NICHOLAS THE MONK AND FORMER SOLDIER

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Nicholas the monk, former soldier, is the fictional protagonist of a Byzantine “beneficial tale,” known more commonly in English as a parable. Nicholas’ story (BHG 2311) appears for the first time in a thirteenth-century version of the Synaxarion of Constantinople, but an anonymous alter ego had acted in a remarkably similar fashion some three hundred years earlier, in a story inserted into the Life of Nicholas of Stoudios (BHG 1365). This much has been known for more than a century, and both texts are included in the Dumbarton Oaks Hagiography Database, a project co-directed by Alexander Kazhdan and Alice-Mary Talbot.\(^1\) Although to date there has been no English translation of either,\(^2\) there are several summaries of the Life of Nicholas of Stoudios (henceforth VNS),\(^3\) and John Wortley’s very useful commentary on the beneficial tale (henceforth NMS).\(^4\) So great are the similarities between the versions that descriptions tend to focus on where they diverge.

**The Parable**

In both versions of the parable, the protagonist sets out to war against the Bulgars in the army of Emperor Nikephoros I (in VNS he is a member of the imperial guard, or scholae). For one reason or another (neither version is specific) he travels apart from the army, and spends the night at an inn or hostel (according to the VNS, this was located

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\(^1\) Kazhdan (1998). See also Clugnet (1902); SynaxisCP, 341–44; and PG 105.863–925, spec. 893A–897C.
\(^2\) A full English translation will accompany a forthcoming critical edition of the Life of Nicholas of Stoudios, by J. Heldt (Uppsala). An English translation of the Beneficial tale of Nicholas the Monk, former soldier, by the authors, is appended to this paper.
in Thrace). Having been treated well and fed by the hostess (in VNS, she is a wealthy woman apt to entertain those passing by, in NMS she is the innkeeper’s daughter) the protagonist takes to his bed. However, during the night, on three occasions, he is woken by the woman, who is driven by a satanic lust to proposition him. On all three occasions he resists her, and he berates her for wishing to drag him down into “the depths of Hades.” Departing (in the NMS having taken time to pray) the protagonist heads towards the battlefield. In the VNS, but not the NMS, the temptress sends slaves to hide her shame by killing the protagonist, but instead the killers die by God’s grace. Arriving in the vicinity of the battle, the protagonist has a supernatural experience (in the VNS he is summoned to a mountain-top by a voice, whereas in the NMS he simply falls asleep and dreams what follows). A powerful figure appears to him (in the VNS, we are told further that he is aged, gigantic and dressed in white), seated with his legs crossed, right upon left. He draws the attention of the protagonist to the battle between the Romans and Bulgars, proceeding below them, and to the fact that the Romans are winning. The seated figure then places his left leg upon his right and the Bulgars gain the upper hand (foot). The Romans are all slaughtered, but the man draws the protagonist’s attention to a single bare patch on the battlefield, where no corpse lays. That, he observes, was where the protagonist would have fallen had he succumbed to advances of the temptress (called in the NMS “the triple-braided snake,” τὸν τρίπλοκον ὄφιν). The protagonist (having awoken in the NMS) withdraws from the vicinity of the battlefield and prays, but he cannot save the army, only himself. Consequently, he enters a monastery and serves God truly, becoming a holy father.

**Who was Nicholas the Monk, Former Soldier?**

Nicholas did not exist. As Kazhdan observed, “contrary to [Ivan] Dujčev[‘s analysis] there is no reason to identify Nicholas of Stoudios with Nicholas the stratiotes (or Nicholas the Monk...).” It is perfectly

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5 VNS: πρὸς πέταυρον ᾅδου; NMS: εἰς ᾅδου πέταυρον. This phrase is used upon her third approach in the VNS, and her first in the NMS.

6 In a later version of the Synaxarion, dating to the seventeenth century, the phrase τρίπλοκον ὄφιν becomes τὸν τρικέφαλον φῆδην, “the three-headed snake.” Neither phrase appears in the VNS. We shall return to this below (see note 43).

7 Kazhdan (1998) 72, against Dujčev in Fontes graeci historiae bulgaricae 4 (1961) 25–27. This is repeated from ODB, 1471. See also Halkin (1967) 58.