Swimming against the Tide: How the Monks of Medikion Challenged Traditional Notions of Sainthood

Dirk Krausmüller
Universität Wien, Wien, Austria
dkrausmuller@hotmail.com

Abstract

Byzantine monasticism is known to us chiefly through two types of texts, the lives of saints, and spiritual treatises. The two genres give us quite different impressions of what it meant to be a perfect monk. The spiritual tradition focused on the inner life, advising the practitioners to purify themselves from sins and contemplate God’s creation, and promising them visionary experiences once they had completed all the requisite steps. By contrast, hagiographical texts focused on visible actions, either ascetic feats or wonderworking. Yet this does not mean that the two discourses are completely unrelated. A common feature is the ability to read thoughts, even if its acquisition is explained in different ways. Both genres give the impression of changelessness. It seems as if all holy men and all spiritual paragons behaved in the same manner. This impression is not altogether wrong but one must be careful not to generalise too much. In this article I will show that two texts from the early ninth century, the Lives of the abbots Nicephorus and Nicetas of Medikion, go against the grain. The hagiographers reject important tenets of the spiritual tradition, as exemplified in the Climax, and criticise, implicitly or explicitly, qualities that were commonly considered to be indispensable for holy men. In order to make my case I will discuss in turn the following topics: healing, mourning, the vision of God, clairvoyance, and prophetic powers.

Keywords

Medikion – Nicetas – Nicephorus – Climax – holy man – healing – clairvoyance – vision of God
The Early History of Medikion

Around the year 780, when the Iconoclast emperor Leo IV died, Nicephorus, the scion of a Constantinopolitan elite family, decided to become monk. He had himself tonsured by the abbot of the monastery of Herakleios in Bithynia and then undertook the restoration of a ruined monastery on an estate that belonged to his family. Later he moved to Medikion, which was possibly also his ancestral property. There he founded first a church of St Sergius and then a church of St Michael. It was around this latter building that the monastery of Medikion arose. Nicephorus became its abbot and was helped in his tasks by two men, the steward Athanasius, who had been trained for the imperial administration, and the second-in-command Nicetas, a native of Bithynian Caesarea, who had spent some time with a local hermit. When Nicephorus died in 813 Nicetas succeeded him as abbot. In 815 he opposed the reintroduction of Iconoclasm through Leo V and was exiled. In 821 he could return to his community where he died in the year 824. The monastery of Medikion was one of several large houses in Bithynia. Yet it stood out through its close connection with the patriarchate. Nicetas was installed as abbot by Patriarch Nicephorus, which was rather uncommon at the time.

The Lives of Nicephorus and Nicetas

Reconstruction of the early history of the monastery has become possible because the vitae of the two saints are particularly rich in historical detail. Yet this is but one dimension of the narratives. They are equally important as expressions of the ideal of sainthood to which the leaders of the community subscribed. The Life of Nicephorus is written in highly idiosyncratic Greek where recherché vocabulary contrasts oddly with non-classical syntax. It is a typical elaborate of the beginning ‘renaissance’ when writers turned to lexicographi-
cal works in order to enrich their texts and proceeded to create new compounds.\textsuperscript{4} This does not, however, mean that it is merely a rhetorical exercise. A look at the content reveals that the author did not simply follow hagiographical convention. The originality of his approach is evident in the section describing the saint’s healing miracles.

And someone came to him worn out by the leprosy of criticism, another one came who was deaf through his disobedience regarding the higher things and now was completely possessed by a demon through illicit deeds, and another one who had snatched up dropsy through the swelling of lust for power, and another one again through the spinning of intrigues, and some were impaired and withered as regards their hands through stinginess, there came to him also those who were lame on both thighs and did not wish to go forward towards the good, those who had turned into stones through their evil and dumb hearts, then were brought those with speech impediments, and he healed all afflictions of them who were deficient through the aforementioned evils.

In this passage the cures effected by the saint are presented in the form of a list. Such summary treatment of the topic is not unusual in hagiographical texts of the time. A particularly close parallel is found in Patriarch Methodius’ Life of Theophanes of Agros.

\begin{quote}
Οἱ μὲν δαιμονώντες ἔμφασιν ἢς ἄνειρον ἢς ἀνείριαστος ἐκαθαρμένοι ἀπῄεσαν ὅτι τάχιστα, ἄλλοι ἐπὶ κλινῶν ἐληλυθότες παράλυτοι στρωμνηφόροι ἀπῄεσαν· ἓτεροι τυφλοὶ παρ’ ἄλλων ἀναγεγραμμένοι σπατάλω τὴν ἐλευσίν ὁμοιομοίως ἀπελευύσαντες οὔτ' εἰς ἀγαθὸν προβῆναι ἑλόμενοι, λελιθωμένοι καρδιαῖς πονηραῖς τε καὶ ἀλάλοις· εἶτα παρεισβέβληντο μογιλάλοι πάντως ἑθεμένων ᾽ὁμοίοι τῶν πρόσθεν κακοῖς ἢν ἐλαττουμένων ἀπαν ᾧχος ἰόμενος.\textsuperscript{5}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{4} On this phenomenon see M. Hinterberger, Wortschöpfung und literarischer Stil bei Methodios I., in: E. Trapp, S. Schönauer (eds.), Lexicologica Byzantina. Beiträge zum Kolloquium zur byzantinischen Lexikographie, Bonn, 13.-15. Juli 2007 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2008) 119-150.

\textsuperscript{5} Anonymus, Life of Nicephorus 14, ed. Halkin, 420.19-421.29.
Those who were openly and unashamedly possessed by demons were cleansed and speedily went away purified; others who came on beds as paralytics went away skirting, while carrying their beds; others who were blind and were led on their way by others made their return, while themselves seeing; and many lame ones whose nature was deprived of feet ran home like deer; deaf and dumb ones who were impaired as regards both senses, on hearing others sing praises with all their heart fashioned a harmony that was clearly enunciated.

This shows clearly that Nicephorus’ hagiographer availed himself of an existing template. Yet he did so only in order to subvert its meaning. Instead of speaking of actual defects of the body, he gave leprosy, deafness, dropsy, lameness of hands and feet, and speech impediments a metaphorical meaning, correlating each illness with a moral failing. This reinterpretation is all the more surprising as the healing miracles of saints were traditionally patterned on those of Christ. The correspondence is particularly obvious in the case of Methodius’ bed-carrying paralytic whose prototype appears in John 5:9, but it is also recognisable in the hagiographer’s mention of people with withered hands and with speech impediments who have their counterparts in Mark 3:1 and Mark 7:32. What prompted the hagiographer to take this unprecedented step was his conviction that the health of the soul was more important than the health of the body because it alone could ensure a person’s salvation. There can be no doubt that he was highly critical of the behaviour of contemporary holy men who paid little attention to the inner states of those who asked for their help, at least to judge from the lives that are devoted to them. There is only one other contemporary source that seeks to reinterpret traditional topoi, one of Theodore of Stoudios’ catecheses. There Theodore claims that living together in harmony is as great a miracle as healing diseases and controlling

---

6 Methodius, Life of Theophanes (BHG 1787z) 57, ed. V. V. Latyšev, Methodii Patriarchae Constantinopolitanii Vita S. Theophanes Confessoris, Zapiski rossijskoi akademii nauk, viii. ser. po istoriko-filologicheskomu otdeleniju, 13.4 (Petrograd: Tip. Rossiskoj Akad. Nauk, 1918) 37.31-38.8.

7 See e.g. Sabas, Life of Peter of Atroa (BHG 2364) 27, ed. V. Laurent, La vie merveilleuse de saint Pierre d’Atroa (+837) (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1956) (Subsidia Hagiographica, 29) 131.1-7.
nature, and insists that if his monks liberate themselves from passions such as fornication and accidie they are on a par with those who drive out demons. Yet there is a marked difference between the two texts. Theodore’ statement is apologetic. He wants to prove to his monks that they are as good as holy men in order to prevent them from running away and becoming hermits. By contrast, Nicephorus’ hagiographer is much more assertive. He confidently declares that ‘nothing ... is better than healing souls, more than curing illnesses of the body’ (οὐδέν ... βελτιώτερον τοῦ ψυχὰς ἰάσθαι ἢπερ σωμάτων ρήμνυειν νοσήματα).

We do not know whether the hagiographer was a member of Nicephorus’ community. Yet even if he was an outsider we can be certain that the views, which he expressed, reflect a debate about the significance of miracles at Medikion. It seems, however, that not everybody there felt comfortable with such a radical approach. In the manuscripts the Life of Nicephorus is followed by a short appendix, which is written in simple and straightforward language and therefore likely to have been penned by another author. It consists of three miracle narratives, which are entirely conventional. Significantly, miracles are also recorded at the end of the second hagiographical text produced at Medikion, the Life of Nicetas, which was written in plain Greek by the monk Theosterictus. Yet this does not mean that this text is devoid of original features.

3 Mourning

In an early part of his text the hagiographer Theosterictus speaks about Nicetas’ path to spiritual perfection. Instead of describing the saint’s behaviour in specific situations he offers his audience a list of monastic virtues.

Τοῦτο δὲ γεναμένου εἴχετο τῆς ἐργασίας τῶν ἐντολῶν τοῦ κυρίου ὁ μακάριος καὶ πάντα τά τῇδε τερπνά καὶ πρόσκαιρα τῆς ἐπικήρου καὶ ῥεούσης ζωῆς εἰς σώδεν λογιζόμενος διὰ τῆς ἀληθινῆς καὶ ἀνοθεύτου αὐτοῦ ἀποταγῆς ἐσταύρωσεν ἑαυτὸν τῷ κόσμῳ καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτῷ· ἔζη δὲ οὐκέτι ἑαυτῷ, ἀλλὰ Χριστῷ καὶ τῷ προεστῶτι πᾶσαν δὲ προσπάθειαν ὑλικῆν διὰ τῆς ἄουλος προσπάθειας τῶν

---

8 Theodore, Great Catechesis 60, ed. I. Cozza-Luzi, Nova Patrum Bibliotheca, 1x.2 (Rome: Typi Vaticani, 1888), 168-169.
9 Anonymous, Life of Nicephorus 14, ed. Halkin, 420.11-13.
10 Anonymous, Life of Nicephorus 21-24, ed. Halkin, 426-428.
11 Theosterictus, Life of Nicetas 45, ed. Hagiographi Bollandiani, xxvi, 1. On the text see J. O. Rosenqvist, A Philological Adventure. Editing the Life of St. Niketas of Medikion, Acta Byzantina Fennica, n.s. 1 (2002) 59-72.
These achievements correspond to the titles of the first five chapters in the Climax, ‘about renunciation’ (περὶ ἀποταγῆς), ‘about lack of attachment’ (περὶ ἀπροσπαθείας), ‘about foreignness’ (περὶ ξενιτείας), ‘about obedience’ (περὶ ὑπακοῆς), and ‘about the remembrance of death’ (περὶ μνήμης θανάτου).13 The following sentences then contain references to the subsequent chapter headings in the same text. Theosterictus’ decision to use them as a checklist for proper behaviour leaves no doubt that the monks of Medikion considered John Climacus to be an authority on the monastic life. Yet this does not mean that they accepted his teachings wholesale. Comparison shows that the headings of chapters six and seven, which focus on ‘repentance’ (μετάνοια), and on ‘mourning’ (πένθος), are missing. That this is not merely an oversight is evident from a later section of the text where Christ’s blessings are applied to the saint. Here we encounter an interesting discrepancy. Christ’s words in Matthew 5:4: ‘Blessed are those who mourn because they will be comforted’ (μακάριοι οἱ πενθοῦντες ὅτι αὐτοὶ παρακληθήσονται), refer to people who bewail their own lot. By contrast, Theosterictus’ statement, ‘mourning about and toiling with those who suffer in both respects (sc. material and spiritual poverty) because of the comfort of the Holy Spirit’ (πενθῶν καὶ συμπονῶν τοῖς ἀμφοτέρων κάμνουσιν διὰ

12 Theosterictus, Life of Nicetas 9, ed. Hagiographi Bollandiani, xx, 1.
13 John, Climax, pinax, ed. J.-P. Migne, Patrologia Graeca 88 (Paris: Imprimerie catholique, 1884) 629-630.
τὴν τοῦ Παρακλήτου παράκλησιν), characterises the saint as somebody who bewails the lot of others. This shift is highly significant because Matthew 5:4 was a central Scriptural proof text for the need to weep incessantly about one’s own sinful condition. This suggests that the monks of Medikion put a premium on sobriety and therefore considered such behaviour to be unacceptable. It is difficult to contextualise these findings. Mourning is not mentioned in lives of contemporary hermits such as Peter of Atroa and Joannicius. Yet this may be of little significance since most of their Late Antique predecessors, too, had little to say on the topic. Theodore’s catecheses, which were also destined for a coenobitic community, may provide us with a closer parallel. A survey of the Parva Catechesis shows that the topic of mourning is present but does not play a predominant role in his teaching.

4 Visions of God

When Theosterictus comes to the last chapter headings of the Climax his list becomes more sketchy. Having mentioned chapter twenty-five on ‘humility’ (ταπεινοφροσύνη) he jumps directly to chapter thirty on ‘love’ (ἀγάπη), thus leaving out the chapters in which John Climacus discusses various aspects of contemplation. As is well known John accepts in these chapters the possibility of visionary experiences. The significance of this omission again reveals itself when we consider Theosterictus’ adaptation of Christ’s blessings. There we find the statement that Nicetas was ‘pure in his heart through which he was seen by God and also conversed with him’ (καθαρὸς τῇ καρδίᾳ δι’ ἧς καὶ ὤφθη θεῷ καὶ προσωμίλησεν). This statement is evidently based on Matthew 5:8: ‘Blessed are the pure of heart because they will see God’ (μακάριοι οἱ καθαροὶ τῇ καρδίᾳ ὅτι αὐτοὶ τὸν θεὸν ὄψονται). However, Theosterictus has made one significant alteration. According to him it is not the purified saint who sees God but rather God who sees the purified saint. This inversion puzzled the scribe of the Greek

14 Theosterictus, Life of Nicetas 16, ed. Hagiographi Bollandiani, xx, 2.
15 See I. Hausherr, Penthos. La doctrine de la componction dans l’Orient chrétien (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1944) (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 132) esp. 152-173.
16 See e.g. Theodore, Small Catechesis 52, ed. E. Auvray, Sancti patris nostri et confessoris Theodori Studitis praepositi parva catechesis (Paris: Lecoffre, 1891) 189.
17 Theosterictus, Life of Nicetas 9, ed. Hagiographi Bollandiani, xx, 1.
18 See e.g. John, Climax 29, PG 88, 1498B-D6. For the following see D. Krausmüller, Nobody has ever seen God: The denial of the possibility of mystical experiences in eighth-and eleventh-century Byzantium, Journal of Late Antique Religion and Culture 11 (2017) 65-73 (<https://jlac.cardiffuniversitypress.org>.
19 Theosterictus, Life of Nicetas, 16, ed. Hagiographi Bollandiani, xx, 2.
manuscript who changed ὦφθη θεῷ to the strange ὦψε θεῷ, evidently because he was convinced that the verb must be in the active voice. Only the Slavonic translation, which reads виденъ бысть at this point, permits us to reconstruct the original.20 Theosterictus clearly believed that it was impossible, even for saints, to have direct access to the divine. In order to impress this view on his readers he was even prepared to tamper with the Bible, which he otherwise would have considered the most authoritative text of the Christian faith. His decision to reject the mystical strand of Late Antique spirituality, which he would have known from the Climax and possibly also from other texts, may appear odd. Yet it could well have been the majority view at the time.21 A sermon on the Annunciation, which seems to date to the eighth or early ninth century, denies that even Christ’s humanity can have a vision of his divinity. Theodore of Stoudios, too, makes it clear that only visions of angels in their true form are possible, and that only for the Virgin. In his catecheses he encourages his monks to imagine the heavenly glory, but never speaks about visionary experiences of the divine. Contemporary lives of holy men, such as Peter of Atroa and Joannicius, also have nothing to say about the topic. Peter once sees an image of Christ come alive but never seeks to come into contact with the divinity itself.22

5 Clairvoyance

This brings us to another aspect of the monastic life, spiritual direction.23 An abbot could only fulfil his duties successfully if he was able to assess the inner dispositions of newcomers who wished to enter his monastery and of members of the community who came to him for confession. Thus it comes as no surprise that this topic plays a prominent role in the Life of Nicetas. Theosterictus devotes an entire section of his text to it.

---

20 See D. E. Afinogenov, Cerkoslavjanskij perevod “Žitiya Sv. Nikity Midikijskogo”. Feosterikta i ego tekstologičeskoe značenie, in: Žitie prepodobnogo otca našego Konstantina, čto iz Iudeev. Žitie sv. ispovednika Nikity igumena Midikijskogo (Moscow, 2001) 147-159, esp.150.
21 For the following see D. Krausmüller, The flesh cannot see the Word: “Nestorianising” Chalcedonians in the seventh to ninth centuries AD, Vigiliae Christianae 67 (2013) 185-208.
22 Sabas, Life of Peter of Atroa 14, ed. Laurent, 101.7-103.10.
23 For the following see D. Krausmüller, Diorasis denied: opposition to clairvoyance in Byzantium from Late Antiquity to the eleventh century, Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik 65 (2015) 111-128.
As regards the illnesses of the soul nobody will deny what a great physician our Father Nicetas was because he recognised from the very movements and habits those who were dominated by sinful thoughts or passions. And when someone happened to suffer a fall – for not to fall is a quality of the angels – and he detected him because of his sullenness and the change of his face, he called him to himself in his own cell in private and made him confess everything about himself through his divinely inspired teaching and consolation.

From this passage we can learn that Nicetas is an acute observer of his monks’ appearance and behaviour. Yet his insights only tell him that a brother has trespassed. What the actual sin was he learns only during confession. This shows clearly that Nicetas relies on his natural powers of perception, which he has honed through long years of experience.

Such an understanding of spiritual direction is at odds with the teachings of John Climacus. John believed that a monk who has purified his heart can look into the mind of another person. Indeed, for him this ability was a marker of spiritual perfection. According to this conceptual framework Nicetas of Medikion would not be a saint at all but somebody who was still on the road to sainthood when death overtook him. Indeed, it is likely that John Climacus would not have thought much of Nicetas since he was very ambivalent about the ability to make inferences from outward signs. Once he defines an evil person as somebody who ‘imagines that he can infer from utterances the thoughts and from gestures what is in the heart’ (ἐκ λόγων τοὺς λογισμούς καὶ ἐκ σχημάτων τὰ ἐγκάρδια λαμβάνειν φανταζόμενος).

24 Theosterictus, *Life of Nicetas of Medikion* 21, ed. Hagiographi Bollandiani, xxii, 2.
25 John, *Climax* 26, pg 88, 1029D.
26 John, *Climax* 26, pg 88, 1033C.
27 John, *Climax* 24, pg 88, 984B.
that the chapter ‘on well-discerning discernment’ (περὶ διακρίσεως εὐδιακρίτου) in which John Climacus sets out his ideas on the topic has no counterpart in the list of Nicetas’ achievements. Significantly, the spiritual and hagiographical discourses were agreed in this matter. Peter of Atroa’s hagiographer asserts that the saint could read the thoughts of his monks. In the first Life of Joannicius the saint’s power to access the minds of his visitors is contrasted with the ability of his disciple Eustratius to make inferences from appearance and behaviour. The hagiographer intimates that Eustratius took this path because he had not yet attained perfection.\(^{28}\) Again it is the catecheses of Theodore that provide us with the closest parallel for the Life of Nicetas. Once Theodore points out that each member of the community can assess whether his own conduct is praiseworthy or not and then adds: ‘Besides I, too, guess from the external movements what is stored up inside’ (πλὴν ὅτι κἀγὼ τεκμαίρομαι ἐκ τῶν ἔξωθεν κινημάτων καὶ τὰ ἔνδοθεν ἀποκείμενα).\(^{29}\) Yet it was one thing for an abbot to speak like that and quite another to deny someone supernatural abilities in a text that was meant to establish his status as a saint. Interestingly, there is one other hagiographer who shares the views of Theosterictus, Ignatius the Deacon, who in his Life of George of Amastris claims that saints recognise each other’s inner qualities in the same way as ordinary people do.\(^{30}\) As is well known, the Life of George is an ‘Iconoclast’ text.\(^{31}\) This suggests that in this matter the faultline was not between Iconoclasts and Iconophiles but between members of the metropolitan elite and the population of the provinces.

6 Foretelling of Death

Another standard feature of hagiographical texts is accounts of the demise of the saints. In the Life of Nicetas we find no fewer than three passages of this kind, describing the death of Nicephorus, the death of the steward Athanasius, and the death of Nicetas himself.\(^{32}\) As these passages resemble each other quite closely it is sufficient to quote only one of them.

\(^{28}\) Peter, Life of Joannicius (BHG 936) 35, ed. J.van den Gheyn, Vita S. Ioannicii auctore Petro, Acta Sanctorum Novembris 11.1 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1894) 384-435, esp. 402AB.

\(^{29}\) Theodore, Great Catechesis 42, ed. Cozza-Luzi, 117.17-19.

\(^{30}\) Ignatius, Life of George of Amastris (BHG 668) 12, ed. V. G. Vasil’evskij, Russko-Vizantijskija Issledovanija 11 (St Petersburg, 1893) 23.4-7.

\(^{31}\) See M.-F. Auzépy, L’analyse litteraire et l’historien: l’exemple des vies de saints iconoclastes, Byzantinoslavica 53 (1992) 57-67.

\(^{32}\) For the following see D. Krausmüller, Can human beings know the hour of their own death or of the death of others? A ninth-century controversy and its historical context, Zbornik Radova Vizantološkog Instituta 53 (2016) 63-82.
When the time had come for him to pass away and be with Christ, since the illness was progressing more violently and was wasting his powers, when Sunday dawned, around the sixth hour, he (sc. Nicetas) stretched out his pious feet, which had run well in the confession of the faith, and departed together with the angels who had come to get him, on the third day of the month Xanthikos.

This passage seems entirely unexceptional if somewhat laconic. However, it is more significant for what it does not say than for what it does. Theosterictus never asserts that the saint knew the hour of his death beforehand and announced it to his monks. Such reticence is highly unusual in contemporary hagiography. The authors of the Lives of Joannicius, Peter of Atroa and Gregory the Decapolite aver that their heroes knew well in advance when their lives would end. In the case of Peter and Gregory the prophecies are astonishingly precise. The former states that he will die within twelve days, whereas the latter declares that he will pass away on 1 January. It is quite clear that the ability to foretell one's death was widely considered an important marker of saintly status. Thus it is all the more remarkable that Theosterictus omits this topic. He may, however, not have been as isolated a figure as it might first seem. In the first Life of Joannicius we read that the Stoudites rejected the saint's claim that he was able to foretell the hour of death and that they almost came to blows with his disciples.

33 Theosterictus, Life of Nicetas 48, ed. Hagiographi Bollandiani, xxvii, 1.
34 Peter, Life of Joannicius 68, ed. van den Gheyn, 428D.
35 Ignatius, Life of Gregory (BHG 711), 78, ed. G. Makris, Ignatios Diakonos und die Vita des hl. Gregorios Dekapolites. Edition und Kommentar, mit einer Übersetzung der Vita von G. M. Chronz (Stuttgart and Leipzig: Teubner, 1997) (Byzantinisches Archiv, 17) 142.3-6; Sabas, Life of Peter of Atroa 82, ed. Laurent, 217.5-14.
36 Peter, Life of Joannicius 36, ed. van den Gheyn, 405AB.
7 Rigorism

As the abbot of a coenobitic monastery Nicetas saw it as his duty to instruct his monks through short sermons. Unlike the catecheses of his colleague Theodore of Studios, however, these sermons have not survived, if they were indeed written down. Yet we do get a glimpse at their thrust from Theosterictus’ *life*, which includes the following passage.

Πυκνότερον δὲ συνάγων αὐτοὺς ἐν τῷ κυριακῷ ὁ ἁγιώτατος πατὴρ ἡμῶν ἔδιδασκεν, ἐνουθέτει, παρεκάλει ἀδελφοί, λέγων, ὅσα συνήψεν ὑπὸ χάρις, μελετήσωμεν συνεχῶς διὸ συνήχθημεν. Ὅσα καίρον ἔχωμεν ἀγωνισώμεθα καὶ μὴ τῇ ῥᾳθυμίᾳ ἐστιν ἡ χάρις πολυπλασιάσωμεν· ταύτης γὰρ λυθείσης οὐδεὶς πραγματεύεται. Ὅσα ἔστιν, φησίν, ἐν τῷ θανάτῳ ὁ μνημονεύων σου, οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν τῷ ἅδῃ ἐξομολόγησις. Οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν τῷ θανάτῳ ὁ μνημονεύων σου, οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν τῷ ἅδῃ ἐξομολόγησις. Ὅταν συνῆψεν ἡ χάρις, μελετήσωμεν συνεχῶς διὸ συνήχθημεν. Ἔκινθομεν ἔνθεν ἐμπόνως, τῇ ἀκηδίᾳ μὴ ἐκλυόμενοι· δράμωμεν ζεόντως, διὸ τῆς τελειότητος χρεία, καὶ δρόμου σφοδροῦ, ἐκεῖ τῷ ἐξωτέρῳ σκότει παραπέμπει. Οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν τῷ θανάτῳ ὁ μνημονεύων σου, οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν τῷ ἅδῃ ἐξομολόγησις.

Bringing them together more frequently in the church our most holy Father taught, advised, begged, saying: ‘Brothers whom grace has joined, let us consider why we have been brought together. Let us fight as long as we have time and let us not become lax through negligence. Let us multiply the profit of the soul as long as the fair is open. Because once it is closed nobody does business. He says: “In death there is nobody who remembers you, in the underworld there is no confession.” (Psalm 6:6) Let us consider what kinds of punishment await those who sin indiscriminately and do not repent. Here the judge is well-meaning, here he is merciful, there he punishes. Here he forgives seventy-seven times, there he sends to the outer darkness. Therefore let us work and toil here, without being unnerved by accidie. Let us run zealously, for there is need of running, and running strenuously, in order that we reach the measure of

37 For the following see D. Krausmüller, An ambiguous authority: Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and the debate about the care of the dead (6th-11th century), *Revista di Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici* 52 (2016) 3-19.

38 Theosterictus, *Life of Nicetas* 15, ed. Hagiographi Bollandiani, xxi, 1.
perfection. Let us be sober, let us be vigilant, because our Lord will come at an hour when we do not expect it.’

Speeches of abbots are not uncommon in contemporary hagiographical texts. However, nowhere do we find such an emphasis on death and the afterlife. The closest parallel is Anastasius of Sinai’s sermon On the Sixth Psalm, which dates to the late seventh or early eighth century. There the same motifs appear, the quotation of Psalm 6:6 and the comparison of human life with a fair. This suggests that the monks of Medikion participated in an ongoing discourse. In this discourse the fear of death was used as a means to bring about moral improvement. Since nobody knows when he will die it is necessary to be prepared at all times. It is evident that this argument would lose much of its force if the time of death could be foretold. Thus one can argue that the hagiographer omitted such prophecies in the case of the three saintly figures Athanasius, Nicephorus and Nicetas because they would have been irreconcilable with the teachings of these men, even though this meant a radical break with hagiographical convention. By doing so he ruled out that human beings could in any way be sharers of the knowledge of God. At the time this was no doubt a contentious issue. We have a sermon about the deceased, attributed to John of Damascus but most likely dating to the early ninth century, which takes a completely different line. The author reinterprets the traditional image of the human life as a fair. According to him it is not the death of the individual but rather the Last Judgement that brings an end to the business of securing one’s salvation. Moreover, he challenges the traditional exegesis of Psalm 6:6.

Περὶ δὲ τοῦ φάναι τὸν Προφήτην, ‘Ἐν δὲ τῷ άδῃ τις ἔξωμολογηθήσεται σοι,’ προειρήκαμεν, ώς αἱ ἀπειλαὶ μὲν φρικώδεις τοῦ παντεπόπτου· νικὰ δὲ ταύτας ἢ ἅφατος αὐτοῦ φιλανθρωπία. Καὶ γάρ μετὰ τό φάναι τὸν ὑποφήτην ταύτα, γέγονε πάντως ἐν τῷ άδῃ ἔξωμολογήσις· ἐκείνων λέγω τῶν ἐκεί πιστευσάντων ἐν τῇ σωτηρίᾳ τοῦ Δεσπότου καθόδω. Οὐ γὰρ ἀπλῶς ἔσωσε πάντας ὁ ζωοδότης, ἀλλ’ ὡς εἰρήνη τε, κάκει τοὺς πιστεύσαντας.40

As regards the fact that the Prophet says: ‘Who will confess to you in the underworld?’, we have said before that the threats of the all-seeing one are fearful but that his ineffable love of humankind is stronger. For after

39 Anastasius of Sinai, On the sixth Psalm, Patrologia graeca 89, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris: Imprimerie catholique, 1863) 106C7-D2.
40 Pseudo-Damascene, On those who have fallen asleep in the faith 13, Patrologia graeca 95, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris: Imprimerie catholique, 1863) 256C14-257A6.
the Prophet had said this, there definitely took place confession in the underworld; I mean, of those who there came to the faith during the salvific descent of the Lord. For the life-giver did not save all but as has been said only those who came to believe.

The author of the sermon manipulates traditional topoi because he wishes to prove that masses and alms for the deceased can change their condition for the better. This leads him to play down the responsibility of the individual for his own salvation, which is such a central feature in Nicetas’ catechesis. Unfortunately we do not know how Theosterictus and the monks of Medikion viewed the care of the dead. Yet we should not dismiss the possibility that they were opposed to the laxism that was being bred by traditional practices.

8 Conclusion

The two hagiographical texts produced for the community of Medikion in the first half of the ninth century, the Lives of the abbots Nicephorus and Nicetas, are exceptionally rich in detail. This permits us not only to reconstruct the early history of the monastery but also to work out what was the hagiographers’ ideal of sainthood. The anonymous author of the Life of Nicephorus makes the point that healing vices is more important than curing bodies. Nicetas hagiographer, Theosterictus, uses the chapter headings of the Climax as a framework for the spiritual ascent of his hero. Yet he leaves out the chapters focusing on mourning and on mystical experiences. The significance of these omissions reveals itself in another section of the text where Theosterictus applies Christ’s blessings to the saint. Here we find two significant modifications. Nicetas does not bewail his own lot but that of others, and he does not see God but is only seen by him. This not only goes against the teachings of John Climacus but also against the text of Scripture. The topic of spiritual direction is dealt with in an equally unusual manner. Nicetas only uses his natural ability to judge from appearance and behaviour, and is not endowed with supernatural powers, which would allow him to read minds. Here Theosterictus not only deviates from the teachings of John Climacus but also from the ideal of the holy man. Thus it is not surprising that Theosterictus does not let his hero foretell the day and hour of his death. In order to understand how he could go against both spiritual and hagiographical convention one must consider contemporary texts. The closest parallels are found in the writings of Theodore of Stoudios, which is hardly a coincidence as both Stoudios and Medikion were strictly coenobitic communities. In such social contexts moderation and
conformity were highly valued. This may explain why Theosterictus did not present his hero as a traditional holy man, and why he avoided those elements of the monastic tradition that went against the predominant sobriety.