



# The Birth of the Cult of St Menas

Ewa Wipszycka<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** It is not necessary to go through all the stages of initiation into the intricacies of hagiographical studies to immediately recognize, when reading the works related to the dossier of St Menas, that we are dealing with a subgenre of hagiography which contemporary scholars term “fictional hagiography”. The figure of the Saint and the events of his life were invented by anonymous authors and editors in various ways, according to their own tastes and the anticipated tastes of their audience. This article seeks to identify the narrative elements, terms, and descriptions of events that serve as markers of this specific genre. My aim is not to reconstruct the biography of the saint, but to gain a better understanding of the religiosity of those who came to Abū Mīnā, particularly their expectations. Researchers of the St Menas dossier are fortunate to have at their disposal extensive findings from archaeological excavations, which enable not only the dating of the sanctuary’s establishment and expansion but also aid in reconstructing the spaces and buildings where the cult of the Saint took place. While literary texts require ongoing critical assessment of their reliability, the extensive sanctuary, its furnishings, churches, houses, and streets relieve us from an excessive level of skepticism. Although the article’s title suggests a focus on texts, archaeology assists the historian in creating a comprehensive picture of what occurred at Abū Mīnā.

**Keywords:** Cotyaeum; Mareotis; Nikiou; Philoxenite; Phrygia; Abū Mīnā sanctuary; camels of St Menas; excavations at Abū Mīnā; fictive hagiographic texts; markers of fiction in hagiographic texts; persecutions of Christians; relics of martyrs; self-denunciation of future martyrs

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## 1. The Sources

The available literary dossier on St Menas comprises several works of different nature and content providing information on his life, martyrdom, and the circumstances surrounding the creation of his tomb and sanctuary for pilgrims. It is appropriate to begin by presenting these texts before proceeding with my commentary on them.

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<sup>1</sup> Ewa Wipszycka, professor at the University of Warsaw, Poland; e-mail: e.wipszycka@uw.edu.pl; ORCID: 0000-0002-3171-3957.

### 1.1. Greek *Martyrdom(s) of St Menas*

The most well-known version of the martyrdom of St Menas, both in the East and, through its Latin translation, in the western Mediterranean world, is the result of editorial interventions made by Symeon Metaphrastes (10th/11th century) on a much earlier text<sup>2</sup>. Exactly how much earlier we cannot determine, as the original version subjected to these interventions remains unknown. The Vorlage of this manuscript tradition must have existed in the 5th century, when the sanctuary was flourishing, since it could not have functioned without works praising the saint and describing not only his martyrdom but also his family, career, and virtues.

### 1.2. Coptic *Martyrdom of St Menas*<sup>3</sup>

It is found in the codex from Ḥāmūli in the Fayum (now housed in the Pierpont Morgan Library and Museum, under the shelfmark M.590). From its colophon, we learn that work on the manuscript was completed in 892/893, which is the only date we can safely assign to this work. The *Martyrdom* does not contain any information that would allow us to propose a *post quem* date. The manuscript has been severely damaged, which is why its editor, James Drescher, published only the beginning and the end of it. The omitted text could be reconstructed based on an Arabic translation made in the 14th century<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> *Passio S. Menae* Graece, Metaphrastic text: G. van Hooft, *Acta Sancti Menae martyris Aegyptii*, AnBol 3 (1884) p. 258-270; R. Miedema, *De Heilige Menas*, Rotterdam 1913, p. 93-103; Pre-Metaphrastic text: K. Krumbacher, *Miszellen zu Romanos*, München 1907, p. 31-43.

<sup>3</sup> J. Drescher, *Apa Mena: A Selection of Coptic Texts Relating to St. Menas*, Cairo 1946, p. 1-6 (text), 100-104 (tr.).

<sup>4</sup> F. Jaritz, *Die arabischen Quellen zum heiligen Menas*, Heidelberg 1993, p. 86-105. Jaritz also provides information about other Arabic manuscripts.

### 1.3. Prologue to the collection of miracles of St Menas<sup>5</sup>

The Coptic text is preserved in already mentioned codex M.590<sup>6</sup>. The shorter Greek version can be found in Ivan Pomialovskii's edition, which is based on a single manuscript<sup>7</sup>.

### 1.4. Coptic *Encomium on St Menas*<sup>8</sup>

We know this text from a single manuscript found in codex M.590 as well. It begins with the following introduction:

An Encomium delivered by our blessed and most honourable father, Apa John, Archbishop of Alexandria, on the noble conqueror (*gennaios athloforos*), the blessed martyr of Christ, the holy Apa Mena, telling of him from his birth to his consummation, informing us of his distinguished race and illustrious parentage, his city and his family, and how he strove in the confession of Christ and gained the crown of martyrdom. In peace. Amen<sup>9</sup>.

Considering that the *Encomium* mentions the Arab invasion, we must look for a Patriarch named John between the mid-7th and late-9th centuries. Within this time frame, two patriarchs bore the name John: John III (677-686) and John IV (776-799). Choosing between them is not easy, as each possibility has supporting arguments; personally, the second option (John IV) seems more plausible to me<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> P. Piwowarczyk provides a detailed introduction to the *Miracles of St Menas* in his article "Prolegomena to the Study of the Miracles of St Menas" VoxP 94 (2025) p. 35-64.

<sup>6</sup> Drescher, *Apa Mena*, p. 7-10 (text), 108-110 (tr.).

<sup>7</sup> *Miracula S. Menae* Graece, ed. I. Pomialovskii, *Zhitie prepodobnago Paisiia Velikago i Timofeia patriarkha Aleksandriiskago poviestvovanie o chudesakh" sv. Velikomuchenika Miny*, Saint Petersburg 1900, p. 62-63.

<sup>8</sup> Drescher, *Apa Mena*, p. 35-72 (text), 128-149 (tr.).

<sup>9</sup> Iohannes (IV?) Alexandrinus, *Encomium in S. Menam*, in: Drescher, *Apa Mena*, p. 35 (text), 128 (tr.).

<sup>10</sup> See arguments given by P. Piwowarczyk, *Literary Sources on Philoxenite: A Survey*, in: *Philoxenite on Lake Mareotis: A Town and Pilgrimage Station on the Way to the Sanctuary of Saint Menas (Abu Mena)*, v. 1: *History and Topography*, ed. T. Derda – M. Gwiazda, Leuven 2025, forthcoming.

Thus, we are dealing with a late text, written at a time when a literary tradition around the saint already existed. The *Encomium* engages in a polemic with this tradition. The author of the *Encomium* claims that he used the archives of the Alexandrian Church:

We shall not invent and tell you fictitious tales but the things which our fathers have set forth for us from the beginning, which we have found lying in the library of the Church of the Patriarchate of Alexandria, written in Greek by the old chroniclers who lived at that time, these who saw with their eyes from the beginning and became officers of the word, instructing us about his family and his martyrdom<sup>11</sup>.

Drescher wrote about this passage: “This kind of circumstantial detail usually betrays apocrypha”<sup>12</sup>. He, too, was aware that it is best not to take John’s claim seriously. Similar assertions appear in many hagiographic texts and are intended to reassure the reader of the narrative’s veracity.

The text of the *Encomium* was used in the compilation presenting the life of St Menas in the 14th-century Coptic *Synaxary* in Arabic<sup>13</sup>.

## 2. Life of St Menas in his Late Antique Dossier

The literary dossier of St Menas is not confined to the Late Antiquity. He remained extraordinarily popular throughout the Middle Ages, not only in Byzantium but also, to a lesser extent, in Western Europe. However, I will not focus on this later cult, which is accompanied by a corresponding set of hagiographic works. My objective is to examine the earliest phase of the legend, when the literary and artistic image of the saint was taking shape in the sanctuary at Mareotis.

The most informative and coherent narrative of St Menas’s life can be found in the *Encomium*. According to its author, the parents of St Menas belonged to the elite, who were personally dependent on the emperor and his decisions. Not all martyrs came from noble backgrounds (for example, soldiers are often the heroes of hagiographies), yet the majority came

<sup>11</sup> Iohannes (IV?) Alexandrinus, *Encomium in S. Menam*, in: Drescher, *Apa Mena*, p. 37 (text), 129 (tr.).

<sup>12</sup> Drescher, *Apa Mena*, p. 129.

<sup>13</sup> *Synaxarium Copticum*, ed. R. Basset, PO 3, p. 293-298 [217-222].

from the upper social strata. One would think that being a Christian martyr would be a sufficient reason for fame, but the authors of hagiographic works, like people of their time, greatly respected social hierarchy. Enhancing the authority of saints in this way was a typical approach taken by the creators of fictional hagiographies.

While St Menas's noble origins are a constant element in his biography, other pieces of information about his life vary significantly, demonstrating that these details reflect the particular agendas of different authors.

According to the *Encomium*, the family of St Menas came from Nikiou, an important city in the western Delta (the author believed that the prestige of this city would enhance the prestige of St Menas's family). However, it was neither Mareotis nor Nikiou, but Phrygia that was the setting of St Menas's earthly life. His father, under direct orders from the emperor, was sent to this province, to the city of Cotyaeum, where he brought his family and entire household. There, until his death, he held the prestigious position of governor (*eparchos*).

A miracle was needed for Menas to be born. As the years passed and his mother could not conceive, she fervently prayed to the Mother of God for a longed-for son, fasting often and sharing her wealth with the poor. The mother's infertility and, ultimately, the miracle of her son's birth are common motifs in hagiography. In this way, the future martyr was marked as exceptional from the moment of his birth.

According to the *Encomium*, after the death of his parents, St Menas did not return to Egypt, but remained in Phrygia. At the age of 15, he was forcibly conscripted into the army, joining a unit called the *Routiliakoi*<sup>14</sup>. He served as an exemplary soldier, loved by all. When Diocletian issued his edict initiating persecutions, Menas left the army and retreated into the wilderness, where he led a devout life. He acquired several camels, which he used to earn money to sustain himself and give alms; his retreat from the world was thus not complete, as he continued to serve people and earn money with his camels.

One day, he had a vision in which he saw martyrs in heaven receiving crowns from angels. As a man of fervent piety, he yearned to join their ranks. Ultimately, a voice from heaven urged him to denounce himself, promising that he would become the most renowned martyr and that

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<sup>14</sup> A unit by this name is not attested anywhere, and this is not the only reason to doubt the veracity of the account of St Menas's conscription into the army. In the Roman Empire, fifteen-year-olds were not forced into military service. In fact, young men from families high in the social hierarchy were generally not compelled to join the army at all.

people from all nations would honour him in his martyrion. St Menas resolved to present himself before the authorities.

Visions of martyrs in heaven and heavenly voices foretelling future fame are common hagiographic motifs. Although the Church did not encourage self-denunciation, if God called a future martyr to it, the act was considered justified<sup>15</sup>. It is clear that St Menas presented himself to the authorities rather than waiting to be arrested. In the view of hagiographers, voluntary martyrdom provided a greater claim to glory than ordinary martyrdom.

St Menas made his declaration of Christian faith at a significant moment: during the festivities for the emperor's *dies natalis*, in the presence of the people and soldiers (as noted in the *Encomium*). A trial ensued, accompanied by torture. The magistrate sentenced that he should be beheaded and that his body should be burnt. However, his body was rescued by the Christians.

Other Coptic texts do not mention Phrygia. Their authors place the entire life of St Menas in the Mareotis, referred to by the Coptic term 'Nepaeiat'<sup>16</sup>. The prologue to the miracles, comprising a short biography of the Saint, knows nothing of his life in Phrygia. The passage, according to the author or authors of this version of St Menas's biography, demonstrates that his martyrdom took place in the Mareotis. When the Saint decides to denounce himself, he entrusts the camels he had previously acquired to a man from 'Nepaeiat'. No mention of Phrygia occurs in the surviving sections of the Coptic *Martyrium* either.

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<sup>15</sup> A list of ecclesiastical authorities condemning self-denunciation or deliberate actions aimed at provoking martyrdom (up to the beginning of the 4th century) was compiled by G.E.M. de Ste. Croix (*Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*, Oxford 2006, p. 157-161). Importantly, de Ste. Croix emphasizes that there is no Christian author "apart from the works of heretics and schismatics, including Tertullian in his later, Montanist phase" (p. 155) who would endorse self-denunciation. On the other hand, hagiographic texts containing numerous examples of self-denunciation enjoyed recognition and popularity.

<sup>16</sup> In the Coptic language, 'Nepaeiat' refers to Libya or Mareotis, see J. Drescher, *Apa Mena*, p. 101. It appears that the boundary between these regions was not sharply defined in the minds of the authors.

### 3. St Menas and Phrygia: 20th Century Discussions

The results of excavations conducted by Carl Maria Kaufmann in Abū Mīnā (1905-1907) sparked interest in the texts concerning St Menas that were accessible at that time<sup>17</sup>. Although the Coptic works later edited by James Drescher were still awaiting publication, sufficient material was already available in synaxaria of various origins, Ethiopic). In 1900, Ivan Pomialovskiĭ published a substantial, previously unknown Greek text of the miracles<sup>18</sup>.

Connecting the ‘Phrygian version’ with the ‘Mareotis version’ of the Saint’s *vita* poses significant challenges for scholars studying the hagiography of St Menas. Are we dealing here with two martyrs who share the same name, each with his own legend – one recounted in Phrygia and the other in Mareotis? When and how was the story of the martyr from Cotyaeum adapted for the sanctuary near Alexandria?

William M. Ramsay, the well-known researcher of the history of Asia Minor, asserted that priority should be assigned to the Phrygian version, which he believed to have arisen from the Christianization of an old deity worshipped in Anatolia and appearing in Anatolian sources under various names Mannis, Mnios, Mnaos, Menes, and Men<sup>19</sup>. The very name ‘Menas’ is undoubtedly a theophoric name that originated in the area where the cult of Mena was widely disseminated. However, it penetrated Egypt very early; the database papyri.info records (as of July 30, 2024) 34 attestations for the period up to 300 AD, with 19 from the 2nd century. In other words, someone born in Egypt could have received this name from parents with no ties to central Anatolia and unaware of the Anatolian origin of the name.

The mere Anatolian character of the name does not necessarily mean that Ramsay was correct in claiming that St Menas represented a Christian version of Men. Ramsay belonged to a group of religion scholars active at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries who were convinced that pagan gods often hid behind the names of saints. This theory faced

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<sup>17</sup> Numerous publications from these years are discussed by H. Delehay in the bibliographic bulletin accompanying the review of M.A. Murray’s work: *AnBol* 27 (1908) p. 458-459.

<sup>18</sup> *Miracula S. Menae* Graece, ed. I. Pomialovskiĭ.

<sup>19</sup> W.M. Ramsay, *The Utilisation of Old Epigraphic Copies*, “The Journal of Hellenic Studies” 38 (1918) p. 151-158, 166-168. The cult of Men has been described by S. Mitchell, *Anatolia. Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor*, v. 2: *The Rise of the Church*, Oxford 1993, p. 24-25.



vigorous criticism, particularly from Catholic scholars. It was abandoned when it quickly became apparent that it lacked a solid basis in sources.

Roots in Egyptian beliefs were also sought for St Menas. Rhein Miedema, in his doctoral dissertation, which he defended at the University of Leiden in 1913, tried to find in the cult of St Menas elements of the worship of the most important Egyptian deities, both from the Pharaonic period and from the Roman times. According to him, “the cult of St Menas is a Christianized form of the worship of the Egyptian gods”<sup>20</sup>.

In 1910, Hippolyte Delehaye vigorously defended the Egyptian origins of St Menas<sup>21</sup>. He viewed the available dossier from the perspective of his research on hagiographic literature, including that produced in Egypt. Having formed an opinion about its characteristic features, he found them to be present in texts concerning St Menas. The ‘Phrygian’ part of the biography did not deter him, as he was convinced that the cult of the saint spread rapidly in Asia Minor, particularly in the Phrygian city of Cotyaeum. According to him, the inhabitants of this city, in their zeal, came to believe that they had given the Church a great martyr. A work written in Cotyaeum, which recounted the Phrygian life of the saint, made its way to Egypt and was received enthusiastically, especially since no local legend yet existed<sup>22</sup>.

From the perspective of contemporary research, Delehaye was mistaken. His main argument, the early success of the cult of St Menas in Asia Minor, is entirely unfounded. Paweł Nowakowski, who has meticulously gathered all available inscriptions related to the cult of saints in this area (of which there are an enormous number), found only one inscription attesting to the cult of St Menas, and that is far from Phrygia, in Cilicia, in Dilekkaya (ancient Anazarbus)<sup>23</sup>.

Forty years after Delehaye’s publication, Paul Peeters, a Bollandist (like Delehaye) and a prominent researcher of hagiography, proposed an entirely new hypothesis to explain why Cotyaeum became a city

<sup>20</sup> Miedema, *De Heilige Menas*, p. 133.

<sup>21</sup> H. Delehaye, *L’Invention des reliques de saint Ménas à Constantinople*, AnBol 29 (1910) p. 117-150.

<sup>22</sup> Delehaye, *L’Invention des reliques de saint Ménas à Constantinople*, p. 127.

<sup>23</sup> P. Nowakowski, *Inscribing the Saints in Late Antique Anatolia*, *The Journal of Juristic Papyrology Supplement* 34, Warsaw 2018, p. 576-577. I would like to warmly thank the author for his very effective assistance in the writing of this part of my study.



sanctified by the martyrdom of St Menas<sup>24</sup>. He recalled the figure of Cyrus, a Greek poet from the Egyptian city of Panopolis, who made a dazzling career in the circles of power in Constantinople, holding high positions; he was an ordinary consul in 441 and belonged to the elite group of patricians appointed by the emperor. However, when he fell afoul of Theodosius II in 441, he was forced to resign from secular life and accept episcopal ordination for the diocese in Cotyaeum. The Christian community in this city had a bad reputation. As John Malalas writes, four consecutive bishops lost their lives there<sup>25</sup>. Cyrus could have met the same fate (perhaps that was the emperor's intention?). However, he managed to survive until the death of Theodosius in 450. At that point, he renounced his clerical status and lived quietly for many more years (he died during the reign of Leo I [457–474], but the exact date of his death is unknown)<sup>26</sup>.

I now give the floor to Peeters:

Cyrus était homme de ressources: il réussit à vivre en bonne intelligence avec le peuple de sa ville épiscopale. Nous n'irons pas jusqu'à dire que ce fut là peut-être le mieux prouvé historiquement des miracles de S. Ménas. Mais on accordera qu'il est difficile de ne pas trouver quelque rapport entre ces trois faits: S. Ménas populaire à Panopolis, ville natale du poète Cyrus; ce même poète Cyrus de Panopolis, devenu évêque de Cotyée en Phrygie dans des conditions assez spéciales, qui devaient l'inviter à faire un effort d'imagination; et même S. Ménas transformé en martyr de Cotyée, où jusque-là il était totalement inconnu.

Cette histoire eut son épilogue. La Passion de S. Ménas, fabriquée pour les gens de Cotyée, sur une inspiration partie d'Égypte, fut introduite au Delta. Les hagiographes indigènes la jugèrent de bonne prise. Elle leur fournit

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<sup>24</sup> P. Peeters, *Orient et Byzance. Le Tréfonds Oriental de l'hagiographie byzantine*, *Subsidia hagiographica* 26, Brussels 1950, p. 38–41.

<sup>25</sup> Iohannes Malalas, *Chronographia* 14.16 (362), *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia*, ed. J. Thurn, *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* 35, Berlin 2000, p. 282; *The Chronicle of John Malalas: A Translation*, tr. E. Jeffreys et al., Melbourne 1986, p. 197–198. I admit that I find it hard to believe in the credibility of this information – it seems like some sort of anecdote. The killing of bishops in the fifth-century empire could not have failed to provoke intervention from the authorities (including the central ones).

<sup>26</sup> On the biography of Cyrus, see J.R. Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, v. 2: *A.D. 395–527*, Cambridge 1980, p. 336–339 (s.v. Cyrus 7).

un cadre dans lequel ils firent entrer ce qui subsistait encore des souvenirs locaux<sup>27</sup>.

According to Peeters, Cyrus encountered the cult of St Menas while still in his hometown, Panopolis. This was, in the Bollandist's opinion, one of the first places where St Menas was venerated, judging by the many ampullae depicting this saint found in Panopolis. Here Peeters was completely mistaken. Only three ampullae originate from Panopolis, and they were not discovered during excavations. The person who provided information about them (Robert Forrer, a Swiss antiquities dealer) had purchased them from sellers, so they could have arrived in southern Egypt at any time in the early 20th century, when the antiquities market was oversaturated with ampullae due to Kaufmann's excavations. Thousands were discovered in Abū Mīnā and were popular among tourists<sup>28</sup>. This mistake by Peeters has little significance for us; Cyrus would undoubtedly have been aware of the sanctuary of Abū Mīnā that was rapidly developing in the early 5th century. In the 440s, the first church already stood over the tomb of St Menas, and an entire city was being constructed to accommodate visitors.

Peeters's idea was adopted and developed by Alan Cameron in his essays: "Wanderings of Poets" (1966) and "Empress and the Poet" (1982) ('Empress' refers to Eudocia, the wife of Theodosius II, who highly valued the poetry of Cyrus)<sup>29</sup>. Characterising the various literary genres practiced by Cyrus, he included a subsection in his book titled "The Hagiographer"<sup>30</sup>, but no new argument was presented in it. There is no way around it: no such argument exists.

It is true that by accepting the hypothesis of Peeters and Cameron as plausible, we could explain why Cotyaeum, rather than another city, appears in our dossier (Cotyaeum certainly was an important city, but

<sup>27</sup> Peeters, *Orient et Byzance*, p. 40.

<sup>28</sup> This has been proved by Ádam Bollók, who found the papers of Forrer, an amateur archaeologist, far from reliable: see Bollók's paper "Portable Sanctity" Brought to the Afterlife: *Pilgrim Eulogiai as Grave Goods in the Late Antique Eastern Mediterranean*, in: *Across the Mediterranean – along the Nile. Studies in Egyptology, Nubiology and Late Antiquity Dedicated to László Török*, v. 2, ed. T.A. Bács – Á. Bollók – T. Vida, Budapest 2018, p. 763-770.

<sup>29</sup> Both have been included in the volume of collected works by A. Cameron, *Wandering Poets and Other Essays on Late Greek Literature and Philosophy*, Oxford 2016, to which I refer.

<sup>30</sup> Cameron, *Wandering Poets*, p. 37-80.

the capital of the province of Phrygia was Synnada). However, this seems insufficient grounds for accepting their hypothesis. Moreover, it is not at all evident that by offering a martyr as an attractive object of veneration to the unruly Christian community, Cyrus could have gained their favour. It would have been a cult without relics, which were introduced at a time when they played a significant role in religious consciousness. Sanctuaries generally possessed them.

The ideas of Peeters and Cameron have been largely overlooked by researchers studying the dossier of St Menas and the history of his sanctuary. It is surprising that no one has paid attention to the studies of these two well-known authors, which are also easily accessible in European libraries. This reflects poorly on the flow of information within academic circles. I do not claim that these ideas had to be accepted right away, but they certainly deserved to be discussed.

Przemysław Piwowarczyk, with whom I have discussed whether the hypothesis of Peeters and Cameron was plausible, is (like me) convinced that their ideas must be rejected and that we should seek explanations in another direction: the well-documented penchant of Egyptian authors for placing their invented narratives in distant, exotic lands, often even in entirely fictional ones. While we do not consider Asia Minor to be 'exotic' (contacts between Egypt and various regions of Asia Minor were frequent), Coptic authors who mentioned its cities in their fictional hagiographical works had a different opinion.

My reader has likely already understood that we are unable to determine how events occurring in Phrygia were introduced into the legend of St Menas. Just to be clear, we are still dealing with the 'literary reality' created by successive authors/editors of the dossier of St Menas; we are not discussing 'lived reality'.

#### **4. The Journey of St Menas's Bodily Remains to Mareotis**

The texts concerning St Menas recount in various ways how, thanks to whom, and under what circumstances his remains came to rest in Mareotis in an underground crypt that became the cradle of the future sanctuary.

In the Coptic *Martyrdom*, the main role here is assigned to his sister, whom Menas had asked before his death to bury him in Egypt. When she arrived with his remains in Alexandria, crowds gathered. A grand

martyrion was immediately constructed in the city. However, an angel informed the archbishop that God had designated a different place for the martyr's eternal rest and instructed him on what to do: he was to place the body on the back of a camel, let the camel roam freely, and bury the saint's remains wherever it stopped.

In the Greek texts, this role was fulfilled by Christian comrades from the unit in which the saint had once served. They believed that the martyr's body would protect them during military operations. They placed the remains in a sarcophagus and laid them in a temporary grave. When the unit was transferred to Egypt, where they were tasked with defending Mareotis against raids by desert nomads, they took the relics with them. When they were ordered to return to Phrygia, they wished to bring back the remains of St Menas, but the camel refused to move from its place.

In both versions of the story regarding the final resting place of St Menas, it was not a human decision but rather the camel carrying his physical remains that determined the location. Animals often served as signals of divine will, acting as the voice of Providence<sup>31</sup>. In the story of St Menas, camels play a special role: after leaving the army following Diocletian's decree, he acquired several camels, which he used to work, thereby earning a living and supporting his acts of charity. When the saint's body was being transported to Egypt, the ship was accompanied by fantastical sea creatures with camel-like necks and heads. Numerous ampullae depict St Menas flanked by camels in an adoring stance, emphasising the animals' symbolic role alongside the saint.

The *Encomium* mentions with horror the existence of a now-lost story in which the saint was referred to as a "camel herder" (ΜΑΝΘΑΜΟΥΛ). This term likely denotes not a herder, but a camel driver or camel handler (Greek: *kamelites*) – a role that Menas appears to play in the Introduction to the miracles, though the Coptic term is not used here. Interestingly, this story is more fully developed in the abbreviated introduction to the *Miracles* than in the Coptic *Martyrdom*, where it is only briefly hinted at. It is possible that a local legend once existed but was effectively erased from collective memory in favour of a more appealing narrative.

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<sup>31</sup> The inspiration for such motifs came from the story of Balaam's ass (Num 22).

## 5. The Tomb in the Desert

I will address separately those passages in our dossier that describe the tomb constructed in the desert by St Menas's comrades-in-arms (or by Alexandrians following the camel under divine guidance), because this is the only episode that can be directly compared with findings from archaeological excavations.

Let us begin with the Coptic texts recounting the burial of St Menas's body. The *Coptic Martyrdom of St Menas*:

And, when it was God's pleasure, the camel knelt in that place. And the people there took the blessed Apa Mena's body down from the camel. And they laid the foundations of a tomb. They built it in a befitting manner. They placed his holy body in it. And they had a silver coffer made. They put the blessed Apa Mena's body in it. They placed it in a crypt. It has remained there till the present day<sup>32</sup>.

The *Encomium*:

The *stratelates* [i.e. the commander of the unit in which St Menas had once served] (...) put the remains of the blessed martyr in a coffin of incorruptible wood and placed the wooden image which he had made upon his remains. He buried them there with commemorative writings. He had a small edifice built over the saint in the form of a small vaulted tomb<sup>33</sup>.

In both texts, the grave is dug in a desolate area specifically for the saint. We are not told how much time passed before the miraculous power of the martyr's body was revealed. A boy, lame from birth, experiences this power when he approaches the grave, drawn by a light he saw above it. The boy falls asleep, and when he awakens, he is healed. Upon learning of the miracle, the residents of a nearby village bring all their sick, blind, and lame to the grave. All of them are healed: "So they [i.e. the villagers] build over the tomb a small oratory like a tetrapylon"<sup>34</sup>.

The entire narrative is constructed from literary *topoi*, including the section about the activation of the relics and the light over the grave

<sup>32</sup> *Passio S. Menae* Coptice, in: Drescher, *Apa Mena*, p. 5 (text), 103 (tr.).

<sup>33</sup> Iohannes (IV?) Alexandrinus, *Encomium in S. Menam*, in: Drescher, *Apa Mena*, p. 63-64 (text), 142-143 (tr.).

<sup>34</sup> Iohannes (IV?) Alexandrinus, *Encomium in S. Menam*, in: Drescher, *Apa Mena*, p. 65 (text), 144 (tr.).

guiding the one who was the first to receive a miracle. According to the conventions of hagiography, this individual is a random, unaware person of humble origins.

In another version of the story, the power of the martyr's earthly remains manifested itself for the first time when sheep grazing nearby were affected. Their shepherd observed a scab-ridden sheep, which, after bathing and rolling on the ground at the holy site, was immediately healed<sup>35</sup>.

The tomb believed to contain the body of St Menas was discovered by Carl M. Kaufmann, the director of the first excavations at Abū Mīnā. During the interwar years, a few skilled archaeologists occasionally worked at the site. Still, it was not until 1976 that systematic research began under Peter Grossmann, who had been working at Abū Mīnā since the 1960s and remained the excavation director until the site's definitive closure in 2013. Their findings diverged significantly from literary accounts<sup>36</sup>.

On the site (or more precisely, beneath the site) where the basilica was erected in the first half of the 5th century, there was not a single grave but the remains of an extensive collective hypogeum – an underground burial complex. Another similar hypogeum was located in Qasimiya, not far from Abū Mīnā<sup>37</sup>. This type of grand tomb served the local wealthy families' need for ostentation. The hypogeum where St Menas's remains were later interred was carved out in pre-Christian times, as evidenced by three small steles depicting Horus-Harpocrates and figurines of Thoth in

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<sup>35</sup> *Synaxarium Copticum*, ed. R. Basset, PO 17, p. 566-567 [1108-1109]. The sick sheep was not enough for the author of this version. He added a story about a king's daughter afflicted with leprosy, to whom St Menas appeared in a dream, instructing her to unearth his remains and build a church on that spot.

<sup>36</sup> A comprehensive, scholarly publication on the excavation results within the tomb chamber and the basilica built above it can be found in: P. Grossmann, *Abu Mina I: Die Gruftkirche und die Gruft*, Archäologische Veröffentlichungen 44, Mainz 1989. For a more concise and easily accessible overview, consult Grossmann's article, *The Pilgrimage Center of Abu Mina*, in: *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, ed. D. Frankfurter, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 134, Leiden 1998, p. 281-302.

<sup>37</sup> P. Grossmann – A. Abdal-Fattah, *Qasimīya: Report on the Survey Work from June 17 to June 19, 2003*, "Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte" 48 (2009) p. 27-44. Qasimiya is located on the northern side of the modern road between Hawariyya and Borg el-Arab.

the form of a seated monkey (the baboon was sacred to Thoth), all discovered *in situ* by Kaufmann<sup>38</sup>.

The tomb was accessed by a shaft whose base lay 5.3 metres below ground level, leading into a spacious chamber that opened into three galleries, each with seven burial niches carved into the walls. The redesign of this complex involved adding a new chamber to hold the sarcophagus containing St Menas's remains. At ground level, above the tomb, a "Baublock" (Grossmann's term)<sup>39</sup> was installed in the initial phase of construction – most likely in the last quarter of the 4th century – serving as a cenotaph<sup>40</sup>.

The entrances to the galleries were sealed, and a second shaft was cut. Stairs were installed in both the original and new shafts, allowing visitors to enter and exit the tomb chamber without causing congestion. Subsequent renovations provided an appropriate architectural setting on the surface for the revered relic.

In the literary dossier of St Menas, there are no traces of memory regarding the transformation of the pagan hypogeum into the tomb of a Christian martyr, nor about the early phase of the development of the sanctuary.

We are unable to reconstruct what the sources remain silent about. Instead, we can take a different approach: we can refer to the current state of research on the emergence of the cult of martyrs and the buildings dedicated to them in the Roman Empire. We are fortunate that in 2019 an excellent book by Robert Wiśniewski, *The Beginnings of the Cult of Relics*, was published. The author, a researcher of the cult of saints and hagiographic works, was a senior investigator on the Oxford-based project *The Cult of Saints from its Origins to c. 700 AD*. I have drawn on his expertise to reconstruct the development of the cult of martyrs in Egypt, which led to the rise of centres like Abū Mīnā. I am operating here within the realm of hypotheses – but better hypotheses than ignorance.

The graves of martyrs from the persecutions in the 2nd and 3rd centuries were undoubtedly treated with attention and veneration by Christians

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<sup>38</sup> C.M. Kaufmann, *Die Menasstadt und das Nationalheiligtum der altchristlichen Aegypter in der westalexandrinischen Wüste. Ausgrabungen der Frankfurter Expedition am Karm Abu Mina 1905-1907*, v. 1, Leipzig 1910, p.71.

<sup>39</sup> Grossmann, *Abu Mina I*, p. 14-22.

<sup>40</sup> A cenotaph is a symbolic tomb that does not contain remains. The one at Abū Mīnā was constructed from mud bricks encased in unworked limestone blocks, which are abundant in the area.



from the beginning. Many were remembered, and the faithful gathered at these sites on specific days to pray, often sharing a meal together. However, these actions did not go beyond the ordinary customs of commemoration, which were familiar to both pagans and Christians. There was not yet a belief that the bodies buried in these graves possessed a unique power to which Christians could appeal, nor did the remains of the deceased have any particular religious status.

However, let us note the emergence, in the second half of the 3rd century, of the belief that martyrs could intercede with God on behalf of the living with particular effectiveness – greater than that of ordinary, devout Christians – though not necessarily at their burial sites.

The memory of the martyrs of the Great Persecution must have been vivid in the first decades of the 4th century, and it was often known who was buried in a specific grave. For a Christian community, a martyr having a grave of their own became a source of pride, elevating it above those who lacked such a privilege. This explains why, starting in the 330s, bodies were relocated to “better” sites, and tombs were given a more prominent form. They took the form of a chapel, often in a small church, where masses could be celebrated. They became the centre of celebrations held on the anniversary of the martyr’s death. Major changes, however, occurred later. Toward the end of the 4th century (and of course afterward), large sanctuaries with sizable churches and numerous clergy were built at the graves of famous martyrs, drawing many pilgrims. These sites also typically had a considerable number of lay attendants. Abū Mīnā is one such example.

Our sources indicate that by the mid-4th century, miracles began to occur at the graves of martyrs. Initially, those who received such grace were primarily individuals with mental illnesses, commonly believed to be possessed by demons, unable to live independently and seeking refuge and basic care at the sanctuaries. Only later did other types of miracles begin to appear.

Let us return to the findings of archaeological research. We know Abū Mīnā’s history begins with the burial of an important individual – probably, according to Drescher, a local martyr<sup>41</sup> – in an existing tomb. However, a significant amount of time passed before the local residents decided to intervene to address the state of the tomb and carry out its further expansion. According to Grossmann, this expansion

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<sup>41</sup> Drescher, *Apa Mena*, p. IX-X.

occurred at the end of the 4th century, as no older archaeological traces have been found, and the first church over the grave was constructed in the first half of the 5th century. This aligns with the model proposed by Wiśniewski: first was the burial of an actual martyr, then the emergence of a desire to place him on display and thereby honour him, followed by the construction of a church and possibly the first non-religious buildings, such as baths or inns.

The local inhabitants remembered that a martyr had been buried in the hypogeum, but they knew nothing specific about him. The authors who created the literary dossier necessary for the cult – since the cult required at least an account of martyrdom for use in sermons – had to rely on their imagination, drawing from the already rich martyrological tradition of the Greek-speaking part of the Roman Empire.

## 6. History of the Pilgrimage Shrine

The *Encomium* is the only text in our dossier that provides information on the history of the creation and expansion of the large pilgrimage sanctuary. Its author attributed the achievements to the successive patriarchs and emperors who collaborated in these efforts. The first figures mentioned are Athanasius (329-373) and Jovian (363-364), followed by Jovian's sons, Valentinian (363-375) and Valens (363-378). It was through their joint efforts that the first basilica at Abū Mīnā was reportedly built, and the assembled Egyptian bishops placed the body of St Menas in a crypt. Theodosius the Great (379-395) and his sons Arcadius (395-408) and Honorius (395-423) then ordered the construction of "a spacious memorial church"<sup>42</sup>, large enough to prevent pilgrims from having to stand outside in the desert and endure "distress". When the great basilica was completed, the then-patriarch Theophilus convened a synod, and the bishops performed the consecration.

The next pair mentioned is Timothy (Timothy Aelurus, 457-477) and Zeno (474-491). According to the *Encomium*, the patriarch persuaded the emperor to provide military protection for Mareotis against barbarian attacks. Moreover, Zeno supposedly ordered senators to build palaces at Abū Mīnā<sup>43</sup>. However, the claim that Timothy Aelurus

<sup>42</sup> *Encomium in S. Menam*, in: Drescher, *Apa Mena*, p. 66-68 (text), 144-146 (tr.).

<sup>43</sup> Regarding the political context of Zeno's decision to support the expansion of Abū Mīnā, see E. Wipszycka, *Philoxenite: Pilgrims on the Road to Abu Mina*, in: *Philoxenite*

supported the sanctuary alongside Zeno is fictional. Zeno reigned as emperor between 474 and 491, while Timothy Aelurus served as patriarch from 457 to 460, after which he was in exile until 475. He was then briefly reinstated from 475 to 476 when Basiliscus temporarily seized power from Zeno. Furthermore, the statement that Zeno allocated fiscal revenue from the “eparchy” to Abū Mīnā may reflect a distorted version of Justinian’s later decision to merge Mareotis with Libya Inferior, directing taxes from this wealthy region to support military forces in a relatively poor province that required a constant military presence.

During the reign of Emperor Anastasius (491-518), according to the *Encomium*, Philoxenus, a high-ranking official, contributed to the expansion of a pilgrimage centre located on the shores of Lake Mareotis, known as Philoxenite. We know from other sources that he held various top positions within the empire, including *magister militum per Thracias* under Anastasius and consul under Emperor Justin in 525<sup>44</sup>. Notably, despite Philoxenus’s long career, there is no mention of him holding any office in Egypt. Of course, this does not rule out his involvement in Abū Mīnā; he may have had personal reasons for venerating St Menas.

We do not know when the construction work at Philoxenite took place. It is not at all certain that it occurred during the reign of Anastasius. It could have taken place later, under Justin or Justinian. It is worth considering that any manipulation that “inserted” the name of an emperor known for his anti-Chalcedonian sympathies in place of Justin, a staunch pro-Chalcedonian, might have had practical value during the Arab period. At that time, there was intense rivalry between the Melkites and Monophysites over control of the sanctuary, with Arab governors serving as arbiters in these disputes. Both patriarchs named John were actively involved in conflicts with the Melkites.

The history of the sanctuary as recounted in the *Encomium* contains several apparent inaccuracies; the author of the *Encomium* was poorly informed about the history of the period in which Abū Mīnā’s expansion occurred. Archaeologists are sure that Athanasius could not have been involved in the construction of the sanctuary, as it would have been far too early (to recall, the first church above the tomb was built only in the first

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on Lake Mareotis: *A Town and Pilgrimage Station on the Way to the Sanctuary of Saint Menas (Abu Mena)*, v. 1: *History and Topography*, ed. T. Derda – M. Gwiazda, Leuven 2025, forthcoming.

<sup>44</sup> Martindale, *The Prosopography*, p. 879-880 (s.v. Philoxenos 8); R. Bagnall *et al.*, *Consuls of the Later Roman Empire*, Atlanta 1987, p. 585.

half of the 5th century). Theophilus might seem a better candidate as a builder, but archaeological evidence suggests that a role for Cyril is more likely. The author seems to have chosen Athanasius and Theophilus due to their reputation: Athanasius, the great defender of orthodoxy and organiser of the Church, was perceived by Egyptians as responsible for everything that happened in the 4th century, while Theophilus left a lasting image as a major builder of churches. Both must have appeared to the author as obvious candidates for having ensured the construction of Abū Mīnā's two most important religious buildings.

It is curious that Valentinian and Valens are mentioned in the *Encomium* as sons of Jovian (they were merely his successors); however, Valens was an ardent Arian who persecuted Catholics in Egypt. Arians were outside the tradition of the orthodox church, so they should not even have been mentioned. Valentinian ruled in the West, and Abū Mīnā – if he had even heard of it – would not have been of interest to him. Among the emperors credited with contributions to Abū Mīnā, Justinian (527-565) is notably absent, despite the fact that, according to archaeologists, he built the large basilica there. This omission is understandable: Justinian was remembered as a persecutor of anti-Chalcedonians, which rendered him unworthy of mention.

Imperial foundations for famous places of worship were nothing unusual in late antiquity. The very architecture of the most important churches in Abū Mīnā suggests the involvement of imperial funds and the presence of architects who designed churches and other buildings according to non-Egyptian models, on a scale that required vast resources.

## 7. Abū Mīnā in the Desert?

While reading texts about St Menas, I realised that in all of them, behind everything that happens at the sanctuary and in its surroundings, is the desert. The camel carrying the saint's remains stops at a specific spot in the desert, the sanctuary complex is built in the desert, and the devotees of St Menas travel to his tomb through the desert.

Modern commentators on the dossier feel certain that this was indeed the case. Scholars such as Carl M. Kaufmann, James Drescher, Peter Grossmann, Paul Devos, and Seÿna Bacot (editor of a new Coptic manuscript containing the miracles of St Menas) were convinced of it. However, Mareotis at the end of antiquity was not a desert! The area was

characterised by its numerous vineyards, as archaeologists conducting surface surveys have observed. They have found the remains of 17 kilns from the 1st to 3rd centuries AD used to produce wine amphorae, as well as several kilns that operated in late antiquity<sup>45</sup>. Old maps confirm this, showing many Arabic toponyms containing the words *karm* (vineyard) or *bir* (well or cistern). Mareotis wine was well-regarded, even beyond Egypt<sup>46</sup>.

In Mareotis, there were also orchards with fig trees, carobs, date palms, and olive trees. Naturally, some small barren areas existed, but these were not “deserts” in the usual sense of the word.

Mareotis had a distinctive geological structure: south of the lake, eight limestone ridges ran parallel to the coastline, formed during the Pleistocene era. The ridges closer to the sea were lower in elevation (10, 25 or 35 metres), while those further inland rose higher (between 60 and 110 metres). Between these ridges, in places, there were areas suitable for cultivation, provided that hydrological investments were made. In autumn and winter, rain fell in Mareotis at varying intensities and flowed down the slopes, allowing for water to be collected in cisterns. In some places, the land lay below sea level, so the water-bearing strata were often close to the surface, making the construction of wells possible. Additionally, small canals connected to the Canopic branch of the Nile allowed water to reach the areas around Lake Maryūt.

During the relatively stable period of late antiquity, land cultivation yielded high agricultural output, making Mareotis a vital food source for Alexandria. However, in the 8th century, devastating invasions by Bedouin tribes, brought from the Arabian Peninsula by the Arab rulers of Egypt, destroyed Mareotis’ hydrological infrastructure, leading to its depopulation<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> *A Multidisciplinary Approach to Alexandria’s Economic Past: The Lake Mareotis Research Project. British Archaeological Reports 2285*, ed. L.K. Blue – E. Khalil – A. Trakadas, University of Southampton Series in Archaeology 5, Oxford 2011, p. 7-11, 299-300.

<sup>46</sup> Ch. Décobert, *Maréotide médiévale. Des Bédouins et des chrétiens*, in: *Alexandrie médiévale 2*, ed. Ch. Décobert, Études alexandrines 8, Cairo 2002, p.127-162.

<sup>47</sup> T. Barański, *Abu Mina, Philoxenite and the Mareotic Vineyards under the Muslim Rule*, in: *Philoxenite on Lake Mareotis: A Town and Pilgrimage Station on the Way to the Sanctuary of Saint Menas (Abu Mena)*, v. 1: *History and Topography*, ed. T. Derda – M. Gwiazda, Leuven 2025, forthcoming.

Why are there no mentions of vineyards or orchards in our texts concerning St Menas? I believe this absence results from the influence of monastic literature, which attributed a special value to desert spaces and created the myth of the desert. The desert was consistently portrayed as an eerie place, inhabited by demons, but it also became an ideal setting for ascetics, who found there the best conditions for pursuing *hesychia* (spiritual tranquillity) and seeking personal paths to God. However, evil spirits remained present, and monks waged an ongoing battle against them<sup>48</sup>.

## 8. Conclusions: Saint Menas: a *Fictional Hero*

Modern scholars of hagiographic literature recognise that a significant proportion of works extolling martyrs belong to the category of “fictional hagiography”, meaning that their protagonists never existed but were instead invented by their author<sup>49</sup>. The term ‘fictional’, despite its negative connotations in contemporary discourse, should not be misconstrued as implying a derisive stance on the part of scholars who employ it. These scholars do not accuse the creators of fictional hagiographies of deliberately deceiving their audiences for personal gain, particularly in terms of material gain. Instead, these texts constitute a form of pious literature – sanctifying and extolling the greatness of the Christian faith. Their authors had noble intentions: they sought to persuade their audiences of the heroic virtues and courage of martyrs, qualities believed to guarantee the efficacy of their intercession before God.

Even when composing narratives about historical martyrs (that is, individuals whose existence can be verified with certainty), hagiographers were often compelled to fabricate numerous elements of

<sup>48</sup> J. Goehring, *The Encroaching Desert: Literary Production and Ascetic Space in Early Christian Egypt*, in: *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert. Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism*, ed. J. Goehring, Harrisburg 1999, p. 39-52; J. Goehring, *The Dark Side of Landscape: Ideology and Power in the Christian Myth of the Desert*, “Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies” 33 (2003) p. 437-451.

<sup>49</sup> The term “fictional hagiography” was popularized by A. Busine in her numerous articles. See especially: A. Busine, *Les Vies de Saints et la construction temporelle des espaces sacrés dans l’Orient romain tardo-antique*, in: *Espaces sacrés dans la Méditerranée antique. Actes du colloque de Poitiers (13-14 octobre 2011)*, ed. Y. Lafon – V. Michel, Rennes 2016, p. 273-287; A. Busine, *L’hagiographie fictive: Origines et développement d’un genre littéraire dans l’Antiquité Tardive*, in: *Des saints et des martyrs: hommage à Alain Dierkens*, ed. S. Peperstraete – M. Weis, Brussels 2018, p. 39-47.

their accounts, as they rarely possessed sufficient reliable information about the martyr. Consequently, the incorporation of fictional elements in such texts was almost inevitable. However, from the perspective of a historian striving to reconstruct the past – one that is distinct from the literary past – the distinction between hagiographic texts that fabricate non-existent martyrs and those that contain at least some trustworthy information about their protagonists and historical context is of considerable importance, particularly for scholars investigating the cult of saints.

Classifying a text as “fictional hagiography” does not entail its dismissal as a historical source. However, it necessitates adherence to specific methodological principles. First and foremost, it is crucial to recognise that such a text serves as a source for understanding the period in which its authors lived rather than the era of its protagonists. Information regarding institutional structures, official titles, military organisation and commanders, and the locations where martyrdoms purportedly took place should be approached with scepticism. Additionally, one must consider whether the text was the work of a single author or whether it underwent revisions and expansions by subsequent contributors.

This “fictional hagiography” is revealed primarily through the use of stereotypical depictions of the behaviours of martyrs, their judges, and executioners, as well as the Christians accompanying them. Such descriptions appear in numerous hagiographic works with relatively uniform wording, serving as pre-made elements used to build narratives. Scholars of hagiography refer to these by the Greek term *topos* (plural *topoi*)<sup>50</sup>. Their presence – especially in large numbers – indicates that the author knew nothing about the real-life figures in question, relying instead on the narrative and lexical material available in the literature known to him or what was conveyed by preachers in churches. Another sign that we are dealing with a “fabricated” text is the occurrence of glaring errors in the depiction of events well-known from other sources. These can include wars that were never fought, rulers who lived in different periods, and so forth. If relics play an important role in the story of a saint prior to the second half of the fourth century, we should take this as a signal that the author is misleading us, as the cult of relics only emerged in the latter

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<sup>50</sup> T. Pratsch, *Der hagiographische Topos. Griechische Heiligenviten in mittelbyzantinischer Zeit* (Berlin – New York 2005), provides a comprehensive survey of hagiographic *topoi*



half of that century<sup>51</sup>. Of course, authors writing centuries after the time of their subjects might have acquired accurate knowledge by consulting reliable sources that recorded local traditions, but this was rarely the case.

Authors of fictional hagiography did not only employ *topoi*; they sometimes simply copied existing works (or parts thereof), incorporating extensive passages written by others in honour of different saints into their texts. Such a case is found in the story of the martyrdom of St Menas, where a homily written by Basil of Caesarea in honour of a martyr from that city named Gordius was used<sup>52</sup>.

By analysing each work individually, we can reconstruct the intentions of their successive authors, editors, and copyists, along with their religiosity. We can understand why they introduced certain episodes, omitted others, chose particular styles, and crafted descriptions of miracles in the way they did. When describing the area where the pilgrimage city grew, they could not deviate excessively from reality – though at times they did – but in all other respects, they had freedom. Their purpose was to glorify the martyr and support the sanctuary's finances by emphasising the value of the offerings made in various forms.

They were remarkably effective in their efforts. For the residents of Alexandria, visitors from around the world, and inhabitants of nearby villages, oral tradition about the sanctuary and its grand festivals – where speeches were given in the martyr's honour – was sufficient. However, it was this literary dossier that contributed to the spread of the cult of St Menas throughout almost the entire Mediterranean basin (though not in Asia Minor, as was discussed earlier)<sup>53</sup>.

It was precisely works like those belonging to the dossier of St Menas that bishops and priests relied on when preparing sermons. It was rare for preachers to create new compositions; they usually read from or adapted pre-existing texts.

<sup>51</sup> R. Wiśniewski, *The Beginnings of the Cult of Relics*, Oxford 2019.

<sup>52</sup> Basilus Caesariensis, *In Gordium martyrem*, PG 31, 389-508; Basil of Caesarea, *A Homily on the Martyr Gordius*, tr. P. Allen, in: 'Let Us Die that We May Live'. *Greek Homilies on Christian Martyrs from Asia Minor, Palestine and Syria (c. AD 350–AD 450)*, London – New York 2003, p. 56-67. Basil knew almost nothing about Gordius, except that he came from Caesarea. He praised not so much the martyr himself as the concept of martyrdom. Unlike the authors writing about St Menas, he did not even attempt to create a biography for him.

<sup>53</sup> For a survey of literary and other written sources, see A. Papaconstantinou, *Le culte des saints en Égypte des Byzantins aux Abbassides. L'apport des inscriptions et des papyrus grecs et coptes*, Paris 2001, p. 146-154 (s.v. ΜΗΝΑΣ).

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