

A Note on the Text and Its Author

The Life of Saint Simeon the Stylite presented herein was composed in the late tenth century by his namesake, Simeon the Metaphrast. Very few biographical details about the Metaphrast are known. Based on remarks by Michael Psellos and Mark of Ephesus,⁴¹ we can glean that Simeon was born to a wealthy Constantinopolitan family sometime in the tenth century, excelled in the study of rhetoric and philosophy in his youth, and later served as a high imperial official under the reigns of Nicephorus Phocas (963-969), John Tzimiskes (969-976), and Basil II (976-1025), ending his life as a pious monk. In addition to his hagiographic output, Simeon the Metaphrast wrote prayers and religious poetry,⁴² and was widely admired for his charity and erudition.⁴³ His memory is currently commemorated by the Eastern Church on the 9th of November.

The surname “Metaphrast” derives from the fact that Simeon composed no less than one hundred and forty-eight saints’ lives, recasting earlier hagiographies into a more polished and rhetorically ornamented register of Greek. In the Byzantine period, “metaphrasis” referred to the process of reformulating texts, either by amplification or abbreviation, to make them conform to classical standards of beauty without altering their

⁴¹ See Psellos’ *Encomium to Simeon the Metaphrast* (Patrologia graeca 114, col. 183-200) and Mark of Ephesus’ synaxarion entry for his feastday (Papadopoulos-Kerameus, ed., *Ἀνέκδοτα Ἑλληνικά*, Vol. 2 [Constantinople: 1884], pp. 100-101).

⁴² q.v. “Simeon Metaphrastes”, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (1908), p. 415.

⁴³ Mark of Ephesus reports a story that Simeon once bested a Persian (Muslim?) in a debate, prompting the latter to return to his homeland in awe.

substance.⁴⁴ While this genre of literature had precedents in the fourth and fifth centuries,⁴⁵ and while it was not totally unknown to the West either,⁴⁶ it became a distinctive feature of the religious literature of the Greek East following the Iconoclastic crisis.⁴⁷

In conformity with the encyclopedic tendencies of this age,⁴⁸ ninth-century churchmen like John of Sardis, Methodius of Constantinople, and Michael Syncellus collected ancient saints' lives and produced new versions of them suitable to the literary tastes of contemporary audiences. Wishing for the language of the texts to match the loftiness of their subject matter, they employed refined diction (often using poetic and Attic words), varied figures of speech, and complex syntax. Summaries of

⁴⁴ According to a definition attributed to the medieval grammarian George Choïroboskos, "metaphrasis is the alteration in diction in terms of quantity (using either more or fewer words) along with rhetorical beauty." Apud Daria D. Resh, "Toward a Byzantine Definition of Metaphrasis," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 55 (2015), p. 765.

⁴⁵ For example, the metaphrasis of the Psalms into Homeric verse by Apollinarius of Laodicea and the metaphrasis of the Life of Saint Cyprian and Justina by Empress Eudocia.

⁴⁶ See, e.g. the Life of Saints Valerius and Rufinus of Soissons by Paschasius Radbertus (*Patrologia latina* 120, col. 1489-1508), which was a rewriting of an older vita into elegant Latin.

⁴⁷ The Iconoclastic crisis refers to the religious dispute over the veneration of icons that took place in the Eastern Empire in the eighth and ninth centuries.

⁴⁸ Encyclopedism refers to a literary phenomenon that lasted from the ninth to the eleventh centuries and was a feature of the Byzantine East as much as the Carolingian West. Authors during this period were less focused on originality as they were on systematizing and organizing past knowledge. It is largely to the scriptoria of this time that we owe most of our editions of classical and patristic literature. Prominent examples of encyclopedic works that were produced are Saint Photius' *Bibliotheca*, Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus' *Historical Excerpts*, and the *Suda Lexicon*. In the West, we might cite Rabanus Maurus' *De universo* and Usuard's *Martyrology*.

longer hagiographies were also incorporated into volumes called *menologia*, which listed the names and biographical details of every saint for every day of the year, organized chronologically. The most important of these collections are the Menologion of Basil II and the Synaxarion of Constantinople. Simeon the Metaphrast's own collection proved to be immensely popular, and was used in such monasteries as the Theotokos Evergetis Monastery in Constantinople.⁴⁹

To compose his novel *Life of Simeon the Stylite*—one of the most well-known and beloved saints of the East—the Metaphrast drew on three principal sources. The first was the biography of Saint Simeon included in Chapter 26 of Theodoret of Cyrus' *Religious History*, which relates the lives of various ascetics.⁵⁰ Theodoret (d. 457) was a theologian and bishop from northern Syria who was a contemporary of the Stylite and reported incidents or miracles that he himself had witnessed first-hand. The bulk of the first six chapters of the Metaphrast's *Life* is in effect a rewriting and amplification of Theodoret's text. This base was then supplemented with the second *Life*, composed by one of the Stylite's disciples named Antonius.⁵¹ Some of the most memorable incidents of the Metaphrast's *Life*, such as the visit of Simeon's mother to the pillar and the conversion of Antiochus the brigand, are owed to Antonius. They constitute approximately one third of the narrative, spanning chapters 7 to 11, in addition to chapter 13. Finally, for

⁴⁹ Christian Hogel, "Symeon the Metaphrast and the Metaphrastic Movement," *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography*, Vol. 2 (2014), p. 186.

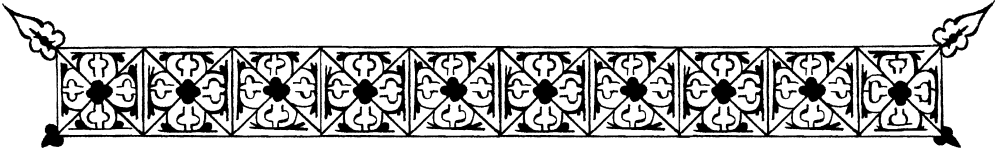
⁵⁰ Text in: *Patrologia graeca* 82, col. 1464-1484.

⁵¹ Text in: Hans Lietzmann (ed.), "Leben des Hl. Symeon," *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Altchristlichen Literatur* 32.4 (1908), pp. 20-78.

the last two chapters, which relate Simeon's death and the translation of his relics, the Metaphrast drew heavily on the first book of the *Ecclesiastical History* of Evagrius Scholasticus, a sixth-century historian from Antioch, who also based his account on eye-witness information. Additional sources that the hagiographer relied on are the independent fifth-century Lives of Saints Theodosius the Cenobiarch and Daniel the Stylite, both of which refer to Simeon the Stylite in passing.⁵²

As Simeon the Metaphrast states in his introduction, his main purpose in composing this edition was to present a coherent chronological account of the Stylite's life from his childhood to his death which he felt was lacking in his predecessors' versions. In this we can only agree that he succeeded. The result is an elegant narrative that vividly conveys the grace and character of the great ascetic.

⁵² It should also be noted that there is yet another Life of Simeon, composed in Syriac (presumably in the fifth century) which contains many more miracles and episodes that are not recounted by the other writers. However, it does not appear that the Metaphrast was aware of this version. For an English translation of the latter, see "The Life of Simeon Stylites," (Frederick Lent, trans.), *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 35 (1915), pp. 111-198.



The Life of Saint Simeon the Stylite

by Simeon the Metaphrast

Chapter 1

Simeon's birth and the beginnings of his religious life in two monasteries.

[1] All the subjects of the Roman Empire are familiar with Simeon the renowned, the great wonder of the inhabited world, but word of him has also reached the nomads of Scythia. Even the Persians, Indians, Ethiopians, and all those whose lot it is to inhabit the other regions of the earth have spoken of the man glowingly after witnessing his deeds firsthand or hearing of them from others. Now, since this man is so great and his reputation so widespread, many have written about him, but no one has as yet applied himself completely, outlining his feats one after the other, nor has anyone recorded precisely how he accomplished them all; but having briefly summarized his early life, they proceed to a cursory treatment of some parts of his middle years and never arrive at the actual conclusion of this man's deeds. Our account, therefore, will certainly be of much use, for we shall start from the very beginning and develop our narrative until we reach the end of his life.

Yet I fear that future readers will judge this to be a work of fiction stripped of any truth. For men love to measure past events according to physical laws: if something is recounted which extends beyond nature's boundaries, those without

experience of the divine dismiss the account as false. Since, then, this man did not⁵³ yield to the very laws of nature nor chose to suffer as humans do, but demonstrated in his mortal body the patience of bodiless beings—and especially since the whole earth and sea are now filled with those instructed in divine matters—I thought to begin my narration from here.

[2] There is a village between Syria and Cilicia they call Sisa. It was here that this wonderful Simeon was born. Early on, his parents taught him to tend sheep so that even in this respect he might be numbered among those of surpassing virtue, namely, Jacob the Patriarch, Joseph the Wise, Moses the Lawgiver, David the King and Prophet, and Micah, and other divine men like them.⁵⁴ [3] Once, when much snow had fallen and the flocks were forced to remain inside, Simeon made use of his spare time by going to the sacred church with his parents. Upon hearing the voice of the Gospel declaring blessed all who mourn and weep,⁵⁵ condemning as wretched those who laugh,⁵⁶ and calling for the emulation of those of pure heart⁵⁷ (and other doctrines joined to these), he asked someone standing by what one would have to do in order to attain these ideals. The man suggested the monastic life (for it would seem that he too was a cultivator of virtue) and showed him that exalted philosophy.

[4] Having thus received the seeds of the divine word and having buried them deep within the furrows of his soul, he departed to the nearby church of the holy martyrs. There, he

⁵³ Supplying a missing οὐκ.

⁵⁴ Jacob, Moses, and David were all shepherds, as were many of the Old Testament prophets (cf. Amos 1:1).

⁵⁵ Luke 6:21; Matthew 5:4

⁵⁶ Luke 6:25

⁵⁷ Matthew 5:8

pressed his forehead and knees to the ground and entreated the One Who desires the salvation of all men⁵⁸ to lead him to the perfect way of piety. After remaining like this for some time, he drifted off and beheld the following vision: as he was digging the foundations of a building, he heard someone close by telling him that he must make the trench even deeper; having deepened it according to the man's command, he tried once more to rest, but the man appeared again and ordered him not to cease his labour but to keep digging. He gave this same command a third and then a fourth time. Finally, once the trench had become as deep as it could possibly get, he said that it was deep enough and ordered Simeon to begin building the rest, explaining that his toil had ended and that the construction would unfold easily. This prediction was borne out by actual events. For the vision revealed that the things that would take place would be beyond the natural order and that, following those extraordinary struggles which Simeon would endure in the beginning, he would finish the ascetic life without obstruction.

[5] Arising from there, Simeon travelled to the community of some neighbouring monks. After living among them for two years, he longed for a state of more perfect virtue and thus departed for that town known as Teleda, where the marvellous Heliodorus had been entrusted with the care of the brothers. This Heliodorus spent sixty-two of his sixty-five years enclosed in a cell: for during the first three years of his life, he was nurtured with milk and received a young child's education; but immediately afterwards, his parents offered him to God as a gift and he entered this wonderful flock. This man was as honest as that great and marvellous Jacob, having acquired such mildness

⁵⁸ 1 Timothy 2:4

and purity that he exceeded the ascetic commandments, surpassed all men in every kind of virtue, and became close to God.

[6] To this man did our pentathlete, this struggler for piety, come, spending ten years exerting himself there. And though he had eighty fellow-combatants, Simeon outdid them all; for while the others took food every two days, he spent the whole week fasting. Many times, then, would this choir of fellow-strugglers be vexed because they were unable to imitate Simeon, and they referred to his labours as indiscipline and a violation of the ascetic way of life.