

The hagiographical tradition and linguistic games in the *Συναξάριον τοῦ τιμημένου γαδάρου*

1. Introduction

The *Συναξάριον τοῦ τιμημένου γαδάρου* (*Synaxarion of the Honoured Donkey*, hereafter: *Synaxarion*)¹ is a poem that has attracted scholarly attention in recent years, and deservedly so. Its satirical character, interspersed with strong religious connotations, and its relation to ancient Greek fables and their reception in Byzantium,² as well as to Medieval tales from the West,³ and to Byzantine literature and history in general,⁴ show that we are dealing with a literary work that has still much to offer to modern scholarship. To all these issues we may add the ongoing study of how the *Synaxarion* relates to the post-Byzantine poem entitled *Γαδάρου, λύκου καὶ ἀλουπούς διήγησις ὠραία* (hereafter: *Diegesis*), which may or may not be a direct adaptation of its Byzantine counterpart.⁵

By taking into account previous research, including remarks made on the relation between the *Synaxarion* and the *Diegesis*, the present paper deals with two aspects of the former text. The first pertains to the characterization of the poem as a *συναξάριον*,⁶ by exploring the possibility that the Donkey is based on a known Byzantine saint and the text of his *Life*. Within this context, I shall try to show how the anonymous poet travesties the material he uses from the saint's *Life*, in order to serve his own literary purpose. The second aspect relates to the conscious shift of

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¹ My translation. Ulrich Moennig's rendition of the title is *Tale of the Hero Donkey* (see Moennig 2010, p. 130; Moennig 2014a, p. 178).

² For the discussion, see Moennig 2009, pp. 117-119 and 126. This is the edition of the *Synaxarion* I use in the present paper. The previous edition of the poem is in Wagner 1874, pp. 112-123.

³ See Lauxtermann, Janssen 2019.

⁴ For a placing of the *Synaxarion* within the Late Byzantine vernacular literature, and its correlation with other works, such as the *Poulologos* and the *Entertaining Tale of the Quadrupeds*, see Moennig 2012, esp. p. 589; Moennig 2014b, esp. p. 383; Moennig 2010, pp. 130-131. See also Stewart 2019, p. 176, where the scholar correlates the use of foul language as a comic tool in the *Synaxarion* and the *Entertaining Tale of the Quadrupeds*.

⁵ For earlier approaches, see Markomichelaki 2002, pp. 468-469. According to Kaklamanis 2020 (p. 494), Pochert 1991 (p. 135) and Lauxtermann, Janssen 2019 (p. 118), the *Synaxarion* and the *Diegesis* have a common source.

⁶ On the semantics of the word *συναξάριον* in connection to a specific genre and its conventions, see Moennig 2009, pp. 121-122 and Stewart 2017, pp. 77-78.

linguistic registers in the last part of the poem (the “golden shoe” incident), as a means of intensifying the irony and underlining the message(s) the poet aspired to convey to the original audience (readers and/or listeners).⁷ This section also includes a comparison with the *Diegesis*, where such linguistic games are not that striking. The concluding section proposes two alternative interpretations for the term *προτίμησις* (apart from the standard meaning).

2. Whose *συναξάριον*?

The title *Συναξάριον τοῦ τιμημένου γαδάρου* (regardless of whether it belongs to the poet or a creative copyist)⁸ is quite telling, for it defines the genre to which the poem belongs: it is a *συναξάριον* (I shall deal with *τιμημένος* in the last section), but the term needs to be discussed further. The aspect of a *συναξάριον* that interests us here is that of a short text commemorating solely the deeds that turned a secular person into a saint.⁹ Often, but not exclusively, the *συναξάρια* focus on the martyrdom of the saint.¹⁰ Based on these premises, my starting point will be the satirical and parodic use of the term, and by extension of the genre it denotes, within the *Synaxarion* for the Donkey, whose ill fate seems sealed until the last part of the poem, when he eventually manages to eschew martyrdom and to harm his opponents.¹¹ Within the context of “genre parody”, the question arises: could it be possible that the Donkey is modelled on a real Byzantine saint? Furthermore, could the poet be parodying specific events drawn from texts (e.g. a *συναξάριον* or a *Life*)¹² relating the life and deeds of this saint?

In order to explore this hypothesis, we may start by looking at the very last verse of the *Synaxarion*. The Donkey, says the narrator, should no longer be called *γάδαρον*, but *Νικήτα καὶ νικόν* (v. 393). The name *Νικήτας* has been largely ignored in the relevant literature,¹³ in contrast to *νικόν*, which has been interpreted as a short-

⁷ Some references in the poem (e.g. v. 272: *ἄκουσον*) suggest an implied audience. However, they could be construed as literary conventions or mere stylistic embellishments. For an analysis of similar instances in the vernacular literature, see Cupane 1994-1995.

⁸ On the titling of vernacular texts see Lasithiotakis 2004 and 2005.

⁹ See Moennig 2010, pp. 128 and 131.

¹⁰ See Moennig 2009, p. 121 and Stewart 2017, p. 77. Moennig lays more emphasis on the question of genre, in this way connecting the *synaxaria* to other relevant genres, such as the *διήγημα*, the *Lives* of Saints and the novel (see Moennig 2009, p. 122).

¹¹ Stewart 2017, pp. 77-78: «[...] the story focuses on the central event in the life of the Donkey, which almost leads to his ‘martyrdom’, the most commonly depicted event in *synaxaria* of saints [...] But the Donkey does not die, instead becoming the saintly hero of the tale». And: «the religious content is highly satirical, and the *synaxarial* form is presumably also parodic».

¹² On the relation between the short *synaxarion* and the longer *Lives*, see the remark in Moennig 2010, p. 131: «contemporary readers were encouraged to reconstruct a *fabula*, this time of an entire *Vita* of which the extant *synaxarion* comprises nothing more than the most important episodes».

¹³ Except for a brief note in Tsantsanoglou 1971, p. 63 n. 1.

ened form of the ancient adjective, used as a neutral noun here, ὄνικόν (from ὄνικός, meaning «relating to a donkey»),¹⁴ and in addition as a wordplay with the form ὁ νικῶν (the one who wins).¹⁵ However, it is possible that the poet is also insinuating the name Νίκων, which too has victorious connotations. With regard to literary history, there is the well-known incident first related by Plutarch (*Vita Antonii* 65, 5) of a donkey called Νίκων, whose name, reminiscent of the noun νίκη and the verb νικῶ, is linked to Octavian's victory at the naval battle of Actium. Since the poet of the *Synaxarion* is obviously a learned man, I see no problem in assuming that he had read the story in Plutarch, but even if we deny him such erudition, he could well have been familiar with it from the *Annales* of Michael Glykas (p. 380, 9-13 Bekker), a work which dates to the 12th century.¹⁶

If so, then the Donkey in the *Synaxarion* would have acquired not one, but two new names: Νικήτας and, subtly, Νίκων. Was there a Byzantine saint who was associated with both these names before the poem was composed (late 14th or early 15th century)?¹⁷ Actually there was, namely Nikon, the “Metanoëite” (i.e. the preacher of repentance; Νίκων ὁ Μετανοεῖτε in Greek), né Niketas, a 10th-century saint, whose *Life*, probably composed in the mid-11th century, exists in two versions, which differ little from each other.¹⁸ Interestingly enough, if we put Nikon's *Life* side by side to the *Synaxarion*, there are several elements that are comparable.¹⁹

First we have the very concept of penance. Nikon's teaching was the constant urge for repentance, hence his nickname (μετανοεῖτε = repent ye!). The act of confession and subsequent penance, or rather the travesty of this sacrament, is a major theme in the *Synaxarion*,²⁰ exemplified both by the Wolf's and the Fox's mock-

¹⁴ See Tsantsanoglou 1971 and Moennig 2009, p. 117.

¹⁵ See Lauxtermann, Janssen 2019, p. 116.

¹⁶ Cfr. Moennig 2009, pp. 117-118. The scholar maintains that in the *Synaxarion* «das Wortspiel [...] ist von einer anderen Qualität [...] Dennoch liegt die Vermutung nahe, dass der anonyme Autor die Episode [i.e. in Plutarch] – aus erster oder aus zweiter Hand – kannte». Tsantsanoglou 1971 (pp. 55-56 and 61-62) rejects any connection to Plutarch's Nikon, for it is not a name used for donkeys. And yet he has no problem accepting that the unconventional name Niketas could be an invention of the poet for satirical reasons (p. 63 n. 1). The story is also included in the *Histories* of Niketas Choniates (early 13th century), but here Νίκων is the donkey-driver, whereas the donkey is called Νίκανδρος (p. 650 van Dielen).

¹⁷ See Moennig 2009, p. 128, for a dating either to the 14th or the 15th century and Lauxtermann, Janssen 2019, pp. 118-122, for a dating to the 15th century.

¹⁸ See *ODB*, s.v. For the perception of time and its eschatological connotations in the *Life* of Nikon, see Anagnostakis 2018. On the use of time and space in the *Life*, see Théologitis 2004. On the motifs of doubt and disbelief in the *Life*, see Kaldellis 2014, pp. 459-460.

¹⁹ Edition used: Lampsides 1982. Lampsides edits the earlier manuscript that transmits the *Life*, but discusses thoroughly its differences to the later manuscript (pp. 324-334). A critical edition of both versions is by Sullivan 1987. A critical assessment of both editions is offered by Rosenquist 1996. The *menaion* of Nikon (see *Μηναῖα τοῦ ὅλου ἐνιαυτοῦ*, II, Rome 1889, pp. 286-296, including a *synaxarion* on p. 293) does not offer material of any importance to the *Synaxarion*.

²⁰ Cfr. Moennig 2009, p. 123 («Travestie einer Beichte» = travesty of a confession) and Stewart 2017, p. 74 («mockery of penitence»).

confessions. However, at the end of the poem, the Fox and the Wolf realize that they underestimated the Donkey, which leads them to change their mind: from now on they are going to honor the Donkey. This is essentially an act of “secular repentance” (i.e. a feeling of contrition without any religious connotations), the only time in the poem that the two hypocrites actually mean sincerely what they say, which stands in contrast to their earlier dishonest “religious repentance”.

Therefore, what happens in the poem is a process of “desacralization”, where the travesty of an Orthodox sacrament is replaced by a meaningful mental change, secular at its core. Terminology is important here: during his mock-confession, the Wolf uses the verb μεταγνώθω in order to show that he repents for his sins, a later form of the ancient μεταγιγνώσκω. When used within religious context, the word may refer to the sacrament of penance,²¹ whereas the secular meaning simply denotes a change of mind, with no metaphysical connotations²² (in her confession, the Fox employs μεταβολή; one of the non-religious meanings of the word is “a change in the shape of things”,²³ which could be construed as an irony on behalf of the poet as regards the outcome of the story).

Perhaps all this makes more sense, if we regard the Donkey as a contemporary (i.e. of the time the *Synaxarion* was written) take on Nikon, meaning a worldly version of this saint, who makes his opponents repent by means of cunning and violence (the trick of the golden shoe leads to the beating of the Wolf and the assault on the Fox), instead of traditional “saintly” ways. In addition, it is noteworthy that, after his forced confession, the Donkey does not show any repentance for his alleged sins: he knows he has done nothing wrong, as God is his witness.²⁴ However, this last claim, along with the one made by the Fox after her and the Wolf’s defeat that the Donkey triumphed thanks to God granting him prudence and wisdom,²⁵ show that what the poem is against is the deceiving rhetoric about the Afterlife, voiced by prelates and monks, which perpetuates social injustice.

The next remark concerns the setting of the *Synaxarion* and the social status of the Donkey, in comparison to the *Life* of Saint Nikon and his own social class. The Donkey belongs to a poor farmer, most probably a *paroikos*, namely someone who works in the fields of rich landowners.²⁶ Since the poem’s protagonists are animals that act as humans, the Donkey himself becomes the personification of a poor dependent farmer. For his part, Nikon was the son of a rich landowner, who (Nikon) had an epiphany when once visiting the fields where the impoverished peasants were toiling. He was shocked by the working conditions there, but instead of taking action in order to ameliorate them, he realized that the only solution was to

²¹ See Lampe, *s.v.* μεταγι(γ)νώσκω and μετάγνωσις.

²² See LSJ, *s.v.* μεταγιγνώσκω and Kriaras, X, *s.v.* μεταγνώθω.

²³ See LSJ, *s.v.* Π and Π 3.

²⁴ Ἄλλον οὐδὲν ἐπίσταμαι, ὁ Κύριος τὸ βλέπει (v. 264).

²⁵ Καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἰδὼν αὐτοῦ τὴν ταπεινοφροσύνην | ἔδωκέν τον καὶ φρόνεσιν, ἔδωκέν τον καὶ γῶσιν (vv. 367-368).

²⁶ See ODB, *s.v.*

withdraw from secular life and devote oneself to God.²⁷ If there is a connection with the *Synaxarion*, then it is once again in terms of parody and derision: the “saint” Donkey / Nikon / Niketas is the oppressed, wretched villain and, if he can hope for even a slight improvement in his life, he has to take action himself – which he does. Therefore, the answer to social injustice and exploitation is not seclusion or fatalism but resistance.

We move on now to the most famous scene in the poem, that of the Donkey’s supposed golden shoe (vv. 268-320), which essentially relates to the gift of clairvoyance, or rather of pretended clairvoyance used as a tool of deception.²⁸ As a whole, the “golden shoe” scene makes sense, but one detail is puzzling: why is the shoe golden? Moreover, why is this detail only included in this version of the poem? Leaving aside the relevant Aesopic fable *Λύκος ἰατρός*²⁹ and the *Diegesis*, from which the shoe is absent,³⁰ we turn to the non-Greek medieval parallels of the tale, and, as Marc Lauxtermann kindly informed me, the shoe, when mentioned (usually it is simply the Donkey’s hoof), is not golden in any other Western or Arabic version of the story. Why then does it appear so in the *Synaxarion*?

Let us see what the *Life* of Nikon has to offer. Early on and after witnessing the wretchedness of the farmers, Nikon leaves his home and reaches the monastery of Χρυσῆ Πέτρα, i.e. Golden Rock, which, according to the narrator, is named after the golden souls of the ascetics residing there.³¹ The abbot of the monastery, being blessed with the gift of clairvoyance, embraces the young man as soon as he enters the premises, calling him by his name, that is Niketas – the narrator comments: «that is the truly victorious one».³² The abbot, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, which makes him capable of sensing what the future holds, assures the young man that he will always have God by his side, and the latter enters the monastery. The narrator then likens the training period of the novice to that of a rookie soldier.³³

By keeping in mind that parody plays a major role in the *Synaxarion* (we saw how it worked in the “confession and penance” motif), we can draw some parallels between the aforesaid episode from the *Life* of Nikon with the late Byzantine poem.

²⁷ See Lampsides 1982, pp. 18-20. On *paroikoi* in the *Life* of Nikon, see also Kaplan, Kountoura-Galaki 2014, p. 396.

²⁸ Cfr. Lauxtermann, Janssen 2019, pp. 115-116. The authors rightly point out the nature of the joke: if the Donkey possessed the ability of foresight, then he would have known that the Fox and the Wolf were coming after him in the first place.

²⁹ See Moennig 2009, p. 118, building on Nikolaos Politis’ previous findings.

³⁰ The Donkey talks about a gift he has at the rear of his foot, without mentioning a shoe. See Alexiou 1955, p. 99 (vv. 387-388). Critical remarks on this edition by Politis 1958, pp. 305-313.

³¹ See Lampsides 1982, pp. 20-22.

³² Ὡς δὲ μικρὸν ὁ γέρον προβάς συνήνησε τῷ νεανία, περιεπλάκη μὲν τῷ τραχήλῳ καὶ τοῦτον οἶά περ πατήρ φιλόστοργος κατησπάζετο, Νικήταν, τὸν τῷ ὄντι νικητὴν, καλῶν ἐξ ὀνόματος (Lampsides 1982, p. 22).

³³ Ἦν οὖν λοιπὸν ἰδεῖν τὸν νεόλεκτον τοῦτ’ στρατιώτην καὶ ἀληθῶς ἀξιόμαχον μάλα νεανικὸν πνέοντα καὶ δίκην ἀδάμαντος διακείμενον (Lampsides 1982, p. 22).

First, the “golden shoe” incident is the exact point where the Donkey is transformed from an inglorious indigent into the glorious “Niketas” of the epilogue – naturally, the anonymous poet makes a similar comment on the author of Nikon’s *Life* regarding the victorious connotations of this name (vv. 388 and 393). Second, the episode in the *Life* is associated with the gift of clairvoyance, which is granted by the Holy Spirit; in the *Synaxarion* we see a travesty of this, since the whole affair is nothing but a sham – the fact that the Donkey claims that God gave him this gift only makes the irony stronger. Third, after the “golden shoe” incident and the hitting of the Wolf, the Donkey engages in a blatant sexual assault upon the Fox (vv. 314-320). Her retelling of what she saw (i.e. the Donkey’s genitalia) teems with military terminology (vv. 336-342), and we remarked that in the *Life* the soon-to-be saint is presented as a recruit during his novitiate.³⁴ The fact that the Donkey assaults the Fox by exposing his sexual organs and the likening of these to weaponry again emphasizes the image of an “alternative sainthood” that the poem promotes: in the outrageously derisive world of the *Synaxarion*, “sainthood” is related exclusively to the physical world and the body itself.³⁵

As can be seen, the episode from the *Life* and the “golden shoe” incident are apparently comparable. But what about the “golden” aspect? Well, the setting of the scene in the *Life* is the monastery of Χρυσῆ Πέτρα. Could it be that in the hands of the anonymous poet Χρυσῆ Πέτρα became, as a means of parody, τὸ χρυσοῦν τὸ πέταλον? If anything, all the other elements are here: divine clairvoyance vs a travesty of clairvoyance; Niketas the soldier of Christ vs Niketas the honored (and well-endowed) labouring hero. It is useful to note that neither the golden shoe nor the name Niketas features in the *Diegesis*,³⁶ which suggests that if the poet of the *Synaxarion* intended to play with elements deriving from the *Life* of Nikon, the poet of the *Diegesis* probably did not.

Based on this last remark, we notice that the wordplay in the prologue of the *Life* of Nikon (Νίκωνά φημι [...] νικητὴν ἀναδειχθέντα καὶ λαμπρὰ τὰ τρόπαια στήσαντα κατὰ τῶν πολεμίων),³⁷ which has its parallels in the *Synaxarion* (ἀλλὰ νικὸν ἄς

³⁴ The mention of weaponry in the *Synaxarion* could also mean that there is a link between the Donkey and the military saints of Byzantine hagiography (Nikon is not one of them). I will not deal with this possible connection in the present paper, but it is a hypothesis that could be further explored. On military saints, see Delehaye 1909 and Walter 2003.

³⁵ Cfr. Moennig 2010, p. 131: «Yet, the use of synaxarion is satirically modulated, as the qualities of the protagonist are obviously different from those of a saint».

³⁶ The case of νικόν is more complicated. It appears as Νικόν in Alexiou’s edition (Alexiou 1955, p. 103, v. 538) and Νίκο in Kaklamanis’ transcription of the first Venetian edition of 1539 (see Kaklamanis 2020, p. 509, v. 538), but Tsantsanoglou 1971 (p. 58) aptly notes that in the Venetian edition it says νικό (actually νικόσε, the words νικό and σε written as one), in tandem with the νικόν of the *Synaxarion*.

³⁷ See Lampsides 1982, p. 14. This is the formulation of the oldest manuscript. In the other the text is thus: καὶ τοῦ ὁσίου τούτου πατρὸς Νικωνος τὰ ἐπ’ ἀρετὴν κατορθώματα μείζω φανῆναι δεικνύουσι τῆς κλήσεως τοῦ ὀνόματος, νικητοῦ γὰρ ἀναδειχθέντος καὶ λαμπρὰ τὰ τρόπαια στήσαντος κατὰ τῶν πολεμίων (Lampsides 1982, p. 326).

τὸν λαλοῦν: Ὅτι ἐνίκησέν μας and νικὸν ἄς εἶσαι ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν, Νικήτα νὰ σὲ λέσιν), has been all but lost in the *Diegesis*. Consequently, here the “saintly” parameter of the Donkey has been pretty much eradicated.

3. Playing with registers

The language of the *Synaxarion* is the mixed language of late Byzantine literature, where “archaisms” and elements of the vernacular are combined.³⁸ In the *Synaxarion* there are verses where one can discern a clear intention behind the use of higher registers on behalf of the poet, as for instance when the Fox and the Wolf use mock-ecclesiastical language in order to intimidate – or so they think – the Donkey, thus exerting their authority and their sense of superiority over him. This is particularly noticeable on the occasions when the Fox and the Wolf refer to the highest authority of all, the Holy Bible. The Fox says: [...] καὶ ἐλεῆσαι καὶ ἡμᾶς ὡς πάλαι Νινευίτας· | ὡς Ἰωνᾶν ἐρρύσατο ἐκ κήτους τῆς κοιλίας, | ἐλευθερώσαι καὶ ἡμᾶς ἐκ τοῦ πικροῦ θανάτου (vv. 109-111). For his part, the Wolf declares, after the Fox’s confession and repentance: τὸν Μανασσῆν ἐνίκησας, τὴν πόρνην ἐμμήσω, | καὶ γέγονας σὺ ὅμοιος πάλε ὥσπερ ἐκείνους (vv. 213-214). But we also have the starting point of it all, the moment when the two accomplices suggest they confess their sins along with the Donkey, as Death is allegedly imminent. The Wolf, unaware of the Fox’s ploy according to the narrator, argues that one should make a confession: ἐν συνειδότη καθαρῶ, γνώμη ἀνυποκρίτω (v. 119).

Apart from such isolated verses, the two speak the mixed idiom of the “Byzantine literary vernacular”, with a preference for simple syntactic structures, because they think that the Donkey is boorish and, by extension, illiterate. The Fox is clear on this point from early on: γράμματα οὐ μεμάθηκας καὶ παιδείεσιν οὐκ οἶδας (v. 63; yet another verse in higher register, again in order to subjugate the Donkey with words). Indeed, the Donkey’s speech until the “golden shoe” scene (i.e. his soliloquies in vv. 22-41 and 226-249, plus three more lines in 262-264) are in low register (some learned elements notwithstanding). This register lacks the kind of archaisms that we saw the other two animals using, such as ancient verbs (e.g. οἶδα), ancient Greek infinitives (the Donkey does not use infinitives at all, except for v. 41, along with an obsolete conjunction: εἰ θέλετε τοῦ ζῆν) and the dative. Truly, from the way the Donkey articulates his thoughts, the Fox and the Wolf are justified in assuming that their prey is not cultivated, and is therefore easy to subdue.

However, the Donkey has an ace up his sleeve. After he is condemned by the Fox and the Wolf for his “sins”, he comes up with the “golden shoe” ploy. The way the scene is constructed and expressed echoes the character of each animal:

³⁸ For a discussion of the poem’s language, including a brief comparison to the *Diegesis*, see Lauxtermann, Janssen 2019, pp. 119-122. On the language of the Byzantine literature written in the vernacular, see Hinterberger 2001; Hinterberger 2006; Toufexis 2008; Holton, Horrocks, Janssen, Lendari, Manollessou, Toufexis 2019.

the Fox is perplexed and she urges the Wolf to have a look. The latter is presented throughout the poem as obtuse, therefore it comes as no surprise that he happily obliges, for surely the wise Fox should know better.³⁹ But why is the cunning Fox so easily deceived? Let us look at the articulation of the Donkey's words: προκειταί μοι ὁ θάνατος, ὡς πέφυκεν ἢ κρίσις [...] | Θέλω γοῦν δεῖξει τὸ χρυσοῦν πέταλον, ὃ ἔχω, | καὶ ὅστις μόνον τὸ ἰδῆ, τὸ πέταλον, ὃ ἔχω, | πρὶν τοῦ θανάτου μου ἰδεῖν, χάριν πολλὴν λαμβάνει (vv. 275 and 280-282). Datives, infinitives, ancient relative pronouns, πρὶν plus infinitive with an "accusative and infinitive" construction, προκειταί μοι / πέφυκεν – it is as if the Donkey has suddenly become a learned man! This shows that the Donkey does indeed know how to speak his enemies' idiom and he succeeds in luring them to their defeat by giving them a taste of their own medicine.

The irony is further stressed by something the Fox told the Donkey at the beginning of the poem: [...] μάθε νὰ συντυχαίνης, | ψέμαν οὐδὲν εἰπῆς ποτέ, ἀλήθειαν λέγε πάντα (vv. 65-66). But the Fox is obviously lying here, for her intention is to harm the Donkey, so she is secretly talking about persuasion, not frankness, and so about rhetoric – something with which the Byzantines were quite accustomed. In the "golden shoe" scene the Donkey is employing that same rhetoric, i.e. a learned idiom with a skillful use of words, which catches the Fox off guard and ultimately deceives her. This is confirmed also by the *Diegesis*, where the Fox exclaims at the very end of the poem that: καὶ ῥήτορας ἐγίνηκε νὰ μᾶς καταμιτώσῃ (v. 527; καταμιτώω means to entangle, deceive). Yet, the previous verse in the *Diegesis* is also revealing, this time by means of juxtaposition to the *Synaxarion*. More specifically, in the *Diegesis* the Fox says the Donkey tricked them: δίχως νὰ ξεύρη μάθημα καὶ γράμμα ν' ἀναγνώσῃ (v. 526). This cannot be true in the case of the *Synaxarion*, where, as we saw, the Donkey is in fact literate, but he was waiting for the right time to show it.

Moving on, the quoted verse from the *Diegesis* (v. 526) needs some further discussion. Being illiterate and being ignorant or unsophisticated are two different things. The first (γράμμα) means one does not know how to speak properly, let alone write and read. The second (μάθημα) emphasizes the lack of knowledge. The Donkey of the *Synaxarion* is not unsophisticated, whilst the Fox is somewhat justified in thinking that the Donkey of the *Diegesis* is. However, as I will argue, in both poems the Donkey cannot be held ignorant. This claim is based on an intertextual reference he makes to the New Testament, which has slipped the attention of scholars, and apparently of the Fox as well. The Donkey says: τὸ τάλαντον οὐ κρύψω (v. 276), which παρὰ θεοῦ δεδῶρημαι (v. 279). On a first level, the noun τάλαντον means «gift» (not far from its Modern Greek use, meaning "talent"),⁴⁰

³⁹ I agree with Stewart 2017 (p. 74) that the Wolf is not bright at all. Moennig 2009 (pp. 122-123) holds the opposite view, arguing that the Wolf is fully aware of the Fox's plan and that it is the narrator who presents him as slow-witted in order to achieve irony.

⁴⁰ See Kriaras, XXII, *s.v.* τάλαντον, 3. It should be mentioned that this meaning («έμφρονη ικανότητα, χάρισμα, ως δῶρο που δίνεται ἀπὸ το Θεό») is linked directly to the *exegetis* of the parable of the talents.

but on a second level what we have here is a subtle reference to the parable of the talents (Mt 25): In it, a wealthy homeowner (i.e. God) is going on a journey. He gathers his servants and gives to each one of them a sum of talents (i.e. money). When he returns he finds that all the servants have increased the sum, but for one, who chose to bury the money he was handed. The furious master then dismisses him.

It is interesting, to say the least, that the Donkey is practically identifying himself with the «unforgiving servant» and then reverses this by the use of brute force. In any case, the Fox and the Wolf, who, as already mentioned, had both resorted to the authority of the Old and the New Testament before,⁴¹ now find themselves unable to fathom that the Donkey is doing the same to them – and with the use of the “proper” language. He literally outwits them in their own game. In the *Diegesis* the linguistic aspect is pretty much lost, but the reference to the parable is still there, meaning that the Donkey is not lacking in μάθησιν after all. Thus, the joke in the *Diegesis* could be that the Fox remains in the dark until the very end.

Another thing that is worth mentioning is that in the *Synaxarion*, after the Wolf is kicked in the teeth, the register shifts and becomes low, interspersed with everyday words (see the inventory of weaponry) and simpler syntax. This passage (v. 310 onwards, but the register is lowered already from v. 295) comprises the sexual assault of the Donkey and the retelling of it by the Fox, with a fixation on the Donkey’s penis, whose shape is described only by means of simile. So, after rhetoric did its work, the Donkey stops playing the game of his enemies and now shows to his primary foe, the Fox, where he is coming from. The sexual body of the oppressed replaces and triumphs over the deceitful mind and spirit of the oppressor. Of course, one cannot but see the misogyny involved here,⁴² nor ignore the fact that the whole scene seems somewhat crude to our modern perspective. Truly, even if we assume that the Donkey is merely trying to scare the Fox, in order to get rid of her, it does seem like attempted rape after all. Even so, it is difficult to disagree that the anonymous poet treated his material in a quite dexterous manner.

4. A final note: the προτίμησις of the Donkey

Early in the poem, when the Fox reprimands the Donkey for his attempt to free himself from her and the Wolf by means of deception, she tells him that if he becomes associated with them he will learn how to speak the truth in a proper manner, thus gaining προτίμησιν (v. 67). After the “golden shoe” incident and the defeat of the two friends, the Fox now argues that God helped the Donkey escape harm, by giving him prudence and knowledge. Thus the Donkey freed himself «with his προτίμησιν» (v. 369). The word appears one last time, in the extoling epilogue. The narrator exclaims: «Hail, oh Donkey, with your προτίμησιν» (v. 385), which corresponds to the epilogue of the *Diegesis* (v. 534: γιὰτὶ μὲ γνῶσις ἔφυγες,

⁴¹ See also Moennig 2009, p. 119.

⁴² See Moennig 2009, pp. 124-125.

μὲ τὴν προτίμησίν σου). As far as the *Synaxarion* is concerned, the meaning of the noun the first time is rather easy to understand: if the Donkey becomes a pupil of the Fox and the Wolf he will gain more respect than anyone else, indeed he will be considered «the most honored Donkey»,⁴³ a play on the poem's title,⁴⁴ since things are reversed in the end. In this vein, in the other two instances where the formulation μὲ τὴν προτίμησίν σου appears it is probably meant that the Donkey has gained the utmost honor despite having acted in the opposite way: instead of joining the two (a scheme of course, which would have led to his killing), he got rid of them.

Up to this point things are rather clear; προτίμησις is the logical extension of the Donkey's characterization as τιμημένος in the poem's title and vice versa: thanks to his προτίμησις, the Donkey is now considered τιμημένος. Yet there is one more aspect that needs to be taken into account. We have seen in the second section that a major theme in the *Synaxarion* is the mocking of the holy sacraments, namely confession and repentance. Another important theme that needs to be mentioned now is the gift of foresight and how it is used as a tool of deception against one's rivals. Naturally, the battle is between the Donkey and the Fox. As regards the Donkey, the situation is rather simple, for his golden shoe is supposedly predicting the future. For her part, the Fox presents herself as a skilled astrologer and a soothsayer (v. 57), and later on she uses her alleged gift in order to put her ploy in action (v. 99). Nonetheless, in the *Diegesis* the Fox pretends to be knowledgeable also about something else, namely the oracles of Leo the Wise (v. 104; also in v. 508, as the Wolf reprimands her for what happened to them), a skill associated once again with the prediction of the future.

What is interesting here is that προτίμησις is the title of one of the oracles that belong to the learned tradition of the so-called oracles of Leo the Wise,⁴⁵ in which the Chosen Emperor is seen resurrected, in this way being granted the right to have a second *Life*.⁴⁶ In some manuscripts (the earliest dating to the 16th century),

⁴³ See LSJ, *s.v.*: honouring before or above others. Lampe, *s.v.* interprets προτίμησις as «penalty», but both textual references are not convincing. One of them is the ecclesiastical history of Theodoret of Cyrus, where in the most recent edition the formulation προτιμήσεις πόλεων has been changed to προστιμήσεις πόλεων, which makes more sense (see Parmentier, Scheidweiler 1954, p. 290). The other text is the ecclesiastical history of Gelesios of Kyzikos. The relevant passage is as follows: Πολλούς τε γὰρ ἀκρίτως τῶν ἐν τέλει θανάτῳ παραδιδούς [= Maxentius], ζημίας τε καὶ φυγὰς καὶ τῆς γῆς ἀναδασμόν, καὶ προτιμήσεις ἀνεξετάστως ἐπέβαλλεν (PG LXXXV, col. 1201A). What Gelasios is saying here is that Maxentius redistributed the land and that honors were granted unwisely to his friends. The Latin translation in the *Patrologia* gets it right: «honores sine delectu tribuebat».

⁴⁴ It is worth noting here that in the *Spaneas* (V 165 Zoras; quoted in Kriaras, XVIII, *s.v.* προτίμησις, 2), προτίμησις and τιμή are used almost as synonyms: δός του προτίμησιν πολλήν, δός του τιμὴν μεγάλην.

⁴⁵ The starting point for the study of the “oracles of Leo the Wise” is Mango 1960. See also Kyriakou 1995 and Kastrinakis 2018.

⁴⁶ See PG CVII, col. 1140CD = Kyriakou 1995, p. 185; Brokkaar *et al.* 2002, p. 84; Vereecken, Hadermann-Misguich 2000, p. 112.

there is a second part to this oracle (in other manuscripts it forms a separate oracle), where the Chosen One is asked to abandon his former “boorish” lifestyle, the word employed being ἀγρότης or ἀγρώτης, thus relating to a peasant way of life in its literal sense.⁴⁷ If we take into consideration the obvious comic character of the tale, then we could argue that the poet of the *Diegesis* is mocking material found in the learned tradition of the oracles of Leo. Leaving aside the eschatology of these texts, the Donkey is indeed regarded in the beginning as a “boorish” creature that manages to escape certain death. In this way, the outcome of the “hoof / foot” scene (no golden shoe here) could be understood as a symbolic resurrection and the change of attitude of his foes from then on as a metaphor for the Donkey no longer leading a boorish way of life.

A third oracle that perhaps is parodied is the one called Εὐχαριστία (*Gratitude*), where the Chosen One is commended for adopting the deceitful ways of the fox, in showing φιλία to the two enemies who are trying to harm him. Thanks to this cunning behavior, the enemies end up fighting each other, while the Chosen One remains unharmed. In the *Diegesis*, the Fox and the Wolf do not exactly fight each other after their defeat, but there is some tension between them, as the Wolf calls the Fox «a whore and a drunkard» (v. 509). In any case, since in the poem the Donkey succeeded in escaping death by using the deceitful technique of the Fox, there is some common ground with the first verse of the said oracle: τὴν ἀλωπεκὴν (or ἀλώπεκος) ὑποκριθεὶς φιλίαν.⁴⁸

The above remarks on the learned tradition of the oracles of Leo applies also to the *Synaxarion*, save for the tension between the Fox and the Wolf – the two are actually consoling each other: Ὑστερον δὲ καὶ ἐπαρηγορήθησαν μετὰ αἰσχύνης πλείστης (v. 372). However, the part concerning the “friendship of a fox” is even more accentuated in the *Synaxarion*, inasmuch as the Donkey opts additionally for a refined style of speech in order to fool the Fox (see previous section). Since scholarly work on the oracles of Leo has shown that these texts were around at least as early as the early 13th century,⁴⁹ and in the form we know them they seem to exist at least from the early 14th century,⁵⁰ while the *Synaxarion* is a late 14th- or early 15th-century text, then it could be tentatively argued that its poet is also

⁴⁷ In the edition of Vereecken, Hadermann-Misguich 2000 (p. 112), the two oracles form the two parts of προτίμησις. In the edition of Brokkaar *et al.* 2002 (p. 80), it is a separate oracle, called εὐσέβεια, and the same goes for the edition in *PG* CVII, col. 1137AB (= Kyriakou 1995, p. 184).

⁴⁸ *PG* CVII, col. 1136BC = Kyriakou 1995, p. 183: ἀλωπεκὴν... φιλίαν; Brokkaar *et al.* 2002, p. 74: ἀλωπεκὴν... φιλίαν; Vereecken, Hadermann-Misguich, p. 110: ἀλώπεκος... φιλίαν.

⁴⁹ There have been several attempts to link some of the oracles to specific events and periods of Byzantine history, going as far back as the age of Iconoclasm (see, e.g., Brokkaar *et al.* 2002, pp. 23-44). I do not go into detail regarding chronology, as my interest is focused on the fact that the learned tradition of the oracles predates the *Synaxarion*. The *terminus ante quem* is Niketas Choniates' *Histories*, namely the early 13th century (see Vereecken, Hadermann-Misguich 2000, pp. 39-41).

⁵⁰ The learned branch of the “oracles of Leo the Wise” first appear in a Latin translation, dating to the early 14th century (see Vereecken, Hadermann-Misguich 2000, pp. 47-48).

mocking the same oracles as the ones derided in the *Diegesis*. The reason that the oracles are not explicitly mentioned in the *Synaxarion* may be attributed to the fact that, as argued in the previous sections, the whole poem is in general rather subtle and suggestive.

If so, then we are allowed to make one final note with regard to the *Synaxarion*. Apart from the association of προτίμησις with the learned tradition of the oracles of Leo the Wise, the word had yet another meaning in the Byzantine world. More specifically, it was a legal term denoting the «right of preemption, or priority, in various property arrangements, usually purchases».⁵¹ The legal term mostly applied to Middle Byzantine village communities. Although it was not established strictly as a means of protecting the poor from the powerful, but rather as a way of regulating the interests of the two groups in an effective manner (according to fiscal reality at a given moment), it was the first group that mainly benefited from it.⁵² However, although theoretically still valid in Late Byzantine times, it was in name only. Indeed, in the Late Byzantine period the village community deteriorated and much land was deserted, which in its turn was handed over to landowners and monasteries. As a result, many peasants were forced to become *paroikoi*.⁵³

Therefore, by taking into account the legal content of προτίμησις in Byzantium and how its effects evolved over time on a fiscal and social level, we may wonder whether the *Synaxarion* harks back nostalgically to a time when προτίμησις was one of the few ways to control the greed of the (lay and ecclesiastical) powerful and thus protect the poor and their property. In this vein, the scene in which the Fox is snatching a hen from the «poor old widow» (v. 161: μία χήρα ἄπορος) could perhaps be understood as an allegory of the Late Byzantine reality the poet was witnessing. The Fox says that her targets were mainly the «destitute widows» (v. 156: οἱ χῆρες οἱ πτωχοῦτσικες), but she also claims that she was chased many a time by the dogs of the «archons»,⁵⁴ when she tried to steal from them (vv. 159-160: πόσες φορές ἐγλύτωσα ἐκ τῶν ἀρχόντων τὰ σπίτια | ὅτι ἔχουν σκύλους δυνατούς, νὰ μὴ με θανατώσουν). What this shows is that we should either focus on the ecclesiastical and monastic connotations of the Fox and the Wolf, or simply not take the Fox's words at face value – after all we are dealing with her rhetorical self-fashioning here. In any case, the said scene does seem like a classic case of the powerful stealing from the poor and within this context the legal aspect of προτίμησις, could, in my view, be brought into future discussions about the *Synaxarion*.

This legal aspect is further supported by the narrator's comment at the end of the poem that the Donkey's act has won him the πάρεον, along with τὴν τιμὴν τοῦ κόσμου (v. 386). As Tsantsanoglou has argued, πάρεον could be the transliteration of a Western term referring to a noble title, and here it implies that, from now on, the

⁵¹ ODB, s.v. *protimesis*; cfr. Kriaras, XVIII, s.v. προτίμησις, 6.

⁵² See Lemerle 1979, pp. 90-105, esp. 102.

⁵³ See Laiou-Thomadakis 1977, pp. 53-58 and 105.

⁵⁴ On the social connotations of the term *archon* in Byzantium, see ODB, s.v.

Donkey has the right to be regarded as a true nobleman.⁵⁵ Therefore, the τιμημένος γάδαρος of the title acquires yet another meaning, that of someone who has been granted a noble title. As far as προτίμησις is concerned, the πάρεον clearly relates to the first meaning of the word (i.e. a truly honoured individual), but also to the last one we saw, that of the right of preemption. Truly, if the Donkey has the right of preemption against the powerful, while also been considered a nobleman (both attributes understood, of course, in a figurative sense), then his impressive triumph, which happened against all odds, is accentuated all the more.

Konstantinos Chryssogelos

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⁵⁵ See Tsantsanoglou 1971, p. 60; cfr. Kriaras, XV, s.v. πάρεον.

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Konstantinos Chrysogelos, *The hagiographical tradition and linguistic games in the Συναξάριον τοῦ τιμημένου γαδάρου*

The present paper deals with several aspects of the Late Byzantine poem *Synaxarion of the honored donkey*. First, it is argued that the figure of the Donkey could have been modelled upon the earlier *Life* of an existing saint, namely that of Saint Nikon the “metanoicite” («repent ye!»). Second, that the conscious shift of linguistic registers plays an important role in the way irony and comic effect are achieved in the *Synaxarion*. Third, an attempt is made to explore the polysemy of the word προτίμησις, which relates to the learned tradition of “the oracles of Leo the Wise”, but also to Middle and Late Byzantine legislation regarding peasant communities.