CHAPTER 6

Byzantine Religious Tales in Latin Translation:
The Work of John of Amalfi

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At any given time after the 6th or 7th century there were at least a thousand religious tales and pieces of edifying monastic folklore, floating in various forms around the Byzantine empire. This is the number estimated by one of the best living experts on the subject, John Wortley, who has compiled a very useful Repertoire of Byzantine Beneficial Tales that is available online.1 It is a surprising fact that relatively few of these were ever translated into Latin. There are of course some exceptions. There was an early Latin version of the Lausiac History of Palladius (or at least part of it) and Rufinus translated the Historia Monachorum in Egypto;2 much later some individual edifying stories made their way into books of western exempla, i.e. illustrative tales that were formed into collections from the 12th century onwards, especially for preaching purposes.3 We also have a report that a translation was made of John Moschus’ Pratum Spirituale in the 9th century, but no trace of that has survived.4 All the more interesting and important, then, is the systematic translation of 42 Byzantine tales made in the 11th century by a western monk and priest residing in Constantinople, John of Amalfi, otherwise known as Johannes Monachus.

This man and his translating activities were completely unknown in modern times until an Austrian Benedictine, Bernhard Pez, found a work under John’s name with the title Liber de miraculis in a Bavarian manuscript and published its prologue in 1721.5 But nothing further was done with the material until 1884 when the German scholar Max Hoferer examined five Munich

1 Wortley 1991.
2 See Dihle 1994, 416.
3 For example, in the well-known collections of Jacobus de Voragine (Legenda aurea) and Caesarius von Heisterbach (Dialogus miraculorum).
4 John the Deacon in his late ninth-century life of Gregory the Great claims that his teacher had translated the work: book 11, ch. 45 (PL 75, 106A). The text of the Pratum is printed in PG 873, 2852–3112.
5 Pez 1721, 631.
manuscripts containing the translation, edited the first story from them, and commented in some detail on the style of the Latin version.\textsuperscript{6} He also attempted to say something about the life and time of the author, but was unable to offer any secure information on the subject. A major advance was made in 1913 by the Benedictine Michael Huber who prepared the first critical edition of the Latin text and included an important introduction that threw much new light on the identity and time of the translator.\textsuperscript{7}

Going far beyond the interesting but meager information contained in the translator’s prologue, Huber was able, on the basis of a twelfth-century Latin manuscript in Vienna, to argue that this John was a bilingual priest and monk of Amalfi who had spent some time in residence at the Zoodochos Pege monastery in Constantinople around the second half of the 11th century. The Vienna manuscript in question, Vind. lat. 739, is of south Italian origin and was completed in Naples in the year 1174. It contains a collection of saints’ lives and theological tracts, including a number of translations from Greek originals, several of which have never been published. In the 1920s and ’30s Adolf Hofmeister did further exploration in this important witness and was able to improve on Huber’s findings in several respects.\textsuperscript{8}

The current portrait, then, of John the translator and his activities, based on the results of both Huber and Hofmeister, would be as follows: John was certainly from the Naples region, if not born in Amalfi itself, and during his time in the Byzantine capital he had very close relations with members of the Amalfitan merchant class who encouraged him in his translating activities. He is likely to have lived closer to the end of the 11th century, rather than in the middle, and was quite old when he completed the so-called \textit{Liber de miraculis}. Apart from that work he also produced Latin versions of a sermon on the death of Nicholas of Myra and of the Life of St. Eirene; both of these translations survive in the Vienna manuscript and, apart from their prologues, still await their first edition. Also in the Vienna manuscript is a Latin version of the Life of John the Almsgiver. This is not the one prepared by the ninth-century papal librarian, Anastasius Bibliothecarius, and Hofmeister is of the opinion that it may be by our John. It too remains unpublished.

So let us turn now to the \textit{Liber de miraculis}, i.e. the text edited by Huber, and the focus of attention in this chapter. The first point to be made is that the title, as Hoferer already indicated,\textsuperscript{9} is probably not original. Judging by his remarks

\begin{enumerate}
\item Hoferer 1884.
\item Huber 1913.
\item Hofmeister 1920.
\item Hoferer 1884, 49.
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