

Preface

Riksbankens Jubileumsfond generously sponsored the international workshop at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul on 10–12 October 2019. The workshop was originally entitled ‘The Reception of Stylites: Rereadings and Recastings of Late Ancient Syrian Super-Heroes’. We are very grateful to the scholars who attended the workshop and brought their contribution of knowledge and debate to the topic of stylitism. It was a fun and memorable occasion before the days that made most of us into recluses due to the pandemic.

That extended period of reclusion which began in 2020 has caused delays in the volume’s developments, but we are now very pleased to have assembled the critical mass of studies presented here. We are very grateful to the contributors for working with us towards this publication and to Ingela Nilsson, Olof Heilo, Thomas Arentzen, Tonje Sørensen, and the staff of the Swedish Institute at Istanbul, as well as to RJ, for supporting this initiative.

Barbara Crostini and Christian Høgel

How Did You Meet Your First Stylite? An Introduction to the Stylite World

How did you meet your first stylite? If this survey was carried out among Byzantinists, the answer may be through Bollandists' editions, or via the image of a pilgrimage token or seal published in some general survey on Byzantine material culture. But if the same question was extended to the average citizen, answers may well be different. Granted, not everyone will have met their stylite at all, as yet. But chances are that some notion of a person on a pillar will have reached even a modern secular audience through an unplanned encounter in a range of different contexts. For example, illusionist and endurance artist, David Blaine (b. 1973) performed a stunt in Bryant Park, NY, on May 22, 2002, standing unaided for 35 hours on a 100-foot high, 22-inch-wide pillar against the silhouette of the surrounding skyscrapers. His website declares that the feat, entitled 'Vertigo', assembled 50,000 live spectators at least at its conclusion, when Blaine jumped off the pillar in free-fall landing onto a layer of cardboard.¹ No reference is made to ancient stylites, but one cannot refrain from associating Blaine's backdrop with the final scene from the famous film by Luis Buñuel, *Simón del Desierto* (1965), where a Jumbo transports the ascete from his Syrian pillar to the American Big Apple, at the same time a spatial, temporal, and cultural feat of transportation.² The comparison is not just visual, but extends to contents too. Were pillar saints just trying to impress with their strange habits? Were they simply testing the limits of the human body in the same way that this professional 'endurance artist' pursues – and sells – his stunts as a career?

¹ <https://davidblaine.com/vertigo/> (accessed 13/07/2022). With thanks to Laura Franco for showing me these pictures during the conference in Istanbul.

² Summary in Rush, *Cinema and its Discontents*, 137–39. See in this volume the paper by Maria Veronese.

Social media have also spread the experience of contemporary pillar dwellers with a religious twist, such as that of the Georgian monk Maxime Qavtaradze, 59, who chose a natural rock formation of venerable memory to establish his diminutive dwelling with balcony on the surrounding valley. His rock is 40 meters high, and at its foot lies a monastery to which the 'stylite' is connected. Besides the high place where the monk dwells, images of his life include a system of pulleys through which food supplies are sent up to him, and a vertical ladder which he ascends or descends when he has to go down for some duty to the monastery.³ Such features are also found on images of ancient stylites, such as pilgrims' seals. Closer to home and reminiscent of her medieval predecessor Symeon of Trier, an athletic looking woman has rented from the local council a hermitical space in the tower of the Austrian city of Linz and blogged her way through months of solitude.⁴ Whether looking at the saintly Maxime, or at the daring Blaine, modern audiences may catch more than a glimpse of the phenomenon with which this book contends from a longer historical perspective. The impression of perilous height and physical endurance remains the same whether one thinks of the fourth- or of the twentieth-century pillar dwellers.

A vast crowd will have met their first historical stylite at an extraordinarily popular exhibition organized by Élodie Bouffard and Raphaëlle Ziadé at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris (26/6, 2017–14/1, 2018)⁵ and Tourcoing (23/2–11/6, 2018).⁶ The exhibition was entitled 'Chrétien d'Orient, 2000 ans d'histoire'. Its aim was to raise awareness of the harsh predicament of Christians in Arab countries by showing their ancient artistic heritage. The exhibition featured a number of stylite artefacts from Syria, including the famous stele of Gibrin, normally at the Louvre, monastic robes with the typical *koukoulion*, and a glass flask with a stylite.⁷ An even larger public will have met their first stylite at the cinema: most likely, through the already mentioned reel by Luis Buñuel, a cult movie in turn referenced in a memorable scene of *Il Pap'occhio* (1980),⁸ an Italian-produced Catholic satire film directed by Renzo Arbore. While Arbore met his stylite in Buñuel, the great Spanish film maker apparently read about stylites for the first time in the medieval collection of saints'

³ <https://ivoflavio-abela.blogspot.com/2013/10/maxime-qavtaradze-lultimo-stilita.html?m=1> (accessed 13/07/2022). See also http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/19/katskhi-pillar-monk-georgia-maxime-qavtaradze_n_3950192.html <http://orthodoxologie.blogspot.it/2013/09/un-stylite-en-georgie.html> <http://it.notizie.yahoo.com/foto/ultimo-stilita-slideshow/last-of-the-stylites-photo-1378470897244.html>.

⁴ <https://www.kirchenzeitung.at/site/themen/kunstkultur/blog-turmeremitin-268> (accessed 14 May 2024).

⁵ <https://www.imarabe.org/fr/expositions/chretiens-d-orient-deux-mille-ans-d-histoire> (accessed 29 June 2022).

⁶ <http://www.muba-tourcoing.fr/EXPOSITIONS/Expositions-passees/CHRETIENS-D-ORIENT-2000-ANS-D-HISTOIRE> (accessed 29 June 2022).

⁷ *Chrétien d'Orient: 2000 ans d'histoire*, 52–57.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRYlf7gyF9Y> (accessed 29 June 2022).

Lives, the *Golden Legend*, by Jacopo da Voragine, introduced to the subject by his friend, the poet García Lorca (1898–1936).⁹ Stylites are unlikely infiltrates in a secular world, yet their incursions reveal peculiarly post-modern traits. For example, Virginia Burrus has highlighted the stylite's hybridity, their identity seen and transmitted as 'a hybrid of man and pillar'.¹⁰

All the while, Christian religious environments have continued to present stylites among the saints worthy of veneration. The Syrian origin of their cult and its connections to Byzantium have of course generated a particular interest for these saints in the Orthodox Churches, where they are perhaps best known. Although they are commonly perceived as less popular in the Catholic world (as the scene from *Il Pap'occhio* implicitly underlines), their Lives circulated in early Latin redactions and their images were, already according to Theodoret of Cyrrhus, well-known in Rome. Like the Parisian Sainte Geneviève, whose body defended the city from attack in the sixth century, so the body of Symeon the Elder was considered a bulwark for Antioch. A connection between these two saints is recorded in Geneviève's Life as mutual knowledge mediated by travelling merchants.¹¹ While their liaison is legendary, based on their similar corporeal function as protective relics one could argue that these saints were representative of a similar attitude in their respective communities. Even now, their relationship is made visible through an icon where they figure side by side. It hangs in the chapel at Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, Paris, where the body of Geneviève is housed in a large coffin surrounded by votive candles. A pilgrim to her tomb might therefore unexpectedly be introduced to stylites in that way. From all these various opportunities, one may conclude that it is more likely than what might at first be thought to have met a stylite even in the twenty-first century. Texts, images, and relics continue to radiate their presence and their stories among secular and religious audiences alike.

Scholarship on Stylites

The time seemed ripe, then, for a more conscious analysis of this insistent and recurrent presence through a diachronic assessment of this phenomenon. Stylites matter to us not only for the underlying political urgency linking their cultural and spiritual fortunes to those of Syrian Christianity, but also, from the scholarly point of view, because a critical mass of primary materials has by now been published that enables and indeed demands further study. Both primary critical editions and a number of translations into modern languages facilitate

⁹ Veronese in this volume, 293–309.

¹⁰ Burrus, "Hagiography Without Humans." Also quoted in this volume by Apostolou, 227–241.

¹¹ Nasrallah, "Survie de saint Siméon," 174; Caseau, "Puanteur," 11 n. 28.

this work, even though it is still far from complete.¹² The cohort of ‘official’ stylites defined in the seminal work by Hippolyte Delehaye – in the order of his chapters: Symeon the Elder, Daniel, Symeon the Younger, Alypius, Luke and Lazarus – has been expanded by the much more wide-ranging evidence assembled by Peña, Castellana and Fernandez, who prove the success of stylitism much beyond its named first, or most famous, champions.¹³

To begin with the more restricted pantheon, study of Symeon the Elder has been greatly facilitated by Robert Doran’s English translations of the three main texts, two in Greek and one in Syriac, published in one volume.¹⁴ However, concerning the critical edition of the originals, the Syriac recensions are not totally published and the Greek versions were edited in 1908 from a restricted number of manuscripts.¹⁵ An ancient Latin Vita, available from the *Acta Sanctorum* (BHL 7957), has not yet been critically edited or translated, despite the interest of this version that seems to antedate (or at least not to be the same as) the Greek by Antonios.¹⁶ As for Symeon’s successor, and at the same time his double, St Symeon the Younger, a relatively recent edition of his *Life* (BHG 1689) in two volumes by Paul van den Ven provides an ample introduction and commentary and is accompanied by a French translation, offering a solid basis for further research.¹⁷ The second volume also prints a critical text of the *Life of Martha* with notes but without translation.¹⁸ The latter text was also transmitted in Georgian, which some argue may have even been its original language. Translations into other languages include Georgian versions of the *Life of the two Symeons, Daniel, Alypius and Timothy the Stylite*.¹⁹

Daniel the Stylite has fared a little better in terms of modern translations. His *Life* is available in a French,²⁰ English,²¹ Spanish,²² and Italian version,²³ all

¹² See for example the considerations by Kuper in this volume, 67–98.

¹³ Peña, Castellana, Fernandez, *Les Stylites syriens*. See also Hübner, “Saulenheilige im Ostjordanland.”

¹⁴ *Lives of Simeon*, ed. Doran.

¹⁵ Flusin, “Syméon et les philologues.”

¹⁶ On the relation between the Latin text and the mural paintings at Zelve, Cappadocia, see Jolivet-Lévy, “Contribution à l’étude,” 37–40; Caseau, “Puanteur,” 14–15; see further in this volume, Menna, 269–292.

¹⁷ *La Vie ancienne de S. Syméon Stylite le Jeune*, ed. van den Ven.

¹⁸ *La Vie ancienne de S. Syméon Stylite le Jeune*, ed. van den Ven, vol. 2, 253–314.

¹⁹ Gabidzashvili, *Philological and Textological Studies*, 187–88; *Vies géorgiennes de s. Syméon Stylite*, ed. Garitte; *Life of Symeon the Stylite the Younger and Life of Timothy the Stylite*, eds. Kekelidze; the *Life of Alypius* survives only in the Metaphrastic versions that are not edited. I thank Sandro Nikolaishvili for providing this information for me.

²⁰ Festugière, *Moines d’Orient*, vol. 2, 93–165.

²¹ *Three Byzantine Saints*, ed. Daws and Baynes, 7–84.

²² *La vida sobre una columna*, ed. Palmer, 47–151.

²³ Franco, *Tra terra e cielo*. I would like to thank Laura Franco for assistance with bibliography on stylites.