ISSN: 0860-9411
eISSN: 2719-3586

VOX PATRUM 94 (2025) 65-100
DOI: 10.31743/vp.17968

Menacing Menas? Saint Menas as a Military Saint and Divine Trickster in his Greek Miracle Collection (BHG 1256-1269)[1]

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Abstract: This study examines the Greek miracle collection of Saint Menas (BHG 1256-1269), investigating the literary construction of the saint as both a military protector and a divine trickster. The analysis highlights the inconsistencies in Menas's portrayal, contrasting his literary depiction as a mounted avenger with non-literary evidence that emphasizes his role as a healer. Using comparative hagiographic analysis, the paper explores the influence of late antique principles of decorum, which shaped depictions of saints to avoid direct violence. The study delves into Menas's punitive and protective miracles, analyzing their reliance on humor, trickery, and indirect retribution rather than overt combat. These narratives are contextualized within the broader framework of military saints, including Theodore, Demetrios, and Phoibammon, whose miracles also embody justice and protection through divine intervention. This paper reveals how such portrayals reflect evolving Christian attitudes toward violence, sanctity, and the supernatural. The findings contribute to the understanding of late antique religious imagination, showcasing how narrative ingenuity addressed both theological and societal needs in Christian antiquity.

Keywords: cult of saints; St Menas; saint Theodore; saint Demetrios; saint Phoibammon; military saint

Our contribution to this special issue of the *Vox Patrum* aims to examine the literary layer of the Greek miracle collection of Saint Menas (BHG 1256-1269). The holy protagonist of this work has not yet been studied as a literary character, whereas the peculiarities of this personage and his thaumaturgic portfolio, which together construct his portrayal,

[1] The research presented in this article has been funded by the National Science Centre (Poland) under the project "Across centuries, languages, and cultures: The Miracles of Saint Menas as a historical source, literary composition and liturgical text", project no. UMO-2021/41/B/HS1/00550.

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definitely deserve such a study. We can tentatively call what is striking about Menas's literary creation 'inconsistency'. On the one hand, Menas is represented in this text as a mighty protector and avenger, manifested in the form of a cavalryman. On the other hand, however, when performing punitive and protective miracles, he is not seen fighting evil with his own hands and armour as one would expect from a soldier saint; instead, he resorts to trickery and applies a repertoire of puns, pranks and mischief. In other words, he does not pierce his opponents with his weapon, but stays away from such "wet work" and reintroduces justice through various coercive means, employing tricks that combine elements of cunning, deceit, and subterfuge. We can also add to this his literary profile as an avenger, which does not align with the one we can reconstruct from non-literary evidence pertaining to his posthumous cult, since archaeological and papyrological sources show that Menas was venerated mainly as a healer. All of these inconsistencies, between Menas the Healer, Menas the Warrior, and Menas the Trickster, make his figure particularly intriguing. In what follows, we analyse the literary portrayal of Menas against the background of his cult as a healer in Abu Mena and the cult of military saints that dynamically grew during the period when Menas's miracle collection was composed. We examine the motifs which concern the miraculous interventions of Menas in the light of the Greek and Coptic hagiographic tradition of other belligerent and military saints[4]. We argue that there was a specific unwritten principle in late antique hagiography which forbade representing saints of God being involved in the direct use of violence and shedding of blood, except in cases involving enemies who threatened Christianity itself. This principle of decorum, according to which killing and the shedding of blood would not be in keeping with the Christian concept of sainthood, paved the way for representing punitive and belligerent saints in quite a specific and seemingly inconsistent way: exposing their apotropaic profile by affiliating them with punitive and protective thaumaturgy, but also simultaneously representing them as divine mischief-makers who exhibit traits associated with magicians,

[4] Due to our unfamiliarity with the Coptic language, however, in the latter case, we will rely on material available in the Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity database, which provides extensive summaries and partial translations from the original into English of the late antique Christian texts collected therein. We also owe great thanks to Gesa Schenke, who helped us to understand several details of the original Coptic texts. Last but not least, we are also grateful to Ewa Wipszycka and Przemysław Piwowarczyk whose insightful comments and suggestions allowed us to improve our article.

pranksters, and tricksters. The Greek miracle collection of Menas will be our case study, through which we demonstrate the various and different faces of this phenomenon. By means of such an analysis, we seek to provide insights into the mentality and religious imagination of late antique Christians.

1. Saint Menas: a Healer or a Warrior?

Fun fact: the image of Saint Menas as an avenger that emerges from the Greek miracle collection does not align with the image of him as a great healer, which we reconstruct from archaeological evidence. Literary sources provide us with thirteen miracle narratives in which the saint mainly defends the oppressed against the enticements and scheming of villains, and punishes cases of murder, perjury, sexual harassment, theft and scam. Most importantly, all his interventions take place in his Mareotic shrine in Abu Mena, located some 45 km south-west of Alexandria, and its surroundings, and are made on behalf of pilgrims to the shrine and/or against wicked individuals who wish to harm the sanctuary in some way[5]. It must be emphasised that all the characters represented in these stories – pilgrims, soldiers, sanctuary staff – are said to be local people. By contrast, in his actual cultic site, one of the most famous and thriving pilgrimage centres in Late Antiquity, attracting crowds of pilgrims from all corners of the empire, he was venerated first and foremost as a healer, possibly with a further narrow specialisation in female reproductive health[6]. The broader specialisation is evidenced by the thousands of clay flasks for water from a spring near Saint Menas's tomb or for sacred oils bearing the saint's image that have been discovered in all former regions of the late antique empire, the narrower one is suggested by

[5] For the Mareotian and Libyan affiliation of Menas and his shrine, see P. Piwowarczyk, *Prolegomena to the Study of the Miracles of St Menas*, VoxP 94 (2025) p. 46-47 (the current issue).

[6] On Abu Mina as a pilgrimage centre see Grossmann, *The Pilgrimage Center of Abû Mînâ*; on female pilgrimage specifically see G. Stafford, *Evidence for Female Pilgrims at Abu Mina*, in: *Transmitting and Circulating the Late Antique and Byzantine Worlds*, ed. M. Ivanova – H. Jeffery, Leiden 2019, p. 11-43; for a survey of excavations carried out in Abu Mina since early 20th century see P. Grossmann, *Abu Mina: A Guide to the Ancient Pilgrimage Center*, Cairo 1986 and *Abu Mina, Ägypten: Das Pilgerzentrum*, "e-Forschungsberichte des Deutsche Archäologische Institut" 1 (2015) p. 1-3.

figurines depicting women, often with a child in their arms, found in situ in the shrine[7]. Meanwhile, the theme of Menas as the patron saint of female fertility is observed in the miracle collection only in the background of a few stories. This discrepancy between the text and the artefacts is in itself intriguing, especially given that the miracle collection was possibly composed in the heyday of the cultic shrine in Abu Mena, that is, somewhere in the 6th century[8]. The dating of the text is, however, problematic, since it provides us with no internal evidence that would allow us to deduce the date of its composition. Most manuscripts attribute its authorship to Timothy, Patriarch of Alexandria, which could allude to any of several personages with this name, such as Patriarch Timothy I (381-384) or one of the later Timothies: Timothy II Ailuros (457-460), Timothy II Salophakiolos (460-475), or Timothy IV (518-536). It is difficult to say whether these attributions have any historical value, but it is commonly accepted that the text predates the 7th century, and a 6th century date is preferable[9]; Przemysław Piwowarczyk, however, in the introductory article to this

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[7] On the flasks see Z. Kiss, *Ampulla*, *The Coptic Encyclopedia* I 116-118; C. Lambert – P. Pedemonte Demeglio, *Ampolle devozionali ed itinerari di pellegrinaggio tra IV e VI secolo*, "Antiquité Tardive" 2 (1994) p. 205-231; S. Bangert, *Menas Ampullae, a Case Study of Long-Distance Contacts*, "Reading Medieval Studies" 32 (2006) p. 27-33; Anderson, *Menas Flasks in the West*. For the female figurines see Z. Kiss, *Menas i Afrodyta. "Dewocjonalia" z sanktuarium świętego Menasa*, VoxP 35 (2015) p. 231-248; cf. A. Papaconstantinou, *Le culte des saints en Égypte des Byzantins aux Abbasides. L'apport des inscriptions et des papyrus grecs et coptes*, Paris 2001, p. 151. However, E. Wipszycka, *Philoxenite: Pilgrims on the road to Abu Mina*, in: *Philoxenite on the Lake Mareotis: a town for pilgrims built under Justinian*, ed. T. Derda – M. Gwiazda, Leuven – Paris – Bristol, forthcoming, suggests that the pilgrims could have prayed to Menas for things other than healing, such as a safe journey, or the well-being of their families, or successful business transactions. She also suggests that the presence of the clay flasks found in various places, such as e.g. in Alexandria, does not necessarily means that they were brought there by pilgrims, but that they could have been exported from Abu Mena and bought by customers, for example as gifts.

[8] Grossmann, *The Pilgrimage Center of Abû Mînâ*, p. 282; S. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 2001, p. 114-115.

[9] See e.g. S. Efthymiadis, *Greek Byzantine Collections of Miracles. A Chronological and Bibliographical Survey*, "Symbolae Osloenses" 74 (1999) p. 196-197; P. Peeters, *Le Tréfonds Oriental de l'hagiographie Byzantine*, SubHag 26, Bruxelles 1950, p. 36; S. Efthymiadis, *Collections of Miracles (Fifth-Fifteenth Centuries)*, in: *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography, II, Genres and Contexts*, ed. S. Efthymiadis, Farnham – Burlington 2014, p. 197; Silvano–Varalda, *Per l'edizione dei Miracula sancti Menae*, p. 51.

volume, advocates for 614 as the *terminus post quem* for the composition of the collection consisting of all 13 miracles, while he does not rule out that some of the miracle narratives or their clusters may be much older[10]. Ángel Narro also points to the 7th century, and more precisely to its second half, arguing that in one of the thirteen miracles (i.e. miracle 3), we find a literal citation from the *Scala Paradisi* (1,640) written by John Klimakos, an author who lived in the first half of the 7th century[11]. Another problematic issue is the interdependence of the Greek miracle collection and its Coptic counterpart, which is in turn ascribed to Theophilos of Alexandria (385-412)[12]. An earlier hypothesis by James Drescher posits that the Greek collection derives from the Coptic one, but in his view, the opposite is also theoretically possible, although less probable, while Przemysław Piwowarczyk convincingly argues in this volume for the primacy of the Greek collection over the Coptic one[13].

Regardless of which collection was produced first, their thematic correspondence in terms of content and type of interventions – both of which are protective and punitive in nature – indicates that their purpose was to assuage the anxiety of potential pilgrims against the dangers lurking along their way, including assault, robbery and even murder[14]. These threats were probably quite real, and awareness of them may have spread as Menas's fame as a healer grew among pilgrims. Another potential rationale behind Menas' role as an avenger and soldier may have been to serve as a warning to potential robbers, thieves and swindlers not to dare attack pilgrims or threaten the property of the shrine. It seems likely, therefore, that at a time when Abu Mena was gaining more and more popularity and drawing larger and larger crowds, it was in the interest of its clerical staff to keep things going by promoting the image of Menas

[10] Piwowarczyk, *Prolegomena*, p. 52.

[11] Á. Narro, *Tipologia de los milagros griegos de San Minás (BHG 1256-1269)*, in: *Mite i miracle a les literatures antigues i medievals*, ed. M. Movellán Luis – J.J. Pomer Monferrer, Tarragona 2018, p. 103.

[12] For the discussion of all of the attributions of authorship of Menas's miracle collections, see also E. Wipszycka, *Philoxenite*, forthcoming.

[13] J. Drescher, *Apa Mena: A Selection of Coptic Texts Relating to St. Menas*, Le Caire 1946, p. 104-105; cf. also Narro, *Tipología de los milagros griegos de San Minás*, p. 102 and 110; see also Silvano – Varalda, *Per l'edizione dei Miracula sancti Menae*, p. 51-52 for more bibliography on the issue.

[14] For a typology of all Menas's miracles see especially Narro, *Tipología de los milagros griegos de San Minás*, *passim*.

the protector, a figure able to protect his followers from the dangers of travelling through late antique Egypt and Libya.

For this purpose, the author of the collection chose to exploit the military context of Menas's biography, exploring the motifs of the emerging special category of military saints. They thus cast this saint in the role of a cavalryman, often abandoning the common dream motif as a medium for his manifestations in favour of his "real" presence. Interestingly, however, contrary to this promising costume, we will not see Menas intervening with weapons in hand, fighting and shedding the blood of his enemies. Instead, he sets traps for villains or remotely incapacitates his victims using paralysis, and where physical force is used nonetheless, he remains invisible or dons a disguise. In cases of lighter guilt, he employs mischief and pranks to teach a lesson to those who cross him. We discuss below all the strategies used by Menas and indicate their constitutive elements.

2. Menas the Warrior among Military Saints

Late antique hagiography and art introduced a distinct category of sacred figures known as military or warrior saints. Broadly defined, these saints were originally believed to have been Roman army soldiers who converted to Christianity and were subsequently martyred during periods of persecution. Some of the most renowned figures in this group include Theodore Teron, George, Sergios and Bakchos, Merkourios, Artemios, and Menas. Over time, other saints, such as Demetrios of Thessaloniki, who initially had no military background, were also associated with this category. In the early stages, their military identity was not a significant focus in hagiographic writings or artistic depictions. However, between the 5th and 6th centuries, the cult of these saints grew rapidly, and they began to be portrayed explicitly as soldier-martyrs in texts and images[15].

According to Christopher Walter, these martyrs were believed to possess numerous posthumous powers, with one of their most significant roles being the ability to ward off evil. This often involved vanquishing a dangerous beast or adversary, a trait inherited, albeit indirectly, from

[15] P. Grotowski, *Arms and Armour of the Warrior Saints: Tradition and Innovation in Byzantine Iconography (843-1261)*, Leiden 2010, p. 57-60.

ancient heroes like Perseus and Hercules[16]. For instance, Theodore is said to have slain a dragon, Merkourios to have killed Julian the Apostate, George is credited in the Georgian tradition with the death of Diocletian, and Sergios and Bakchos were relentless in their fight against evil[17]. Their military identity thus played a vital role in shaping their apotropaic, or protective, function. This role was heavily influenced by the protective nature of armies and the concept of defensive warfare, solidifying the image of military saints as defenders against both physical and spiritual threats.

The earliest traces of Menas's military background can be found in two sources considered to be the oldest testimonies in his hagiographic dossier. One of them is a hymn attributed to Romanos Melodos in which the saint is called a soldier (στρατιώτης) and a member of the army in Phrygia, and is said to be of Egyptian origin. The other one is Menas's earliest passion, which is more detailed and presents its protagonist as a Christian, who, having enlisted in the army, was sent with his companions to Kotyaion, in the Roman province of Phrygia Salutaris. During the reign of Diocletian, Menas abandoned his legion, retreating to the desert; later, however, he decided to return to the city and publicly declare his faith in front of the crowd gathered in the theatre. For this gesture he was arrested, condemned to death and beheaded, and his body was set on fire[18]. The dating of both sources is problematic. Although the attribution of the hymn to Romanos (died after 555) would allow for dating it to the 6th century, his authorship has been questioned[19]. While the passion cannot be dated with certainty, it was probably composed sometime in the 5th or 6th century[20]. Furthermore, both of these sources are considered to

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[16] C. Walter, *The Warrior Saints in Byzantine Art and Tradition*, London 2016, p. 50.

[17] Walter, *The Warrior Saints*, p. 50; Grotowski, *Arms and Armour of the Warrior Saints*, p. 53. See also H. Delehaye, *Les légendes grecques des saints militaires*, Paris 1909.

[18] Both the passion BHG 1254c, and the *kontakion* attributed to Romanos Melodos were first edited by Karl Krumbacher in his *Miscellen zu Romanos*, Munich 1907.

[19] Krumbacher, *Miscellen zu Romanos*, p. 94-99; see also P. Maas – C. Trypanis, *Sancti Romani Melodi Cantica. Cantica dubia*, Berlin 1970, p. 108-115 and 202-203 who place this hymn among the dubious ones.

[20] As proposed by N. Kälviäinen in the Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity database (henceforth CSLA), record no. E06942 whose argument is based on H. Delehaye's survey of the genre of the "epic" passions to which the passion BHG 1254 can be counted; according to Delehaye, "epic" passions are a genre which evolved in the 5th/6th centuries

be modelled on an earlier passion, which has been lost[21]. It is therefore difficult to determine whether the tradition of Menas the soldier explored in his passion and mentioned in the hymn could have been an inspiration for the author of the miracle collection or whether the latter exploited it independently, drawing information from earlier sources. Despite the challenges in establishing the chronological sequence of the texts in Menas's hagiographical dossier and their interrelationships, "[t]hat Menas was a soldier was not called into doubt by the Byzantines", and thus his affiliation with the group of military saints is confirmed[22].

Most of the miracle narratives assembled in his Greek collection refer to him as a mounted soldier. To be more precise, the term 'soldier' itself appears once, when Menas is described as a "horse rider in the guise of a soldier" (καβαλλάριος ἐν εἴδει στρατιώτου), while he is most frequently depicted simply as a horseman (καβαλλάριος – horse rider; ἔφιππος – on horseback). Once the saint is said to appear on horseback "in the guise of *spatharios*", i.e., a soldier (ἐν σχήματι σπαθαρίου)[23]. All of these descriptions evoke an image of a mounted military man who, by default, must have been equipped with some kind of weapon.

This leads to another inconsistency. The image of Menas as a horse rider and a cavalryman fits perfectly into one of the most popular iconographic types of warrior saints: the image of a holy rider. Many such depictions on pieces of fabric, terracotta wall tiles, stone steles, and finally, thousands of clay flasks dating back to the 6th century have been found. The figures on them are identified, often thanks to inscriptions, as Saints George, Theodore, or Sergios, but, curiously, not Menas[24]. Me-

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from the earlier "historical" passions which emerged in the 4th century (H. Delehaye, *L'invention des reliques de S. Ménas á Constantinople*, AnBol 29 (1910) p. 117-146).

[21] See Krumbacher, *Miscellen zu Romanos*, p. 44-48; cf. H. Delehaye, *L'invention ses reliques de Saint Menas a Constantinople*, AnBol 29 (1910) p. 121-122; Silvano – Varalda, *Per l'edizione dei Miracula sancti Menae*, p. 53.

[22] Walter, *The Warrior Saints*, p. 186.

[23] *Miracula Sanctae Menae*, Mir. 8; 1; 3, 6, 7, 9; 1 respectively. The term *spatharios* once referred to a military title at the imperial court, but from the late 6th century/early 7th century it referred to a soldier, see M. San Nicolò, Σπαθάριος, in: *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft, Series 2,* v. 3/6, Stuttgart 1929, c. 1546; A. Kazhdan, *Spatharios*, in: *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, v. 3, New York – Oxford, s.v.

[24] The earliest representations of Saints George and Theodore include e.g.: textiles depicting Coptic horsemen (equestrian saints) killing a serpent. They date to sometime in the 5th to 7th centuries, possibly the 6th century; their origin is unknown but is

nas himself is very rarely represented in iconography as a cavalryman, even though his depiction in the miracle collection draws on images of the holy riders[25]. Instead, on the clay flasks from Abu Mena, which are the most important and numerous pieces of evidence for Menas's iconography, he is represented as a standing figure in an orant pose, and is typically wearing a short tunic and a cloak fastened on his right shoulder. His appearance here is identified by some scholars as civilian, while others think it to be military attire, comprising a muscled cuirass[26]. Still, if the flasks represent Menas as a soldier, it is a soldier on foot, so in either case, the literary depiction of him does not align with the iconographic ones.

Furthermore, the soldier Menas in his miracle collection plays a clearly defined role as a "punisher" or "avenger" (ἐκδικῶν) and a protector who, as the text explicitly mentions, "redeems those who invoke him in oppression" (ὁ τοῖς παρακαλοῦσιν αὐτόν ἐν θλίψει λυτρούμενος)[27]. These roles seem to sit comfortably with his military attire. Curiously, however, he never acts as a soldier, apart from the fact that he is depicted riding on horseback. He is never using a weapon nor fighting with enemies with his hands, nor shedding blood personally. Instead, he relies on tricks, subterfuge and, in lighter cases, pranks and mischief. We suggest there is a certain reluctance observable in the miracle collection to rep-

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presumably Egypt; terracotta wall tile from Sousse (Tunisia) with image of a mounted warrior fighting a serpent, 6th century; stone stele from Brdadzori, Georgia, 6th century; Saint George killing the dragon/serpent. For their reproductions and accompanying discussion, see A. Pedersen – S. Oehrl, *Late Viking-Age Dragon-Slayers – Two Unusual Urnes-Style Brooches from Sjælland, Denmark*, "Medieval Archaeology" 65/2 (2021) p. 333-339.

[25] Some such exceptional images have been noted by C. Kaufmann, *Zur Ikonographie der Menas-Ampullen*, Cairo 1910, p. 135 (image dated to the 9th c.) and 148 (image dated to 7th c.).

[26] Walter (*The Warrior Saints*, p. 186) says that this image of Menas is not necessarily military, while Grotowski (*Arms and Armour of the Warrior Saints*, p. 90) sees on the flasks Menas in cuirass; Suzana Hodak also identifies the cloths of Menas as military in representations which depict him standing in an orant pose, see S. Hodak, *Coptic Literature as a Source for Coptic art*, in: *Pharaonen, Mönche und Gelehrte. Auf dem Pilgerweg durch 5000 ägyptische Geschichte über drei Kontinente. Heike Behlmer zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. D. Atanassova – F. Feder – H. Sternberg el-Hotabi, Wiesbaden 2023, p. 375; cf. W. Woodfin, *An Officer and a Gentleman: Transformations in the Iconography of a Warrior Saint*, "Dumbarton Oaks Papers" 60 (2006) p. 111.

[27] Mir. 13 and 3 respectively.

resenting him being directly involved in using violence and killing. This reluctance leads to Menas assuming the role of the trickster.

3. Menas the Trickster: The Peculiarities of the Saint's Policework

The most telling illustration of this reluctance is the well-known story of the sterile woman named Sophia who travelled alone to Menas's shrine in Abu Mena, intending to offer all of her wealth, since she had no heir[28]. On her way there, she was confronted by a soldier on horseback who was tasked with patrolling the area, as the text explicitly mentions. The soldier attacks the woman intending to rape her. To ensure his freedom of action, he dismounts and ties his horse's reins to his ankle. At that moment, the martyr Menas, called upon by Sophia, suddenly appears on his horse. He rescues her from the soldier's grasp, places her on his horse, and takes control of the reins, urging the horse to flee. The horse bolts, dragging the soldier – who was still tied to it – along the ground until they reach the shrine of Abu Mena. There, seemingly unfazed by his rough ride, the soldier offers his horse to the shrine and dedicates the rest of his life to repentance and prayer.

This story vividly illustrates Menas's strange approach. While one might expect a showdown between two mounted warriors – or a "good cop, bad cop" scenario – this is not what unfolds. Rather than engaging in direct combat, Menas uses clever deception to foil the soldier's temptations. He turns the soldier's setup against him, trapping him in a reversal of his own making. In this way, Menas acts more like a cunning trickster, skilfully outwitting his opponent without resorting to force. The trickster is defined in religious studies as an archetype of a divinity or a semi-divine being who exhibits a great degree of intellect or secret knowledge and uses it to play tricks or otherwise disobey standard rules and defy conventional behaviour. One of his most important functions is that of a mediator between the human and the divine realms who often assumes the roles of a transformer and cultural hero. This figure is characterised by their inclination to use deceit, disguises, mischief and pranks in order

[28] Mir. 3, *The Female Pilgrim (Sophia)* (BHG 1259); for the summary of the story see E. Rizos in CSLA E07443.

to invert a situation and through these means bring about a change and reinstate order[29].

Cast in the role of trickster, Menas relies on a variety of tricks not only in the abovementioned case of the assaulted pilgrim Sophia, but also in other cases where he interferes: he assumes disguises or invisibility to deceit people, and uses subterfuge, mischief and pranks to confuse, outwit and ridicule his victims.

One of the means he frequently uses is paralysis. Another female pilgrim, traveling to Abu Mena to pray to be healed from her severe migraines, is rescued from the hands of a lewd innkeeper in whose inn the woman stops during her journey[30]. As the assailant prepares to attack her with a sword and rape her, she calls upon Menas and the attacker's arms instantly become paralysed. The saint then appears on horseback, breaks down the inn's doors and rescues her. Following this, she visits the shrine and asks the chief presbyter to baptise her, choosing to spend the remainder of her life there. Later, the innkeeper who had attempted to harm her is freed from his paralysis when he visits the shrine with his arms still incapacitated and receives holy oil from the saint's lamp. Grateful, he donates his entire fortune to the shrine and spends the rest of his life serving alongside the woman he had once tried to assault. In this narrative, Menas functions as a magician, inflicting paralysis on the innkeeper as if casting a spell before intervening personally. Once again, the punishment is inflicted on the wrongdoer without the saint being directly involved in the retribution.

Menas resorts to paralysis twice more in his miracle narratives. Once he punishes in this manner a case of perjury, when a wealthy pagan man steals a sheep belonging to a poor Christian widow[31]. When he is accused

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[29] On the trickster, their properties and functions, see esp. W. Hynes, *Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters: A Heuristic Guide*, in: *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*, ed. W. Hynes – W. Doty, Tuscaloosa 1993, p. 33-45. See also L. Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*, New York 1998; S. Miceli, *Il demiurgo trasgressivo. Studio sul trickster*, Palermo 2000; M. Grau, *Refiguring Theological Hermeneutics: Hermes, Trickster, Fool*, New York 2014. On the Christian trickster saints, see J. Doroszewska, *Trickster Saints and Their Manifestations and Miracles in Late Antique Hagiography* (forthcoming with Routledge).

[30] Mir. 6, *The Samaritan Woman* (BHG 1262); summary based on that by E. Rizos in CSLA E07446.

[31] Mir. 8, *The Poor Woman's Sheep* (BHG 1264); summary based on that by E. Rizos in CSLA E07448.

by his neighbours of this evil deed, he goes to the shrine in Abu Mena and takes a false oath believing that he will suffer no harm from the perjury, since he is unbaptised. He could not have been more wrong, as immediately after vowing on the saint's sarcophagus and the saint's relics that neither he nor his servant had stolen the sheep, his legs and arms are suddenly paralysed. Terrified, he confesses his crime and promises to restore four sheep to the widow, but suddenly the saint's voice is heard asking him to shut his mouth. The chief presbyter and the crowd tie him to one of the columns of the saint's ciborium, where he spends the rest of his life, apparently having not been healed, begging for forgiveness, and being served by his wife. After his death, his wife dedicates all of his fortune to the shrine and spends the rest of her life there. In this episode, whose climax is set in the shrine, Menas, although presumably present there, remains invisible nonetheless, while he mercilessly and irreversibly punishes the perpetrator. Again, the saint refrains from direct violence and hides himself behind magical tricks involving invisibility and paralysis.

In yet another story, a poor pagan man named Pastamon, who kept stealing the best pigs from the shrine, receives a dream vision of Menas, who strictly prohibits him from further thefts because there are other poor people who need to be fed[32]. The man ignores the warning and steals another pig, which he slaughters with the intention of salting the meat. However, the meat suddenly turns to stone, infuriating him and leading him to vow to continue stealing. The saint appears to him in a dream, threatening him once again, but Pastamon wakes up resolute to steal the finest pig from the saint's sty. He sneaks in early in the morning but is immediately paralysed, remaining motionless until the herdsmen discover him. They bring him to the shrine, where he confesses his sins and spends the rest of his life as a penitent. In this account, the sudden paralysis and the petrification of the meat are magic tricks used by Menas to avoid violence. While the saint does appear visibly in this instance, it is only to warn the audacious thief, and notably, this is a rare occurrence of the saint appearing in a dream. The punishment itself, on the other hand, takes place in the absence of the saint, who does not participate in the scene.

Another trick of Menas is acting in an invisible form or in disguise, presumably to keep clear from being openly involved in violence. In one episode, a soldier requisitions a quantity of timber offered by someone

[32] Mir. 13, *The Swine Thief* (BHG 1269); see E. Rizos in CSLA E07453 for a full summary.

to the shrine and beats up the sanctuary servants who attempt to stop him[33]. Suddenly, the soldier is lifted into the air by an invisible force, which holds him by his hair and transfers him to the shrine. In front of an astonished crowd, the soldier confesses his sin and is safely brought to the ground. He offers twelve pieces of gold and leaves happily. A similar motif appears in an episode which combines a protective motif with a healing one. It recounts how the parents of a demoniac who had been possessed by an evil spirit since childhood bring him to the shrine to pray for his deliverance[34]. They spend a long time there but receive no miracle on behalf of their son, so they decide to leave. On their way back home, the saint appears to them "as if in the form of a man" (ὡς ἐν σχήματι ἀνθρώπου τινός) and advises them to return to the shrine. They claim that they are unable to control the demoniac, who behaves in a very aggressive way, and they fear losing their life at his hands. Seeing that the stranger is mighty and powerful, however, the parents ask for his assistance in this matter and offer him remuneration in return. The saint suggests that they offer the money in the shrine and seizes the possessed man by the hair, brings him to Abu Mena, and then vanishes. The man, who is lifted into the air screaming, soon collapses as though dead. The people place him near the saint's sarcophagus and anoint him with oil from the lamp in the tomb. A voice from the tomb commands the demon to leave, as the saint intends to disgrace it publicly. The demon exits the man's body through his mouth as a flame. Grateful, the man's parents dedicate his intended inheritance to the shrine and have him tonsured there. Sometime later, he passed away at the shrine. In the cases of both the soldier and the demoniac, Menas solves the problems in a violent manner, but uses evasions to avoid being associated with violence in his own form. To this end, he employs magic tricks, namely the gift of invisibility and disguises himself as an accidental stranger.

The disguise is a trick that appears in yet another episode, this one about a pilgrim to Abu Mena murdered by a greedy man at whose house the unfortunate man stayed for the night[35]. The villain killed the pilgrim to steal his pouch of gold and quartered his body, which he then put in

[33] Mir. 11, *The Wood Offering* (BHG 1267); see E. Rizos in CSLA E07451 for a full summary.

[34] Mir. 12, *The Possessed Man* (BHG 1268); summary based on that by E. Rizos in CSLA E07452.

[35] Mir. 1, *The Isaurian Pilgrim* (BHG 1257); see E. Rizos in CSLA E07441 for a full summary.

a basket with the intention of throwing it into Lake Mareotis. However, he did not have time to cover the tracks of this crime, and Menas rushed onto the scene on horseback disguised as a *spatharios* accompanied by a large crowd. The saint grabs the murderer and reveals the crime. These tricks are enough to make the murderer, in horror at this sudden appearance of the "police", confess his sin, promise to give to the *spatharios* the victim's money plus a hundred pieces of gold, and become a monk at the shrine of Menas. With another trick, Menas resurrects the body of the murdered pilgrim, whereupon he reveals his true identity to the victim and the murderer and disappears. Both men come to the shrine and make dedications. The murderer confesses to committing this act, while his victim is astonished to hear that he was slain. Thus, even in the case of such a serious transgression of divine and human law, Menas reacts like a trickster, not a soldier, and the punishment inflicted is more about forcing a public confession and offering financial compensation to the sanctuary; it is therefore relatively mild when compared to the lifelong paralysis inflicted upon the perjurer who stole a poor woman's sheep (Mir. 8).

Another trick used by Menas is arranging accidents as a form of punishment. In the well-known miracle of the Jew and the Christian, a Jewish merchant from Alexandria entrusts a Christian friend with a sealed purse of money, asking him to safeguard it while he is away[36]. When he returns, the Christian denies ever receiving the money. The Jew suggests they visit the church of Saint Menas to swear oaths. Believing that an oath taken in a Christian church will have no effect since his dispute is with a Jew, the Christian agrees. They both pray, and, contrary to the Jew's hopes, nothing happens to the Christian. On the way back, the Christian falls from his horse, losing his signet ring to the sealed purse, but remains uninjured, which he interprets as a minor punishment for his dishonesty[37]. When they arrive in Filoxenite, they stop for food[38]. While the Jew despairs, the Christian's slave suddenly appears, carrying the Jew's purse and the Christian's signet ring. He explains that a powerful figure, a soldier on horseback, visited the Christian's wife, gave her the signet ring, and instructed her to send the money to her husband, because the saint had forced him to do so by torturing him. The Jew rejoices upon receiving his money, praises the Christian faith, donates a third of it to Saint Menas's

[36] Mir. 4, *The Jew and the Christian* (BHG 1260) E07444.

[37] For the discussion on the signet ring see Piwowarczyk, *Prolegomena*, p. 42-44.

[38] On the role of Philoxenite on the road to the shrine in Abu Mena, see, Wipszycka, *Philoxenite*.

shrine, and is baptised. The Christian, deeply affected, donates half of his wealth to the shrine and spends the rest of his life there as a penitent. Thus, despite appearing in the costume of a soldier to the Christian's wife, Menas does not threaten her, and the Christian's fall from his horse occurs either without the saint's involvement or he acts in an invisible form. The purse and the keys to it are thus obtained by the saint through trickery, not only so that the rightful owner can recover them, but also so that the guilty party admits to the deed.

The saint acts similarly in another episode, in which a certain Eutropios from Alexandria has two silver plates produced, intending to dedicate one of them to Menas[39]. When the vessels are made, the one bearing the saint's name proves to be more valuable. The man decides to keep this finer vessel for himself and offer the less valuable one to the shrine. He boards a boat to cross Lake Mareotis, but along the way, his slave falls overboard with the prized vessel. Deeply distressed, Eutropios prays to the martyr to save his servant. Two days later, the servant emerges from the lake, holding the vessel and explaining that the martyr and two handsome men kept him safe for three days and returned him to land. They go to the shrine, where Eutropios dedicates both vessels and his servant. Here, too, this deception is an accident orchestrated by Menas. It is another case of punishment whereby the saint tricks a person into eventually giving more to the sanctuary than he originally planned.

In the next two cases, the saint also punishes swindlers and crooks, but this time the tone is much more humorous than in the previous cases. One such story recounts the tale of the son of Porphyrios, a devotee of Saint Menas from Panephaiat[40]. Porphyrios' son owns a barren camel and asks the saint to help her conceive, promising to dedicate her first offspring to him. The camel gives birth three times, but the man fails to fulfil his vow. One day, the saint appears on horseback, surrounded by a great cloud, and gathers all four camels – the mother and her young – and takes them to his shrine. When the man realises his camels are gone, he understands why. The saint then appears to him, explaining that he has claimed what was due to him but has spared the man from punishment out of respect for his father, Porphyrios. The man travels to the shrine and finds his camels there. Filled with remorse, he dedicates all his possessions to the saint

[39] Mir. 2, *Eutropius and the Silver Plates* (BHG 1258) E07442; see also P. Varalda, *Il ricco Eutropio e i piatti. La versione greca di uno dei Miracula sancti Menae (BHG 1258)*, "Bollettino della Badia Greca di Grottaferrata" 18 (2021) p. 207-250.

[40] Mir. 9, *The Barren Camel* (BHG 1265) E07449.

and spends the rest of his life at the shrine, where he is appointed as caretaker of the saint's camels. Menas requisitions the donations due to him by means of a cloud in which he hides the camels, instead of taking them from their owner by violence. He acts here like an illusionist magician. He also does the same, although much more amusingly, in a similar case involving a pagan named Prinos, who lives near Lake Mareotis in the Alexandria region[41]. In his village, there was a large temple with a statue to which he regularly offered sacrifices and gifts. He owned a fine mare that had not been able to conceive. After overhearing some Christians discuss the miracles of Saint Menas, he vowed that if his mare gave birth, he would dedicate three of the colt's legs to the martyr and one to his god. When the mare does give birth, the colt is born with only three legs. That night, the saint appears to Prinos in a dream and challenges him to ask his statue to provide a fourth leg. This experience leads Prinos and his entire household to convert to Christianity, and he donates half of his wealth to Saint Menas' shrine.

To complete the survey of Menas's miraculous interventions based on a combination of trickery and violence, we cannot miss one more episode that has a protective and healing character[42]. It recounts how three brothers from Alexandria set out to visit the saint's shrine, bringing piglets as offerings. Along the way, they stop at Lake Mareotis to let the piglets drink. Suddenly, a crocodile seizes one of the piglets, and when one of the brothers tries to save it, the crocodile pulls him into the water as well. The man cries out to Saint Menas for help, and the saint appears on horseback in the middle of the lake, rescuing him. The saint immediately heals the man's injured stomach, puts him into a deep sleep, and transports him to the shrine. The man awakens by the saint's sarcophagus, where the shrine's clergy find him and, mistaking him for a thief, have him detained by the crowd. After he tells his story, the people marvel at

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[41] Mir. 10, *The Foal with Three Legs* (BHG 1266); CSLA E07450 (E. Rizos).

[42] Mir. 7, *The Three Brothers, the Pigs, and the Crocodile* (BHG 1263) E07447. We deliberately omit one episode, namely, Miracle 5, *The Paralytic and the Dumb Woman* (BHG 1261), because it is distinctly different in character, as it talks about a healing via an incubation ritual and has nothing to do with Menas as a military saint. Furthermore, the same miracle is attributed to other saints, i.e. Kosmas and Damianos, as well as Merkourios, and is also mentioned in the Miracles of Cyrus and John by Sophronius of Jerusalem; we will analyse this miracle in a separate article. It is worth mentioning, however, that this miracle also endows Menas with a great deal of trickery and deception.

the miracle. Meanwhile, Saint Menas appears on horseback to the man's brothers, who are mourning by the lake, and tells them to go to the shrine, where they will find him. The saint vanishes, and the brothers, encouraged by his words, go to the shrine and reunite with him.

This is a peculiar story because it contains a theme of punishment without guilt. For unexplained reasons, the typically protective intervention of Menas results in very unpleasant consequences for its subject: the man rescued from the crocodile's jaws is mistakenly accused of theft and bound like a criminal. This is a direct result of the fact that Menas is extremely discreet in placing the man at his tomb, so his sudden appearance arouses suspicion in those present. Given his power, could the saint not have arranged this in a more victim-friendly way? Or was it a punishment for unmentioned faults? There are no answers to these questions, but the conclusion is clear. This is further evidence that the saint works through wiles and tricks, which often include a violent element, but in which Menas is never directly involved.

To sum up, despite the costume of a mounted soldier and intervention in criminal cases or other accidents, Menas does not act according to the expected stagecraft, but handles these cases with trickery each time. He sets traps for sexual predators, inflicts sudden paralysis on perjurers and thieves, arranges mishaps for villains and crooks, and punishes petty miscreants with miracles that express outright mockery and mischief; alternatively, he uses disguises or "invisibility caps" to protect his sacred identity when he decides to get personally involved in a case and appear at the scene of an intervention. Thus, Menas has been dressed in the costume of a trickster who, possessing a whole repertoire of tricks and mischief, not only protects people, but also converts criminals and sinners, and to top it all off, acquires abundant material goods as tribute to his sanctuary every time. He is thus an arch-trickster, capable of outwitting anyone and thereby gaining not only his due and promised offerings, but often taking everything. This ability has a two-fold significance: in addition to yielding material donations for his shrine, it also results in "spiritual offerings", since the saint wins human souls for heaven – not only the souls of the pious, whom, by protecting them, he strengthens and comforts in their faith, but also those of hardened and daring sinners, whom he transforms into fully devoted servants of God who decide to spend their entire life in the shrine.

Cleverly outsmarting the enemy and taking them by surprise with trickery is a strategy for injecting humour into stories at the expense of

the victims of the practices depicted in them. As a result of his sly actions, a bully soldier attacking a defenceless woman loses control of his horse and, brought to the sanctuary by him, becomes the subject of a spectacle there. A lewd innkeeper with a similar deed on his conscience must meekly come to the shrine to beg the saint to undo his paralysis, as must the perjurer who robbed a poor old woman, and the daring pig thief who challenged the saint himself. There is a similarly hilarious element in the cases of saintly manipulation, when the thief's wife hands the masked saint the keys to the stolen purse, or when the dishonest devotee's servant falls into the water, only to emerge later with a valuable plate that had been the subject of a dispute with the saint, as well as the other 'accidents' orchestrated by the saint to outwit sly men and spinsters. People donate multiples of what they had previously planned, and sometimes even their entire wealth, while great sinners offer their hearts and souls and become servants of his shrine.

Whether these actions involve very severe punishments or lighter ones, the saint's humorous outmanoeuvring of his opponents produces a pleasant feeling of double satisfaction in the audience. For the punishment is double: not only is the guilty party duly punished, but they also become a laughing stock. Their scheming and sins are exposed in all their pathetic futility when confronted with divine power and wisdom. Satisfaction also comes from the feeling that order has been restored, because evil has not only been punished, but atoned for and replaced by good. This is why the divine avenger assumes the role of divine trickster and jester. In this role, Menas acts as an agent of transformation. Through his tricks and pranks, he instigates growth, whether by humbling those who consider themselves smart and powerful, making them repent, or by enlightening the ignorant, or forcing reflection on moral or spiritual matters. Humour thus appears to have a spiritual dimension in these stories and is a tool for spiritual teaching.

Undoubtedly, therefore, the strategy of staging Menas as a trickster figure translates directly into a great variety of miraculous narratives by juggling motifs and humorous punchlines which are revealed to have a deeper spiritual and moral meaning. It seems that we owe the development of the trickster paradigm to the principle of decorum, which tacitly forbade depictions of Menas fighting with weapons in hand and directly using violence. Before we pass on to discuss the potential religious and aesthetic rationale behind this tendency, we will compare the specificities of Menas's activity with that of other military saints with

a protective-punitive profile that can be found in Late Antique hagiography, both in miracle collections and other literary genres, to sketch out a broader context for the phenomenon in question.

4. Other Military and Belligerent Saints

In terms of texts dedicated specifically to the miracles of military saints, we have a Greek collection of texts concerning Saint Theodore and Saint Demetrios, while in terms of Coptic texts, we have the Apa Phoibammon collection and the *Encomion on Merkourios*, as well collections dedicated to saints who are not military sensu stricto, but are still quite belligerent, such as Saint Thekla.

Saint Theodore, as represented in the *Enkomion on Theodore* by Chrysippos of Jerusalem, composed in the 460s or 470s, is also involved in actions related to seeking justice in various cases of wrongdoing[43]. The collection of twelve miracles performed by this saint, appended to the *Enkomion*, depicts Theodore in a curious manner, as in his interventions he oscillates between being a severe judge of evil-doers and a sympathising ally of thieves. Although the text claims that the saint always wears military garb, which he never removes, not even while in heaven, he rarely appears to his followers[44]. Only twice do depictions of him evoke his military background. Once he appears riding on horseback, but only to retrieve a boy abducted from his family home. Even here, the saint does not fight the kidnapper, but discreetly appears when the boy is alone and offers him a second horse as transport[45]. In another example, he is seen threatening a stubborn sinner with a sword in a dream to put pressure on him; in this case, he appears – like Menas – in the guise of a *spatharios* to force the murderer to confess[46]. In other

[43] Chrysippos of Jerusalem, *The Enkomion on Saint Theodore* (BHG 1765c). The miracles are edited by A. Sigalas, *Des Chrysippos von Jerusalem Enkomion auf den hl. Theodoros Teron*, Leipzig – Berlin 1921 (BHG 1765c), p. 50-79 and H. Delehaye, *De Sancto Theodoro martyre Euchaïtis Helenoponti*, in: *Acta Sanctorum Novembri*, v. 4, Brussels 1925, p. 11-89. The translation and commentary by J. Haldon, *A Tale of Two Saints: The Martyrdoms and Miracles of Saints Theodore 'The Recruit' and 'The General'*, Liverpool 2016. For a dating of the text, see Haldon, *A Tale of Two Saints*, 44.

[44] Haldon, *A Tale of Two Saints*, p. 66 (= Sigalas: 59, 10-13).

[45] Mir. 1: Haldon, *A Tale of Two Saints*, p. 67-69 (= Sigalas: 59, 21-62, 16).

[46] Mir. 4: Haldon, *A Tale of Two Saints*, p. 72-73 (= Sigalas: 65, 10-68, 5); cf. the *Miracles of Menas*, Mir. 1 (BHG 1257).

cases, he acts in a manner similar to Menas, for example, by punishing a thief with the sudden death of his horse, by arranging that a thief carrying a stolen item is caught by the victim of the theft, and by exposing a gang of robbers by tangling their steps so that they are unable to escape from the scene of the theft[47]. Elsewhere, after assuming an invisible form, he suspends another thief in the air, who is horrified and confesses his guilt; in other cases, the saint even discreetly helps poor people steal as a means of supporting them financially[48]. The repertoire of coercive measures used by both saints is therefore quite similar and based on parallel types of trickery.

The Coptic *Miracles of Apa Phoibammon*, dedicated to a soldier and martyr from Assiut with whom several shrines in Egypt are linked, provide us with a handful of parallels[49]. This collection, probably composed in the 6th century, comprises a number of posthumous miracles performed by this saint, from among which three are punitive. In these stories, Apa Phoibammon appears once as a mounted soldier and on another occasion punishes a pilgrim who steals a golden cross which embellishes the saint's tomb[50]. The saint first brings the cross back to its former location, while the pilgrim who returns to the sanctuary to look for it is bound by his head to the tomb by an invisible force, which makes him publicly confess his guilt. A thief who steals a lamp from the saint's shrine is inflicted with a severe illness, leading the man to restore the stolen object to its rightful location, while a perjurer who is suspended in the air confesses his sin[51]. In all of these cases, the saint remains invisible or acts remotely, although his punitive actions have quite physical consequences for the culprits.

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[47] Mir. 2: Haldon, *A Tale of Two Saints*, p. 69-70 (= Sigalas: 62, 17-64, 4); Mir. 3: Sigalas: 64.5-65.9; Haldon, *A Tale of Two Saints*, p. 71-72; Mwer. 8: Haldon, *A Tale of Two Saints*, p. 76 (Sigalas: 71, 10-72, 1).

[48] Mir. 5: Haldon, *A Tale of Two Saints*, p. 74 (= Sigalas: 68, 6-69, 5); Mir. 7: Haldon, *A Tale of Two Saints*, p. 75-76 (= Sigalas: 70, 13-71, 9).

[49] Editing and translation of the text: K. Verrone, *Mighty Deeds and Miracles by Saint Apa Phoebammon: Edition and Translation of Coptic Manuscript M 582 ff. 21r-30r in the Pierpont Morgan Library*, Dissertation, Brown University 2002, *non vidimus*; we used the summary of the miracle narratives and discussion of the text by G. Schenke in CSLA E00240.

[50] Apa Phoibammon in military garb: Mir. 3 (Fol. 23r I,21-24v I,6): *The Pious Peasant* (reward miracle); The punitive miracle: Mir. 2 (Fol. 22v I,5-23r I,20): *The Impious Thief*.

[51] Mir. 6 (Fol. 26v I,1-27r I,8): *The Lamp Thief*; Mir. 7 (Fol. 27r I,9-II,32): *The False Oath*.

An extant fragment of the *Miracles of Merkourios*, about a soldier and martyr from Caesarea in Cappadocia, composed probably between the 5th and 7th centuries, appears to recount how a thief punished by the saint with blindness prays afterwards at his shrine for forgiveness. Once cured, he returns the stolen money and makes a large offering at the martyr's shrine[52]. The Coptic *Encomion on Merkourios*, attributed to Basil of Caesarea, and possibly written in the 6th century, relates six miracles connected to his martyr shrine in Caesarea. Here, in one miracle, a woman who refused to make a donation to the shrine is punished by the saint with a severe illness that no one can cure, and regains her health only when she eventually makes a donation[53]. In another miracle, robbers steal objects from a shrine to the martyr and try to sell them to a different shrine[54]. The saint clouds their minds so that they return to the same shrine, trying to sell the objects they had earlier stolen from it. When the robbers realise their mistake, they implore the saint not to punish them, while he rebukes them for stealing objects that belonged to him.

We can observe a whole range of stories concerning punishing and protective miracles in the examples discussed here; in these stories, soldier saints, despite their military garb and affiliation, are not eager to engage in hand-to-hand combat or use direct violence to injure or kill their opponents. It should be stressed, however, that all of these cases involve the punishment of common criminals or sinners for vulgarly mundane sins, including rape, perjury, murder (for profit), violent robbery, petty theft and fraud.

There is a recurrent motif in hagiography in which military saints do not hesitate to take someone's life as punishment. These are cases of a different kind, in which great heretics and persecutors of Christianity fall prey to the saints. Thus, we have the motive of killing a sinister emperor who threatens the Christian orthodox state. In the aforementioned Coptic *Encomion on Merkourios* attributed to Basil of Caesarea,

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[52] For the text and German translation see W.C. Till*, Koptische Heiligen- und Martyrlegenden*, v. 1, Rome 1935, p. 19-20; *non vidimus*; we used the summary and discussion of the text by G. Schenke in CSLA E01848.

[53] Miracle 4; for the text and translation see F. Weidmann, *Encomium on St. Mercurius the General (M 588, ff. 27vb22-31r)*, in: *Homiletica from the Pierpont Morgan Library: Seven Coptic Homilies attributed to Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, and Euodius of Rome*, ed. L. Depuydt, CSCO 524, Louvain 1991, Copt. 43, p. 3-9 (text) and CSCO 525, Copt. 44, p. 3-9 (tr.). We used the summary by G. Schenke in CSLA E01861.

[54] Miracle 5; we used the summary by G. Schenke, CSLA E01861.

the author recounts a vision of his in which Merkourios slays the Emperor Julian the Apostate[55]. Basil says that he saw the saint drawing his spear and announcing that he would no longer let the impious emperor blaspheme God. Three days later, news arrives that Julian has died; afterwards Basil sees the martyr in heaven with his spear stained with Julian's blood. The same vision of Basil is recounted by John Malalas in his *Chronographia*[56]. A similar motif is found in the Armenian *Epic History* by P'awstos the Singer (Faustus of Byzantium), written in c. 470, where the Arian emperor Valens is killed by Saints Theodore and Sergios[57]. Still, it is worth emphasising that the scenes of slaughter in both cases are not rendered but marked by other means which suggest the commission of such a slaughter: the saints either report having committed it or the blood on their spear bears witness to it. Arch-heretics or high-profile persecutors of Christians therefore constitute another category in which the principle of decorum does not apply, though there is some reserve about any literal depiction of the saint shedding blood.

There is yet another category of motifs that allows for the depiction of a saint fighting and inflicting death. These are cases in which the saints are involved in defending the cities for which they are patrons from an enemy. A similar situation occurred in the case of Saint Demetrios of Thessaloniki, a martyr who posthumously assumed the role of a soldier in order to protect his city from an attack by Avars and Slavs. The two late antique miracle collections recount how Demetrios, in hoplite attire, materialises on the city walls and actively supports the citizens in their battle against the attackers. The text explicitly mentions that the saint kills with a spear the first enemy to climb the walls[58]. A parallel motif can be found in the *Miracles of Thekla*, who was not a military saint whatsoever. Still,

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[55] Miracle 6 (G. Schenke, CSLA E01861).

[56] Iohannes Malalas, *Chronographia* 13, 25, ed. L. Dindorf, *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia*, Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae, Bonn 1831; J. Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia*, Berlin 2000, tr. E. Jeffreys – M. Jeffreys – R. Scott, *The Chronicle of John Malalas*: *A Translation*, Sydney 1986; see E. Rizos in CSLA E02775.

[57] P'awstos, *The Epic Histories* 4, 10, ed. and tr. N.G. Garsoïan, *The Epic Histories Attributed to P'awstos Buzand (Buzandaran Patmut'iwnk')*, Cambridge 1989, *non vidimus*; we used the summary of ch. 10 of the text and the discussion of it by N. Aleksidze in CSLA E00243.

[58] *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, collection II (BHG 499-516k), mir. 13, 120, ed. and tr. P. Lemerle, *Les plus anciens recueils des miracles de Saint Démétrius et la pénétration des Slaves dans les Balkans*, Paris 1981, p. 135.

in this text, the eponymous saint is represented as a belligerent figure. She once defends her hometown of Ikonion against attackers, whom she seizes in her hands, sprinkles sand in their eyes, and then kills[59]. A very similar motif appears in the Coptic *Enkomion on Saint Merkourios*[60]. During the consecration of the martyr's shrine by the bishop, the celebrations attract such a large crowd that many people have to stand outside the shrine. During the service, barbarians known as Sarmates attack these people and take them captive. However, the attackers are unwilling to enter the sanctuary itself out of fear of the saint. The barbarians take their prisoners with them, and after having travelled for three days, they encounter Merkourios, who has descended from heaven mounted on a white horse with crowds of cavalrymen surrounding him. The saint kills many barbarians with his spear and then frees the captured people and brings them back to his sanctuary.

The three categories of saintly interventions discussed above show that, while in exceptional cases that pose a threat to the orthodox Christian state or some of its communities from a pagan or heretic emperor or an external barbarian enemy, direct violence and bloodshed fall within the concept of sainthood, while in cases of individual threat, it does not. Cases of misdemeanour by petty criminals or swindlers are too insignificant or too trivial for the saint to become personally involved in them. The situation is different with punishment that makes use of trickery of various kinds – these allow the saint to avoid defiling himself through contact with a common carjacker, while at the same time, punishing him. The actual punishment is often of a mocking nature, which further disgraces the culprit. It can therefore be said that the type of punishment is appropriate to the nature of the sins committed – the latter being either too vulgar, too filthy or too pitiful for the saint to have intervened as a heavenly soldier. Below, we will outline the cultural background that may have influenced the fact that literary representations of military saints in one case allowed for their use of direct violence, while in others they did not. We will argue that these differences are due to changes in attitudes among Christians towards war and military service that resulted in the emergence of cults of military saints, on the one hand, and, on the other, in the development of a principle of decorum that allowed for representations of violent saints only in certain circumstances.

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[59] *Miracula Sanctae Theclae* (BHG 1718), mir. 6: ed. and tr. G. Dagron, *Vie et miracles de sainte Thècle*, Bruxelles 1978.

[60] *Miracula Sancti Mecurii*, mir. 3; G. Schenke in CSLA E01861.

5. Christian Attitudes Towards Violence, War and Military Service

In the first few centuries of Christianity, the prevailing Christian attitude toward violence was generally pacifist. Early Christians were often reluctant to engage in violence or warfare. This stance was largely informed by Jesus's teachings on loving one's enemies and turning the other cheek (Matthew 5:39). This was especially evident during periods of persecution, when Christians suffered martyrdom rather than resorting to violence to defend themselves. The idea of martyrdom, where Christians willingly suffered death rather than renounce their faith, became central in the Christian conception of sanctity. This tendency highlighted a preference for enduring suffering with dignity rather than resorting to violence. Thus, the idea of a holy martyr not defending himself in any way against his oppressors also extended to martyr soldiers, which may have subsequently influenced hagiographic depictions of these saints as seeking to avoid resorting to direct violence.

A related but separate issue is the Christian attitude to war and military service. In his book on the iconography of Christian military saints, Piotr Grotowski briefly discusses the complex interplay between Christian pacifism and the acceptance of war within Byzantine religious and political contexts. As he sketches it, Christianity initially embraced a pacifist stance, viewing peace as a divine gift[61]. Early Church teachings, influenced by the Sixth Commandment, discouraged participation in military service and condemned violence. Prominent figures like Origen argued that prayer was a more effective means of supporting rulers than arms.

At some point, however, shifts in the doctrine can be observed as the Church's stance evolved, particularly after Constantine's "Edict of Milan" (313), which led to the acceptance of Christian participation in the military as a necessary protection against barbarian threats. Councils like the Synod of Arles (314) formalised this shift, treating those who refused military service for religious reasons as deserters[62].

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[61] Grotowski, *Arms and Armour of the Warrior Saints*, p. 63-74.

[62] Modern criticism has questioned whether the document issued by Constantine and Licentius actually had the status of an edict, and has considerably downplayed its

The concept of Holy War began to emerge, leading religious leaders like Augustine to justify defensive wars as a last resort for protecting the Christian community, while still emphasising the importance of maintaining peace whenever possible. The emergence of the doctrine of "Just War" paralleled the Christianization of the Roman Empire, influencing the portrayal of military saints as protectors of the faithful. The latter was also influenced by imperial and religious propaganda, in which emperors like Heraclius linked military campaigns to divine will, framing wars as battles between the forces of good, namely, Christianity, and evil ones – their pagan adversaries. Religious symbols, including icons, were integrated into military practices, bolstering morale and reinforcing the notion of divine endorsement. The gradual Christianization of military customs saw the replacement of pagan rituals with Christian ones. Warrior saints emerged as symbolic defenders against both physical and spiritual enemies.

The Church's changing perspective on military service reflected a balance between pacifist ideals and the practical need for war. Defensive warfare, particularly against external threats, began to be seen as a necessary means for protecting the Christian state. However, the Church did not fully endorse war or killing, as evidenced by Basil the Great's guidance that soldiers who had taken lives in battle should abstain from Communion for three years as a form of penance. While this rule was not universally enforced, similar sentiments were echoed by other Church leaders in the late fourth century. Peace remained central to Christian teachings, with John Chrysostom emphasising it as God's greatest gift in his liturgies and sermons. The invocation of peace during the liturgy, which persists in the Eastern Church today, reflects its enduring importance. To summarise, Grotowski's insights suggest that, although defensive wars were tolerated, pacifist tendencies were still observable and bloodshed remained something undesirable.

In our opinion, it is in this context that we should understand the principle of decorum applied in hagiography and other Christian writings concerning depictions of the interventions of military saints. The gradual acceptance by Christians that defensive war could be considered a necessity contributed to the emergence and flourishing of the cult of military saints. This new cultural phenomenon was, in turn, reflected in hagiographic images that depicted heavenly warriors assisting in such a war. The field of

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importance, see e.g. N. Lenski, *The Significance of the Edict of Milan*, in: *Constantine: Religious Faith and Imperial Policy*, ed. E. Siecienski, London 2017, p. 27-56.

action of the military saint also extended to individual internal enemies of the Christian state when, by virtue of their position, they posed a real threat, as in the case of heretical emperors or persecutors of Christians. However, war and general threats are not the same as the petty affairs of individual sinners, even when they are guilty of serious crimes. In other words, military support in battle from the saints does not fall into the category of punitive interventions. The slaughter of sinister emperors should probably likewise not be considered as such, since this was more about removing a serious threat than punishing its executor. Therefore, the punitive and protective miracles performed on behalf of ordinary people by Menas and his saintly colleagues are different in character than the former category and are consequently underpinned by different principles.

In cases of ordinary individual matters, possible bloodshed or hand-to-hand combat, combined with the idea of sanctity, were undesirable for the late antique authors of miracle collections and their audiences deemed it as being too strong a combination of the sacred and the profane. It seems to me, therefore, that we are dealing here with religious criteria, on the one hand, and aesthetic ones, which underlie this peculiar principle of decorum, on the other. Nonetheless, hagiography, and in particular those collections of miracles oriented towards promoting the image of the saint in question as a heavenly protector and executor of punishment, needed a model by means of which the saint could carry out the activity of establishing order and justice. This provided a space for the development of the trickster saint as a model for a holy punisher and a divine mischief-maker whose capacities and mode of action do not resemble mundane reality but reflect a divine one. It made room for the emergence of punitive miracles based on tricks, which allowed for the avoidance of triviality and vulgarity, as well for literalism, realism and predictability, and instead highlighted the supernatural and miraculous nature of the saints' interventions. Although it is not easy to pinpoint the basis on which the model of the military trickster saint was formed, below we point to some elements that it may have drawn from.

6. Saintly Magical Tricks and Other Deceptions

The punishing tricks used by Menas and other military saints are meant to reflect the divine powers they wield for the good of the people. These are supernatural abilities that prove their elevated position in

the hierarchy of entities and give them a unique advantage. Concepts of these abilities can be found primarily in the oral and epic traditions that speak of divine figures and semi-divine heroes and their divine qualities and characteristics, as well as in the magical practices of the time, which were aimed at acquiring certain supernatural powers as well.

As we have seen, both Saint Menas and his Greek and Coptic colleagues often used invisibility in order to use violence against the culprit while still keeping their identities secret or their image unsullied. This motif refers us back to folk traditions and magical practices. Magical invisibility is one of the most enduring and versatile themes in folklore, with folklorists identifying as many as fifty subcategories[63]. It frequently appears in ancient myths and epics, where various magical items, such as the Cup of Invisibility, are wielded by the gods. The motif's enduring appeal lies in its narrative flexibility. An invisible character can move freely, unbound by societal norms and restrictions. As Elisabeth Tucker explains, invisibility provides the freedom to take risks, pursue desires, and engage in adventures without fear of punishment or disapproval. This behaviour aligns with Jung's archetype of the trickster – a bold, rule-defying figure who prioritises personal desires over societal expectations[64]. In the realm of hagiography, the motif grants saintly tricksters a miraculous ability to combat evil and restore justice on their own terms. The power to remain unrecognised or unseen enables them to outsmart their enemies. Invisibility was also highly sought after in ancient magical practices, as evidenced by the Greek Magical Papyri, which include rituals and spells aimed at achieving this coveted ability[65].

Another option for concealing a saint's identity was to use a disguise. In terms of disguised appearances by Menas, numerous parallels are provided by the epic tradition. The Homeric gods, such as Athena in the Odyssey, frequently employ this device to mask their divine identity[66]. However,

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[63] See S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*, Copenhagen 1955, D1980: Magic invisibility.

[64] E. Tucker, *Magic Invisibility, Motif D1980*, in: *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: A Handbook: A Handbook*, ed. J. Garry – H. El-Shamy, New York 2017, p. 160.

[65] H. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells, Volume 1: Texts*, Chicago – London 1986, p. 9: PGM we222-32; PGM 247-62.

[66] Athena disguises herself in the Odyssey: as Mentes: 1, 105-324; as Mentor: 2, 267-320; as a Shepherd-Boy: 13, 221-371, etc. On the disguises of Homeric gods vis à vis those of saints see V. Déroche, '*Tout d'un Coup': L'épiphanie Masquée Dans Les*

the closest parallel to the military saints is the Homeric Odysseus, king of both trickery and disguise. He provides the clearest model for the figure of a warrior who favours trickery over physical strength and skill with weapons as a means for defeating his opponent; he achieves his goals not through violence, but above all through reason[67]. This is not to imply that Odysseus' repertoire of tricks is the same as that used by Menas and his holy colleagues, but that this characteristic type of action, whether used in self-defence, for revenge, or to achieve some other goal, is founded in both cases not on the use of force, but on intelligence and cunning, aided by magical or divine helpers, props, and one's own abilities.

One of Menas's preferred methods of punishment was to paralyse his victims. This approach echoes the use of aggressive magic, which was highly prevalent in antiquity. Evidence of this can be found in numerous lead tablets known as *katadesmoi* in Greek and *defixiones* in Latin[68]. These so-called binding spells, as modern scholars refer to them, were functional curses dating back to 5th-century B.C. Greece. From there, they spread across the Mediterranean, persisting until the end of Antiquity[69]. The tablets often bore the name of the intended victim and, over time, included increasingly complex texts outlining specific rituals. These rituals involved the binding, piercing, or burning of wax, clay, or lead effigies, akin to "voodoo dolls". The tablets were then deposited in graves, wells, or springs, effectively delivering the victim to chthonic deities and restless spirits, who carried out the curse. The primary purpose of these spells was to immobilise the target, often for personal, legal, or economic reasons. Aside from erotic spells or those aimed at courtroom adversaries and business rivals, a significant portion targeted thieves and slanderers. John Gager describes these as "pleas

Recueils de Miracles de l'Antiquité Tardive, in: *Dōron Rodopoikilon: Studies in Honour of Jan Olof Rosenqvist*, ed. D. Searby – E. Balicka-Witakowska – J. Heldt, Uppsala 2012, p. 147-157.

[67] Many thanks to Janek Kucharski for drawing our attention to this parallel. Odysseus's tricks: The Trojan Horse, Odyssey 8, 492-520; The Encounter with Polyphemus (Cyclops) when Odysseus introduces himself as 'Nobody" 9, 105-542; Disguises and Deception in Ithaca, when Athena helps Odysseus assume the disguise of a beggar to deal with the suitors: 13, 375-420; 17, 336-500; 19, 107-250. On Odysseus as a trickster see P. Pucci, *Odysseus Polutropos: Intertextual Readings in the Odyssey and the Iliad*, Ithaca 1987; K. Zieliński, *Odysseus-Trickster and the Issue of the Compatibility of the Image of the Hero with Its Function in the Traditions of the Oral Epic*, "Studia Religiologica. Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego" 53/3 (2020) p. 181-202.

[68] F. Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, Cambridge – London 1997, p. 114 and 173 n. 12.

[69] On binding spells in antiquity see esp. Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, p. 118-175.

for justice and revenge"[70]. Binding spells thus became a common method for addressing enemies and wrongdoers. Menas, by paralysing evildoers, mirrored the actions of sorcerers who crafted binding spells, enabling him to inflict harm on his victims remotely and with immediate effect. It should be added here, however, that the motif of paralysis can also be traced back to biblical traditions, where it occurs as a form of punishment for one's sins: 1 Kings (13,4) recounts how King Jeroboam ordered the capture of the prophet by stretching out his hand, which immediately withered away; and John's gospel (John 15,1-18) mentions Jesus' words commenting on the case of a paralysed man, saying that a person could face a punishment worse than paralysis for his sins, which does not explicitly express a belief that paralysis is a punishment.

Regarding the pranks attributed to Menas – such as making a mare give birth to a three-legged colt or abducting camels from within a cloud – close parallels are scarce. One distant comparison might be drawn from inscriptions found in the Epidaurian Asklepieion, which document miracles performed by the god on behalf of his followers. One of these tells the story of Amphimnastos, a fishmonger who vowed to give a tenth of his profits to Asklepios but ultimately failed to follow through[71]. While selling fish in the agora of Tegea, his entire stock was struck by lightning and burned. This remarkable event drew a crowd, prompting Amphimnastos to confess his greed and pray to the god. In response, the fish were miraculously restored, and he fulfilled his pledge by offering the promised tenth to Asklepios.

This tale stands out among the Epidauros inscriptions in terms of the character of the divine intervention. Despite the poor condition of the stele, which complicates the reading of many inscriptions, most seem to focus on healing[72]. The story of Amphimnastos, however, showcases a different aspect of Asklepios: a god who enforces offerings owed to him, combining retribution with a touch of humour. Through a playful yet stern trick, he compels the unfaithful follower to fulfil his vow, but unlike Menas, Asklepios only claims what was initially promised. While this episode bears some resemblance to Menas's mischievous acts, the humour here is more subdued and purposeful. It is unclear, however, whether such

[70] J. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, New York – Oxford 1999, p. 177.

[71] L. LiDonnici, *The Epidaurian Miracle Inscriptions: Text, Translation, and Commentary*, Atlanta 1995, p. 121 (C4 [47]).

[72] LiDonnici, *The Epidaurian Miracle Inscriptions*, p. 116.

stories influenced the Christian miracles associated with Menas, although the Asklepian healing cult documented in the Epidaurian inscriptions is sometimes compared with Christian miracle collections; in our opinion, both traditions could have drawn from a common folk reservoir of motifs.

These various elements from both oral and literary traditions, as well as from everyday life, may have made up the conglomerate that resulted in the formation of the holy trickster warrior who had at his disposal a range of supernatural powers and who, like Odysseus, preferred to fight with cunning and artifice rather than with weapons, and to hide behind disguises to avoid revealing his identity. Cleverly outsmarting the enemy and taking them by surprise with trickery is a strategy for injecting humour into stories at the expense of the victims of such practices depicted in them. Such is the significance of the punitive tricks performed by Menas and other saints.

7. Conclusion

The transformation of Saint Menas from a healer into a protector and avenger in his Greek miracle collection reflects both pragmatic and cultural shifts within the development of his cult. During the height of Abu Mena's popularity as a pilgrimage centre, the promotion of Menas as a divine guardian addressing the very real perils faced by travellers was likely an intentional response to the concerns of pilgrims. This shift also aligns with the rise of military saints in late antiquity, a trend that reimagined soldiers-turned-saints as celestial protectors wielding divine authority to uphold justice. The author of the miracle collection thus exploited the growing popularity of military saint cults, and gathered or invented miracles which tapped into Menas' military identity, casting him thereby in the role of a local policeman ushering in order and justice.

However, adherence to a principle of decorum shaped how Menas's interventions were depicted. The hagiographer avoided representations of direct violence that might appear incongruent with the sanctity associated with Christian saints. Instead, Menas emerges as a trickster – a figure who embodies divine power through cunning, humour, and supernatural feats. This approach not only avoids trivialising the sacred subject and preserves it from being polluted with incongruent profane elements, but it also provides ample opportunities to enrich and diversify the narrative by incorporating various motifs in the form of numerous punishing tricks.

These, in turn, allowed for complex moral and spiritual lessons to be introduced into the discourse.

The figure of Menas as a trickster reveals a nuanced understanding of justice in late antique Christianity. By leveraging humour and indirect retribution, his miracles convey dual messages of divine authority and moral transformation. Evildoers not only face punishment but are also often converted or redeemed through their encounters with the saint. This dual function highlights Menas's role as a mediator between the human and divine realms, capable of transforming both material circumstances and inner dispositions.

Furthermore, the study of Menas as a military saint highlights broader trends in Christian attitudes toward violence and sanctity, and sheds light on the mentality of late antique Christians. While the emerging doctrine of "just war" allowed for the acceptance of defensive violence in certain contexts, saints like Menas operated within a framework that distanced them from the vulgarity of direct bloodshed. This principle underscores the adaptability of Christian hagiography, which combined theological rigor with narrative creativity to address evolving cultural and social needs.

In sum, Saint Menas's literary portrayal as a divine trickster illuminates the intersection of humour, justice, and sanctity in the late antique religious imagination. His ability to safeguard the faithful while converting sinners showcases the pragmatic and spiritual goals of his cult. The trickster paradigm, with its blend of cunning and morality, remains a testament to the ingenuity of early Christian storytelling and its capacity to adapt to the complex realities of its audience. By emphasising the multifaceted nature of Menas's miracles, this study not only enhances our understanding of his cult but also provides a broader framework for analysing the cultural and religious dynamics of late antique hagiography. The complexity of Menas's figure is, however, revealed in his name itself: according to tradition, it is an anagram of "Amen", but it also brings "menaces" to mind[73].

[73] The story about Menas's name derives from the saint's Coptic Encomium, see on that Drescher, *Apa Mena*, p. 133.

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