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Woman Monks of Coptic and Christian Hagiography

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Abstract

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English

Woman monks are not uncommon to find in Coptic and other hagiographic literature. They were described to dress into male attire and travel to anchoritic monasteries where they would get a single cell to devote their lives to God through seclusion, prayers, fasting, meditation, studies, and other daily chores, all the while not being known as women by most of the men in their brethren. It was a tough life for a man and it would have been a tough life for a woman. In this study, five hagiographies about woman monks will be examined: three Coptic, one Christian, and one found in both traditions. These women performed miracles and went through changes in both body and mind. The woman Hilaria is one of the most popular saints in Coptic belief and her story is the corner stone of this thesis. Her legend is also considered to be one of the oldest and might be the origin of these kinds of stories, which makes it remarkable on its own. Nonetheless, four other female saints will be examined to find what this essay seeks to answer: What are these women, as women, doing and why? What is the meaning of these stories? Why do they go to anchoritic monasteries? Are we dealing with portraying ideals on Coptic and Christian women? These are some of the questions that this essay is based upon. It combines Egyptological, Christian, literary, as well as gender research for a relevant and fresh view on these texts and their meaning.

Svenska

Kvinnliga munkar är inte ovanliga att hitta i koptisk och annan hagiografisk litteratur. De klädde sig i manliga kläder och reste till anakoretiska kloster där de fick en cell för att viga sitt liv åt Gud genom avskildhet, böner, fastande, meditation, studier och andra vardagliga sysslor, allt medan de flesta av männen i deras brödraskap inte visste att de var kvinnor. Det var ett hårt liv för en man och det var ett hårt liv för en kvinna. I den här studien kommer fem hagiografier om kvinnomunkar att undersökas: tre koptiska, en kristen och en som återfinns i både traditioner. Dessa kvinnor utfärdade mirakel och gick igenom förändringar i både kropp och sinne. Kvinnan Hilaria är ett av de mest populära helgonen inom koptiskt trosväsende, och hennes historia är hörnpelaren i denna uppsats. Hennes legend anses också vara en av de äldsta och kanske ursprunget till dessa sorts historier, vilket gör den enastående i sig själv. Trots det kommer fyra andra kvinnliga helgon att undersökas för att hitta de svar som denna uppsats söker: Vad gör dessa kvinnor som kvinnor, och varför? Vad betyder dessa historier? Varför går de till anakoretiska kloster? Har vi att göra med porträtterande av ideal för koptiska och kristna kvinnor? Dessa är några av de frågor som denna uppsats bygger på. Den kombinerar egyptologiska, kristna, litteratur- och genusstudier för ett relevant och färskt perspektiv på dessa texter och deras betydelse.

Keywords: Woman monks, Coptic, Christianity, hagiography, Hilaria, saints

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1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine five hagiographic works found in Coptic and Christian literature. These works describe and tell the stories of women who dressed up as men to become monks and live an ascetic life. The core of this essay is the story about Hilaria, a key woman monk in Coptic hagiography. There are many other legends of the same sort. The other four saints considered in this essay are, from the Coptic Synaxarium Mariam, Anastasia, and Pelagia, and from Christian hagiography, Pelagia as well as Eugenia. As it is a relatively unexplored topic, this study aims to contribute to the research on hagiographic, and in particular Coptic, literature and the portrayal of these women. The stories' Christian message has already been studied and so this paper's focus will be primarily on gender, although it cannot disregard the Christian value of the texts as it plays a major part.

The women of these legends are fictional and it is therefore clear that the authors deliberately chose to write about female monks as opposed to male monks. The question is why they did this and what it means.

The main question of this study is to find out what exactly the female monks are doing, specifically as women, and why. This can be divided into a few sub-questions:

- a) Did the portrayal of female monks reflect the ideal Coptic woman?
- b) Why do these women choose to live in the toughest of monasteries as anchorites?
- c) What do these legends mean? What is their message?

The goal of this study is to bring light to these questions, but from a fresh perspective.

1.2 Theory and methodology

With the rise of feminism, gender research has made huge advances in the last few decades. Gender research exists within a line of various scholarly disciplines and as itself. It is a field which explores the interaction between various social structures such as – among others – gender, race, and sexuality. It is a relevant perspective as women in history as well as literature are sought to be elevated. Therefore, it is appropriate for this paper to draw upon gender research and hermeneutic close-reading when analysing the texts at its disposal. The essay is not based upon any existing theory. It is a comparative and discussing study about the texts and their meaning to add insights to the research on this type of writing in Coptic and Christian tradition, and to elevate the roles of women in historical and Egyptological literary context. Secondary sources and English translations of the saints' legends are used, which can be found in books as well as online.

1.3 Earlier research

Earlier research about Hilaria and the female monks is available, although quite restricted. There are both old and new sources. Because the benchmark of this study is Hilaria – who is quite

studied in comparison to the others – the main source is *Three Coptic Legends* from 1947 written by James Drescher. It examines the Christian message of the story, which is important to understand in order to learn the stories' origin and put them into new perspectives and context.

The three prime anchoritic centres in Egypt are Scetis, Nitria and Kellia. In the Coptic version of Hilaria, she went to the Macarius monastery, located in Scetis.¹ There she met the monk Pambo who became her mentor. According to historical sources such as *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Pambo lived in the 4th century A.D.² This is at the same time Saint Macarius lived, who is considered one of the founders of Scetis. Pambo's spiritual mentor was likely Saint Anthony, another important patron in Coptic monasticism who helped found Kellia together with Amoun.³ According to the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Pambo was visited by Macarius in Nitria⁴, which seems to have been founded by Pambo himself as well as Amoun.

The other female monks are Mariam (Marina), Anastasia, Pelagia, and Eugenia, They all have similar elements.⁵ Kari Vogt has, in 1995, compared Hilaria and Mariam's legends and found that the common themes are change of names, cross-dressing, change of habits, eunuchs, false accusations about sexual encounters as well as denouement.⁶

Vogt's study is about female monks and her focus is on the legends of Hilaria and Mariam, which are considered to be the oldest of these legends (set in ca 300–400 A.D., but written insofar as we know, long after that), from which the rest have sprung.⁷ Her study is thematic but she has also focused on how and why these stories came to be in hagiographic literature. Another common theme is what Vogt refers to as 'the destruction of femininity'⁸ which in a sense is true, but according to Upson-Saia these women never truly became men.⁹ Upson-Saia also examines themes relating to gender identities, sexuality as well as how societal norms are reflected in the literature.¹⁰

In a paper from 2011, Stipe Odak addresses some existing theories about why women decided to dress as male monks during the Middle Ages, and his examples include Eugenia, Pelagia, and Mariam. Elizabeth Abbott has argued that women dressed into men to gain more social power – because men were superior to women – but the argument seems a little stretched according to Odak. He points out that for example, Mariam had to take on typically feminine tasks in the monastery.¹¹

Another thing to take into consideration concerning earlier research is that Oscar von Lemm¹² has claimed that Hilaria and the other woman monks originate from much earlier woman called Bent-resh. Bent-resh is a fictive woman whose story is attested on a stela. The story is set during the Ramesside Period, although the stela itself has been dated to the Third Intermediate Period, ca 1069–715 B.C.¹³ Drescher says that it is very difficult to determine if Bent-resh and Hilaria really have any connection.¹⁴

As can be seen, the research about these woman monks does exist, but only scarcely. This study thus aims to expand the research on this topic.

¹ Van Esbroeck 1991.

² Ward 1997, 195.

³ Gabra & Vivian 2002, 24.

⁴ Ward 1997, 125.

⁵ Drescher 1947, 124.

⁶ Vogt 1995, 144–46.

⁷ Vogt 1995, 142.

⁸ Vogt 1995, 145.

⁹ Upson-Saia 2010, 2.

¹⁰ Upson-Saia 2010, 1–6.

¹¹ Odak 2011, 37–38.

¹² Drescher 1947, 121; 128.

¹³ Louvre Museum 'Stele: the healing of the princess of Bakhtan'.

¹⁴ Drescher 1947, 129.

2 Origin of Coptic Monasticism

Life as an anchorite was centred around hard work, fasting, praying, as well as solitude. The monks who came to the monasteries were given a cell, designed specifically for prayer and silence and it was in this cell they spent most of their time. The monasteries normally had a leader or father, *apa*, and would once or twice a week get together for communal prayer and a meal.¹⁵ It was a strict way of life and the monks would wholly dedicate their entire life to God.

2.1 Saint Paul and Saint Anthony

The first anchorites are said to be Egyptians Saint Paul and Saint Anthony, who both lived during the 3rd and 4th centuries A.D.

Saint Paul (or Paul the Theban) is said to be the first hermit. Saint Jerome (347-420 A.D.) attested Paul's life in ca 374 A.D. At a young age, Paul had to flee to the desert. He lived in a cave for almost a century, all alone until one day in the year 341 A.D., Anthony visited him after hearing words about him. At the time, Anthony was already ninety years old and Paul himself 110, nearing his death. Paul asked Anthony to bring the cloak of Athanasius and bury him in it when he died. Anthony thus did as Paul wished. Even though Anthony is typically regarded as the founding father of monasticism, Paul was in a manner of speaking, the first anchorite. Anthony, however, was the one who commercialised it since Paul was secluded and hidden away until his death in 341 A.D.

According to a manuscript, *Athanasius Vita* (ca 360 A.D.), written by Athanasius on the life of Saint Anthony, Anthony went into the desert to find solitude and was impressed by its beauty. The desert was also a place associated with demons¹⁶, which makes the practise of monasticism in the desert even more meaningful. As Ioannes Cassian said in his *Conlationes* (ca 420 A.D.), the anchoritic monks did not go out to the desert merely for seclusion and detachment from the world, but for higher purposes such as divine contemplation and to fight the devil and demons in their home.¹⁷ Anthony's habits and strict way of living – praying, fasting, and fighting against demons – left his body in a perfect, or natural, state which many of his friends marvelled at. He also became a source of inspiration as he was given 'magical' abilities such as healing the sick, fighting demons, soothing the grieving, and advising everyone to love Christ more than anything in the world.¹⁸ Anthony's way of living became an ideal pattern for the anchoritic life and many followed him.¹⁹ He is also a role model for Coptic monks.²⁰

2.2 Scetis, Nitria, and Kellia

There are three main anchoritic centres located in northern Egypt: Scetis, Nitria and Kellia. Sometimes, they are all referred to as Scetis – especially in Christian literature – but this is an

¹⁵ Gabra & Vivian 2002, 29–31.

¹⁶ Chitty 1980, 6.

¹⁷ White 1932, 14.

¹⁸ Chitty 1980, 5.

¹⁹ White 1932, 13–14.

²⁰ Gabra & Vivian 2002, 1.

incorrect and misleading name. *Scetis*, *Nitria*, and *Kellia* are three distinct anchoritic centres located in Wadi el-Natrun. Their locations have been discussed but it is certain that they are all three different places with Scetis being the southernmost centre and Nitria the northernmost, and Kellia and is thus located somewhere in between the two. Evelyn White has dedicated an entire chapter in his book *The Monasteries of the Wâdi 'n Natrûn*²¹ on the whereabouts of Scetis, Nitria, and Kellia, where he compares historical sources, topography and language to affirm where he believes they were located.

The founder of the Nitrian monasteries was most likely a man named Amoun, who died sometime before 356 A.D. He was associated with Anthony as well as Pambo.²² Pambo dwelt in Nitria, which is inconsistent with Hilaria's legend, since she went to Scetis. What this shows, though, is simply the fictive nature of Hilaria's legend. Amoun, Macarius, and Anthony, (and possibly Pambo²³) seem to be the key figures in the foundation of these three anchoritic centres.

²¹ White 1932, 17–42.

²² White 1932, 45–53.

²³ White 1932, 53.

3 The Saints

Oscar von Lemm has earlier pointed out that that the Coptic woman monks, and Hilaria specifically, are descendants of an earlier, fictional woman by the name of Bent-resch, therefore her story will be included in this chapter, followed by Hilaria, Mariam, Anastasia, Pelagia, and lastly Eugenia.

3.1 The Bent-resch stela

Bent-resch is a fictional, Egyptian character whose stela is dated to the Third Intermediate Period. According to it, she lived in Bakthan (Bactria, located in present day Afghanistan) during the 19th century during Ramesses II's reign. When Ramesses II is in Mitanni, Bent-resch's older sister is presented to the king, who marries her. One day, Bent-resch becomes ill and a messenger is sent to the Egyptian court, asking for somebody to come to her aid and heal her. The king sends a scribe by the name of Thutemhab. He establishes that Bent-resch has been possessed by a spirit and cannot help her. The chief of Bakthan – Bent-resch's father – asks Ramesses II to send a god. The king then reports to the god Khonsu-in-Thebes-Neferhotep. They lead the god, Khonsu-in-Thebes-Neferhotep, to the god Khonsu-the-Provider, which is a god that expels demons and evil spirits. The king asks Khonsu-in-Thebes-Neferhotep to ask Khonsu-the-Provider to go to Bakhtan. Khonsu-the-Provider agrees to do this and is sent off to Bakhtan by the sacred barque. He arrives, is greeted by the chief, and then goes to Bent-resch. He cures her immediately and is blessed by her *akh*-spirit. The chief of Bakhtan makes offerings to the spirit and god, and organizes one day of celebration for them. The spirit leaves, but Khonsu-the-Provider stays for another three years in Bakhtan, as the chief wished that he would not return to Egypt. One night, the chief awakes in fear after seeing the god return to Egypt in a dream, and he makes sure that the god returns to Egypt. He offers gifts, horses, and soldiers which Khonsu-the-Provider brings back to his house and Khonsu-in-Thebes-Neferhotep. In the end, he returns safely to Egypt and the stela ends with a customary blessing to the king: Rameses II.²⁴

3.2 Hilaria

Hilaria's legend is one of the most popular legends of Coptic hagiography. It exists in a variety of versions (Coptic, Syriac, Arabic, etc.). This essay focuses on the Coptic version. Hilaria's legend is also considered one of the oldest, dating back to sometime after the year 500 A.D., although the story itself takes place earlier, in the 5th century. Hilaria was, according to legend, the daughter of emperor Zeno, whose two reigns lasted between the years 474–475 A.D. and 476–491 A.D. Zeno's first wife was Arcadia and the second wife was Ariadne²⁵, Hilaria's mother. According to history, Zeno had two sons but no daughters.

In the legend, Hilaria is the eldest daughter of Zeno and has a younger sister called Theopisté, Hilaria is drawn to the monastic life so she disguises herself, runs away from the palace in Constantinople to Alexandria where she meets the deacon Theodore. He then helps her, thinking that she is a knight, to Scetis. Apa Pambo greets them both. When Hilaria tells him

²⁴ Wensinck 1911, 3–6; Nederhof 2006, 1–9.

²⁵ Wensinck 1911, XVII.

that she wishes to become a monk there, Pambo advises her to go to Enaton, another monastery with a less strict life. He says that since she has grown up in comfort, the life of Scetis will be too difficult for her. However, she stands her ground, saying: ‘Father, I have come here with all my heart. If you cast me forth, you will answer to God for my soul.’²⁶ Pambo marvels at this and gives her a cell close to his own, still not knowing that she is a woman. She learns Egyptian and works hard in the monastery. Hilaria’s family is devastated at the loss of their eldest daughter. After three years, it is revealed to Apa Pambo through God that Hilaria is in fact a woman, but he does not learn that she is the daughter of the emperor. He tells Hilaria to not let anybody know that she is a woman.

Hilaria becomes known as Hilarion the Eunuch since her body is not like that of a man yet her womanly features have faded: Her body is shrunken because of the ascetic life she leads, and she is beardless.²⁷ After Hilaria spent nine years in Scetis, her sister becomes ill. Zeno becomes very concerned for his youngest daughter. He sends her first to the monasteries of Byzantium but her condition does not improve and he is advised to send her to the monks of Scetis. He writes a letter and sends Theopisté to Egypt with two maidens and two servants. They arrive in Alexandria and are guided to Scetis where Apa Pambo greets them. After reading the emperor’s letter, he asks all other monks to pray for the ill princess. Hilaria immediately recognizes her sister, but is not recognized herself. She starts to weep and pray for her. Hilaria is given the task to take care of her, and she is with her every day, kissing her and sleeping next to her on a shared bench in her cell.

After seven days, Theopisté is healthy again. When she has returned to Constantinople and her family, Zeno asks her what happened while she was in Scetis. Theopisté tells him about the monk Hilarion who had cared for her. She also says to her father that this monk had kissed her on the lips and lain next to her in bed. Zeno is troubled by this and sends a letter to the monks of Scetis, asking them to send this blessed Hilarion to the palace so that he may pray for a sick nobleman. Hilaria returns to the palace and the king asks her why she kissed Theopisté and slept on the same bench as her. Hilaria then makes him swear to not reveal what she is about to tell him and that he will let her return to the monastery. Four gospels are brought for him to swear before and she then says that she is Hilaria, his daughter. Zeno is first in disbelief, but after an hour he comes to his senses and embraces and kisses his lost daughter. He weeps, and Hilaria’s mother and sister also find out the truth. They are all overjoyed. As Zeno swore to God, he allows Hilaria to return to Scetis, after having her and her company spend three months in Constantinople.

She lives for twelve more years in Scetis and is buried there after her death. Apa Pambo then tells the truth about Hilaria’s identity to the rest of the monks of the monastery and all of them marvel over her life, praising both her and God.²⁸

3.3 Mariam/Marina

‘Marina the monk’ is a widely popular saint in the Orthodox Church, and her legend is attested in Coptic as well as Greek, Latin, Syriac, Ethiopian, Arabic, and French literature. According to Léon Clugnet, her place of birth is Lebanon and the story is set during the 5th century A.D. He also believes that the story was attested in the 5th century, but Richard Marcel believes it was written after that, in the 6th or 7th century.²⁹

According to legend, she is born as Mariam into a rich Christian family. When she is a little girl, her mother passes away leaving behind only Mariam and her father Eugenius. He then raises her on his own. When time comes for her to be married and for him to go live in a monastery for

²⁶ Drescher 1947, 74.

²⁷ Drescher 1947, 75.

²⁸ Wensinck 1911, 9–16.

²⁹ Hourani 2013, 20–21.

an ascetic life, Mariam asks her father why he would ‘save his soul and destroy hers’.³⁰ In return, he asks what he should do with her since she is a woman. For this, Mariam suggests that she disguise herself as a man. This is also what she does. She shaves off her hair and puts on men’s clothes. Her father is very impressed by her determination and spirit so he donates most of his goods to charity and then he and Mariam – now called Marinus – travel to the monastery Qannubin in the Kadisha Valley, which is in Lebanon.

They share a cell and nobody learns that the monk Marinus is a woman. After ten years, Eugenius passes away and so Mariam is left on her own. This is when she doubles her fasting and praying, increasing her asceticism. The other monks think that her voice, which is soft, is because of her harsh ascetic life.

At some point, Mariam is sent to the city with three other monks to conduct business on behalf of the monastery. They stay at an inn one night, and the same night a soldier of the king also arrives to the inn. The virgin daughter of the innkeeper is seduced by the soldier and they spend the night together. The soldier then tells her that if she becomes pregnant, she is to say that it was the monk Marinus who had been with her. The innkeeper’s daughter becomes pregnant and when her father finds out about it, she does as she was instructed, saying that it was the monk Marinus who made her pregnant. The innkeeper becomes furious and travels to the monastery. He yells at the abbot, curses, and insults the monastery. The abbot manages to calm him down and bring him aside to talk. The innkeeper tells the abbot about his daughter, the pregnancy and Mariam, and is then sent away. The abbot calls Mariam and he scolds her for her sins. Mariam then weeps and falls to her knees, bowing down before the abbot and asking forgiveness for her sins. But the abbot is angry and casts her out of the monastery.

She resides outside of the monastery for a long time, and when the innkeeper’s daughter has given birth to the baby, he brings the baby boy to Mariam. Mariam then proceeds to nurture the baby while simultaneously increasing her fasting and prayers. After three years, she is readmitted to the monastery after pleads from the monks who felt pity for her. Her time at the monastery is now even harsher and more restricted than before. Besides her regular monastic duties, she must also clean, cook, and bring water. The child of the innkeeper’s daughter is raised in the monastery and becomes a monk. After a total of forty years, Mariam becomes ill and passes away. The abbot orders that her old garbs be exchanged for new ones. As her clothes are removed, the monks see that Marinus the monk, is in fact a woman. They hurry to inform the abbot, who comes rushing. He cries at her body. The abbot then calls for the innkeeper to tell him that the monk Marinus was a woman, and not a man. The innkeeper travels to the monastery and the place of Mariam’s body and weeps next to her. They pray over her body and are blessed by it. One monk even regains sight in his blind eye. After she is buried, the innkeeper’s daughter and the soldier are tormented by a devil – by God’s will – and they, too, travel to the burial site of the saint Mariam – now Marina – to confess, in front of everyone, the wrongdoings they did to her in life.³¹

3.4 Anastasia

Anastasia’s legend, found in the Coptic Synaxarium, seems to have taken place sometime between the years 482–580 A.D.

The beautiful and moral Anastasia is a woman born to a wealthy and noble family in Constantinople. When the already married emperor Justinian wants to marry her, Anastasia goes to his wife and tells her. Upon hearing this, the empress sends Anastasia to Alexandria and has a convent built outside of the city. The emperor, however, learns her whereabouts and sends for her. Anastasia manages to flee to the desert. She hides in Scetis as a prince. One day, she meets Apa Daniel and tells him her story. Apa Daniel then brings her to a cave. He asks one of the

³⁰ St Mary & St Mina Coptic Church 2014, ‘St. Marina, the Ascetic’.

³¹ O’Leary 1974, 187-88; St Mary & St Mina Coptic Church 2014, ‘St. Marina, the Ascetic’.

elders to fill a water pot every week and leave it at the door of the cave. This is where she dwells for 28 years, without anyone ever finding out that she is a woman.

She writes messages to Apa Daniel on pottery for the elders to bring when they leave the water at the cave. One day, he receives a piece of pottery where Anastasia has written that her time has come. Apa Daniel and one of his disciples then leave their monastery and go to Anastasia's cave, where they are met by her blessings. She bids her last farewell to them and then prays before passing away peacefully. Daniel and the disciple weep and begin the burial process. It is when the disciple carries her body that he understands that she is a woman, but he does not say anything. He only marvels quietly. After the burial, when they are both back at the monastery, the disciple kneels before Apa Daniel and asks that he tell him her story. He explains that he knows she was a woman. Apa Daniel tells him Anastasia's story, about how she was born into a noble family and how she gave up her wealth for Jesus Christ.³²

3.5 Pelagia

Pelagia is found both in and out of the Coptic Synaxarium. The Latin Christian legend's setting is probably 4th century A.D., according to when bishop Nonnos lived. In it, Pelagia is described as born in Antioch – located in modern day Turkey – to pagan parents.³³ She is said to be inspired by a real woman with the same name, who at age 15 was martyred by suicide.³⁴ Unlike the historical saint, the fictive Pelagia, known as 'Pelagia the Penitent', lived as a prostitute and dancer in Antioch. In *The Golden Legend* (a collection of saintly legends recorded by Jacobus de Voragine in the 13th century), she is described as wealthy due her profession.³⁵ One day, she passes by a church when bishop Nonnos (or according to *The Golden Legend: Veronus*) takes notice of her. He sees spiritual greatness in her and decides to pray for her that evening. The next day, she goes to listen to the bishop preaching about the Last Judgement. Afterwards, she asks him to be baptized and upon seeing her so sincere, the bishop agrees. That night, the devil tempts her to return to her previous life of sins, but she begins praying and manages to make the devil go away. She decides that all her possessions be given to the poor and then leaves Antioch dressed as a man. The remainder of her life, she spends in Jerusalem as a hermit and ascetic, known as the beardless monk Pelagius. It is not until her death that the other monks discover that she is in fact a woman.³⁶

In the Coptic Synaxarium, the woman monk by the name of Pelagia³⁷ is probably one and same saint as the later, Christian saint. It is not rare that saints have various lives ascribed to them.³⁸ In the Coptic version, Pelagia was indeed born a pagan of Antioch, and she did live an immoral life. She was apparently converted to Christianity by a bishop Paul, then dressed in male attire and travelled to Jerusalem where she met bishop Alexander (who is not attested in historical records of this time and place). He sent her to a monastery, which was probably Scetis because Pelagia is associated with a certain Apa Daniel of Scetis.

³² O'Leary 1974, 73–74; Coptic Orthodox Church Network, 'The Departure of St. Anastasia'.

³³ Catholic News Agency 2017, 'St. Pelagia "The Penitent"'.

³⁴ Catholic Online, 'St. Pelagia of Antioch'.

³⁵ De Voragine, *The Golden Legend*; trans. Granger Ryan 1993, 230.

³⁶ Catholic News Agency 2017, 'St. Pelagia "The Penitent"'; De Voragine, *The Golden Legend*; trans. Granger Ryan 1993, 230–32.

³⁷ O'Leary 1974, 224.

³⁸ Uljas, April 2017 [conversation].

3.6 Eugenia

Eugenia's legend is the only one of these five that cannot be found in Coptic Synaxarium. Like Pelagia's, her legend is attested in *The Golden Legend*, meaning that, as far as we know, it was originally written in Latin. It takes place in Egypt during the 3rd century, as can be verified by the presence of emperors Valerian and Gallienus. She is mentioned in the chapter of Saints Protus and Hyacinthus, who were her servants and companions. They studied philosophy together.

Eugenia is the daughter of the Roman nobles Philip and Claudia. At some point, the Senate chooses Philip to be prefect of Alexandria and so he brings his wife, two sons and Eugenia to Egypt. Eugenia learns everything about arts and writing, and Protus and Hyacinthus become knowledgeable in all kinds of sciences. At the age of 15, Eugenia is asked to marry a noble man called Aquilinus, but she declines because she is convinced that a husband should be chosen for his morals rather than his ancestry. After that, she begins reading the teachings of Saint Paul, which, as time passes by, makes her Christian at heart. One day, she, Protus and Hyacinthus are returning home when they hear Christians chanting the words 'All the gods of the Gentiles are demons, but the Lord made the heavens'.³⁹ Eugenia is very inspired by this single sentence and tells her servants that everything they have learned so far, words and teachings of philosophers and orators, has been destroyed by that sentence. She says that they should not be her servants, but her brothers, as followers of Christ. Eugenia then puts on men's clothing and the three of them travel to a monastery in the outskirts of Alexandria, where Christians are allowed to live at the time. The head of the monastery is a man called Helenus. He is extremely strict in his faith and does not let women come near him. He challenges heretics to inhuman challenges to prove their faith, such as walking through fire unharmed. Eugenia tells him that she is a man, but through a vision sent by God, he knows that she is a woman. Nonetheless, he allows her and Protus and Hyacinthus to live at the monastery as monks. Eugenia is now called Eugene.

Eugenia's parents are struck by grief over their missing daughter. They are told that she has been taken by the gods, which they believe means that she has passed away. There is a large statue risen for her in Alexandria and Philip orders everybody to worship it. Eugenia, on the other hand, lives her monastic life with the other monks and at the time Helenus dies, she takes his place.

A woman by the name of Malencia falls in love with Eugene the monk after once being cured by him, and she designs a plan to fool him, never knowing that Eugene is a woman. She pretends to be ill and sends for Brother Eugene to come to her. Eugenia comes to Malencia's house, who confesses her love for her, kisses her and invites her into her bed. Eugenia is shocked and refuses to lie with her and scolds her for being so impure, sinful, and wretched. She leaves and Malencia is left with only her fear. She becomes so afraid that she decides to accuse Eugene the monk for violating her. She goes to Philip – Eugenia's father – and files the complaint. She explains that a maid had walked in on Eugene trying to have his way with her, and that is how she was saved. Philip is infuriated and orders the arrest for Eugene and the other monks. He even sets a date for all of them to be thrown into the arena with wild beasts. He summons them before him and questions Eugenia on the teachings of Christ. She stands her ground and says that Malencia is a liar. When the maid is brought to testify, she says what Malencia instructed her to say, that she walked in on an assault. Seeing no other solution, Eugenia decides that the only rightful thing to do next is to tell the truth. She reveals herself to Philip and all the others as Eugenia, his daughter. She shows her chest and says how he, Philip, is her father, Claudia her mother and her brothers are Avitus and Sergius. She gestures to Protus and Hyacinthus and says who they are, as well. Philip and Claudia are overjoyed to see their daughter alive. They praise her and the entire family converts to Christianity – meaning Philip loses his place in the prefecture. He converts many others to Christianity but is ultimately executed. Claudia and her children then return to Rome and convert more and more people. Emperor Valerian of Rome orders that Eugenia be put to death, but her execution fails many times before she is eventually

³⁹ De Voragine, *The Golden Legend*; trans. Granger Ryan 1993, 165.

decapitated. Claudia, Hyacinthus and Protus follow her in martyrdom shortly after.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ De Voragine, *The Golden Legend*; trans. Granger Ryan 1993, 165–67.

4 Analysis and discussion

Based on the previously presented examples, it is clear that these kinds of legends were not unusual, but the question remains: What exactly are they, as women, doing? And why are they doing it?

4.1 Bent-resh as the original character

Let us first consider Bent-resh a little. It has been argued by von Lemm⁴¹ and White⁴² that Bent-resh is the origin of the Coptic stories. The argument is based upon the similarities between the names of Bent-resh and Hilaria. Hilaria, translated as ‘joy’ in Greek, is according to von Lemm a translation of the name Bent-resh, which has been translated as ‘Daughter of Joy’ in Egyptian.⁴³ I do not think that this is reason enough to connect the two. Firstly, the Bent-resh stela, disguised as a Ramesside royal inscription but written long afterwards, might have served as propaganda for the priests who wrote it rather than a story about the gods as it is written on a stela rather than papyri.⁴⁴ The propagandistic purpose of the Bent-resh stela is unclear, it may be about the dichotomy between the priesthoods of Khonsu-in-Thebes-Neferhotep and Khonsu-the-Provider, or simply a tribute to the two gods.⁴⁵ It can also have been written to glorify earlier Egyptian kings during foreign rule.⁴⁶ Secondly, the stories are widely different in terms of themes as well as contents. Even though Christian legends often contain motifs from earlier Egyptian stories, it is very unlikely that Hilaria is based on Bent-resh.⁴⁷ As we can see, Hilaria is a character who actively makes a choice to come closer to God and her faith. Bent-resh’s character is passive, she does not even speak throughout the entire story. Bent-resh, the so-called heroine,⁴⁸ is not the star of her story. She does not leave her family, home, and wealth and there is no transformation of her body or sex, nor any secret identity. She is not the healer – but the person being healed – and she does not lead a life of hard work and dedication to the gods. It is not Bent-resh who is being commemorated in the end, but the two gods Khonsu-in-Thebes-Neferhotep and Khonsu-the-Provider, as well as king Ramesses II. It seems very unlikely that Bent-resh and Hilaria have any sort of connection, their names apart. It is most likely only a coincidence that their names have a similar meaning.

4.2 The women’s transformation

What is the message of these stories? It does not seem like the authors are trying to propagate priesthood or asceticism, because in that case they might as well have written about male monks

⁴¹ Drescher 1947, 128.

⁴² O’Leary 1974, 154.

⁴³ Wensinck 1913, XV.

⁴⁴ Lichtheim 1980, 90.

⁴⁵ Lichtheim 1980, 90.

⁴⁶ Lichtheim 1980, 90.

⁴⁷ O’Leary 1974, 154.

⁴⁸ Wensinck 1913, XVI.

to begin with. It also seems unlikely that asceticism was something to be propagated, especially since the older monks seemed reluctant that younger monks joined them, as can be read in for example *Apophthegmata Patrum*. For instance, Pambo suggested Hilaria to go to another monastery, called Enaton, and he stressed that life there was simpler for someone like her, who has grown up in wealth and comfort. If he did this out of personal interest is of course difficult to determine, but it is certainly possible. Asceticism is also about seclusion rather than belonging to a community, and in the beginning, monasticism was more focused on the anchoritic cell than coenobitic convents.⁴⁹ It is therefore unlikely that the authors were trying to publicise monasticism and asceticism.

Another thing to notice is that the legends do not tell much about life in the monasteries but rather, they focus on the women's personal journeys. It is quite clear that the core theme of the Coptic stories is *transformation*. At first sight, it appears that these women transformed into men, but that is not quite what is happening. The female monks became likened to eunuchs, who were often known as the so called 'third gender' in Byzantine literature.⁵⁰ It is understandable that earlier research concluded that they 'became men' without further thought since our understanding of gender is something that has lived on for centuries and well into early modern days. These views on gender originate in Greek and Roman thought. The Greeks and Romans did however recognize various non-binary genders whose characteristics were neither male nor female but often described as unnatural or problematic.⁵¹ In Greek literature, the male body was perfect and the female body was something almost inhuman, or at least 'undercooked'.⁵² They also saw the male as active and the female as passive. In Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, the god Apollo claims that a mother was not a 'real parent' because she was merely 'the "field" in which the seed of the father grows'.⁵³

Only recently has *gender* as opposed to *sex* been the subject of debate where cultural and social components construct gender, whereas sex is purely biological, or as Judith Butler theorises: a subcategory of gender.⁵⁴ Assuming then, that gender is more than two and that sex is a subcategory of gender, Hilaria and the other saints do not become men, but sexless, or perhaps even genderless. As Upson-Saia argued, they never wholly became men because of their soft voices and beardless faces. She means that this was to serve as a reminder for the reader that only 'real men' could achieve full masculinity.⁵⁵ However, since the women's feminine features withered, it seems as if though we are not dealing with the authors trying to propagate ideals for Coptic women, but perhaps something else. It might be the same thing which Akhenaten did during his reign in Egypt during the Amarna Period, where he, as seen on for example statues and paintings, eradicated his sex and became something that was neither male nor female, but divine. It is possible, and probable, to assume that Hilaria and the female monks were not striving to become men, but something even more perfected, something that would bring them closer to God and perfection.

Was the transformation of their gender (their social transformation) also a transformation of their sex (their physical transformation)? This is a very complicated question because of the complex contexts surrounding gender and sex, but I think it can be assumed that it was so. Not only did these women go through a change of gender, living life as neither men nor women, but their bodies changed drastically, too. The stories describe how their bodies withered and all their feminine beauty faded. In Drescher's translation of Hilaria, the following passage can be found: 'For her breasts, too, they were not as those of all women. Above all, she was shrunken with ascetic practises nor was she subject to the curse of women; since God Almighty ordained for

⁴⁹ Chitty 1980, 11.

⁵⁰ Montserrat 2003, 127.

⁵¹ Foxhall 2013, 68.

⁵² Foxhall 2013, 70-72.

⁵³ Foxhal 2013, 71.

⁵⁴ Nicholson 1990, 6-7.

⁵⁵ Upson-Saia 2010, 2-3.

her the thing appointed.⁵⁶ ‘The curse of women’ refers here to menstruation, so what it literally says is that Hilaria’s menstrual periods ceased. This clearly shows that not only did she transform spiritually and socially, but that her entire physical body underwent change. I.e., both her gender and sex changed to something outside of the binary roles. Maybe the physical change was due her practises and did not have any other meaning, but I do not believe that the natural change and the meaning of said change are mutually exclusive. The importance of being not only genderless but sexless cannot be disregarded because these saints were striving for celibacy, which brings us to the next motif of the stories.

4.3 Accusations of sexual sin

The accusations of sexual sin, as Kari Vogt noticed⁵⁷, is a very interesting element in these stories. Upson-Saia points out that despite being dressed as men, the saints’ feminine allure still caused troubles for them in the form of false accusations of sexual sin.⁵⁸ Hilaria was not so much accused of it as her actions were perceived as strange and worrisome to emperor Zeno, but the indication was still there. Mariam was accused of fathering a child. Eugenia was directly accused of having sexually violated a woman against her will, even though it was the accuser who suggested they lie together. This is exactly like how in the Egyptian *The Tale of the Two Brothers* (ca 1215 B.C.), Bata was accused by his brother’s wife of having sexually abused her, even though it was her idea to sleep together. It cannot be denied that early Christian legends borrowed motifs and elements from pagan lore,⁵⁹ and perhaps this is a perfect example of that.

If we instead look to Anastasia and Pelagia’s stories, there are no false accusations against them, but the element of chastity is present, at least after their conversion to Christianity. Pelagia lived as a prostitute before being noticed by the bishop who proceeded to pray for her soul. This is the Christian faith’s keystone: forgiveness of sins, and Pelagia earned it by, after her conversion, managing to overcome the temptations the devil made for her and by spending her life serving God. The author also brings up another important Christian value here: the opposition of temptation. Pelagia, by resisting the devil’s temptation, proves her worth as a Christian. Anastasia’s chastity is not as prominent and it is not clear whether she was a virgin or not, but nonetheless, she spent her whole Christian life as a nun and/or monk, which likely means that she abstained from sexual encounters.

Apart from striving for celibacy, Elizabeth Abbott has argued that these women dressed in men’s garbs and lived life as men to gain more social power and liberty – something they would never receive as women.⁶⁰ This is much like Hatshepsut seems to have done during her reign in the 18th dynasty, although in her case, she was not trying to hide the fact that she was a woman.⁶¹ However, the argument seems irrelevant and misplaced. For example, Mariam had to take on typically feminine tasks in and outside of the monastery such as cleaning and even taking care of a child.⁶² Not to mention, the saints’ monastic lives were fashioned in obedience and hard work⁶³, not liberty and male privilege. If we however adjust the idea a little bit: These women did not dress in male attire for social advantages, but they nevertheless dressed into male attire because they were in fact, socially inferior because of their gender. It is not for the reason Abbott says – social respect – but rather because it allowed them to enter an exclusively male dominated

⁵⁶ Drescher 1947, 75.

⁵⁷ Vogt 1995, 145.

⁵⁸ Upson-Saia 2010, 3-4.

⁵⁹ Drescher 1947, 129.

⁶⁰ Abbott 2001, 81.

⁶¹ Matic 2016 ‘Gender in Ancient Egypt: Norms, Ambiguities, and Sensualities’ [podcast].

⁶² Odak 2011, 38.

⁶³ Odak 2011, 38.

part of their faith that also happened to have been the ideal, Coptic ascetic way of living. It is very clear from the texts that the saints went to the monasteries to devote their lives to Christianity and God, not for any kind of social climb. What other way would be as perfect as the way of Anthony on the other Coptic patriarchs? Therefore, it seems likely that they were not looking for the sort of social respect they could never receive as women. In Mariam's story, she was accused of having fathered a child and did nothing to disprove the accusations, but instead asked for forgiveness and took the punishment she should never have had to be assigned. It was a truly selfless act, and if someone is looking to gain power, it seems extremely unlikely that they would take the blame for a crime they did not commit. Of course, Mariam did not have much of a choice since her ultimate proof would have been to expose that she was in fact a woman. However, Hilaria did that when facing sexual accusations – probably to not soil the reputation of the monastery, its monks, and ascetics in general⁶⁴ – and so did Eugenia, so why did not Mariam? The answer might lie in the importance of humility. Many of the male saints possess this quality. One of the most noticeable ones is Longinus, who not only did not take credit for healing a woman's illness, but even spoke ill about himself to her.⁶⁵ Hilaria and Eugenia also revealed themselves to their fathers which gave the stories another theme, namely, (family) reunion. Mariam had no such possibility.

4.4 The Coptic saints

Because Hilaria, Mariam, and Anastasia are found in the Coptic Synaxarium, Eugenia in other hagiographic literature and Pelagia in both, it is of interest to see if they as distinct groups have similarities and differences. For example, do the Coptic saints have or lack special elements in comparison to the others? There are a few examples of common elements in between the Coptic legends.

The two with the most similarities to each other are Hilaria and Anastasia, who both went to Scetis. All four Coptic saints were wealthy and except for Pelagia, of noble descent. Mariam and Anastasia were both born to Christian parents as opposed to Hilaria and Pelagia who were pagan.

Hilaria and Anastasia also both *ran away* to their respective monasteries. What is interesting to note, though, is that Anastasia went to a nunnery first and then *flew* to Scetis dressed as a man when the emperor searched for her. Hilaria did not flee from anything, but she did have to leave her palace in secret. Mariam and Pelagia, however, did not need to run away.

All four of them live an anchorite's life in the monasteries. The only one who knew that Mariam was a woman was her father, and after his death, nobody learned about her real identity until after her own death. She was also the only one cast out from her monastery when she was accused of sexual sin – and that's probably because she did not reveal her true identity like Hilaria and Eugenia did. Both Hilaria and Anastasia had one person who knew their identities as women, (Pambo in Hilaria's story, Daniel in Anastasia's). It also seems as if though Anastasia and Pelagia were associated with the same Daniel of Scetis, although, as we can see in Hilaria's case with characters such as Pambo (middle to late 4th century) and Zeno (late 5th century), dates do not necessarily add up in these legends. This is simply an indicator that the legends are fictive.⁶⁶ In the Coptic Synaxarium, on Pelagia's chapter, the Daniel of Scetis whom she is said to be associated with is the one who lived between the years 485–580,⁶⁷ which means he is the one contemporary to emperor Justinian – who wanted to marry Anastasia. This means that in Pelagia's story, we are supposedly dealing with the same Daniel whom Anastasia met in hers. That likely does not mean anything except that the use of the same historical persons in different

⁶⁴ O'Leary 1974, 154.

⁶⁵ Ward 1997, 123.

⁶⁶ Wensinck 1911, XXX.

⁶⁷ O'Leary 1974, 224.

hagiographies strongly indicate the fictiveness of these legends. Anastasia's legend is also a rare example of dates and historical persons corresponding, which might indicate that it was first attested around the same time as its setting.

Hilaria, Mariam, and Anastasia are all exposed as women and revered after their death. The Coptic Synaxarium does not mention what happens to Pelagia, but it is likely that she lived the rest of her life as a male monk and was exposed after her death, as narrated in the later Latin version.

Hilaria, though, is the one truly outstanding of the four. Firstly, she was not just a wealthy person: she was a princess, the oldest daughter of a historical emperor. She is also the only one who seems to have possessed 'magical' abilities like those of Saint Anthony, such as healing. She managed to heal her sister when nobody else could. Why could she do this and what does it mean? There might be several reasons the author portrayed Hilaria in this way. Was it to show the power of love (through God?) Was it to show just how strong her dedication to God was? Was it a way to mould her in the image of Anthony? The bodies of the female saints have some differences and similarities to that of Saint Anthony. In contrast to the women, Anthony's body did not wither away, but reached a sort of natural male perfection. This is somewhat different from the women, whose bodies did change. Nonetheless, the result was much the same, namely bodily perfection. That perfection then let the saints perform wondrous things such as healing the sick. However, it is important to remember that there are three major differences between the women and Anthony. Firstly, their gender, which has an impact on the meaning of the story. Did they want to create a female ideal monk with for example Hilaria, who seems to be the most similar to Anthony? Why are these women, *women*? Their gender is directly linked to the second difference between the women and Anthony, namely the manner of which their bodies changed. In Coptic literature, the bodily effect of asceticism in male ascetics is described as coming from bodily endurance, while the bodies of female ascetics are described more in a manner of having individual side-effects.⁶⁸ The third major difference between them is that the women are purely fictive. This sets them apart from Anthony and other saints whose attested lives are non-fictional with a touch of fiction, as opposed to Hilaria and the female monks whose stories rather are fictional with a touch of non-fiction.

Unlike Anthony, who specifically strived for bodily perfection, the 'natural body' like the body of Adam⁶⁹, Hilaria's body changed to something even more perfected than that. She did not become 'the perfect woman' or 'the natural woman', but something much higher than that. The question still remains, though: why is she a woman? Why have women been portrayed in this way? If the message of the story is divine proximity, then why specifically are they women? Could only women go through this transformation? Was the male body already perfected? Not really, because Christianity, and especially asceticism, is about overcoming one's earthly desires, whether you are a man or a woman. In *Apophthegmata Patrum*, there are numerous passages on killing desire of the flesh. Christianity puts a heavy emphasis of the human as *imperfect*. A good Christian will recognize this and work to overcome these faults that occur naturally in every human, and this of course leads us to the corner stone of Christian faith: forgiveness. So, what is happening? The answer might be that it simply gives the reader a 'wow effect'. That a woman – who was inferior to man – could be so dedicated and pious would leave a far greater impact on the reader than if a man had the same kind of story. Since a man would not have to hide his identity or go through a change of gender, a similar legend but with a man as the lead character would not, in a way, make sense.

4.5 The Christian saints

What about the saints Pelagia and Eugenia? They are both found outside of the Coptic

⁶⁸ Montserrat 2003, 127.

⁶⁹ Chitty 1980, 4.

Synaxarium but the tradition and narrative pattern remain. Eugenia was noble while Pelagia lived as a prostitute – which is a major difference of character when comparing her to the rest. Nonetheless, they were both pagan and converted to Christianity, and they converted after hearing a preach – which is different from Hilaria, Mariam, and Anastasia who seemed to already know in their hearts that they wanted to devote their lives to Christianity. Before dressing into men’s garbs, Pelagia faced temptations and warded them off, and she also gave up all her earnings to charity, after which she dressed into a man and left for Jerusalem. She was known as a man for the rest of her life and only after her death was her real gender revealed to her brethren.

Eugenia, like Mariam and Anastasia, did not want to marry. She, on the other hand, has a story that in the beginning is closer to Hilaria’s. After converting, she dressed into a man and ran away from home and her family was devastated at the loss, just like in Hilaria’s legend. Eugenia got a new name, and only one person in the monastery – except for her confidants Protus and Hyacinthus – knew that she was a woman. She then became the leader of the monastery. When faced with sexual accusations, she revealed her identity to her father. There was a reunion, and her family became Christian. The whole family was later martyred. That is where the story begins to separate from Hilaria’s and becomes closer to a general martyrdom story. It seems then, that after Eugenia revealed herself as a woman, she did not continue to live the rest of her life as a ‘man’ or ascetic. It does not specifically say in the text, but it seems likely that for the remainder of her life, she was known as a woman. This is where her legend differs the most from all the others. Even though some of the narratives are similar to for example Hilaria’s legend, the message is different. Hilaria was trying to come closer to God in herself. She made a very personal journey. She also died an anchorite, as opposed to Eugenia, who died a martyr. Eugenia is more like an archetype *heroine*. Hilaria and the others are also heroines of their legends, but Eugenia takes it a step further and is more closely related to the typical kind of heroine who does something selfless for the community which she serves, in her case: she converted people to Christianity, she could resist certain executions, and she was also, as it seems, known to be a woman before her death. This means that she did not go through a bodily and mental transformation like the other four. Her body stayed the same, and her being a ‘female monk’ did not have the same relevance, but seems to be more of a narrative borrowed from Coptic tradition.

5 Conclusion

These legends were not representations of an ideal Coptic woman. Since their gender was eradicated, these stories were about something entirely else. It also was not a way of propagating asceticism, since early Coptic monasticism was not what it is today. Seclusion was the core of the ascetic life, and so monasticism did not need to be broadcasted to the public.

While Eugenia's legend focused on heroism and martyrdom, the texts on the saints found in the Coptic Synaxarium focused on inner and personal devotion, perseverance, and asceticism. The anchoritic monasteries were the harshest monasteries and that is exactly the reason these women ventured there. It was for the same reason other anchorites wanted to go to the desert – the home of demons – and be detached from the world: it would place them on the highest level of divine devotion and challenge them on a spiritual, mental, and physical plane, all so that they could exclusively give up their lives for Jesus Christ and God.

Transformation is at the core of the Coptic stories, but what was the effect of the transformation? The message the authors were trying to convey had a heavy Christian value, as earlier scholars have already exclaimed. The special thing about these hagiographies, though, is that the main characters were in fact women. The eradication of their femininity side to side with their failure to reach masculinity are two very important elements woven into these stories. These two elements would have been lost if the main characters were men, which would have given the legends a completely different meaning. It would also have been rather pointless – and unrealistic – to write a story like this with a male protagonist because men were not as socially or religiously restricted as women. The dedication these women showed weighed extra heavy *because they were women*. To claim that these women dressed in male attire for social advantage and to become men is a sign of our understanding of binary gender roles, and seems a bit excessive. They were not trying to live life as men, even though they were transcending their gender.

Hilaria, Mariam, and Anastasia chose this way of life because of two reasons. Firstly, they wanted to truly devote their life to God, and the ideal way of doing this was through an anchoritic lifestyle which was only available to men. This forced them to first dress in men's garbs which led to their respective transformation. Secondly, and perhaps the most important reason, they wanted to come as close to God as possible and this is where the meaning of their transformation lies. By becoming something neither male nor female, these women truly managed to come as close to God as possible. Their spiritual change did not only affect them as humans, but their bodies changed and were cast in the image of God. They achieved bodily and spiritual perfection.

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Illustration Index

Front image from St Mary & St Mina Coptic Church. 'St. Marina, the Ascetic',
<http://www.stmaryandstmina.org/st-marina-the-ascetic/>. Accessed and downloaded 15 May 2017.