

Dealing with physical impairment in Byzantium: some examples from Italo-Greek Hagiography

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Περίληψη: Βασισμένο σε αγιολογικά κείμενα, το παρόν άρθρο ερευνά τις βυζαντινές αντίληψεις γύρω από τις σωματικές παθήσεις. Πραγματεύεται την αναπαράσταση παθήσεων σε εννέα κείμενα της ιταλοελληνικής αγιολογίας τα οποία είναι αντιπροσωπευτικά των διαφορετικών τάσεων που διέπουν αυτή τη λογοτεχνική παραγωγή. Το κείμενο εστιάζει στους τρόπους με τους οποίους τα άτομα με σωματικές βλάβες παρουσιάζονται σε αυτές τις αγιολογικές πηγές προκειμένου να εξετάσει κατά πόσο η έκφραση της σωματικής τους πάθησης επηρεάζει τον τρόπο με τον οποίο τα αντιμετωπίζει η βυζαντινή κοινωνία.

Abstract: In this article, we are dealing with hagiographic literature in order to look into Byzantine perceptions of impairment. We are discussing representations of physical impairment drawn from nine Italo-Greek hagiographical narratives, which represent different tendencies of this hagiographic tradition. We will look into the ways in which people with physical impairment are portrayed in these hagiographical sources, trying to find out how the manifestation of their impairment impacts the way they are perceived in Byzantine society.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: Βυζάντιο – ιταλοελληνική αγιολογία – ιστορία της κοινωνίας – σωματική πάθηση

Key words: Byzantium – Italo-Greek hagiography – social history – physical impairment

Hippolyte Delehaye (1859-1941) was an assiduous student of Greek and Latin texts and member of the Society of Bollandists, which since the 17th century has produced editions and critical works on hagiographic literature, defining the latter as “any written monument inspired by the cult of saints and destined for its promotion”.¹ “Hagiography” denotes the literature inspired by the acts, the miracles and the sayings of holy men and women. *Lives* of saints, *Passions* of martyrs, collections of miracles, translations of relics and edifying stories are regarded as a substantial part of the Byzantine cultural legacy. They offer an unofficial historiography because, for the

¹ Delehaye, H. 1906. *Les légendes hagiographiques*. Subsidia Hagiographica, 18. Bruxelles.

medieval man, these texts offered a means of apprehending time and understanding history according to circular time. Hagiographies can also be read as literature, since they recount legendary tales with literary motifs going back to the ancient novelistic tradition. Through their various and constantly revised forms, hagiography can also convey political ideas and offer new ways of understanding the transmission of cultural memory.

These narratives are important sources for anthropologists and sociologists. Closely related to the development of a local cult, they mirror social behaviours. Peter Brown's article *The Rise and Function of the Holy man* (1971)² followed ten years later, by his essay on *The Cult of the Saints* (1981),³ paved the way for approaching hagiography as a means to write social history. By the same token, in 1968, Evelyne Patlagean, published the major article *Ancienne Hagiographie byzantine et histoire sociale*,⁴ within the framework offered by the Annales School. Using structural anthropology as a starting point, Patlagean defines hagiographic literature as a narrative of sanctity, which can be analysed using the vocabulary of History and Sociology. This approach involves the "dechristianization" and secularisation of hagiography, with the cult of saints being regarded as a phenomenon taking place within human society. Here, Delehaye's definition seems miles away and the sociological aspect of this literature is stressed.⁵

In this article, we will be dealing with hagiographic literature in order to look into Byzantine perceptions of impairment and disability. Although impairment has been the subject of attention in ancient Greece and Rome⁶ as well as in Biblical Studies,⁷ Byzantinists have been relatively slow in engaging with the discourse of the impaired *other*. Stephanos Efthymiadis' recent study⁸ shows that hagiography offers a path to exploring Byzantine views of impairment. Hagiographical narratives constitute an important source about perceptions of health and sickness in Byzantium: they give us a glimpse into the real conditions in which disabled people lived, as well as their integration and marginalization from society. Miracle accounts offer a description of disability and impairment, emphasizing a cure, and making manifest the healing powers of the saint.

² Brown, P. 1971. «The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity» *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61, 80-101.

³ Brown, P. 1981. *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. London.

⁴ Patlagean, É. 1968. «À Byzance: ancienne hagiographie et histoire sociale» *Annales* 23.1, 106-126.

⁵ Flusin B., 2019. «L'hagiographie byzantine et la recherche: tendances actuelles», in Rigo, A. et al. (eds) 2019. *Byzantine Hagiography : Texts, Themes and Projects*. Turnhout, 1-18.

⁶ Garland, D.E. 2010². *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World*. London; Laes, C., C. F. Goodey & M. L. Rose (eds) 2013. *Disabilities in Roman Antiquity: Disparate Bodies*. A capite ad calcem. Mnemosyne, Supplements, 356. Leiden; Stahl, J. 2011. «Physically Deformed and Disabled People», in Peachin, M. (ed) 2011, *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World*. Oxford, 715-733.

⁷ Avalos, S., S. J. Melcher & J. Schipper (eds) 2007. *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*. Semeia Studies, 55, Atlanta; Lawrence, L. J. 2013. *Sense and Stigma in the Gospels: Depictions of Sensory-Disabled Characters*. Oxford.

⁸ Efthymiadis, S. 2016. «The Disabled in the Byzantine Empire», in Laes, C. (ed) 2016, *Disability in Antiquity*, Abingdon-New York, 388-399.

A case-study: Italo-Greek hagiography and social history

We will focus on the corpus of Italo-Greek hagiography, a literary production in some ways marginal and peripheral itself, which has never been studied from the point of view of the depiction of physical impairment. These hagiographic narratives, ranging from the fifth-century *Passions* to the *Lives* composed in the thirteenth century, describe saints from Sicily and Southern Italy and were composed either within this geographical area (known as “indigenous” production) or outside of this region (known as the literature of the “diaspora”), according to the recent classification by Stephanos Efthymiadis.⁹

We will focus on Italo-Greek saints’ *Lives*, which are novel-like hagiographies and *Lives* of Italo-Greek monks, as well as collections of miracles, dating from the eight up to the twelfth century. These texts offer new and unexplored material that allows us to examine cultural attitudes towards physical impairment, legendary or not, from beyond the centre of the Byzantine Empire. Within the framework of this study, we will be discussing representations of physical impairment drawn from nine Italo-Greek hagiographical narratives. The following texts, illustrative rather than exhaustive, have been selected as being representative of different tendencies of this hagiographic tradition and offer fertile ground for further thought and reflexion.

- The legendary *Lives* of two Sicilian bishops: the *Life of Leo of Catania* (BHG 981b) (9th c. presumably between 829 and 843) and the *Life of Pankratios of Taormina* by Pseudo-Evagrios (BHG 1410) (end of the 8th c. – beginning of the 9th c. / ante 814).
- A hagiographic narrative illustrating the tendency towards a more historical hagiography: the *Life and Miracles of Phantinos the Elder* (a.k.a. of *Tauriana*) in Calabria by a certain bishop Peter styled “ὁ δυτικός”, the Westerner (BHG 1508-1509), a group of eighteen posthumous miracles pieced together in Southern Italy before Syracuse fell to Arabs (878).
- Five examples of monastic hagiography, which flourished at the beginning of the tenth century, with the foundation of Greek-speaking monasteries in the Mezzogiorno, until the beginning of the thirteenth century, with the end of the Swabian domination: the *Life of Elias the Younger* (BHG 580), the earliest of these monastic saints (†903), a narrative composed in the tenth century that describes the wanderings of Elias, a victim of Arab raids in Sicily, to Africa, the Holy Land and Greece, before he founded a monastery in South Calabria; the *Lives* of the monastic family of Christopher and his wife, Kale, and their sons, Sabas and Makarios (BHG 1611 et 312) by Orestes, patriarch of Jerusalem under the Fatimids (ca. 986-1005). Forced to flee their hometown, the

⁹ Efthymiadis, S. 2017. «L’hagiographie grecque de l’Italie (VIIe – XIVe s.)», in Goullet, M. (ed) 2017, *Hagiographies. Histoire internationale de la littérature hagiographique latine et vernaculaire en Occident des origines à 1550*. VII. Turnhout, 345-421.

village of Collesano in Sicily, because of the Arab conquest, they settle in Lucania (the modern Basilicata). The *Life of Phantinos the Younger* (BHG 2366z), a narrative composed by a native of Thessalonica where this Calabrian Saint passed away; the *Life of Neilos* of Rossano (BHG 1370), the founder of the Grottaferrata monastery, composed in the first half of the eleventh century.

- One piece of monastic hagiography dating from the Norman period (1071-1194): the *Life of Bartholomew* of Simeri (BHG 235), the founder of the monastery of *Theotokos Hodegetria* (Santa Maria del Patire) in Rossano (ca. 1095), composed in the twelfth century.

In our study of Italo-Greek hagiography, we will take into account the medical, social and cultural models of impairment. According to the medical model,¹⁰ impairment denotes any loss or abnormality of physiological, anatomical, or even psychological structure or function. The only valid response to this model of impairment is medical care and treatment, so as to alter or at least present the disabled body as close to healthy as possible. The social model¹¹ relocates the problem to disabling societal structures: there may be a physiological manifestation, but the real problem lies in social and structural discrimination. The social implications of disability impairment are brought to the forefront; impairment can also be defined as any biological illness or condition that is associated with stigma, exclusion, or marginalisation. Although the social model remains the predominant model for disability studies, the cultural model¹² has a growing number of adherents, as it reflects the complexities of disability and shows how notions of disability and non-disability operate within a given culture. Impairment is regarded as a shifting and culturally-determined phenomenon, as the notions of disability and non-disability are experienced, represented, and interpreted differently across various cultures and historical periods, depending on cultural ideologies and worldviews.

A joint approach of these three models, primarily of the social and the cultural ones, will help us to outline a “landscape of disability”¹³ in Byzantium through the lens of Italo-Greek hagiography. We will look into the ways in which people with physical and sensory impairment are portrayed in these hagiographical sources, trying to map out a visual landscape of human diversity and to determine the role that people with impairments play in the overall *spectaculum*. On this note, particular attention will be paid to disability-related language used in the sources, as vocabulary choices can reveal a lot about the ways in which authors of hagiographies make known or critique views of impairment in their own socio-religious context. In other words, we

¹⁰ Brisenden, S. 1993. «Independent Living and the Medical Model of Disability», *Disability and Society* 1.2, 173-178.

¹¹ Peckruhn, H. 2014. «Disability Studies», in O’Brien, J. (ed) 2014. *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies*. Oxford, 101-111.

¹² Junior, N. & J. Schipper 2013. «Disability Studies and the Bible», in McKenzie, S.L. & J. Kaltner 2013 (eds). *New Meanings for Ancient Texts: Recent Approaches to Biblical Criticisms and their Applications*. Louisville 2013, 21-38.

¹³ Rose, M. L. 2003. *The Staff of Oedipus: Transforming Disability in Ancient Greece*. Ann Arbor, 9-28.

will try to define how hagiographic sources present subjects with a disability who take on community roles, and how the cause and the manifestation of their disability impacts the way they are perceived in Byzantine society.

The Gospels as *hypotext*¹⁴

Miracle stories are our basic sources for apprehending views of impairment in hagiographic literature. These stories present, in a somewhat dramatic manner, the experiences of common people who begged for saintly intervention to heal their physical ailments.¹⁵ These figures can be part of a text narrating a saint's life, but have also given rise to independent miracle collections. The appearance of this type of hagiographic narrative stems from the idea that the holy man is, in essence, a miracle worker, following the example of Christ: "And Jesus answered and said unto them, Go you way and tell John the things which ye do hear and see: the blind (τυφλοὶ) receive their sight, and the lame (χωλοὶ) walk, the lepers (λεπροὶ) are cleansed, and the deaf (κωφοὶ) hear";¹⁶ 'insomuch that the multitude wondered, when they saw the dumb (κωφούς) speaking, the maimed (κυλλοὺς) whole, and the lame (χολοὺς) walking, and the blind (τυφλοὺς) seeing".¹⁷ The healing of the impaired is an essential part of the mission assigned by Christ to the Apostles: "Heal the sick (ἀσθενοῦντας), cleanse the lepers (λεπροὺς), cast out devils (δαίμονια)".¹⁸

This *motif* is reproduced in hagiographical narratives settled in the apostolic times, as in the *Life of Pankratios of Taormina*, where the activity of the apostle Peter in Antioch is described as a "θεοθεράπευτον ἰατρῆον"¹⁹: "He granted the lame to walk (χωλοῖς τὸ περιπατεῖν ἐχαρίζετο), the blind to see (τυφλοῖς τὸ βλέπειν) and the deaf to hear (κωφοῖς τὸ ἀκούειν). He strengthened the paralysed, restored the withered and cleansed the lepers (λεπροὺς ἐκαθάριζεν)".²⁰ The mission of the saint is somehow modelled on the action of Christ in the Gospels: his action allows us to define the basic categories of impaired people found in hagiographical narratives. For instance, upon his arrival in Sicily, Pankratios of Taormina "healed many ailments (νόσους) to those who came to him, the blind (τυφλῶν), the lame (χολῶν), the withered (ξηρῶν), the paralysed (παραλύτων) and those with dropsy (ὕδροπιῶντων), and he delivered those possessed by demons (δαίμονιῶντας) from the anguish (ἐκ τῆς ὀδύνης) of the unclean demons (τῶν ἀκαθάρτων δαιμόνων)".²¹ The Greek term used

¹⁴ Genette, G. 1982. *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré*. Paris.

¹⁵ Eftymiadis, S. 2014. «Collections of Miracles (Fifth-Fifteenth Centuries)», in Eftymiadis, S. (ed) 2014, *Disability in Antiquity*, Farnham-Burlington, 103-142.

¹⁶ Mat 11.4-5.

¹⁷ Mat 15.31.

¹⁸ Mat 10.8.

¹⁹ The source of this very rare expression in Greek is John Chrysostom (*In lacum Genesareth et in sanctum Petrum apostolum (Sp.)*, PG 64, 51, 17).

²⁰ *Life of Pankratios of Taormina* 18.70-71. Ed. C. J. Stallman-Pacitti & J. B. Burke, *The Life of Pankratios of Taormina. Greek Text, English Translation and Commentary*. Byzantina Australiensia, 22. Leiden-Boston 2018.

²¹ *Life of Pankratios of Taormina* 124.228-229 Stallman-Pacitti.

to qualify the sway of the demons is indicative of the fact that the influence of the demons is actually conceived as a form of suffering.

The activities of St. Leo of Catania are thus described in an eloquent manner: “Eyes that were blinded (ὀφθαλμοὶ πεπηρωμένοι) received the light again; ears that were deaf (ὄτα κωφεύοντα) were unexpectedly opened; hands that were paralyzed (χεῖρες παρειμένα) surprisingly recovered their power of movement; feet that lay idle and limping (πόδες ἀλγοῦντες καὶ σκάζοντες) were strengthened, restored for running well (πρὸς εὐδρομίαν). Every bodily mutilation (πᾶσά τε λώβη σωματικὴ) and every affected limb (πᾶν μέλος ἐμπαθὲς) received the appropriate treatment (θεραπείαν) through the laying on of hands and prayer”.²² Similar terms are used to describe the miraculous activity of Makarios, the brother of Sabas of Collesano, who healed the blind (τυφλοῖς τὸ βλέπειν ἐχαρίσατο), the dumb (γλώσσης μογιγάλου δεσμὰ διέλυσεν), the lame (χωλοῖς...εὐδρομίαν) and the deaf (κωφοῖς...ἀκούειν ὀξέως).²³ The same goes for Saint Bartholomew of Simeri, who was able to soothe every suffering thanks to the mildness of his tongue (πάντας τοὺς οἰαδῆποτε ἀθυμία συνισχυμένους πρὸς εὐθυμίαν εὐφυστάτα ἐκκαλούμενος, τῷ ἡδεῖ τῆς γλώττης καθήδυνεν).²⁴

The literary imitation, the *mimesis*, of the Gospels is not limited to a general presentation of impaired people who receive healing but can also be detected in entire episodes. For instance, the healing of the bleeding woman²⁵ inspired several writers of hagiographic literature, such as the author of the *Life of Leo of Catania* (“Immediately the source of her deadly haemorrhage was unexpectedly blocked up, and she received her cure”²⁶) and Orestes, the patriarch of Jerusalem, in his *Life of Sabas of Collesano*, where it is explicitly stated that the woman suffering from an issue of blood (αἱμορροΐας πάθει) constitutes an imitation of the bleeding woman found in the Gospels (μιμεῖται τῆς ἐν τοῖς ἀγίοις εὐαγγελίοις ἐμφερομένην αἱμορροῦσα πάλαι γυναῖκα).²⁷ In the *Life of Elias the Younger*, the saint gives to a paralysed man his stick and orders him to walk (ἔγειρε καὶ περιπάτει), following Acts 3.6. The man recovers immediately: he gets the saint’s stick, gets up, and walks (τὴν ῥάβδον τοῦ ἀγίου λαβὼν, ἠγέρθη καὶ περιπάτει).²⁸

The hagiographic *topoi*

The presentation of the impaired in hagiographic sources is often characterized by several hagiographic *topoi*. Impairment is usually the consequence of sin or

²² *Life of Leo of Catania* 36.184-187. Ed. A. G. Alexakis, *The Greek Life of St. Leo bishop of Catania*. Subsidia Hagiographica, 91. Bruxelles 2011.

²³ Orestes, *Life of Christophoros and Makarios* 22.94. Ed. I. Cozza-Luzi, *Historia et laudes SS. Sabae et Macarii Iuniorum e Sicilia auctore Oreste Patriarcha Hierosolymitano*. Roma 1893.

²⁴ *Life of Bartholomew of Simeri* 22.219-220. Ed. G. Zaccagni, 1996. «Il bios di san Bartolomeo da Simeri (BHG 235)» *Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici* 33, 205-274.

²⁵ Mat 9.20-22; Mk 5.25-34; Luc 8.43-48.

²⁶ *Life of Leo of Catania* 37.186-187 Alexakis.

²⁷ Orestes, *Life of Sabas of Collesano* 44.61 Cozza-Luzi.

²⁸ *Life of Elias the Younger* 62. 96-99. Ed. G. Rossi Taibbi, *Vita di Sant’Elia il Giovane*. Istituto Siciliano di Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici. Testi, 7. Palermo 1962, 1-123.

disobedience and is conceived as a form of punishment. In the *Life of Elias the Younger*, fatal disease is clearly considered as being the result of contumacious conduct (παρακοῆς μισθός). The commander Michael refuses to show sympathy towards a prisoner named Columbus, as the saint has asked him, and is therefore punished: he becomes seriously ill (νόσῳ γὰρ περιπεσὼν χαλεπῇ) and finally passes away (ἐν κρίσει δεινῇ ἀπέρρηξε τὴν ψυχὴν).²⁹ In the same *Life*, arthritis (ἀρθριτικὴ νόσῳ) is directly related to disgraceful behaviour (αἰσχρῶν πράξεων); this behaviour is not clearly defined, but the saint mentions that Konstantinos should attain righteous faith (ὀρθὴν πίστιν), purification of the flesh (σαρκὸς κάθαρσιν), and courtesy of the soul (ψυχῆς εὐγένειαν) in order to be freed of his arthritis.³⁰ In the *Life of Pankratios of Taormina*, the saint heals the priestess Khryse of leprosy, but when she proves insincere, he brings further affliction to her: “her flesh developed blisters (φλυκταίννας), like those from a burn, from her feet to her head, so that even her eyes were filled (ὡς καὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτῆς πλησθῆναι)”.³¹

Impairment, disability and disease are systematically related to the presence of demons, such as in the *Life of Elias the Younger*, where blindness is presented as the result of an attack of impure spirits (πολλοὶ δὲ τῶν ἐχόντων πνεύματα ἀκάθαρτα... τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ἀλγοῦντες);³² physical impairment is actually an expression of spiritual ailments, such as leprosy, in the case of the priestess in the *Life of Pankratios of Taormina*: “Woman, you have actually dared to say that you do not have spiritual ailments (ψυχικὰ νοσήματα)! Have you not forgotten God and approached the demons (δαίμοσι) and destruction and do you not offer sacrifice to them, and are not those who forget God (ἐπιλανθόμενοι τοῦ θεοῦ) with an illness which is truly severe and terrible (νόσῳ χαλεπῇ καὶ δεινοτάτῃ)?”.³³ Interaction with demons often leads to episodes with symptoms related to epilepsy. For instance, in the *Life of Elias the Younger* (ἔχων δαιμόνιον...πέπτωκεν πρηγῆς καὶ ἀφρίζων ἐσπαράττετο)³⁴ and in the *Life of Sabas of Collesano* (ἀκαθάρτῳ πνεύματι διοχλούμενος... ἤρξατο βρῦχειν καὶ ἀφρὸν ἐκτινάσσειν τοῦ στόματος; ἀκαθάρτῳ δαίμονι κάτοχος... καὶ τοὺς ὀδόντας δεινότατα τετριγῶς ἀφρὸν...προΐει τοῦ στόματος; διαστρέφειν μὲν ὀφθαλμοὺς... δαίμονος ἀλιτήριον παίγνιον).³⁵ But demons can also be responsible (δαίμονῶν) for other types of impairment, such as paralysis due to tetanus, defined as opisthotonos.³⁶

The inability of physicians to deal with disease and impairment is another literary device in hagiographic sources. Recourse to secular medicine is often the first step, which ultimately demonstrates the futility of the physician’s methods and the superiority of the saint. The case of the woman with a swollen throat (ἐν τῷ τραχήλῳ χοιρέαν) addressing Saint Pankratios is a good illustration of this phenomenon: “For I can no longer endure the incisions of scalpels (τὰς τομὰς τῶν σιδήρων) and the

²⁹ *Life of Elias the Younger* 64. 96-99 Rossi Taibbi.

³⁰ *Life of Elias the Younger* 40. 60-61 Rossi Taibbi.

³¹ *Life of Pankratios of Taormina* 131.236-237 Stallman-Pacitti.

³² *Life of Elias the Younger* 74. 118 Rossi Taibbi.

³³ *Life of Pankratios of Taormina* 129.234-235 Stallman-Pacitti.

³⁴ *Life of Elias the Younger* 21.30-31 Rossi Taibbi.

³⁵ Orestes, *Life of Sabas of Collesano* 12, 19, 39.22, 32, 54 Cozza-Luzi.

³⁶ Orestes, *Life of Sabas of Collesano* 20.33-34 Cozza-Luzi.

brutality of cauterizing instruments (τῶν καυστήρων τὴν ἀγρίωσιν) and doses of strong medicines (τῶν αὐστηρῶν φαρμάκων τὰς ἐπιθέσεις). For all the doctors in the city have made some attempt with me, each unfolding his expert skill (τὴν σοφιστικὴν αὐτοῦ τέχνην) conscientiously, and the appearance of a cure (εἶδος θεραπείας) has not been produced in my case; and this is not only the experts of the city, but also those of the surrounding provinces, to whom I have given a great deal of money, without obtaining relief'.³⁷ The same goes for the paralysed man in the *Life of Elias the Younger*, who also suffered from fever (πυρετῶ) and headache (κεφαλαλγία), but physicians were not capable of alleviating his suffering.³⁸ Ironically enough, in some cases, physicians are unable to heal their own ailment, such as the case of a physician named David in the *Life and Miracles of Phantinos the Elder (a.k.a. of Tauriana)*, whose eyes were again causing him pain (ὀφθαλμοὺς ἀλγήσας πάλι).³⁹

The stricken person may seek a saint's help by themselves, such as the woman with a swollen throat in the *Life of Pankratios of Taormina*⁴⁰ and in the *Life of Phantinos the Younger* (ch. 62). However, in most of the cases, it is relatives who take the initiative to bring the ailing person to the saint, as in three cases of miraculous healing performed by Phantinos the Elder (*a.k.a. of Tauriana*), concerning an emaciated man, a blind child, and a paralysed man.⁴¹

The healing provided by the saint is often described in realistic terms and in a rather crude manner, such as the in the description of fountains of blood (πίδακες αἵματος) that flow from the ears and the nose of the paralysed potter whose tale is found in the *Life of Phantinos the Younger*.⁴² However, in novel-like hagiographical texts, the saint's healing capacity can contain legendary elements, in accordance with the general character of the narrative. In the *Life of Pankratios of Taormina*, signs of leprosy fall away like scales (ἐξέπεσεν ὡσεὶ λεπίδες),⁴³ such as the swelling of blisters (ἐξέπεσαν τὰ τῶν φλυκταίνων οἰδήματα),⁴⁴ and the lepers healed by Markianos in Syracuse, who strip away the evil marks of their leprosy like clothing (ὡς ἱμάτιον ἀπεδύσαντο τὴν κακόστικτον αὐτῶν λέπραν).⁴⁵ The last image is also found in the *Life and Miracles of Phantinos the Elder (a.k.a. of Tauriana)*, where an emaciated man strips off his skin disease like clothing⁴⁶ (ἀπεδεμησάμην ὅλον τὸ δέρμα τῆς σαρκός μου καθάπερ ἱμάτιον καὶ εἰς τὸ ἔδαφος ἔρριψα).

³⁷ *Life of Pankratios of Taormina* 135.242-243 Stallman-Pacitti.

³⁸ *Life of Elias the Younger* 62.96-99 Rossi Taibbi.

³⁹ *Life and Miracles of Phantinos the Elder (a.k.a. of Tauriana)* 6.58-59. Ed. V. Saletta, *Vita S. Phantini Confessoris ex Codice vaticano graeco N. 1989 (Basil XXVIII)*. Roma 1963.

⁴⁰ *Life of Pankratios of Taormina* 135.242-243 Stallman-Pacitti.

⁴¹ *Life and Miracles of Phantinos the Elder (a.k.a. of Tauriana)* 2, 5, 8.53-54, 57-58, 60-61 Saletta.

⁴² *Life of Phantinos the Younger* 59.464-467 Follieri.

⁴³ *Life of Pankratios of Taormina* 130.234-235 Stallman-Pacitti.

⁴⁴ *Life of Pankratios of Taormina* 133.238-239 Stallman-Pacitti.

⁴⁵ *Life of Pankratios of Taormina* 263.398-399 Stallman-Pacitti.

⁴⁶ *Life and Miracles of Phantinos the Elder (a.k.a. of Tauriana)* 2.53-54 Saletta.

A glimpse into Byzantine society

The text often functions as a window, and “sensorially-centred” language, especially concerning sight, is used to describe episodes dealing with impairment. The reader has the impression that they are participating in a *spectaculum*, and witnessing a person’s suffering through the eyes of a spectator. The people who are featured in the scene, play a major role in the narrative. This literary device is extremely interesting from the point of view of the representation of otherness, as it reveals cultural and social perceptions.

A man suffering from swollen foot is hard to see (δυσθεώρητον) in the *Life of Elias the Younger*⁴⁷. In the *Life of Sabas of Collesano*, a man suffering from tetanus, defined as oristhotonos, is a sight to be pitied for those who visit him (ἐλεεινὸν τοῖς πρὸς ἐπίσκεψιν αὐτοῦ φοιτῶσι θέαμα);⁴⁸ the same adjective is used to characterize the sight of a woman who is suffering due to having been attacked by demons. Here, here symptoms are akin to those of an epileptic seizure (ἐλεηνὸν θέαμα τοῖς ὀρῶσιν ἐτύγχανεν).⁴⁹ In the *Life and Miracles of Phantinos the Elder (a.k.a. of Tauriana)*, we again find the same description (ἐκείμην ἐλεεινός)⁵⁰ concerning a corpse-like man, using a first-person narration, as well as for a paralyzed man (ὄν καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐθεασάμεθα πάνυ ἐλεεινῶς τεταλαιπωρηκότα).⁵¹ In the *Life of Sabas of Collesano*, the spectacle of a skeletal man (ἀπεξηραμμένος ἅπαν τὸ σῶμα) is characterised as lamentable or pitiable (οἰκτρὸν θέαμα τοῖς παροῦσιν) and provokes tears (δακρῶν διὰ τὴν συμφορὰν ἄξιος).⁵² In the same text, a man with symptoms of epilepsy due to an attack by demons provokes sorrow amongst the people around him (καὶ τὸ πρᾶγμα κατηφείας τοὺς περιεστῶτας ἐδείκνυ μεστούς, ὀρῶντας...)⁵³.

However, the sight of impaired people does not always generate compassion but can give ground to negative reactions. In the *Life of Sabas of Collesano*, people are afraid and stand back (πάντων οὖν δείματι συσχεθέντων) when they see a monk being attacked by an impure spirit and acting like a person suffering from epilepsy (βρύχειν καὶ ἀφρὸν ἐκτινάσσειν ἐκ τοῦ στόματος), a reaction that the narrator of the episode considers to be natural (ὡς τὸ εἰκός).⁵⁴

Such situations could also lead to the marginalization, the social exclusion of impaired people, often described in derogatory, pejorative, or defamatory terms. The symptoms of their impairment are not in line with socially-accepted behaviour and can even be considered hideous and repulsive. In the *Life of Sabas of Collesano*, a man attacked by demons and behaving like someone suffering from epilepsy is tied down with iron chains (σιδηραῖς δεδεσμημένος ἀλύσειν) because he is shouting inappropriately (ἀκόσμως) and acting “like a dog” (κυνὸς ἀναλαβῶν ὑλακὴν), and a

⁴⁷ *Life of Elias the Younger* 52.80-81 Rossi Taibbi.

⁴⁸ Orestes, *Life of Sabas of Collesano* 20.33 Cozza-Luzi.

⁴⁹ Orestes, *Life of Sabas of Collesano* 40.55 Cozza-Luzi.

⁵⁰ *Life and Miracles of Phantinos the Elder (a.k.a. of Tauriana)* 2.53-54 Saletta.

⁵¹ *Life and Miracles of Phantinos the Elder (a.k.a. of Tauriana)* 8.60-61 Saletta.

⁵² Orestes, *Life of Sabas of Collesano* 31.46 Cozza-Luzi.

⁵³ Orestes, *Life of Sabas of Collesano* 39.54 Cozza-Luzi.

⁵⁴ Orestes, *Life of Sabas of Collesano* 12.22 Cozza-Luzi.

pig (ὡς σὺς).⁵⁵ In the *Life of Phantinos the Younger*, the saint, displaying his compassion (συμπαθής), asks that the spectators not shout down at the paralyzed man (μὴ δὴ, λοιπόν, ἀγνώστως, ἔφη, καταβροντᾶτε τὸν κείμενον) without knowing the reason of his condition.⁵⁶ In the same text, a painter suffering from dropsy (ὕδρωπικός) is characterized as ill-smelling (δύσοσμος). In the *Life of Pankratios*, leprosy is considered to be an “unsightly condition of the flesh” (ἐν τῇ ἀπρεπείᾳ ταύτῃ τῆς σαρκός).⁵⁷ In the same text, we read that lepers who were healed by the apostle Peter “had their hands and feet bound behind them (ποσὶν καὶ χερσὶν ὀπισθίως δεδεμένοι) to stop them from devouring their own flesh”.⁵⁸ A passage indicating the social seclusion of lepers is also found in *Life of the apostle Andrew (BHG 102)*, composed in the eleventh century by Epiphanius of Constantinople who had read, and was largely inspired by the *Life of Pankratios of Taormina*, in which a nobleman contracts leprosy and, as a result, is placed on a dunghill (ἐπὶ τῆς κοπρίας), as people cannot bear the awful smell (μὴ φέροντες τὴν δυσωδίαν αὐτοῦ). No one goes too close to him; people bring him some food while holding their noses (τὰς ῥίνας αὐτῶν κρατοῦντες), and quickly go away.⁵⁹

An episode from the *Life of Phantinos the Younger* sheds light on another social dimension of impairment related to marginalisation: the wife of a paralysed (παράλυτος) potter (κεραμεύς) is blushed with embarrassment (ἐρυθριῶσα) when going to other houses to beg for some bread.⁶⁰

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This short overview shows how much hagiographic literature can be an interesting and extremely rich source for aspects of social history, such as the image of impairment and, generally speaking, of the *Other* and *Difference* in Byzantium. As we have seen from these few examples coming from Italo-Greek hagiography, depictions of impairment can be found in miracle stories, so as to stress the incapacity of physicians and the miraculous healing provided by the saint. This kind of material is not equally present in all hagiographic sources: some texts contain no scene of this kind at all (such as the *Life of Nil of Rossano*) and other texts provide very little information concerning the healing activities of the saint (such as the *Life of Bartholomew of Simeri*). The mimesis of the Gospels constitutes an important literary device concerning the basic types of impaired people found in hagiographic literature but also the construction of whole healing episodes. These scenes can contain realistic elements, but can also participate in the general legendary character of some novel-like Italo-Greek hagiographies. The vocabulary and the staging, the *mise en scène*, of these miracle stories stress the role of the public attending the scene, offering a unique

⁵⁵ Orestes, *Life of Sabas of Collesano* 19.32 Cozza-Luzi.

⁵⁶ *Life of Phantinos the Younger* 45.452-453. Ed. E. Follieri, *La Vita di San Fantino il Giovane*. Subsidia Hagiographica, 77. Bruxelles 1993.

⁵⁷ *Life of Pankratios of Taormina* 128.232-233 Stallman-Pacitti.

⁵⁸ *Life of Pankratios of Taormina* 18.70-71 Stallman-Pacitti.

⁵⁹ *PG* 120.245.

⁶⁰ *Life of Phantinos the Younger* 59.464-467 Follieri.

glimpse into Byzantine culture and society. The reactions of the crowd range from pity to fear, and from repulsion to exclusion. It would be interesting to look into the criteria based on which spectators sometimes show empathy or hostility towards impaired people. One could assume that the type of disease prompts specific reactions (leprosy, for example, almost always gives ground to hostile reactions), but it is not possible to trace a specific pattern. For instance, in most cases, epilepsy provokes negative reactions, but can also generate sorrow. One should bear in mind that the reaction of the audience meets the needs of the narrative itself and functions as a literary device that complies with the course of events described. The general image that arises from the study of these examples is that of a hard, cruel society that does not easily accept impairment. Here, the mildness and the compassion of the saint contrasts with the representation of a world that does not easily accept the extraordinary, considered as a sign of evil.

Lingering between historical reality and fiction, hagiographic literature, with a wide range of unexplored sources, offers insight into the representation of *Otherness* in Byzantium.