
GETTING SICK AND GETTING CURED IN LATE ANTIQUITY

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There survive among the literary remains of the Later Roman (or Byzantine) Empire more than a thousand of what are known as the "spiritually beneficial tales" [*diêgêseis psychôpheleis*]. Most of them originated in the later 4th to the mid-7th centuries in the monasteries of Egypt and the Levant. They are a rich and fascinating folksy literature, partly because of their vigorous spontaneity, partly because they offer the would-be social historian rare glimpses into the lives of people of little or no sophistication. But this has to be qualified. These tales are products of the monastic community, which was a very important element of the Later Roman way of life. Hence, while the tales may be relied upon to afford a glimpse of how people thought and felt, we must never lose sight of the fact that it is a monastic lens through which we receive that glimpse; also that the tale's main *raison d'être* was to benefit the soul, not to provide twentieth-century scholars with evidence. They speak of many matters: almsgiving, baths, clothes, debt, emasculation, food, gardens, graves, Jews, magic—to name but a few.

A surprisingly small number of tales mention medicine and relations with the medical profession. There might have been more of them if the attitude of monks and of those they influenced had been a little less accepting of sickness and more willing to try to be rid of it. Witness this story of a monk who saw a widow weeping her heart out at the shrine of a martyr, complaining that God has abandoned her. When questioned she explains why:

Today it is three years since I have been ill, nor has a child of mine nor a servant nor anybody else of my house been ill, ["Not even a cock died" adds one version] so I suppose that God has turned away from me because of my sin: that is why I am weeping, that God would visit me according to his mercy, and that right soon [~Ps 2427]

"I was amazed at her intelligent [*philosophos*] soul and, having prayed for her, I went my way, glorifying God' says the monk, obviously approving . [W483, Nissen 05, BHG 1440q]

A very similar story also tells of a widow of some years: "Now, my body rises up against me in its desire for intercourse with a man. That is why I call upon God: to humble me, so that I do not have to experience a second husband," she explains. Later she is found in the grip of a violent fever, lying groaning in bed. When this was reported to the monk, "he was astounded at that chaste soul and he glorified God," convinced that her prayer had been answered. [W499 Mioni 5 BHG 1442m]

These tales can be compared with the story of the monk who prayed for a thunderbolt, a difficulty or some illness to make him fear God all the time. Also, he wanted his share [*meros*, cf Luke 1512] of punishment here, in this world. A note of common sense appears as the story ends with a vision of a smiling Christ who raises him up and puts his hand on him, assuring him of forgiveness. The monk returns to himself with great joy in his heart, which leads to great humility and thanksgiving. [W883, BHG 1450wb]

Basil the Great studied medicine in his youth; he had wretched health most of his life and indeed himself established a hospital in Cappadocian Caesarea. He teaches that there are some illnesses which are sent to us as a correction and that these must be patiently endured. There are even some illnesses which are edifying, teaching us how to treat the soul, while the use of medication helps one to appreciate the wisdom and goodness of the Creator who put herbs in the world. Basil advocates an Aristotelian mean towards physicians: one is neither to have absolute confidence in them nor to despise their art [Vincent Desprez, *Le Monachisme primitif*, Bellefontaine 1998, 361-2]

Yet here are stories of monks who fell sick and actually refused all treatment. For example, an unnamed elder fell seriously ill and was bleeding internally; he could eat almost nothing. A brother had some dried fruit, of which he made a compote and pressed the elder to eat some of it because it would do him good. The elder said: "I wish God would leave me with this illness for a further thirty years," and refused to touch the compote. [W544 N156 Sys 4.78.] (There is a further illustration of monks' willingness to minister to each other in sickness in the touching tale of a disciple who inadvertently poured, not honey, but rancid linseed

oil, over the dish he was offering his sick elder -- and which the elder quietly consumed [N151 Sys 4.72].)

This monk's willing acceptance of sickness was a product, partly of that belief that sickness was a sign of divine favor, partly because sickness was seen as something which played a role in the divine economy itself; witness this sixth-century story of an excellent monk who, nevertheless, had to strive against sexual temptation.

As he was not winning the battle, he left the monastery and went off to Jericho to satisfy his desires. Just as he was entering the den of fornication, he was suddenly afflicted with leprosy all over. When he saw himself in such a condition, he immediately returned to the monastery, giving thanks to God and saying: "God has stricken me with this terrible disease in order that my soul should be saved," and he glorified God exceedingly. [W258, PS 014]

Not all monks accepted illness with such equanimity. Doctors (there were doctors living at Nitria: HL 7.4) could be called in by superiors and consulted; in which case their prescriptions might be held to override the dictates of the ascetic life. Monks were fully aware of the normal doctor-patient relationship by analogy with their relationship with "the great doctor who heals souls and bodies, our Lord Jesus Christ" [Macarius the Great, Am 180.12.] Thus an anonymous elder:

He who would be healed of his spiritual wounds must endure whatever his doctor imposes on him. It is not with pleasure that the person who is physically sick suffers an amputation, is cauterised or drinks a purge; he recalls these experiences with distaste. But because he is convinced that there is no other way but these of being rid of his suffering, he endures them with courage and is grateful to his physician, knowing that by a little suffering he will be delivered from a lingering disease [Sys 16.18, PE 2.40.7b]

Nevertheless there were some monks who boldly rejected, not only all medical aid, but even basic health precautions. When the famous Melania the Younger saw her traveling-companion not only wash his hands and feet in fresh, cold water but also roll out a fleece to sleep on, she took him to task in no uncertain terms:

How dare you, at your age when the blood is still lively, cherish your body like that . . . ? Here am I, sixty years old and, apart from my finger tips, water has never touched my hands or my face or any part of my body . . . And even though I have been afflicted with various illnesses and have been strongly encouraged by doctors to care for my body in the usual way, I have always refused [their advice.] [W218 HL 55.2]

Antony the Great, the "father of monasticism," ca 250-356, "Never washed his body with water to make it clean, never washed his feet nor ever put them in water unnecessarily" [VA 47.3]. The implied association between the use of water and medical care is clear when Daniel of Scêtê (mid 6th century) meets a younger brother coming from the baths in Alexandria. Following him home, Daniel reproves him severely for bathing when he was not sick. [W465, Daniel of Sêtê 06, BHG 2102c, PE 3.16.2] Among monks bathing was suspect because it was held to be immodest as well as luxurious. In another tale a demon describes his possession of a nun in terms which suggest that bathing was both naked and unisex:

I taught her to go often to the baths, shamelessly and unblushingly adorned. I shot and wounded many with her [looks] -- and her with theirs, ensnaring not only laymen, but priests too, and I titillated them, [inciting them] to shameful intercourse with her. By [their] assent to shameful thoughts and by what they saw with their eyes at night (for I made it all visible to them) I trapped them into ejaculation. [W466 BHG 2102d].

The Emperor Theodosius II (408-450), a great hero of monks, is praised in another tale for avoiding "baths and meat." [W512 BHG 1445v].

Ascetics were not universally antipathetic to the medical profession and there was good reason why they should not be. In a replay of a well-known topos meant to demonstrate that monks had no monopoly on sanctity [Wortley 1993] it is revealed to Antony the Great when he

was living in the desert: "There is somebody in the city who is like unto you, a physician by calling, who gives his superfluous earnings to those in need and who sings Holy, holy, holy with the angels every day" [A/B Antony 24, PG 65:84B.] This may explain why by the time the following story was collected almost two centuries later, the attitude to doctors was somewhat changed. It was said of a priest

. . . . that when he was lying seriously ill, the doctors urged him to eat some meat. Now this blessed brother had a [blood-] brother in secular society, a very devout man who lived his life for the living God. As the brother was eating the meat, his brother who lived "in the world" came to see him -- and was offended when he saw what was happening. He was distressed (he said) that, at the end of so long a period of ascetic rigor and self-discipline, his brother should now partake of meat. He immediately went into a trance and saw one who spoke to him, saying: "Why are you offended at the sight of the priest eating meat ? Do you not realize that he ate it out of necessity and obedience ?" [W289, PS 065]

The monks themselves seem to have known a thing or two about prophylaxis, as the following story reveals, with its relatively rare note of common sense. There was a monk troubled by thoughts of the wife he had left behind. The fathers laid severe burdens of labor on him which made him ill, but did not solve the problem. A visiting elder who found him too weak to come to the door counseled this wise procedure: "Take a little food at mealtime, say your small office and cast your burden on the Lord. Our body is as a garment; look after it and it will last; neglect it, and it will rot away." The man tried this and in a few days the battle receded from him. [W549 Sys 5.45 N174]

The case of Alban makes it very clear that monks did sometimes get very sick—even with STDs: "Alban, an able monk, was driven by lust from his cell, to Alexandria where he frequented the theatre and the hippodrome, and where he fell in with a harlot." From their relations he developed a carbuncle [anthrax] on his member. "He was so sick for six months that his genitalia became gangrenous and fell off. Later, relieved of those parts, he was cured and turned back to God again ... but died a few days later." Alas, this account of a probable case of phagedaena

leaves much to be desired. We can only assume the intervention of the medical profession; but then the monk's early death calls into question the efficacy of any treatment he received. [W202 HL 26.5]

Turning away from monks to life "in the world," we find this story of a very secular person: an officer of the secret police :

There was a magistrianos who was sent on imperial service. He found the corpse of a poor man lying naked on the road. Moved with compassion, he told the servant to take the horse and go a little further on. He dismounted and, taking off one of his linen clothes, put it on the dead man lying there and went his way. Some days later the same magistrianos was sent on service [again]. As he was going out of Constantinople, he chanced to fall from his horse and hurt his foot. The servant took him back to his house where the doctors took care of him. But after five days, his foot turned black. When the doctors saw that the foot had turned black, they told each other that it would be better to amputate the foot, lest sepsis invade the whole body and the man die. They said to him: "We will come at dawn and treat you." But the man instructed his servant to go out after the doctors, to find out and learn from them what they intended. They said to him: "Your master's foot has turned black; if we do not amputate, the man is destroyed." The slave went back in tears to his master saying: "This is what they intend to do to you." On hearing this, he was grieved and could not sleep for worry.

A lamp was lit; around midnight he saw a man entering by the window who came to him and said: "Why do you weep? Why this grief?" The other replied: "Would you not have me weep and lament, sir, when I have a fracture and this is what the doctors intend to do to me?" The one who had appeared to him said: "Show me your foot," and he anointed it, saying: "Now stand up and walk around." The other replied: "[The foot] is broken and I cannot [stand on it.]" "Lean on me" he said to him, and leaning on him [the patient] walked around, limping. "You are only limping a little" said [the one who had appeared]; "stand up again," and forthwith he anointed him again, now on both feet. Then he said: "Now get up and walk

around." [The patient] stood up and walked around—healed.

"Now put yourself at ease" said [the visitor] and then said some things to him about mercy, quoting the words of the Lord, "Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy" [Mtt 57] and "The judgement will be merciless to those who have no mercy" [Mtt 1835]—and similar things. Then he bade him farewell and the magistrianos asked him if he was leaving. "What more do you want, now you are cured?" he asked—and the magistrianos said to him: "[In the name of] the God who sent you, tell me who you are." To this the other replied: "Look at me. Can you definitely recognize this piece of linen?" "Yes sir, it is mine" he replied, and the other said to him: "I am the one you saw lying in the road, over whom you threw your garment; God sent me to heal you. Be ever grateful to God"—and he left by the window through which he had come. The healed man glorified God, the cause of all good things. [W528, BHG 1445x, N 038.]

This tale is primarily about charity; one of many expressions of a theme familiar in the western texts as the Legend of of Saint Martin and his cloak. This officer of the crown can afford a team of doctors—who appear to be unanimous in their diagnosis but are unwilling to reveal their conclusions to the patient. His servant has to find out what these are and what treatment they intend. Then this mysterious visitor arrives. He is something of a healer himself, so we may not greatly err in seeing in his behavior a reflection of more worldly physicians. He first turns his attention to the patient's distress—which is perfectly understandable. The magistrianos thinks his foot is only broken, but the doctors have diagnosed gangrene and intend to cut it off. The visitor clearly disagrees with both diagnoses. Perhaps the foot was only sprained and spectacular bruising was visible (extensive haematoma.) He applies a little basic physiotherapy: massage, gentle exercise, encouragement and rest, resulting in a cure! The underlying message is clear: that there is a Healer greater than earthly physicians available to those who have faith in Him, keep His laws and walk in His ways.

A similar message is given out by a similar tale, but with some additional details:

The elders told us about a gardener who worked and distributed everything he gained in charitable donations, keeping back only just sufficient for his own needs. Eventually, Satan made this suggestion to him: "Put aside a little nest-egg for yourself, to make provision for your needs when you grow old or fall sick." He then set [money] aside and filled a pot with his nest-egg. He then chanced to fall sick and his foot became infected with gangrene. He spent his entire nest-egg on doctors and it profited him nothing. Later an experienced [μπειρος] doctor came by and said that his entire body would become gangrenous if the foot were not amputated; he decided that the foot should be removed. That very night [the gardener] came to himself and repented of what he had done. Sighing and weeping he said: "Lord, remember the things I used to do when I worked and made provision for the brethren" and, even as he said this, an angel of the Lord came there and said to him: "Where is the nest-egg you put by and where is the hope you put in it?" Thinking about this for a moment, the man said: "Lord, I have sinned; forgive me and henceforth I will sin no more." Then the angel touched his foot and he was healed immediately. He got up at dawn and went to work in the field. As agreed, the doctor came by with the instruments [μετ_ τ' ἰσθηρίων] for amputating the foot. Unable to find the sick man he asked his neighbour where he might be. "At dawn he went out to work in the field" came the reply. Dumbfounded, the doctor went off to the field where he worked and, seeing him digging the earth, he glorified the God who had restored him to health. [W025 BHG 1322j / 1445e N261]

It is difficult to know what to make of the statement that the sick gardener spent his entire nest-egg on medical treatment and was no better, clearly echoing the Gospel-story of the *haemorrhousa* who had "suffered many things of many physicians and had spent all that she had and was nothing bettered but rather grew worse" [Mc 525-43/Mtt 918-26/ Lc 843-56]. Nevertheless, it makes an obvious point clear: that most doctors had

to be paid, even in an apparently hopeless case of necrotising fasciitis. A slightly different version of the same story even says how much one man paid in a similar situation:

An elder tormented by avarice worked hard, labouring severely, and by his hand-work he collected one gold piece [=4.45g], a second one and then a third. Then he worked feverishly to augment these to five -- and promptly went down with a physical disease or sickness. His foot swelled up and broke out in ulcers. He called doctors and paid them all five of his pieces of gold. His condition did not improve, but rather deteriorated and his foot became thoroughly diseased. [W615, N493 Greek text translated here in PE 3.21.7.13]

What can we say of these physicians who took their patients for every cent they possessed? Were they more interested in collecting their fees than eliminating the disease? Were they mere quacks? It is hard to tell. Readers would quickly have perceived the contrast between the mercenary doctors of the world and "the blessed ones," the saints who by their intervention or through their relics effected healings. Such a saint was usually known as *anargyroi*, meaning "takes no silver." Fortunately, somewhat lower than the saints, there appears to have existed a superior breed of doctors *anargyroi*, who charged no fees. In both versions of the last tale mentioned above, when the money was exhausted, there came by a doctor who clearly was not going to get anything for his pains, but who made what appears to have been a correct diagnosis and prescribed the appropriate (albeit drastic) treatment. In the first version this man is identified as "an experienced doctor," suggesting that there was a grade of physicians superior to the general, for a tenth-century history mentions such doctors—*atroi tines empeiroi*—who attempted to separate a pair of Siamese twins [Theophanes Continuatus 6.49, p. 433, PG 109:449D.] There are two other tales (both attributed to the seventh-century Anastasius of Sinai) in which we even find the expression "arch-doctor" [*archi-iatros*] used quite casually and in a way which would be entirely appropriate in such circumstances. The first of the two tales is very little help but worth mentioning for the glimpse it gives into the *mentalité* of the epoch:

In the same place there also lived John the Sabaote, together with Demetrios the great, the imperial physician-in-chief [*archiatros*]. One day they saw the tracks of a great dragon in the sand of the wadi. Abba Demetrios said to Abba John: "Let us get out of here in case we are done a damage by the beast." Abba John said: "Let us rather pray," so they stood there, praying, with the beast about a quarter of a mile away. And they saw it being carried up on high—by divine command—right up to the clouds, then falling back down to earth with a rushing noise, with such speed that it was dashed into a thousand pieces. [Anastasius the Sinaïte VS 24 / A14, BHG 1442ta].

Observing phenomena of that order is hardly an activity characteristic of the medical profession, but the second tale is much more *à propos*. It tells (at some length) of a dangerous arch-brigand in Thrace. The Emperor Maurice [582-602] brought him to heel with an imperial mandate, but the captive fell ill within days of his reform. He lay in the hospital known as Sampson at Constantinople where he wept, asking God to receive his tears, which he wiped on a kerchief. "But a certain doctor-in-chief [*archiatros*] who used to visit that hospice" (*xenôn*, the distinction had not then been finely drawn between hotel, hospice and hospital). [Anastasios the Sinaïte, D02 In Ps. vi PG 89:1112A-1116B W863 BHG 1450m]. Was this doctor in the habit of visiting [*episkeptomēnos*] the hospital?. Did he offer his services more or less gratuitously? We can only guess; but there does seem to have been effective medical treatment available for those who could not, or could no longer, pay for it; treatment which might have been superior to that "on the market."

Returning to the tales of the Gardener and of the Avaricious Elder, it hardly need be pointed out that the supernatural healing in both versions of this story (unlike the magistrianos!) probably has more in common with the healings in the Gospels than with contemporary medical practice. A major divergence from both comes at the end of the second version: "The doctor was stupefied at the sight of him walking around and, on hearing what had taken place, pagan [*Hellên*] that he was, he became a Christian." In yet a third version it is the monk's hand that becomes infected, which was very grave because he is a calligrapher; here too the doctor forsakes Hellenism for Christianity. [W872 BHG 1440kw, Cod. Vatic. Palat. 364

f148rv] This might suggest that doctors in general were a little more reluctant than others to abandon the old ways for the new religion. It is curious that the tales make almost no mention of that familiar character of western popular literature in the middle ages, the Jewish doctor.

It seems to have been more or less taken for granted in the Byzantine world that the healing ministry of Christ continued to be exercised by those (dead or alive) who truly served Him; and that these discharged the Dominical command to heal the sick far more effectively than any secular healer might practice his art. This is stated expressly in a little Georgian tale of a girl who fell down "as though possessed by a demon or subject to magic" after inadvertently striking an icon of the Virgin with an apple. "Many doctors came and were unable to heal her—until a Christian person came by, recognized the cause and summoned the priest, saying: "Offer a prayer over this unfortunate woman." [The priest] placed that icon on her and she was promptly rid of the demon." [W951]

Other tales proclaim the superiority of supernatural healing from the house tops; for instance, a Christian named John said :

When I was living in Constantinople I stayed in the household of a rich and noble woman who entrusted me with the management of all her affairs. Then I had the misfortune to fall seriously ill. I lay burning with a very high fever, so severe that I thought that fire was springing from my members. When my body had been consumed away for twenty days (more or less,) after examining my pulse, the doctors said to the noble lady: "You should be aware, my lady, that it is all over for him tonight. Get someone to be with him and to make him a monk,"—it was already evening.

A pious person, Andrew by name, is brought to him; he counsels him to emend his life, which he agrees to do. The fever breaks and, next morning, after a meal and a bath he is up and running again. John tells another story about this Andrew, a former money-changer :

The woman in whose household I lived was served as secretary by a young man named Symeon, good-looking and light-hearted. By force of frequent looking down upon

the people who lived opposite to us, he became enamoured of a woman. To my warning not to be like that, he paid no heed whatsoever. Then he had the misfortune to fall ill; he broke out in blanes and lost his sight for two and a half years. Because he was useful to the noble lady, she called in the doctors a number of times, offering to spend up to five pounds of gold [360 nomismata, 1.638kgs] if he were healed -- or if he could but go his way without a guide. They said to her: "Be under no delusion, noble lady; this man cannot be cured by a doctor, for the faculty of sight is destroyed. [He will not see] unless the God who made him grant him the gift of sight."

The young man grieved and wept on this account. He used to come with me to Master Andrew to hear words of godliness. Often he besought him saying: "You do so many good deeds, but I alone am denied your mercy." [Andrew] said: "If a householder had not noticed that smoke was coming in the windows, he would not have sealed them up." [Symeon] continued urging him to pray for him. So one day, greatly entreated by him, [Andrew] said to [Symeon]: "Get yourself off to [the Church of] Saint Anastasia and pray there with contrition and tears. Say that the servant Andrew sent you to her." Finding a guide, he went to the [Church of] Saint Anastasia. He knelt down before the railings of the place-of-sacrifice, praying with tears and calling upon the martyr, saying: "I know that I am a sinner and unworthy to receive mercy, but your servant Andrew sent me to you."

He then began to experience an itching in the eyes. Irritated, he was dismayed and rubbed them with his fingers. He got up and said to the person who led him by the hand: "Let us go home." When he had climbed the stairs and gone into the dining room there was a sound in his eyes like bursting bubbles. He was afraid and began to cry out: "Lord have mercy!" When the noble lady heard it, she came out saying: "What is matter with you, Symeon?" He said: "Look, I can see the side-board and all that is in the dining room." Wishing to be certain, she showed him her fingers saying: "How many are there?" to which he replied: "So many." Then, in wonder, together they all

glorified our merciful God. [W060 BHG 1322c, Revue des Etudes Slaves 54 (1982) 108-116]

While here the object is clearly to assert the efficacy of a higher healing, the earthly healers are by no means underrated or derided. The doctors take the patient's pulse—a procedure already known for centuries—and from that evidence proclaim he is about to expire. This is confirmed by the saintly Andrew when he cites Mtt 310, "The axe is now laid to the root of the tree."

The case of Symeon is particularly interesting. If the text is to be taken at face value after two and half years of treatment, the noble mistress offers the doctors up to a total of 360 pieces of gold—a huge sum by any reckoning—for even a partial cure. The temptation to abuse this lucrative situation must have been enormous ("The doctor cures when he can smell money" says a Polish proverb) but these doctors demonstrate that they are men of integrity. They tell the noble lady, quite frankly, what the situation is: that the optic nerve has been destroyed. He cannot be cured by a doctor; indeed, he will never see again "unless the God who made him grant him the gift of sight." So if some of the stories reviewed above lead one to suspect that certain doctors were unprincipled money-grubbers, this last pair do much to redress the balance by throwing the integrity of the doctors into high relief. Nor are the doctors' diagnoses called into question.

It is generally agreed that ancient and medieval doctors were far more advanced in diagnosing sickness than they were in healing it. There is one tale which shows that their diagnoses were not limited to physical conditions. It is the story of a handsome, young magistranos (not the same one as before) who was frequently entertained by an older colleague who had a young wife. She fell in love with the young man (unknown to him) and sickened with love. The husband brought doctors to her who, having examined her diagnosed a psychological malady. [W019 BHG 1318r N037] Their syllogism however leaves something to be desired: "She must have some psychological disease, for there is nothing physically wrong with her." It has a decidedly modern ring.

In order fully to understand what the medical profession was up against in late antiquity and the early middle ages, there is a third factor which has to be taken into account. For if doctors were in a certain sense in competition with spiritual healers on the one hand, they also had to

contend with practitioners of the black arts on the other. This is not the place to discuss magic and magicians in the tales but this one example is apposite. It concerns a certain Romanus whose property another sought to acquire. But:

. . . failing in his aim and mad with rage against him, [the malefactor] went off to Eleutheropolis and consorted with a magician in his desire to kill [Romanus]. The magician, on receiving substantial payment, applied diabolical skills. Romanus, who had gone out into the fields with some workmen, was seized with paralysis and carried into his house; as the disease gradually intensified, dropsy set in, his strength ebbed away, and after a few days he was written off by the doctors.

However, Romanus prayed to Saint Euthymius, who promptly appeared saying: "Have no fear, but show me your complaint." When Romanus pointed to his belly, the figure of the vision, straightening and joining his fingers, cut open the place as if with a sword and removed from the stomach a tin tablet [*petalon kassiterinon*] with certain characters on it; this he placed in front of Romanus on a small table. Rubbing the place with his hand he expunged the cut and cured him while he said: "This has happened to you because for a long time you have not gone to church or approached the divine mysteries . . ." [Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Euthymius* 57, ed. Schwartz 783-798, translated by R.M. Price]

This is not the only example of supernatural surgery; there is one in the early fifth-century *Lausiac History* which might more accurately reflect the practice of earthly surgery. It concerns Abba Elias who found life with three hundred virgins (whose pastor he was) too much for him and ran away. Angels promised to rid him of his lascivious reaction to the virgins if he would promise to return and look after them. "Then one of them seized him by the hands, another by the feet while another took a razor and cut off his testicles—not in reality but in fantasy; and in an ecstasy (so to speak) he was healed." [W203 HL 29.4] John the Baptist's treatment of Conon the Priest in a similar situation was less severe: "[He] made him sit down on one of the hills, stripped him of his clothes and three times made the sign of the cross beneath his navel. "Believe me, Conon the priest," he said, "I wanted you to carry away some reward from

the struggle. But since you did not wish it to be so, I have caused the struggle to cease." [PS 03]

Here, to end with, is the one story in which an earthly doctor actively intervenes in a monastic situation. It was told by a eunuch named John, ca AD 600 :

I came up into the ThebaId, the community of Abba Apollo, and there I saw a young brother whose father in the flesh was also a monk. The young man had made it a rule for himself to drink neither water nor wine nor any other liquid as long as he lived. So he ate chicory and bitter herbs and those vegetables which had the ability to assuage his thirst. His task was to put the loaves in the oven. After three years he fell ill and, eventually, went to the Lord. As he burned with fever and terrible thirst, everybody pressed him to drink a little, but the brother would not hear of it. The father of the community summoned a doctor to do what could be done for the dying man; but when he arrived and saw the brother in such a miserable condition, he too pressed him to take a little drink—but without success. So he said to the father: "Get me a large vessel." Into this he poured four measures [*kilikia*] of tepid water and then had the brother put into it up to his thighs for about an hour. The godly elder [John the Eunuch] assured us (for he said he was present when they took the brother out of the water) that when the doctor measured the water, he found it to have been reduced by one measure. [W358 PS 184.3]

The story does not say that such treatment of severe dehydration was successful. On the contrary, it seems to say that the man's death ensued. While the immersion might have somewhat comforted the patient in his fevered distress (which would at least demonstrate the physician's compassion) medical colleagues tell me that, far from alleviating his condition, this might actually have aggravated it somewhat by an acceleration of the dehydration process. Hence we have to conclude that if the level of the water went down at all, it could hardly have been reduced by 25%, and what reduction did take place would have been due to evaporation or a leaky barrel, not by absorption into the patient's body—as the narrative implies.

This might (indeed does) call into question the credibility of the tales -- but then nobody claims that they are statements of fact. But whatever the "truth" of this story might be, once again, the doctor comes out of it looking rather well. Faced with an impossible situation (a stubborn monk apparently determined to self-destruction,) he uses his head. Denied the benefits of modern medical science, he does the best he can with the resources at his disposal. For this he should surely be held in high honor by us who in our latter twentieth-century omniscience sit too often in judgment on our primitive forebears. Modern medicine does not have to play second-fiddle to a battery of supernatural healers nor does it have to contend with firmly held convictions that suffering and disease are inflicted by the evil one on the one hand and by the deity (as a blessing) on the other. It must have been a fiercely difficult task to practice medicine in those conditions and with the resources then available. It is to their great credit that doctors are given a passing grade in the tales.

ABBREVIATIONS AND REFERENCES:

- AB* *Analecta Bollandiana*
- A/B* *Apophthegmata Patrum, collectio alphabetica* ed. J.-B. Cottelier with Latin translation, *PG* 65:71-440, supplemented by J.-C. Guy, *Recherches sur la Tradition grecque des apophthegmata patrum*, Brussels 1962; French translation by Lucien Regnault, *Les Sentences des Pères du Désert, collection alphabétique*, Solesmes, 1981.----- English translation by Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Oxford and Kalamazoo 1975.
- Anastasius the Sinaïte
ed. F. Nau, "Le texte grec du moine Anastase sur les saints pères du Sinaï" [1-40 + appendix,] *Oriens Christianus* 2 (1902) 58-89, and "Le texte grec des récits utiles à l'âme d'Anastase (le Sinaïte)," *ibid.* 3 (1903) 56-75, but see Bernard Flusin, "Démons et Sarrasins: l'auteur et le propos des *Diégêmata stêriktika* d'Anastase le Sinaïte," *Travaux et Mémoires* 11 (1991) 380-409.
- BHG* *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca*, ed. François Halkin, third edition, Brussels 1957 (*Subsidia Hagiographica* N° 8a) and *Novum auctarium Bibliothecae Hagiographicae Graecae*, Brussels 1984 (*Subsidia Hagiographica* N° 65.)
- Cyril of Scythopolis,
Lives of the Palestinian Monks, ed. Eduard Schwartz, *Kyrrillos von Skythopoli, Texte und Untersuchungen* 49.2, Leipzig 1939. English translation, *Lives of the Monks of Palestine by Cyril of Scythopolis* by R.M. Price with Introduction and Notes by John Binns, Cistercian Publications Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1991.
- Daniel of Scêtê
"Vie et récits de l'Abbé Daniel de Scêtê," ed. Léon Clugnet, *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*, 5 (1900) 49-73 and 370-391
- HL* *Historia Lausiaca*, by Palladios, Bishop of Hellenopolis, edited by E.C. Butler, *The Lausiaca History of Palladius II, Texts and Studies* VI.2 (Cambridge, 1904,) 3-169; . *Palladio, La Storia Lausiaca*; Testo critico e commento a cura di G.J.M. Bartelink. trad. di Marino Barchiesi, Milano 1974 [⁵1998] (*Scrittori greci e*

- latini. Vite dei Santi. 2*); English translations by (1) W.K. Lowther Clarke, *The Lausiac History*, London 1918 and (2) R.T. Meyer, *Ancient Christian Writers* 36, Westminster, Maryland 1965. French translation "par les soeurs carmélites de Mazille," *Palladius, Les Moines du Désert: Histoire Lausiaque* Paris, 1981.
- Mioni, Elpidio: "Il Pratum Spirituale di Giovanni Mosco: gli episodi inediti del Cod. Marciano greco II.21," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 17 (1951) 61-94.
- N *Apophthegmata patrum: collectio systematica* edited by F. Nau, "Histoires des solitaires ıgyptiens," *Revue de l'Orient chrétien* 12 (1907) through 18 (1913) *passim* (Greek text of the first four hundred tales found in Cod. Paris. Coislin 126 with French translation of tales 1-215.) Critical edition (partial:) *Les Apophtegmes des Pères, Collection systématique, chapitres I-IX* edited by J.-C. Guy and Bernard Flusin, *Sources Chrétiennes* N° 387, Paris 1993; *idem Chapitres X-* (details. to follow); Latin translation of "Pelagius and John" (6th-7th century) *PL* 73: 851-1052; French translation by Lucien Regnault, *Les Sentences des Pères du désert, série des anonymes*, Solesmes-Bellefontaine 1985 and *Les sentences des pères du désert: nouveau recueil*, Solesmes 1970.
- Nissen, Th.: "Unbekannte Erzählungen aus dem Pratum Spirituale," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 38 (1938) 351 - 376
- PE Paul Euergetinos (editor) *A Collection [synagôgē] of the inspired sayings of the godly and holy fathers . . .* (in Greek) first published at Venice, 1783; 6th ed., 4 vols., Athens 1980.
- PG *Patrologia Graeca* ed. J.P. Migne
- PL *Patrologia Latina* ed. J.P. Migne
- PS *Pratum Spirituale*, by John Moschos, edited by J.P. Migne (after Fronto Ducaeus and J.-B. Cotelier) with the Latin translation of Ambrose Traversari ("Fra Ambrogio,") 1346 - 1439, the Florentine humanist, *PG* 87:2851-3112; French translation by M.-J. Rouet de Journel, *Le Pré Spirituel*, Paris 1946 (*Sources Chrétiennes* 12); Italian translation by Riccardo Maisano, *Giovanni Mosco, Il Prato*, Naples, 1982; English translation by J. Wortley, *The Spiritual Meadow*, Kalamazoo 1992.
- Theophanes Continuatus* or *Chronographia*, *PG* 109
- W Wortley, John, *A Répertoire of Byzantine "Beneficial Tales" [diêgêseis psychôpheleis]*
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 Wortley 1993:
 "The spirit of rivalry in early Christian monachism," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 33/4 (1993) 1-22.