TRANSGRESSING CLAIMS TO SACRED SPACE: THE STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE OF THE PORTABILITY OF RELICS FOR ANTICHALCEDONIANS IN SYRIA-PALESTINE IN THE FIFTH AND SIXTH CENTURIES CE

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“Those who apostatized from God defiled my house.” “I do no longer appear there.” “Do not return to that place. I am not there. I removed myself.” Calling out in disappointment and frustration, the martyr Marcellus stormed down the path that was leading up to his martyrion in the Thebaid in Egypt and warned the flocks of pilgrims to turn away and no longer come and visit the site that had been erected in honor of his relics. Without fail, on previous days the pilgrims had experienced the many wonders, miracles, healings, and exorcisms that this gracious patron of the afflicted and intercessor with God had performed at his shrine. Indeed, to many, Marcellus seemed to have been known as a very personable martyr, one who appeared to his devotees face to face and promptly provided relief, on the very day a needy or sick person entered his shrine. Yet all of a sudden things had changed. The heretics, a label with which the author of the text designated the adherents of the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), had “take[n] his temple by force,” and Marcellus in turn had to leave, not because the Chalcedonians did not want him to stay any longer at the site, but because he himself had decided so. Marcellus also appeared on the streets to those who had set out on their paths to come and visit him. Through his appearance on the road and not at his shrine, that martyr made known that he no longer dwelt at the place at which he previously had received veneration. The holy site was no longer. The presence of the martyr was gone.

1 In the exploration of the significance of the figure of Peter the Iberian and his representation, Shalva Nutsubidze’s and my own research interests enjoy a happy congruence. It is a great honor for me to be able to present this contribution in Professor Nutsubidze’s memory. I am grateful to Amy Phillips at Woodstock Theological Library, Georgetown University, without whose kind assistance this article could not have been completed. I also wish to acknowledge the research assistance for an earlier stage of this project, which Jacob Van Sickle provided in 2010.

2 For the account of Marcellus deserting his shrine in the Thebaid, see John Rufus, Plerophoriae 93 (ed. and French tr. F. Nau, Jean Rufus, Évêque de Maïouma: Plérophories,
As unusual as such a story might sound to the ears of hearers in the modern world, to ancient audiences, the logic of the events that were recounted in the respective story was not unfamiliar. Marcellus in Egypt was not the only martyr who deserted his shrine.3

The present study argues that the feature of the portability or movability of relics, which is a characteristic of many, perhaps most relics, may not have been the solely decisive, but certainly was a significant force that gave momentum in the attempts of the opponents of the Council of Chalcedon in fifth-century Syria-Palestine to redefine their understanding of the necessary relationship between the Sacred and spatial confinement. Increasingly, anti-Chalcedonians appeared to have felt that the Holy Places of Palestine were no longer accessible to them. That they thought of themselves as having been excluded was due to two reasons mainly. First, anti-Chalcedonians experienced real or imagined acts of persecution at the hands of the followers of the council in Palestine. Secondly, anti-Chalcedonians understood themselves as being exposed to the threat of defilement, even suffering defilement in their own persons, when visiting sites that were in the hands of those who had accepted Chalcedon. This article therefore argues that in order to counteract that limiting experience of finding the Holy Places of Palestine increasingly dominated by Chalcedonians and thus as being inaccessible to themselves, anti-Chalcedonians highlighted in their life of religious devotion that relics were endowed with the capability to be used for creating Holy Places of the anti-Chalcedonians’ own choosing and approval.

This study is based on evidence gleaned from doctrinally diverse sources of late antique provenance that reflect the respective positions of Chalcedonians and anti-Chalcedonians. Based on the historiographical, hagiographic, and biographic tradition surrounding the figure of Peter the Iberian and his dealings with relics, this study critically investigates and articulates the dynamics behind a development that allowed relics to


3 See, e.g., the martyr on the island of Cyprus, whose name John Rufus no longer remembered. That martyr had left his shrine and advised his devotees not to come to him any more and visit him there, since he no longer dwelt at that site. See Plerophoriae 28 (ed. and tr. Nau, Jean Rufus, Évêque de Maïouma: Plérophories, 69–70). In his rendition of the text of the Plerophoriae, Michael the Syrian, Chronicle 8.11 (tr. J.-B. Chabot, Chronique de Michel le Syrien, Patriarque Jacobite d’Antioch [1166–1199], T. II [Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1901], 77) provided the name Spiridion as identification of the martyr. On Spiridion of Cyprus, see also Socrates, Church History 1.12 (ed. and tr. G. C. Hansen, P. Périchon, and P. Maraval, Socrate de Constantinople. Histoire ecclésiastique. Livre I, SC 477 [Paris: Cerf, 2004], 146–149).