

³³ *Legislatio Aquisgranensis, Synodi secundae decreta authentica* (a. 817) (Siegburg 1963) 477 (canon 17): *quam et tempore intelligibili ipse puer confirmet*. On the discussions that took place in the West see de Jong (n. 32) 30-73.

they had been made to take as children, rather than simply run away as most rebels had done to that date.³⁴

We have no preserved evidence of similar discussions in the East, and it is quite probable that the situation was not entirely similar. However, it is also clear that Basil's prescriptions were not followed to the letter. The Council in Trullo regulated again on this matter. The beginning of its canon 40 runs as follows:³⁵

Since to cleave to God by retiring from the noise and turmoil of life is very beneficial, it behoves us not without examination to admit before the proper time those who choose the monastic life, but to observe respecting them the limit handed down by our fathers, in order that we may then admit a profession of the life according to God as forever firm, and the result of knowledge and judgment after years of discretion have been reached. He therefore who is about to submit to the yoke of monastic life should not be less than ten years of age, the examination of the matter depending on the decision of the bishop, whether he considers a longer time more conducive for his entrance and establishment in the monastic life.

This has been seen as an innovation, significantly lowering the age of consent from the one required by Basil.³⁶ This is certainly true as far as norms are concerned. However, the production of such norms is an interactive process, and the wording of the canon rather suggests that it was common practice to allow children under ten years of age to take monastic vows: what the council rules is that they should be at *least* ten when they do so, and possibly older if the bishop thought it necessary.

Only in the eighth century do we have any documentary evidence of children being given to monasteries, with the Coptic child-donation contracts from the archives of St Phoibammon in Western Thebes. The impression gained from those texts, as well as from a cluster of Coptic hagiographical texts that take up the same motif of the child promised to "the saint," is that children were brought to monasteries by their parents when they reached the

³⁴ The most famous case being that of Gottschalk, who defied Hrabanus Maurus, superior of the monastery of Fulda, and was indeed granted his freedom from the monastic state; see the summary of the case in de Jong (n. 32) 77-91.

³⁵ Council in *Trullo*, Canon 40, in Rhallés-Potles 2:397-398.

³⁶ See for instance É. Patlagean, "L'enfant et son avenir dans la famille byzantine," *Annales de démographie historique* (1973) 88; repr. in her *Structure sociale, famille, chrétienté à Byzance* (London 1981), no. X.

age of five, and that this was done rather reluctantly.³⁷ One of the *Miracles of Sts Cyrus and John*, written by Sophronios of Jerusalem who was very close to John Moschos, clearly shows how the institution, hiding behind the identity of “the saints,” decided such matters in place of the parents. The passage concerns the early years of the shrine’s administrator, Georgios, who had arrived as an orphan with his mother from Cilicia. She had taken him to see the saints because she had been told they could heal the illness of his eyes.³⁸

As Georgios was a child, the very merciful martyrs took him under their protection. As they loved him with the love of a father, they decided not to send him back to his mother. Having taken the place of his father, they shared the children with the mother. They gave her the girls, two of them, who were already grown. They took Georgios under their protection and convinced his mother, in a dream, under oath, that they would cure him (because this happened before the cure), and that they would do for him what his father would not have done, even if he had survived.

Here the child is simply “abducted” by the martyrs, who, we are told a bit further, solved all his problems, offering him a new homeland, giving him back his sight, and becoming his fathers (πατέρες γεγόμενοι). As such, they raised him to acquire virtue and had him enter the clergy. The focus is slightly different from that of the monastic texts, since this concerns a martyr shrine and the secular clergy, but the underlying principle is very similar, namely that the holy men and the ‘martyrs’ know what is good for a child much better than its parents.

³⁷ See my “Θεία οἰκονομία. Les actes thébains de donation d’enfants ou la gestion monastique de la pénurie,” *T&MByz* 14 (2002) 511-526, and “Notes sur les actes de donation d’enfant au monastère thébain de Saint-Phoibammon,” *JJP* 32 (2002) 83-105.

³⁸ *Miracle* 51.9, a passage only preserved in the Latin translation by Athanasius, *PG* 87.3615-16; see J. Gascoü, *Sophrone de Jérusalem, Miracles des saints Cyr et Jean* (BHG 477-479) (Paris 2006) 182.

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