

## DISCUSSION

### FOLKLORE AND GREEK HAGIOGRAPHY: SOME PRELIMINARY NOTES

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**Abstract:** Based on personal experience and previous academic research, this article aims to lay the foundations for an interdisciplinary approach to Greek hagiography. It represents the first attempt to define the coordinates of the study of ancient hagiographical texts (lives of saints, collections of miracles, praises, etc.) through methodologies from folklore studies. By presenting a concrete example from a collection of miracles of healing dreams, I hope to show the potentialities of such an approach to scholars of my field, who are generally unaware and skeptical of it. At the same time, I would like to outline the richness of data that Greek hagiography has to offer to folklorists. To sum up, mutual exchange is expected (and needed) in the future.

**Keywords:** Christian saints, folklore of the ancient world, Greek hagiography, index of motifs, Thompson classification

## INTRODUCTION

When talking about folklore studies among scholars trained as classicists, one needs to make do not only with a general ignorance of the topic but also with a remarkable academic prejudice. And in fact, methodologies from folklore studies are absent from almost every degree in Classics available in the international scene. Therefore, even only learning about them is not easy at all as a student. As far as I am concerned, I was lucky enough to meet a particular inspired professor, who is able to combine the philological expertise and innovative interpretations of the ancient (especially Greek) texts. His open-minded approach to Greek and Byzantine literatures and his consistent attempt to make folklore studies accepted in our academic field are starting to bear fruit. Indeed, during this academic year (2021/2022) the institution, with which he is affiliated, offers the first ever (at least in Italy, but I suppose at the international level)

teaching “Folclore dell’antichità e del Medioevo greco” (Ancient and Medieval Greek Folklore) within the master’s degree in Classics. I believe that this is the right recognition for his academic efforts and at the same time a first message of change, but for sure it is not enough, mostly because it is – as much as illuminated – an isolated case.

In such an academic context, I decided to follow this professor’s footsteps, so that for my master’s degree I worked on the (Greek) hagiographical collections of healing miracle performed by saints Cosmas and Damian, combining the more traditional philological study – which a graduate student in Classics is commonly required to do – and a more original commentary of the text focused on the folkloric elements rather than on the historical-religious ones. Starting from my personal experience, in the next pages I will develop some considerations: which are the main methodological issues in applying the methods from folklore studies to hagiographical texts; to which extent such approach can contribute to their interpretation; and finally, I will make an example from the miracles collection I have been working on as a case study, offering the first-ever translation into a modern language of the passage in question.

Before going into the topic, I would like to preface that I do not pretend to draft a complete and detailed vision of the theme; rather I aim to offer a different point of view, which I hope that could – even if minimally – contribute to the scientific debate.

## **FOLKLORE AND GREEK HAGIOGRAPHY: METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES**

Greek hagiography and folklore constitute a theme of great interest, but still too little valorized. Or better, we should admit that already the Bollandist fathers – the first among all Hippolyte Delehaye – recognized that the folklore milieu, even if it was addressed with disregard as “fantastic” and “invented”, was an important factor in the formation of the hagiographical legends. Nevertheless, according to his “orthodox” point of view, it was exactly that kind of cultural matrix that had been damaging to the documentary value of the hagiographical texts towards the history of Christianity. Therefore, he put efforts into purifying the texts from such elements. Even if his too rigid method was highly overcome during the twentieth century and hagiographical texts have been studied for their literary value too, the folkloric richness of such texts still remains neglected.

Only few sporadic attempts can be enumerated. Firstly, in 1960 A.-J. Festugière came out with the pioneering article entitled “Lieux communs littéraires

et thèmes de folk-lore dans l'Hagiographie primitive" (Festugière 1960). Nevertheless, in spite of the promising title, it consists of a brief presentation of some "folkloric-looking" themes detectable in some hagiographical sources. The second example I would like to mention is the volume by E. Ziolkowski devoted to the fortune of the biblical episodes in modern and contemporary folklore (Ziolkowski 2017). Instead, a recent article by P. Boglioni is noteworthy for its capacity of outlining the specificities of the ancient folklore as compared to the modern and contemporary ones. Indeed, since the outcome of a folkloric survey on ancient texts more often provides not social but spatio-temporal information about the different narrative units, it seems to be not useful in the concept of popular culture, elaborated on sociologic opposition. Rather, the definition of "ethnic culture" is more interesting and finds confirmation in the texts (Boglioni 2005: 9). Nevertheless, its main drawback is to remain on the theoretical level.

Beyond their peculiarities, all these essays have something in common: they are scientifically unfounded. This is mainly due to the fact that folklore is approached not as a discipline with its own scientific status – and therefore with its technical language, method, and fields of research – but as an easily approachable tool by which to supplement the commentary discourse. The problem is precisely this one: everything is limited to the *discursive* level, without really going into it. In this way, classicists, on the one hand, do not do justice to folklore studies and do not really take advantage of methodologies from folklore studies in interpreting and understanding the texts and their cultural content, on the other.

Quite the opposite, the scientific potentialities of such methods are impressive, as showed by T. Braccini in several essays (Braccini 2018b, 2019, 2020, 2021). Even if dedicated to the Greco-Roman world, his monograph *Lupus in fabula: Fiabe, leggende e barzellette in Grecia e a Roma* is particularly worthy of attention (Braccini 2018a). He offers an overview of the main narrative folkloric categories, providing examples from Latin and Greek literature, referring to the Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification by motifs and types (Thompson 1989) and to other catalogues.

Nevertheless, nothing similar has been done for Greek hagiography yet, either on the theoretical or on the application level. The main difficulties related to such a task are the following:

- Working on hagiographical texts means to deal with an apparently homogeneous literary category – concerning the typical (but general) features, such as the religious relevance of the textual subject and the "author-less tradition of storytelling" to which it belongs – but which proves to be extremely various with regard to both the form and the content. Therefore, a sophisticated method of analysis and classification needs to be developed, while just applying the traditional models to the

whole mass of textual materials is sterile and generates confusion and skepticism among scholars.

- Even if some significative research tools are available, this enormous amount of textual material needs to be, firstly, edited and then compiled, studied, and interpreted. A number of these sources have not been published yet and/or still remain without any available translation into a modern language, whereas a broad accessibility both for specialists and for scholars from related fields would be extremely useful for increasing our understanding of the Byzantine world. At the same time, more thematic-based dossiers of passages from different hagiographical sources should be compiled, taking what J. Wortley did concerning the “beneficial tales” as an example (Wortley 2010).
- The very essence of the hagiographical texts (especially the Christian miracles collections) – they indeed uprooted themselves from the original place of worship (and composition) and started circulating and being modified and multiplied – makes them difficult to be interpreted. Firstly, because those intercepted on the written page were just a few among the circulating miracle stories, which were part of an ever-changing cultural tradition. And secondly, because they often survive in multiple versions or, when unique, they are “stratified” texts. The positive side of such a peculiar process is that they are a cultural product of great interest for their richness and complexity of contents.

As it is evident from what is written above, there is plenty of work to be done in this field, and a broad and common (i.e., multidisciplinary research projects) effort is expected.

I am certain that a good starting point could be to identify different sub-categories of themes that recur in Greek hagiography, in order to develop a common grid of analysis based on the Thompson classification, but then adapted, from time to time, to the Greek narratives, with specific entries and collected data. This would enable us to handle an otherwise unmanageable mass of texts and, at the same time, to employ a scientific and valid approach.

## **FOLKLORE AND GREEK HAGIOGRAPHY: NEW RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES**

So, the use of methodologies from folklore studies represents an original perspective of inquiry that could, in fact, prove extremely productive, providing new interpretative avenues for the texts in question. I will mainly refer to the

category of the collections of healing miracles because this is the field I have been working on. Anyway, I believe that they stand out among the hagiographical production for the folkloric materials offered.

Indeed, this typology of texts is characterized by a peculiar genesis. Born from the ritual practice of collecting brief registrations written inside real *libelli* by the recipient devotees of the prodigious healings at the place of worship (Delehaye 1910), they then developed as textual tradition formed by addition and stratification of witnesses, generation after generation, until becoming narratives for all intents and purposes, characterized by a specific (and repetitive) pattern (Csepregi 2007: 193–194; Constantinou 2014). Therefore, oral tradition strongly influenced the deep framework of these narratives both in their forms and in their content. To sum up, the typology of saints involved in these hagiographical texts – that of the healing saints – is particularly suitable for developing such studies, because it would allow to both introduce the methods from folklore studies in hagiography and renew the knowledge of *folk-medicine*.

Differently from what one might imagine, the folkloric inquiry can be extremely useful also for philological and literary purposes, in particular:

- to place the ancient text in its *chronological and geographical context* of composition. Indeed, the reconstruction of a narrative field modelled on some specific folkloric motifs provides relevant information about the cultural path made by a narrative unit. Even if it is not diriment alone, this kind of outcome is great evidence if integrated with other data, such as the comparison of the employed terminology in the texts in question.
- At the same time, I believe that, as far as this typology of texts is concerned, the folkloric analysis can be employed as a criterion, in order to evaluate the literary value of such texts and to answer – at least partially – the question whether it is possible to speak about the *literary genre* of Byzantine incubation literature (i.e., the collections of healing miracles as a whole) and – if yes – which are its main features.
- Finally, it helps to unveil the cultural model integrated in the examined literature, in the specific case of the collections of healing miracles, the very Byzantine perception of incubation as a religious ritual which consisted in sleeping in a sacred site and receiving the healing by one or more holy saints through the medium of dream.

After considering the aspects that pertain to the philological and literary studies of the ancient texts, let us move to those that involve folklorists more directly. Indeed, Greek hagiography – as well as Greco-Roman literature in general – has plenty to offer. Most of the Mediterranean folklore plunges its roots in the ancient world, but even more in the Byzantine one, which firstly – thanks to

the language – easily flew into the rich tradition of the Modern Greek folklore. Greek hagiography then is even more valuable, because religious and profane are perfectly mixed together. In healing dream miracles, for example, Christian orthodoxy needs to cope with profane medicine and popular beliefs and the border between official and occult is often very labile.

In the next and last paragraph, I will present an example from the collection of healing miracles I have been working on as a case study.

### **A CASE STUDY: THOMPSON MOTIF B784 IN THE COLLECTION OF HEALING MIRACLES PERFORMED BY SAINTS COSMAS AND DAMIAN**

The Thompson motif B784, ‘Animal lives in person’s stomach’, is largely attested in the hagiographical literature, both the Latin and the Greek one, but the latter constitutes just a part of a global lively tradition centered around this folkloric motif. As masterfully showed by D. Ermacora in his numerous papers, the popular belief according to which snakes can crawl into somebody’s mouth while they are sleeping clearly reflects the most widespread fear among humans (Ermacora 2015: 101).

In the Greek collection of healing miracles performed by saints Cosmas and Damian (contained in manuscript Lond. Add. 37534, which is datable back to the eleventh century CE, while the most ancient narrative nucleus was probably composed between the second half of the fourth and the second half of the fifth centuries CE), we find this passage:

*γεωργός τις ἐν τοῖς μέρεσιν ἐκείνοις διατρίβων, ... ἐθέριζεν. τῆς δὲ μεσημβρινῆς ὥρας ... καὶ δὴ κοιμηθεὶς πρὸς ὀλίγον ἀφαρπάσαι τοῦ ὕπνου ... καὶ τὸ στόμα κεχενῶς τὸ συμβαῖνον οὐκ ᾔδει. ὄφεις δὲ ἔρπων ἔφθασεν αὐτὸν καὶ, καθὼς ὄπλον ἐστὶν ἀπὸ ἀρχῆς τοῦ ἀντιπάλου, ἐνεργηθεὶς ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ ὡς εἰς τινα φωλεὸν χαλάσας ἑαυτὸν διὰ τοῦ στόματος κατέδου εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. καὶ τοῦ ὕπνου κόρον λαβὼν ὁ γεωργὸς ἠγέρθη μηδὲν κακὸν ὑποπτεύων ... ὅτε ... νυκτὸς καταλαβούσης πρὸς κλίνην ἐτρέπη καθευδήσαι ... ἤρξατο κινεῖσθαι ἔνδοθεν ὁ ὄφεις. ἀλγήσας οὖν ὁ ἄνθρωπος ... τοῦ ὄφεως δάκνοντος ἔνδοθεν καὶ σπαράττοντος ... ἀπαχθῆναι πρὸς τέμενος σωτήριον ... οἱ δὲ ἅγιοι ἐπὶ αὐτῷ ἐσπλαγχνίσθησαν ... τοίγαρουν διωχθεὶς ὑπὸ τῶν ἀγίων ὁ ὄφεις τοῦ στόματος ἐξελθὼν.*

(Greek text revised by me, based on Rupprecht 1935: 10–11).

A peasant, who lived in those lands, ... was dedicating himself to the harvest. At midday, ... he lay down to rest a bit and then ... since he had the mouth open, he didn’t realize what was happening. A snake, crawling,

reached him and, as if it was a weapon sent by the army of the Enemy, animated by the devil, as if going down a lair, entered, through the mouth, the guts of the man. After having slept enough, the peasant woke up, without suspecting anything bad ... When ... it was getting dark, he headed towards the bed to sleep ... the snake started moving inside. So, because the man felt pain ... while the snake was biting and ripping the man's guts ... he arrived at the sanctuary ... the saints felt compassion for him ... expelled by the saints, the snake crawled out the mouth of the man.

It is a wonderful example of the so-called *bosom serpent* motif, which is extremely widespread both geographically and chronologically. Our instance, to be placed within a medical-folkloric imaginary of prodigious healings performed by saints, conveys also a strong Christian message. In the Christian world, that of snake-demon is a privileged association. Indeed, the animal represents the sin or the missed adhesion to Christianity in several narratives, such as the story reported by the Dominican Stephen of Bourbon in his work (thirteenth century): according to him, a snake was found inside the body of a dead knight, who had refused the Christian burial. In the case of our specific narrative, where a snake (defined as ὄπλον ... ἀπ' ἀρχῆς τοῦ ἀντιπάλου, the weapon of devil) enters the body of a man causing a disease, this privileged association of snake-demon has a precise and strengthened function. Indeed, in collections of healing miracles performed by Christian saints, the snake is the *demoniac cause* par excellence of the disease which the *saints* are going to heal. In this way, the very Byzantine conception according to which demons were the origin of all the diseases is strengthened (Vakaloudi 2003: 173).

I will not go into a detailed description of the fortune of this motif within other folkloric traditions. In order to give an idea of how popular this motif is, I just mention: the story transmitted by the African tradition of the Ekoi, according to which each night a snake comes out of the mouth of a woman, whose husband suffers from an ankle problem, and licks him, so that he cannot heal (Talbot 1912: 83); several bosom serpent narratives are transmitted by the Japanese collection of miracles from the ninth century (Motomochi Nakamura 1973: 213–215); and finally, the Scandinavian saga of Olaf Tryggvason from the late twelfth century, where a bosom serpent is the author of the execution of the king (Andersson 2003: 106). All these references are taken from the work of D. Ermacora (Ermacora 2015; Ermacora & Labanti & Marcon 2016).

Clearly, each of these narratives, even if based on the same popular belief, conveys different cultural meanings, and the goal is to recognize similarities but also differences. In this sense, our hagiographical instance can be placed within a broader tradition, but it keeps its specificities which stem from the



different cultural context where the motif settled in, and result in additional messages to be conveyed, beyond the basic scheme of the folkloric motif.

As said before, folklore can be deemed as a criterion to evaluate the literary value of the Greek hagiographical texts. The comparison with a passage from the *Life of Saint Simeon Stylites the Younger* (commonly datable to a period between the end of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh century) seems to be particularly interesting (Life of St Symeon Stylite the Younger 136; Van den Ven 1962: 153). A Georgian peasant (βηρός τις), tired from working in the fields and because of the drunkenness (έκ πολλῆς οἴνοφλυγίας βαρυτάτῳ), fell asleep in the countryside with his mouth open (τῷ αὐτοῦ στόματι ἀνεωγμένῳ), so that a snake could easily slither into his intestines, attracted by the smell of wine (διὰ τῆς ὀσφρήσεως τοῦ οἴνου εἰσδύναντος ἐν τοῖς ἐγκάτοις αὐτοῦ). Only the intervention of Saint Simeon Stylites the Younger could heal the man, who expelled the live snake from his anus (τὸν ὄφιν διὰ τοῦ ἀφεδρῶνος ζῶντα κατήγαγεν), after the saint had marked his belly with the sign of the cross (σφραγίσας τὴν κοιλίαν αὐτοῦ).

Indeed, the common and immediately identifiable rural setting of the story strikes the reader. In addition to the common framework of the narrative, the way of healing (through the intervention of the holy healer) is the same, too. Nevertheless, a big difference is noteworthy. In this story, the man had drunk too much wine, and the snake had been attracted exactly by the smell of wine (διὰ τῆς ὀσφρήσεως τοῦ οἴνου εἰσδύναντος). The latter is one of the most typical components of the story type ATU 285B: snakes are often attracted by the smell of food or beverages coming from inside the human body. Even the most ancient surviving western variant of this story type (Ermacora 2015: 81–83) – a Hippocratic passage (Hp. *Epist.* 5, 86) – contains a reference to wine as the main cause of the snake approaching the young man while he was sleeping. Taking into account the impressive similarity between our passage and the one contained in the *Life of Saint Simeon Stylites the Younger*, I believe that this difference needs to be valorized. Indeed, to assume the complete absence of the element of wine from the (oral) tradition of saints Cosmas and Damian would be inconsistent with the features of motif B784. Rather, it corroborates the hypothesis of the epitomization of the (written) version preserved in the *London Codex*.

At the same time, the employment of a folkloric perspective helps us not only to enhance the cultural vitality of the narrative in question but also to understand why it is placed as the opening of the collection of miracles. If the bosom serpents work as a language “that enables people without formal knowledge of disease to understand and communicate what is wrong with them” (Bennett 2005: 23), such a narrative represents the most suitable theme to inaugurate a collection of miraculous healings.



## CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

In this brief paper I mainly aimed to draw attention to an almost completely ignored research perspective, which has plenty to offer in terms of interpretative sparks.

Even the more recent essays devoted to Byzantine dreaming completely neglect folklore studies, despite calling for interdisciplinarity to work on such a topic (Angelidi & Calofonos 2014). As I tried to show, methodologies from folklore studies could be a real turning point in the study of Greek hagiography, with regard to both the compilation of the textual materials and the overall interpretation of these narratives. Looking for motifs and types (the main components of a folkloric tale) will also encourage a narrative and narratological analysis, leading to the de-construction of the narratives in several significant units. At the same time, dealing with folklore means to come into contact with one of the society's deepest cultural layers.

This research perspective alone is certainly not enough. When approaching Greek (or rather, ancient) texts, philological attention and historical-literary expertise are absolutely needed. Therefore, besides being impossible, we cannot entrust folklorists with such a study and wait for the results. Scholars primarily trained as classicists should be involved, together with experts on folklore: collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and open-mindedness are undoubtedly the necessary requirements to make this possible.

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