The Life of St. Anna/Euphemianos

Introduction, Translation and Commentary

by

Vasileios Marinis

Introduction

St. Anna/Euphemianos belongs to an extraordinary group of Byzantine women who attained sanctity by disguising themselves as monks and living in male monasteries or in solitude. The current catalogue comprises thirteen vitae of such women, ranging from the fifth to the ninth centuries. The number is large enough to justify the suggestion that transvestite nuns while unusual were not especially exceptional.

Anna’s vita is found in a single manuscript of the Synaxarion of Constantinople (Paris. gr. 1582, fourteenth century) at the end of the entry for October 29. The vita’s original composition is usually placed shortly after the saint’s death in the first half of the ninth century. The only terminus post quem provided by the text itself is 806, the end of the patriarchate of Tarasios, who is referred to as “the patriarch of Constantinople at the time.” The anonymous author of the vita was most certainly not someone who knew Anna personally, for the vita is vague in details of events, persons, and locations crucial to the saint’s life. For example, Anna’s uncle, who has a significant
role in the life, is never mentioned by name. Similarly, with the exception of the monastery *ton Abramiton* and the obscure reference to the monastery “in the area of Sigma,” the names of other locales where Anna lived as an ascetic are omitted. Indeed, the author appears more knowledgeable of the places the saint lived in Constantinople than outside it. According to the *vita*, Anna was born in Constantinople, the daughter of a certain John, a steward of the church of Blachernai. After both her parents had died, she married and had two children. Anna’s husband passed away before the birth of her second child, as was foretold by her uncle, an ascetic in the important monastic center of Mount Olympos. The same monk also prophesied the death of Anna’s children. Thus freed from any earthly obligations Anna distributed her wealth to the poor, was tonsured, and after she disguised herself as a monk, she entered a monastery in Mount Olympos. She eventually moved to the neighboring monastery of her uncle, where her fame as a miracle-worker spread rapidly and attracted many novices. Because this community had reached its capacity and could not accommodate the newcomers, its abbot petitioned Tarasios, the then patriarch of Constantinople, to remedy the circumstance. As a result, the brotherhood was moved to the monastery *ton Abramiton* in Constantinople, which was restored for that purpose. There, Anna/Euphemiomos was harassed by a reprobate monk, who at first considered her a eunuch. Eventually, suspecting that the saint was a woman, the accusing monk tried unsuccessfully to expose her by pushing her down a hill and revealing her naked body. This monk was executed for attempted murder and Anna/Euphemiomos, in order to avoid the scandal, retreated to a life of seclusion with two fellow brothers. She ended her days in another monastery in the Sigma area of Constantinople.

Based on internal evidence in the text Anna lived in the second half of the eighth century. Her paternal uncle, the unnamed monk from Mount Olympos in Bithynia, first visited her during the reign of the iconoclast emperor Leo IV (r. 775-780), and later during the reign of Constantine VI (r. 780-797) and his mother, the empress Irene. Anna’s monastic brotherhood restored and moved to the monastery *ton Abramiton* after receiving permission from Tarasios, patriarch of Constantinople from 784 to 806. This restoration must have occurred sometime between 784 and 787. Anna passed away some years after that.

The unconventional behavior of transvestite nuns has yet to be explained sufficiently, but it is beyond the scope of this article to embark on such an enterprise. Scripture, and specifically *Deuteronomy* (2:25), explicitly prohibits cross-dressing. Scholars have offered an array of motley interpretations, ranging from Freud to Gnosticism to “mysterious rites of passage,” along with other enthusiasms necessitated by stories as sensational as cross-dressing Byzantine nuns. The *vitae* themselves provide a variety of reasons for transvestitism, and these are often practical in nature rather than theological (or psychological for that matter). To cite just a few examples, Mary changed her name to Marinus and joined a male monastery in order to avoid separating from her father, a monk in that community. Anastasia the Patrikia fled to the desert and lived as the monk Anastasios in order to avoid the romantic advances of the emperor Justinian. And Matrona/Babylas decided to transform herself into a monk in order to escape the notice of her abusive husband, while she lived as a monastic. Although these are certainly cases of a “*négation fondamentale de la féminité,”* the denial of femininity is not the prerogative of transvestite nuns but of all women monastics, who were encouraged to “forget feminine weakness.” The author of Anna’s *vita* does not cite any particular reasons for her decision to join a male monastery on Mount Olympos, nor does the author feel the need to explain or justify it. This suggests that such incidents were far less out of the ordinary to the eyes of the Byzantines than to ours.
Edition used for translation:

Καὶ μνήμη τῆς ὁσίας μητρὸς ἡμῶν Ἄννης τῆς νέας, θυγατρὸς γεγονοῦσα Ἡλίαννος διαταράδου τοῦ ναὸς τῶν Βλαχερνῶν

Ἄννης τῆς μετονομασθείσης Εὐφημιανοῦ.

αὕτη ἡ ὁσία μήτηρ ἡμῶν Ἄννα γεννᾶται ἐν τῷ Βυζαντίῳ παρὰ εὐλαβεῖς τινος διακόνου τοῦ ναὸς τῶν Βλαχερνῶν τῆς ἐπαγγελίας δεσποτῆς ἡμῶν Θεοτόκου. ἀπορροφηθεῖσα δὲ τῶν γεννητόρων, ἐσπευάτας ἦν μήμη αὐτῆς ἀνδρὶ εὐλαβεῖται συζεύξας αὐτὴν, δὲ καὶ πεποίησε. καὶ ἔλθων ἐκ τοῦ Ὀλύμπου ὁ πρὸς πατρὸς θείος αὐτῆς, ἀνήρ ἀσκητικώτατος καὶ διωρητικώτατος, ὁ καὶ ὑπὸ τοῦ ἐκκοσμουμένου Λέοντος τὴν γλώσσαν ἐκκοπῆς, λαλών δὲ καὶ μετὰ τὸ ἐκκοστῆθη ταῦτην ἀνεμοποιοῦσα, ὡς εἴδε ταῦταν ἄνδρι συζευχθένταν, ἄνεμου πρὸς τὴν πρὸς θείους ἀγώνας καὶ πόνους ἀφορέει ἀνδρὶ συζεύξατε> ἐφι καὶ πρεσβύμενος αὐτῆς ἀνεχόρησε. χρόνων δὲ τινων παρερημάτων καὶ τοῦ δοσεβοῦς ἕκεινου βασιλέως εἰς ἱδρυαμα καταχέντος, Ἑιρήνη καὶ Κωνσταντίνος οἱ ὁρθόδοξοι καὶ πιστότατοι βασιλεῖς τὸν ἤγιον ἔκεινὸν ἄνδρα μετασταλάμενοι, ὡς οἱ πάθοι ἀναδιασκέντησαν παρὰ τοῦ πρὸ τῶν πασσάμαντος, τὴν εὐλογίαν ἐκ τοῦπτου ἑλάμβανον καὶ τὰς εὐχὰς ἐκομίζοντο. οὕτους δὲ παλιν τὰ συνοισοῦντα πρὸς εὐαρέστησαν Θεοῦ υποθείς, τὴν πρὸς τά ἱδά ἔμβλεψεν. τότε πάλιν ἑδραῖ τὴν μακράν ταυτή, άνδρίου καὶ ἑσυχο, τέκνον> φησι: <πολλά γὰρ αἱ θλίψεις τῶν δικαίων. γνώσισας δὲ Ἰσα, μὴ πρότερον γεννήθηναι τὸ ἐν τῇ κοιλίᾳ τοῦ παρθηνοῦ, πρὶν ὡς τὰν ἄνδρα τοῦ τάφω καλύφης, δὲ καὶ γέγονεν, μέτα γὰρ τὸν ἔκτον μήνα τῆς συλλήψεως τένοντος ταῦτης ἀνήρ.>
And she, after lamenting a great deal and having worn herself with sorrow, after she had weaned the child from her milk, she entrusted it to the hands of her other uncle, and she prepared herself for the [spiritual] contests, whose nature and duration are known to the initiated and those who have pursued the strenuous path of asceticism.

And while she was engaged in this way of life, that most clear-sighted man arrived from Mount Olympus. Falling at his feet and asking for his blessing, she heard him say, “Be strong in the Lord, my child.” And that marvelous man said, “Where is the child?” To which she replied, “I entrusted him to your own brother and my benefactor, after God. The other one is with me.” And having said these and other words in emotional turmoil and from a greatly pained heart, and having brought both her children before the venerable old man, she supplicated with tears [saying], “Pray, O venerable father, for the children.” And he said, “These do not need a prayer.” And she received this grievously and sighing deeply she said, “Woe is me, the sinner, what is going to happen to us?” And the elder said, “Didn’t I say to you, <my> child, ‘the sorrows of the righteous are many and if we do not stand firm, we will never be justified; for this is what befits and pleases God.’” And she said, “Maybe, my sir, the Lord has decided that my young children should make the journey to the other side?” And the excellent man replied, “You have spoken rightly, my child, because the Lord will soon take those <children> from you.” And after she thanked God as was appropriate and fell at the feet of the venerable elder and received his blessing, she started distributing her wealth with both hands. And not long after her children died, and having shed tears for them and having put the rest of her wealth into the hands of the poor, she went around the churches praying and lighting candles, and venerating the suntaktērios. Finally, having found a monk from Mount Olympus and being tonsured by him, in secret she wore a monk’s habit, whereas she had the female
habit on the outside. And without being noticed she found herself in the area of Mount Olympus and she got rid of the nun’s habit.

And she hastened to one of the cenobitic monasteries and she came inside and talked to the gatekeeper, telling him that she would prefer more than anything else to speak to the abbot in person. And the gatekeeper, as he was accustomed, sent a message to the abbot that someone had come, and presenting him after he was summoned, he [the gatekeeper] left. And as the most honorable woman protrasted herself at the feet of the abbot and asked [him] for the usual blessing, this holy man gave her the blessing, raised her up and said, “Why did you come to us and what is your name?” And she replied, “The reason for my coming to this holy monastery, holy father, is my present multitude of trespasses, in order to find, even though I am unworthy, the divine mercy in the day of judgment, by living in contemplation for the remaining time of my life. As for my name, it is Eupheminos.”17 And the elder said to her, “My child, if such are the thoughts in your heart, and you desire salvation, avoid speaking it freely; because the nature of the eunuchs is vulnerable to thoughts that create passions.”18 Having said these words, he performed the usual prayer and included her in the brotherhood. And she made such progress and increased in every kind of virtue and humility in comparison to her previous life that she became a model and an example for all the monks practicing the ascetic life in the monastery.

Meanwhile the servant who took care of the affairs in her house, to which duty he was appointed by the saintly woman, having arranged everything, as she had instructed him clearly, went out to search for his mistress, and having met the monk who tonsured he, he inquired of him whether he happened to know the whereabouts of the woman who had abandoned earthly concerns and was searching for the spiritual things.
And <the monk> said to him, “<My> child, I will not deny that her situation was revealed to me. But where she is now, I do not know. But let us walk for a little bit together to this monastery.”

And upon arriving they learned from the gatekeeper that the person they were looking for was “inside the nets.” And they asked that she should be pointed out to them. As soon as she came out, the monk pointed to the servant and said, “Here is your most faithful house-steward who has suffered a great deal in searching for you. And if you are willing, let us go to our lavra.” And when she heard these words and went to the abbot of the monastery and received a blessing from him and from the other brothers, she departed from there and went with the servant, accompanied by the monk, to the lavra. And after having spent considerable time there, she was revealed as the author of innumerable miracles. Indeed as the reputation of the miracles spread, a large crowd of people who renounced the world was streaming to the monastery. But the narrowness and the harshness of the place hindered the [moral] progress of those coming [to the monastery]. As a consequence the abbot of the monastery inspired by God, after he explained to the patriarch of Constantinople at that time, the holy Tarasios, the miraculous works of the monk Euphemianos and how, after the reputation of the miracles spread, a large crowd of men who renounced the world flowed to the monastery but the newcomers could not be accommodated because the place was very narrow and very limited in space. And he found the most saintly patriarch consenting to his own plan. And through a gift he received a ruinous site, what is now called the monastery *ton Abramiton*, and in a short period of time he restored a monastery from the very foundations for the salvation of many souls, and made arrangements for the holy woman to finish there her remaining ascetic life.
And when this was done and when her angelic way of life became well known to everyone and in a short time the secret was revealed, it is not possible to describe the number of people who came and visited every day.

And after that the holy woman faced a temptation from a certain person, who was a monk in appearance, but in deeds and actions was above all devoted to the devil who rejoices in misfortune. This man had undertaken as his exclusive work the following, that is spewing forth harsh and obscene insults to the holy woman, as against a eunuch, and accusing her openly, for her part she gave them no thought at all, but rather asserted that she considered what was said against her a benefaction. And a certain God-loving woman, upon hearing the crude and abominable words of that accused person who eventually proved to be a murderer, said to him, “Be careful brother, in case he is not, as you say, a eunuch, nor susceptible to passions as you suppose, but a woman and in a state of innocence. And you will obtain as your reward the fiery hell, since you slander this woman who is not subject to passions, and you contaminate those who hear you. For some years ago a certain woman, after distributing all her possessions, disappeared, and be careful lest she be the one you call a eunuch, and you bring down your soul to the pit of destruction.” And that loathsome and treacherous man, having added this as well to his wicked schemes, he intensified his speech, hurling insults against many. And he also rushed to throw her down a slope, so that her clothes would be lifted up and he might see her naked and become certain. And not long after, having done this, he saw nothing, but he became half-paralyzed through divine power. And from there he departed and went home. And there he was arrested and accused of the crime of <attempted> murder, and his head was crushed with a piece of wood as in a halter, what is locally called a *phourka*, and he cast away his destructive
and abominable soul. And the holy woman, since her fame spread on account of this event and in order to avoid scandals, she made her way to the area of Stenon,25 having only two monks with her.

And finding a church there which had a spring and a small garden, stayed there along with the two monks, Eustathios and Neophyto. And she departed again from there after the passing of some years, having been invited to Constantinople in the area of Sigma26 by certain monks. And after she spent there the remaining year of her life living in a saintly fashion and in a manner pleasing to God and bestowing many cures and miracles to those who came to her, she departed to the Lord.

Notes
1 It is with great affection that I dedicate this to Angela Constantinides Hero, as indeed a small antidoron for her continuous support and encouragement. I am indebted to A.-M. Talbot, E. Bourbouhakis, and E. Patedakis for their suggestions and help with this text.
3 It is also possible that some of the vitae are fictional.
4 Janin rightly argues that this re-foundation must have taken place between 25 December 784 (the date of patriarch Tarasios’ ordination) and 787, when a certain Symeon, abbot of the monastery ion Abramaton, participated in the Second Council of Nicaea, see R. Janin, La géographie ecclésiastique de l’empire byzantin, I: Le siège Constantinople et le patriarchat occumène, 3: Les églises et les monastères, 2 ed. (Paris: Institut français d’études byzantines 1969), 5.
5 “A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment, for all who do so are an abomination to the Lord your God (NKJV).”
6 Mary/Marinos’ vita was composed sometime between the early sixth and mid-seventh centuries. See “The Life of St. Mary/Marinos” in A.-M. Talbot, ed., Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints’ Lives in English
7 This vita was probably composed towards the end of the sixth century. See, Patlagean, "L’histoire de la femme déguisée," 600.
10 Although Anna’s father is mentioned by name (John) and title (diaitarios) in the heading, he is referred to as a deacon in the body of the text, an indication perhaps that the redactor of the synaxarion used two different sources. The author of the vita appears to use the two titles, diaitarios and deacon, interchangeably. For the imperial diaitarios see J.B. Bury, The Imperial Administrative System in the Ninth Century: With a Revised Text of the Klerorologion of Philotheos (New York: Burt Franklin, 1958), 128.
11 The church of the Blachernai was located in the northwestern corner of Constantinople and was constructed in ca. 450 by empress Pulcheria. The napheoria of the Virgin was kept there in a separate chapel (called the soro) built by Leo I (r. 457-474). For the Blachernai see J.B. Papadopoulos, Le palais et les églises des Blachernes (Thessalonike: Imp. de la Société commerciale & industrielle de Macédoine, 1928); R. Janin, Constantinople byzantine: développement urbain et répertoire topographique, 2 ed. (Paris: Institut français d’Études Byzantines, 1964), 123-28; Janin, Géographie ecclésiastique, 161-71.
12 Located in Bithynia, Olympos (now Ulu dağ) was one of the most important Byzantine monastic centers. It appears to have flourished primarily between the 8th and 9th centuries, see R. Janin, Les églises et les monastères des grands centres byzantins: Bithynie, Héllespont, Latmos, Galèsios, Trébizonde, Athènes, Thessalonique (Paris: Institut français d’Études Byzantines, 1975), 127-92.
13 This was emperor Leo IV (r. 775-780).
14 These were emperor Constantine VI (r. 780-797) and his mother, empress Irene (r. 797-802).
15 Cf. Ps. 33:20.
16 This was Anna’s second child.
17 Although in the majority of cases transvestite nuns adopt the male version of their names, occasionally they take up an entirely new one, as did Anna. The reason in this specific case might have been that the saint’s name did not have a male counterpart.
19 This is likely a reference to the exterior wall surrounding the monastery.
20 Tarasios was patriarch of Constantinople from 25 December 784 to 18 February 806. He died in Constantinople on 25 February 806.
21 The Patria erroneously attributes the origin of this monastery to Constantine I, see Theodorus Preger, ed., Scraptures origium Constantinopolitanorum (Lipsiae: Teubner, 1901; reprint, 1989), 260. It was rather founded in the late 5th or early 6th century by a monk Abraham, who also founded the monastery of Byzantron on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem and later became a bishop in Ephesus, see PG 87, col. 2956. The location of the monastery of Abramiton cannot be defined with any accuracy but Janin places it outside the land walls in the vicinity of the Golden Gate, see Janin, Géographie ecclésiastique, 4-6. For this foundation see also A. Berger, Untersuchungen zu den Patria Konstantinopoulos (Bonn: R. Habelt, 1988), 679-81; P. Hatlie, The Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople, ca. 350-850 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 188-89, 457.
22 See note 4.
23 On this episode see Ringrose, The Perfect Servant, 78, 80.
25 The word refers to Bosphorus, see Janin, Constantinople byzantine, 479.
26 There were at least two known monasteries in or near Sigma: one dedicated to the Mother of God and one to St. Stephen, see Janin, Géographie ecclésiastique, 230-231, 477.