

“THE GREAT INITIATE OF GOD’S GRACE”: A KONTAKION ON ST NICHOLAS BY PSEUDO-ROMANOS

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Abstract:

During the ninth and tenth centuries, St Nicholas of Myra became increasingly popular as a saint, eventually rising to rank of the apostles in veneration. This article presents an investigation into the monastic piety which brought St Nicholas onto the stage of the Byzantine liturgical storyworld as one of the most important saints. Through a closer examination of how he was presented from the ninth century onwards in hagiography in general, the main focus of the article is a kontakion on the saint attributed to the great poet Romanos the Melodist (ca. 485–560) in particular. The question of authorship, time and place of origin of the kontakion is discussed. The article finally brings a new translation of the kontakion into English.

Key words:

Keywords: pseudo-Romanos, Romanos the Melodist, kontakion, kanon, Byzantine hymnography, St Nicholas of Myra, St Nicholas of Sion, hagiography

Hagiographical Hymns in General

Scholarly work on Byzantine hymns devoted to saints is still a desideratum. This goes not only for a large amount of unedited hagiographical kanons,¹ but also for the kontakia² on saints' lives. Most of these hagiographical kontakia, several hundred,³ remain unedited, but because of the high esteem and popularity of Romanos the Melodist among Byzantinists we have 20 kontakia devoted to apostles or saints attributed to him in a critical edition. The edition was originally prepared by Paul Maas but it was his collaborator, Constantine Trypanis, who finished the volume after Maas' death based on his notes and personal communication.⁴ Maas and Trypanis regarded all the kontakia in this edition spurious, and Trypanis' verdict on the quality of the hymns could easily scare away interested scholars (see below). Furthermore, only a few translations of these hymns into modern languages exist,⁵ not least the excellent translation by Charles Kuper in the previous volume of *Patristica Nordica Annuaria*.⁶ This article and translation follows in the footsteps of his work and begins remedying the lack of translations.

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¹ Antonia Giannouli, "Byzantine Hagiography and Hymnography: an Interrelationship" in: S. Efthymiadis, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography*, vol. 2. (Genres and Contexts), Farnham: Ashgate 2014, 285–312 (285 and 291). On Byzantine hymnography, see John A. McGuckin, "Poetry and Hymnography (2): The Greek World" in: S. A. Harvey & D. G. Hunter (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008, 641–656.

² On the kontakion in general, see Sarah Gador-Whyte, *Theology and Poetry in Early Byzantium: The Kontakia of Romanos the Melodist*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017, 9–17.

³ See the list in José Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode et les origines de la poésie religieuse à Byzance*, Paris: Beauchesne 1977, 74–93. This list includes of course also the genuine kontakia of Romanos.

⁴ Paul Maas & C. A. Trypanis, *Sancti Romani Melodi Cantica: Cantica Dubia*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1970, preface and p. ix n. 5.

⁵ There only exists an Italian translation of the two kontakia on St Nicholas of Myra attributed to Romanos, see P. Rosario Scognamiglio, *Inni di Romano il Melode* (Studi e testi 1), Bari: Levante 1985.

⁶ Charles Kuper, "The Pseudo-Romanos Kontakion on Symeon Stylites the Elder", *PNA* 34 (2019), 79–98.

The Question of Authorship

In scholarship, a general agreement has not been reached about the hagiographical kontakia, although the modern editors agree on most of them. Already J. B. Pitra, the first editor of a large amount of Byzantine hymns, among them kontakia ascribed to Romanos,⁷ deemed many of the hagiographical kontakia dubious for various reasons, some historical, some given by comparison with the poet's other works considered genuine.⁸

Trypanis was quite harsh in his verdict on dubious hagiographical hymns, which he found had an "inferior poetic quality" and furthermore had lost the "true nature of a metrical sermon which characterizes the genuine kontakia of Romanos".⁹ In his and Maas' edition, he distinguishes between two main types of hagiographical kontakia, the "encomiastic hymns" and the "biographical hymns". Whereas the encomiastic hymns reflect the rhetorical encomia on saints and focus on praise, the biographical hymns adhere more to the life of a particular saint. The kontakion on St. Nicholas presented in this article belongs to the encomiastic type, which Trypanis characterizes as "indulged in exuberant praise of the saint" where "[s]terility of inspiration competes with bombastic verbosity." His characteristic of the biographical type does not do this type much favour either: "they narrate in a dry, flat style the miracles performed, many of which are imaginary stories suitable only for highly unsophisticated audiences."¹⁰

As further evidence against the authenticity of the hagiographical kontakia, Trypanis sees an "Atticizing tendency" and lexicographical

⁷ J. B. Pitra (ed.), *Analecta sacra Spicilegio Solesmense parata*, vol.1, Paris: Jouby et Roger 1876.

⁸ Maas & Trypanis, *Cantica Dubia*, ix.

⁹ *Ibid.*, x and 204. Recently, the generic definition of a kontakion as a "metrical sermon" has been debated, see Thomas Arentzen, *The Virgin in Song: Mary and the Poetry of Romanos the Melodist* (Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion), Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press 2017, 11.

¹⁰ Maas & Trypanis, *Cantica Dubia*, x. This unflattering description echoes that of Karl Krumbacher who characterised the hymns following the vita meticulously as "geschmacklos versifizierte Heiligenbiographien", Krumbacher, "Studien zu den Legendens des Heiligen Theodosius" in: *Sitzungsberichte der philosophisch-philologischen und der historischen Classe*, Munich 1892, 220–379 (322). See also Giannouli, "Hagiography and Hymnography", 291–293.

evidence such as the use of words which are only attested later than sixth century. Another difference between the genuine and the dubious kontakia is also the uses of the epithets *τάλας*¹¹ (wretched) and *ἐλάχιστος* (smallest) in the acrostics. Whereas these epithets occur in hagiographical kontakia written by other poets, they are never found in the genuine kontakia of Romanos.¹²

Finally, Trypanis also mentions that whereas many of the genuine kontakia are written to their own melody (*idiomela*), most hagiographical kontakia are *contrafacta* (*prosomia*) written to existing melodies. This is particularly the case concerning the introductory preludes (*prooemia*) of the dubious kontakia.¹³

Trypanis therefore concludes that Romanos cannot be the author of these hymns. The evidence points towards the iconoclastic period perhaps even later.¹⁴

The Maas and Trypanis edition of the dubious kontakia was published in 1970. Seven years later, José Grosdidier de Matons published his monograph on Romanos in which he also discussed the question of authenticity. Grosdidier de Matons based his criteria on stylistic analyses, for instance the use of participles and percentage of discourse and dialogue.¹⁵ Whereas Maas had originally considered the two kontakia on the forty martyrs of Sebasteia (SC[63–64]/MT57–58)¹⁶ genuine, Trypanis came to the opposite conclusion in the foreword to the edition of

¹¹ Somewhat confusingly, *ΤΑΛΑΣ* is also the name of an otherwise unknown poet, who might be a Stoudite monk active in the first part of the ninth century and who is superseded only by Romanos in number of kontakia in the kontakaria, see Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode*, 63–64. Whereas *τάλας* used as an epithet is found elsewhere in the kontakaria, *ἐλάχιστος* is only attested in the hymns of Ps.-Romanos, see *ibid.*, 228–229.

¹² Maas & Trypanis, *Cantica Dubia*, xi.

¹³ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹⁵ Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode*, 231–241.

¹⁶ I refer to the kontakia by the numbering they have been assigned in the editions by Maas & Trypanis and the French edition by Grosdidier de Matons in the Sources Chrétiennesseries. MT = Paul Maas & C. A. Trypanis, *Sancti Romani Melodi Cantica. Cantica Genuina*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 1963 and Maas & Trypanis, *Cantica Dubia*. SC = *Romanos le Mélode: Hymnes*. Vol. I–V, Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes par José Grosdidier de Matons, (SC 99, 110, 114, 128, 283), Paris: Cerf 1964–1981.

the *cantica dubia*.¹⁷ However, Grosdidier de Matons, with his criteria, found them to be authentic along with the kontakia on St Panteleimon (SC[65]/MT69), St Demetrios (SC[61]/MT71) and Sts Cosmas and Damian (SC[62]/MT73).¹⁸ Unfortunately, he died before he could finish the last volume(s) of his edition of the kontakia of Romanos, which would have included the hagiographical kontakia.

Why then were the hagiographical kontakia attributed to Romanos? Trypanis suggests that “it was not to be endured that Romanos, the writer of kontakia par excellence, had omitted to celebrate this or that saint, when cantica of rival saints were circulating under his name”. This also goes for our hymn on St Nicholas. It is one of two hymns on the popular saint attributed to Romanos. The other one is much shorter consisting of only one prelude and ten stanzas.¹⁹

Dating of the Kontakion on St Nicholas

If we cannot establish firmly who is the real author hiding behind the name of Romanos,²⁰ we can try to place it more precisely in time and place of composition. Trypanis places it in the ninth century at the earliest, since he assumes that the *vita* known as *Thaumata Tria* from the

¹⁷ Maas & Trypanis, *Cantica Dubia*, ix n. 3.

¹⁸ Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode*, 242, and the table of concordance of hymns p. 332.

¹⁹ With the acrostic ΩΔΗ ΡΩΜΑΝΟΥ (MT78), Maas & Trypanis, *Cantica Dubia*, 130–134. The hymn has been translated into Italian with a short introduction, see Scognamiglio, *Inni di Romano*, 49–65. In addition to these two hymns attributed to Romanos, there are two more kontakia in the manuscripts (Kontakaria) on the feast day of Nicholas the 6th of December: one is by “The Stoudite” while the other has an alphabetic acrostic, see Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode*, 79. Nicholas was popular, also in terms of kontakia written in his honour.

²⁰ It could even be a different poet with the same name, who is however unknown. A similar case exists with kanons carrying the name Joseph in the acrostic which are attributed to either Joseph the Stoudite (Joseph of Thessaloniki) or Joseph the Hymnographer, see Nancy Patterson-Ševčenko, “Canon and Calendar: The Role of a Ninth-century Hymnographer in Shaping the Celebration of the Saints” in: L. Brubaker (ed.), *Byzantium in the Ninth Century: Dead or Alive? Papers from the Thirtieth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Birmingham, March 1996* (Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies 5), Birmingham: Routledge 2016, 101–114 (105 n. 8).

ninth century is the source of all later versions of the saint's life, including the one or ones that were the source of the author of our hymn.²¹ It is clear that the author presupposes knowledge of the life and miracles of St Nicholas. Some stanzas mention "innocent men" (st 3.3), "the young man" (st 15.3) and "men about to be killed" (st 21.8–9) without further explanation of who they are. This lack of explanation suggests that the audience were supposed to know what the author was referring to.²² It is more difficult to determine which *vita* he used as source. It seems rather that he followed either different sources or some source which is now lost.

The hymn is, as mentioned, of the "encomiastic" type and does not retell the life of Nicholas, but rather weaves in and out different episodes between praise and comparisons between the saint and heroes from the Old and the New Testament. Especially the Epistle to the Hebrews, which deals with the role of the high priest, is alluded to often. Concerning sources of the life of St Nicholas of Myra, we encounter the major obstacle pertaining to all research into the saint: at some point, probably during the end of the ninth century, his story was merged with that of a later namesake, St Nicholas of Sion, who lived in the sixth century (see further below). The earliest source to the life of St Nicholas of Myra is the so-called anonymous *Praxis de stratelatis*, which is written no later than 580.²³ It tells the story about three generals who were unjustly

²¹ Maas & Trypanis, *Cantica Dubia*, 204–205. The *Thaumata Tria* is edited in Gustav Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos. Der heiligen Nikolaos in der griechischen Kirche*, Band I: Die Texte, Berlin: Teubner 1913, 183–197. Anrich dates it to 850–900, see Gustav Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos. Der heiligen Nikolaos in der griechischen Kirche*, Band II: Prolegomena, Untersuchungen, Indices, Berlin: Teubner 1917, 382. Both volumes have been digitized by the Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen and are available at <https://gdz.sub.uni-goettingen.de/id/PPN632244593> (accessed 14 December 2020).

²² See also Maas & Trypanis, *Cantica Dubia*, 204 n. 118, and Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos II*, 363. The relevant passages are explained in the footnotes to the present translation.

²³ Based on the fact that a section of the *Praxis de stratelatis* (18–21) is quoted by the presbyter Eustratios in his treatise "On the State of Souls after Death" from 580, see Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos II*, 370, and on Eustratios the Presbyter in Angelo di Berardino, *Patrology: The Easter Fathers from the Council of Chalcedon (451) to John of Damascus (+750)*, Cambridge: James Clarke & Co 2006, 106–107. Edition of the *Praxis de stratelatis* in Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos I*, 66–91, German translation in Lothar Heiser, *Nikolaus von Myra: Heiliger der ungeteilten Christenheit*, Trier: Paulinus Verlag 1978, 47–55.

put to prison on a false accusation that they wanted to usurp the imperial throne from Constantine the Great (*Praxis de stratelatis* 11–13). In prison they remember how the bishop Nicholas saved three falsely accused men from beheading in Myra (5–7) and prays to the saint to intercede on their behalf and set them free (19). A true wonder happens when Nicholas, who is at that moment in Myra, appears in the emperor's dream and demands that the three generals be set free, which they are on the following day, later returning to Myra with precious gifts to Nicholas (20–26). This story builds the core narrative of the life of Nicholas of Myra.

Some centuries later, most likely in the first half of the ninth century, another important source appears, the *Vita per Michaëlem*.²⁴ Perhaps it was written by Michael the Stoudite.²⁵ This vita, the author claims, is an attempt to collect scattered stories about Nicholas. In this vita many of the later core elements in the life of Nicholas are found, among others the probably most well-known story that he helped three young daughters from life in a brothel by throwing a bag with money through their window a night (*Vita per Michaëlem* 10–18). However, this story is not mentioned in our hymn, whereas other episodes from the vita are alluded to:²⁶ Nicholas' orthodox faith and firm stance against heretics such as the followers of Sabellius and Arius²⁷ (25–26); how he helped Lycia through a famine by asking for a little amount of grain from a ship going to Constantinople – the wonder was that the amount was not missing when the ship harboured in the capital (37–39); and his friendly behaviour towards people who stray from orthodoxy (40).

²⁴ Edition in Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos I*, 111–139. German translation in Heiser, *Nikolaus von Myra*, 58–79.

²⁵ Heiser, *Nikolaus von Myra*, 56.

²⁶ The references are mentioned in the footnotes to the present translation at the appropriate stanzas.

²⁷ Later, Nicholas was said to be present at the council of Nicaea as a champion of orthodox faith. This is mentioned for the first time in the Synaxarion-vitae from the tenth century, see Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos II*, 301. Nicholas was from the thirteenth century mentioned in the lists of participants at the council. However, the legend that he punched Arius at the council of Nicaea is much later and attested only in the sixteenth century, see Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos I*, 459–460. For a translation of the sources mentioned in Anrich's volume, see <https://www.roger-pearse.com/weblog/2015/02/28/did-st-nicholas-of-myra-santa-claus-punch-arius-at-the-council-of-nicaea/> (accessed 14 December 2020).

The kontakion seems also to be dependent on an encomium to St Nicholas of Myra attributed to Andrew of Crete. Anrich dated this encomium to the second half of the ninth century, but no consensus has been reached.²⁸ A heretic who is not named in the kontakion²⁹ is identified in the encomium as a certain Theognes who was a bishop of “the Marcianites”³⁰. He was brought back to orthodoxy by St Nicholas. If indeed the *Praxis de Stratelatis*, the *Vita per Michaëlem* and the *Encomium* attributed to Andrew of Crete are the main sources of the kontakion, we might have a *terminus post quem* around 850.

As regarding a *terminus ante quem*, the earliest witness of the kontakion on St Nicholas is highly likely the Patmos-kontakarion. This important manuscript for the tradition of the kontakia have recently been dated to around 950 at the earliest.³¹ This means that we have narrowed down the time span to a hundred years.

In general, the period from the end of iconoclasm in 843 and until the first half of the tenth century is the period in which the liturgical use of hagiography is systematized.³² Important figures in this process were the monks at the Stoudios Monastery in Constantinople.³³ For our purposes the most important Stoudite is Joseph the Hymnographer, who is said to have written one or more kanons for each saint in the liturgical year, although the exact number that can be regarded as authentic still

²⁸ Patterson-Ševčenko, “Canon and Calendar”, 109 n. 27.

²⁹ See st. 18.5 “the one who joined alien dogma to faith” (τὸν γὰρ ἑτέρως δόγμα ἀλλόφυλον τῇ πίστει συνάπτοντα).

³⁰ *Encomium Andreae Cretensis* 7, edition in Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos I*, 419–427 (425).

³¹ See Thomas Arentzen & Derek Krueger, “Romanos in Manuscript: Some Observations on the Patmos Kontakarion” in B. Krsmanović & L. Milanović, *Proceedings of the 23rd International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Belgrade, 22–27 August 2016. Round Table*, Belgrade 2016, 648–654 (648).

³² This is also the period where the important collections of prose versions of saints’ lives for liturgical use are composed: the *Synaxarion of Constantinople* (around 900) and the *Menologion* of Symeon Metaphrastes (last decades of the tenth century), see Stephanos Efthymiadis, “Hagiography from the ‘Dark Age’ to the Age of Symeon Metaphrastes (Eighth–Tenth Centuries), in: idem, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography*, vol. 1 (Periods and Places), New York: Routledge 2016, 95–142 (129–130).

³³ For the liturgical renewal created by the Stoudites, see Robert Taft, *The Byzantine Rite: A Short History* (American Essays in Liturgy), Minnesota: The Liturgical Press 1992, 52–66.

is uncertain.³⁴ Joseph also seems to have been responsible for the formation of the *Menaion*, a liturgical book containing prayers and hymns for the fixed cycle of the liturgical year, one for each month,³⁵ as well as a new version of the *Octoechos* or *Parakletike*, which contains prayers and hymns for each day of the week in a cycle of eight weeks that is repeated during the year from the end of Pentecost until the beginning of Lent (then the *Triodion* and the *Pentekostarion* are used).³⁶ In the *Menaion* for December we find two kanons to St Nicholas of Myra as well as the prelude and first stanza of our kontakion for the morning office (orthros) on 6 December. The truncation of the kontakion from a lengthy hymn to only prelude and first stanza was perhaps a result of the Stoudite reform, probably because the addition of the kanon to the morning offices called for an abbreviation. This reform was also mainly concerning the monastic rite which was yet to fuse with the cathedral rite of Constantinople where the kontakion remained in use at night vigils until the beginning of the thirteenth century.³⁷

However, most important for the new additions by Joseph the Hymnographer is his role in promoting St Nicholas of Myra as a saint with the rank of the apostles.³⁸ In his *New Octoechos*, each day was dedicated to different holy people: Mondays to the archangels, Tuesdays to John the Baptist, Wednesdays and Fridays to the Cross and the Theotokos, Saturdays to the martyrs and Sundays to Christ. Thursdays were dedi-

³⁴ 466 kanons are attributed to Joseph the Hymnographer according to E. Tomadakis, see Patterson-Ševčenko, "Canon and Calendar", 104–105 and n. 8. About 385 of these are considered genuine, see Giannouli, "Hagiography and Hymnography", 291.

³⁵ Patterson-Ševčenko, "Canon and Calendar", 105.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

³⁷ On the use of kontakia in the cathedral rite, see Alexander Lingas, "The Liturgical Place of the Kontakion in Constantinople" in: C. C. Akentiev (ed.), *Liturgy, Architecture and Art of the Byzantine World: Papers of the XVIII International Byzantine Congress (Moscow, 8–15 August 1991) and Other Essays Dedicated to the Memory of Fr. John Meyendorff*, Byzantino-Rossica 1, St. Petersburg: Publications of the St. Petersburg Society for Byzantine and Slavic Studies 1995, 50–57. The fusion or "synthesis" of the rites of Jerusalem and Constantinople is complicated, but see Stig Simeon Frøyshov, "Rite of Jerusalem" and "Rite of Constantinople" in: *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*, <https://hymnology.hymnsam.co.uk/>.

³⁸ Patterson-Ševčenko, "Canon and Calendar", 110–111.

cated to the apostles and together with them, St Nicholas of Myra. Different prayers and hymns were assigned to each week of the eight-week cycle, which means that the Octoechos contains eight canons to St Nicholas of Myra, seven of which are attributed to Joseph the Hymnographer.³⁹ There might be a reference to this elevation of St Nicholas to the rank of the apostles in our kontakion:

You became the apostles' truthful companion, most esteemed one,
and dedicated yourself to their way of life,
father Nicholas, wise hierarch. (st. 17.1–3)

Ὁπαδὸς ἀψευδῆς τῶν ἀποστόλων, πάντιμε,
γεγονῶς τὴν αὐτῶν πολιτείαν ἐζήλωσας,
Νικόλαε πάτερ, σοφὲ ἱεράρχα

If this is a reference to his role as an apostle-like saint, an elevation Joseph the Hymnographer seems to have been crucial in establishing, one might wonder if the kontakion could have been penned by Joseph himself (he wrote kontakia as well)⁴⁰ or one of his collaborators.

However, one more source needs to be addressed. This is the aforementioned *Vita of St Nicholas of Sion* which merged with the life of his older namesake in Myra. The merging of the two vitae is first attested in the *Vita Compilata*, which dates to around 900.⁴¹ The *Vita of St Nicholas of Sion* was written shortly after the abbot of the monastery Holy Sion in Lycia and later bishop of Pinara had died in 564.⁴² In two stanzas, our kontakion refers to wonders known from the vita of Nicholas of Sion

³⁹ Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos II*, 364 and Patterson-Ševčenko, "Canon and Calendar", 111 n. 33. The promotion of St Nicholas might even be due to the fact that Joseph according to some vita was saved by St Nicholas when he was imprisoned by the Arabs on Crete, see Patterson-Ševčenko, "Canon and Calendar", 102, and for one of the sources Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos I*, 455–457.

⁴⁰ See Patterson-Ševčenko, "Canon and Calendar", 107; Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode*, 64.

⁴¹ Anrich (*Hagios Nikolaos II*, 311) dates the *Vita Compilata* to somewhere between 860–975, whereas Patterson-Ševčenko, ("Canon and Calendar", 109 n. 27) suggests ca. 900.

⁴² Edition and English translation of *Vita Nicolai Sionitae* in I. Ševčenko & N. P. Ševčenko, *The Life of Saint Nicholas of Sion*, Massachusetts: Hellenic College Press 1984. Concerning the dating of the vita, see p. 11.

and which are found in the *Vita Compilata* and in the *Vita per metaphorstem* respectively, first is the wonder in the washbasin, where Nicholas (of Sion) stood straight on his feet for two hours,⁴³ which is shortly referred to in stanza 10.2 “you stood up straight on the feet directly”⁴⁴, and the second wonder is just as briefly mentioned and almost allusive:

So the young man, whom he was about to kill,
 you raised up to life with prayers, Nicholas,
 and gave him back to his own country.
 When the people had seen him,
 they approached you with faith
 and a desire for your blessing, beseeching you fervently (st. 15.3–8)

διὸ καὶ τὸν παῖδα, ὃν ἔμελλεν⁴⁵ ἄφνω
 ἀπονεκρῶσαι, ζῶντα παρέστησας εὐχαῖς σου, Νικόλαε,
 καὶ τῇ ἰδίᾳ χώρᾳ ἀπέδωκας·
 ὄνπερ οἱ λαοὶ κατανοήσαντες
 πίστει καὶ πόθῳ προσήρχοντό σοι
 εὐλογηθῆναι παρὰ σοῦ, καθικετεύοντες θερμῶς

As Trypanis rightly notes,⁴⁶ this episode about the young man is incomprehensible without some presupposed *vita* that the poet is referring to. In the *Vita of St Nicholas of Sion*, the young man is Ammonios, a young Egyptian who is on board a ship sailing to Jerusalem (ch. 27). During the journey on the sea, the devil attacks the ship with heavy winds, but Nicholas calms down the winds with prayers (ch. 30). However, the spar of the mast is broken because of the wind, and so Ammonios climbs the mast to fix it. The devil then throws Ammonios from the mast, killing him. He is raised back to life by the prayers of Nicholas (ch. 31) and brought back to Egypt where the people receive Nicholas with great honour and where he performs more miracles. This wondrous healing account is not found in the *Vita Compilata*, but instead in the *Vita per metaphorstem*, which was written/rewritten by Symeon Metaphrastes in the

⁴³ *Vita Nic. Sion. 2; Vita Comp. 13.*

⁴⁴ Gr. ἐπὶ πόδας εὐθὺς ἔστης ὀρθός.

⁴⁵ Here we follow a variant reading, see the translation.

⁴⁶ Maas & Trypanis, *Cantica Dubia*, 204 n. 118.

last decades of the tenth century.⁴⁷ As the *Vita Compilata* is the earliest account of the amalgamation of the two Lycian saints, it is reasonable to suggest the *Vita Compilata* as a source for the kontakion, which gives us a terminus post quem of 900. Thus highly likely, the kontakion was written in the first half of the tenth century. Trypanis dated this hymn to the second half of the ninth century, but suspected it might be a little later.⁴⁸ His suspicion seems justified.⁴⁹

Where Was the Kontakion Composed?

Having established an approximate date for the composition of the kontakion, the question remains where it was penned. Already Cardinal Pitra suggested that it might have been written to be performed at a feast celebrating the saint and possibly in a church dedicated to St Nicholas in Myra, because the city of Myra, “your people” and “your church” are mentioned several times.⁵⁰ Anrich is a bit more cautious concerning the exact location.⁵¹ No doubt the hymn was meant to be performed on the feast day of the saint⁵² (cf. the prelude and st. 2) which must have been established on the 6th of December at least in the ninth century⁵³ when

⁴⁷ See Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos* II, 363 n. 3, and idem, *Hagios Nikolaos* I, 234–267, for the edition of the text and p. 244 for the relevant passage (*Vita per metaphrastem* 9). On the *Menologion* of Symeon Metaphrastes in which this vita is found, see Christian Høgel, “Symeon Metaphrastes and the Metaphrastic Movement” in: Efthymiadis, *Ashgate Research Companion*, vol. 2, 181–196.

⁴⁸ Maas & Trypanis, *Cantica Dubia*, 204.

⁴⁹ Scognamiglio also favours a date close to 900, “tenendo conto che la *Vita Compilata* e l’*Encomio* attribuito ad Andrea da Creta sono stati composti nella seconda metà del IX sec., bisogna pensare come data di composizione, alla fine di questo secolo”, Scognamiglio, *Inni di Romano*, 19.

⁵⁰ References to the city of Myra and “your people” (λαός σου) in pr. 1–3, st. 2.1; 3.4; and 6.9. The strongest support for the assumption that the hymn was written to be performed in a church dedicated to St Nicholas is st. 12.9 “...rescue now also your servants / who cry out in your church: ‘Do not forget us...’” (ῥῦσαι τοὺς δούλους σου / τοὺς ἐν τῷ ναῷ τῷ σῶ κλαυγάζοντας). If indeed the kontakion was written in and to be performed in Myra, it would bear “touches of local patriotism” which Trypanis mentions as one of the characteristic elements in the hagiographical kontakia, Maas & Trypanis, *Cantica Dubia*, xi.

⁵¹ Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos* II, 362 n. 3 and 4.

⁵² See the prelude, st 2.1; 10.8.

⁵³ Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos* II, 464. Perhaps even by the eighth century, *ibid.* 460.

Joseph the Hymnographer was instrumental in promoting the saint. As at least one other kontakion to St Nicholas was written by an earlier Stoudite and Joseph himself wrote seven or more kanons to the saint, the kontakion may also have originated in a Stoudite environment. Moreover, from around 950 the kontakion had entered the Patmos Kontakarion, which was probably written at the monastery of the Stylite at Mt Latros in Bythina, not far from Constantinople.⁵⁴ A century or more later, the hymn became part of the *Menaion* in an abbreviated form for the orthros service on the of St Nicholas 6th December, a place it still holds today in modern *Menaia*.⁵⁵

The Kontakion on St Nicholas – Structure and Content

That the kontakion originated in a monastic context, possibly the Stoudite monastery, can be deduced from its overall aesthetic character, which is closer to that of the kanons. As mentioned earlier, this kontakion belongs to the encomiastic type, which does not follow the vita of a saint closely. It is rather episodic and thematic and occasionally refers to episodes of the saint's vita accompanied by praise, prayers and exhortations. Compared with the genuine kontakia of Romanos the Melodist, this kontakion is not dramatic, but it shares a common trait which is the connection between the story of the saint's life and the feast that is celebrated.⁵⁶ Not only in the prelude, which follows the meter and melody of Romanos' most famous kontakion "Ἡ Παρθένος σήμερον"⁵⁷, but also in stanza 2 and 3 the word "today" (σήμερον) is used to connect the life and deeds of St Nicholas with the celebrating congregation.⁵⁸

On a structural level, it also resembles the kontakia of Romanos the Melodist in that it has a prelude announcing the theme and the refrain,

⁵⁴ Arentzen & Krueger, "Some Observations", 648.

⁵⁵ For instance in *Μηναία*, Τόμος Β, Rome 1889, 401. A newer version of the *Menaia* was not readily accessible to me at the moment of writing.

⁵⁶ See Giannouli, "Hagiography and Hymnography", 291–293 and especially 304–307. There are examples of hagiographical kanons with stronger emphasis on narrative and dialogue, *ibid.*, 293 n. 49.

⁵⁷ For this hymn, see *Romanos le Mélode: Hymnes* II, 50–77 (SC 10).

⁵⁸ Regarding the use of "today", see also my article, "Imaginære rejser ind i de hellige fortællinger – med Romanos Melodos som rejsefører", *PNA* 33 (2018), 61–82 (68–70).

then follows a first stanza where the poet exhorts his audience to praise St Nicholas, then several stanzas dedicated to the story or theme, and then, as is often the case in the genuine Romanos kontakia, the hymn ends with a final stanza in which the poet turns to prayer and exhibits penitence and humility. However, in the kontakion on St Nicholas, the introductory praise and the concluding prayer cover several stanzas, so the structure can be described as follows:

Prelude: Announcing theme and refrain

St 1–6: Exhortation, praise

St 7–20: The encomium to St Nicholas with several episodes from his life

St 21–25: Concluding prayer with a penitential tone

Concerning the content, it is more or less an expansion of the prelude where St Nicholas is called a priest who cared for his people and saved innocent people from death. In the refrain he is called “the great initiate of God’s grace” (ὁ μέγας μύστης θεοῦ τῆς χάριτος).⁵⁹ This is an important invocation as it deals with his role as a priest initiated in the mysteries (st. 2, 5, 7, 8 and 19) and having the rank of the apostles (st 17) – he even seems to be compared with the Theotokos when St Nicholas is said to be a vessel of the Holy Spirit and a wonder-bearer (st. 14.8–9).

The poet also several times refers to the priestly role of St Nicholas as one who anoints (μυρρίζειν) people with perfume oil (μύρον). This is an obvious wordplay on the city of Myra (Μύρα), but has also to do with chrismation and the grace distributed in that ritual (st. 6, 9 and 25).⁶⁰ Especially in stanzas 9 and 25, the poet elicits strong affective and olfactory imagery when he asks for the perfume oil to cover with fragrance “the stinch of grave sins” (δυσωδία ἀμαρτημάτων χαλεπῶν, st.

⁵⁹ On the function of the refrain in drawing in the congregation in the performance of the kontakion, see Thomas Arentzen, “Voices Interwoven: Refrains and Vocal Participation in the Kontakia”, *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 66 (2016), 1–10, and my contribution on the narratological concept of metalepsis by the use of the refrain in Eriksen, “Imaginære rejser”, 81–82.

⁶⁰ This kind of wordplay is very typical of the hagiographical hymns in general, mostly on the saint’s name though, see Giannouli, “Hagiography and Hymnography”, 304.

9.8) and “my whole stinking heart” (τὸ τῆς καρδίας μου δυσῶδες ἅπαν, st. 25.6).

In the same stanzas we find what Antonia Giannoulli calls “the modesty topos”,⁶¹ which is very common in the hagiographical hymns. In stanza 6.2 the poet uses the almost formulaic “no one can sufficiently express your fame” (οὐδεὶς ἰκανὸς πρὸς εὐφημίαν λέξει σοι) and in stanza 9 he⁶² implores God to give him strength to recount the life of St Nicholas. Finally, in the last stanza, the poet reflects on his lowly status and prays for the saint to receive the very kontakion which he has “woven from helpless lips” (ἐξ ἀπόρων χειλέων ἔπλεξα, st 25.5).

Another stylistic element is the frequent use of apostrophes to the saint, addressing him with his name or other adjectives that pertain to his priestly role. Although Romanos the Melodist will occasionally also use apostrophes to address biblical characters, he normally reserves this heightened mode of expression to addressing God or the Theotokos.⁶³ The “endless direct addresses to the saints” are a feature of the hagiographical kontakia, that Trypanis found “contrast most unfavourably with the genuine cantica”.⁶⁴ However, this feature is also found in the hagiographical kanons in the Octoechos or Parakletike which are sometimes called “intercessory” hymns, and therefore the hagiographical kontakia should not be judged by the aesthetic standards of the early kontakia, but by that of the kanons from the ninth century onwards.⁶⁵

⁶¹ This topos is according to Maas and Trypanis never found in the genuine kontakia of Romanos; Trypanis (from Maas’ notes) frowns upon the kontakion on St John of Chrysostom in which the poet uses the modesty topos, which is “completely alien to Romanos, who wrote about the passion of the Lord without any rhetorical mock humility” (p. 191 n. 21). See also Giannouli, “Hagiography and Hymnography”, 305 n. 78, but humility was no unknown sentiment for Romanos the Melodist, see Derek Krueger, *Writing and Holiness. The Practice of Authorship in Early Christian East*, (Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion), Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2004, 169–174.

⁶² Or she – as the poet still remains unknown.

⁶³ See especially Gador-Whyte, *Theology and Poetry*, 188–193.

⁶⁴ Maas & Trypanis, *Cantica Dubia*, xii n. 22.

⁶⁵ See Giannouli, “Hagiography and Hymnography”, 293, who also counterargues Trypanis: “the negative opinions on it [the hagiographical kontakia] should be put in context, particularly as the trends developed in later hymnography correspond to new needs and priorities in the Byzantine Church”.

Another characteristic of the hagiographical hymns in general is that the saints are compared with characters from the Old and the New Testament.⁶⁶ As we have already seen, St Nicholas is compared with the apostles and indirectly with the Theotokos, and among the apostles he is directly compared with Paul (st. 3.5). Several scriptural citations or allusions are from the letters of Paul, but there are also citations from the gospels.⁶⁷ However, most comparisons are with important figures from the Old Testament. The patriarch Joseph (st. 16), Moses (st. 5, 7, 15), Aaron (st. 5, 7, 19), Samuel (st. 5, 7), Levi (st. 5), David (8, 19) against Goliath (st. 4), Habakkuk bringing food to Daniel (st. 11), Elijah and Elisha (st. 14). Most of these comparisons are made to show St Nicholas comparable to or even surpassing the Old Testament figures – for instance, St Nicholas brings more than just grain to his people compared with Joseph, st. 16.3–9 – and sometimes the comparisons pertain to this priestly role (such as Aaron, Samuel and Levi), sometimes to his fight against heretics and the devil (Moses, st. 15, David, st. 4). The comparison with Habakkuk and Daniel is a bit stretched, as St Nicholas rescues from a death sentence three innocent men in prison, whereas Habakkuk brought food to Daniel in the den.⁶⁸ The tertium comparationis here is that Nicholas “completed a similar course” (ισόμοιον δρόμον διατέλεσας, st. 11.3–4).⁶⁹ Finally, Moses, Elijah and Elisha are used to describe both his initiation in the mysteries (st. 5.3–5) and his death and ascent to heaven (st. 14). Many of these Old Testament types are found also in the encomium of Andrew of Crete, however expanded and adapted to show certain aspects of the life and deeds of St Nicholas.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 306–307.

⁶⁷ See the notes in the translation where we have mentioned the ones that have caught our and others’ attention. There might be more to find for a trained exegetical eye.

⁶⁸ A similar idea is, however, found in Romanos, *On the Nativity I* (SC10/MT1) 20.7–8.

⁶⁹ See also Scognamiglio, *Inni di Romano*, 32–34 n. 30, for a more elaborate interpretation of the comparison with Habakkuk.

On the Translation

The translation was done by the present author and Thomas Arentzen from the basis of a draft translation that we made with a group of colleagues.⁷⁰ We have not attempted to imitate the metre, nor the stylistic elements such as alliteration, wordplay or the acrostic of the Greek text. The translation is fairly literal, although we occasionally change the wording as to make it more readable in English.

⁷⁰ The draft was made by a reading group connected to the project “Retracing Connections: Byzantine Storyworlds in Greek, Arabic, Georgian, and Old Slavonic (c. 950–c. 1100)”. I would like to thank Christian Høgel, Sandro Nikolaishvili, Dimitris Skrekas, Milan Vukašinović, and Marijana Vuković, who provided the rough draft together with us. Also a special thanks to Maria Dell’Isola and Christian Høgel from the Centre of Medieval Literature at the University of Southern Denmark for help with texts in Italian. Furthermore, Arentzen and I would like to thank Christian Høgel for generous help with both translation and accommodation when working on the translation, and Derek Krueger for helpful suggestions. I would finally like to thank Thomas Arentzen for many hours of stimulating translation work and discussion on this piece of a neglected but fascinating world of hagiographical hymnography. Arentzen and I are solely responsible for any typos or errors in the translation.

Uffe Holmsgaard Eriksen & Thomas Arentzen:

A translation of Pseudo-Romanos, *On Saint Nicholas* (MT77)¹

ACROSTIC: PRAISE AND PSALM BY ROMANOS²

Prelude

You became a renowned priest in Myra, holy one;
embodying today the gospel of Christ
you gave up your soul for the sake of your people;
you saved from death the innocent ones.
For that reason you are hallowed,
the great initiate of God's grace.

1

People, let us praise this hierarch³ in song,
the shepherd and teacher in Myra,
so we may be embraced by his intercessions.

¹ *Kontakion 77* according to Maas' and Trypanis' numbering. Greek text: P. Maas and C. A. Trypanis (eds.), *Sancti Romani Melodi Cantica: Cantica Dubia*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1970, 71–78. The metrical patterns (model stanzas) for the hymn are Τὰ ἄνω ζητῶν for the prelude and Τράνωσον for the stanzas. The melody is sung in the second mode or ἦχος β'. For more on the rhythmic and musical structures of the *kontakia*, see Maas & Trypanis, *Cantica Dubia*, 210–211.

² ΑΙΝΟΣ ΚΑΙ Ο ΨΑΛΜΟΣ ΤΟΥ ΡΩΜΑΝΟΥ.

³ Term for describing high ranking clergy, such as a bishop or “one who directs in the sphere of the holy” see G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1969, s.v. ιεράρχης.

Behold, he appeared completely purified,⁴ undefiled in spirit,
bringing Christ an unblemished sacrifice,
a pure one acceptable to God.⁵
For as priest he is cleansed
both in soul and flesh, and thus is truly
a protector and defender of the church,
the great initiate of God's grace.

2

So behold, people, today is the feast of the hierarchy;
let us make ourselves shine⁶ by celebrating brightly
and sing a hymn to Christ the savior!
Christ glorified him with glory and left among mortals
a great luminary shining for all.
As a priest of his mysteries,
as a worker full of devotion
you showed yourself, both a marvelous guardian of the orphans
and a protector of widows. And you intercede for all,
the great initiate of God's grace.

⁴ We translate the word καθάρσιος as synonymous with καθαρός, i.e. that in a passive sense St Nicholas is purified, rather than the more active sense of the word as “cleansing” or “purifying”. Scognamiglio does the same in his translation, suggesting that this purified state refers to asceticism and thus probably an influence from the *Vita of Nicholas of Sion*; see P. Rosario Scognamiglio, *Inni di Romano Melode* (Studi e testi 1), Bari: Levante 1985, 22 n. 9. Regarding the *Vita of Nicholas of Sion*, see note 24. Furthermore, the word καθάρσιος is not found in the genuine kontakia of Romanos.

⁵ Heb 9:14.

⁶ In Greek λαμπρυνθῶμεν, λαοί, perhaps an allusion to the irmos of the first ode of the *Paschal Canon* of John of Damascus, “Ἀναστάσεως ἡμέρα, λαμπρυνθῶμεν, λαοί”. We have moved λαοί to the previous line. On the *Paschal Canon* by John of Damascus, see Egon Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1961, 206–216. See also Andrew Louth, *St John Damascene. Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford Early Christian Studies), Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002, 258–268. The first lines of this irmos (first model-stanza of an ode in a kanon) are probably borrowed from *Oratio* 1.1 (*In sanctum pascha et in tarditate*) by Gregory of Nazianz: “Ἀναστάσεως ἡμέρα, καὶ ἡ ἀρχὴ δεξιᾶ, καὶ λαμπρυνθῶμεν τῇ πανηγύρει” in Gregoire de Nazianze, *Discours 1–3*, Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes par Jean Bernardi (SC 247), Paris: Cerf 1978, 72.

3

Today the hierarch took up a weapon of victory,⁷
 the cross of Christ; he struck down the lawless
 and saved innocent men from punishment.⁸
 He shared its glory with Myra as divine rewards,
 as Paul also shared⁹ the commands
 with everybody.¹⁰ Completely purified,
 he joined the heavenly choir
 performing the divine song. He dazzles those on earth
 with rays of blood, even though he died in body,
the great initiate of God's grace.

4

The good shepherd called upon the lambs;
 he gathered them alive and enclosed them in the sheepfold.¹¹
 And having snatched them away from the enemy
 he wounded with a solid slingshot everyone's adversary.

⁷ Perhaps also a very subtle allusion to the name of the saint, which etymologically is a composition of the words νίκη (victory) and λαός (people), one who is the “victory of the people”, see Scognamiglio, *Inni di Romano*, 46 n. 52. The wordplay is taken up in other hymns for St Nicholas on his feast-day in the *Menaia*, for instance in one of the stichera prosomia for Great Vespers on 5 December, see *Μηναία*, Τόμος Β, Rome 1889, 401 (“Νίκη, φερωνύμως ἀληθῶς, τοῦ πιστοῦ λαοῦ ἀνεδείχθης”, “Truly bearing the name, you showed yourself as victory of the faithful people”). Unfortunately, a newer edition of the *Menaia* was not readily accessible at the moment of writing.

⁸ The “innocent men” can refer to St Nicholas’ saving actions in general, and in particular to *Praxis de Stratelatis* 5–9, where St Nicholas saves three innocent men from being executed just as the executioner is about to chop their heads off with a sword, cf. the edition by Gustav Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos. Der heiligen Nikolaos in der griechischen Kirche*, Band I: Die Texte, Berlin: Teubner 1913, 68–71, as well as the three generals (stratelates) who are put unjustly in prison because of a false accusation of high treason, *Praxis de Stratelatis*, 14–25, *ibid.*, 72–77.

⁹ Perhaps a reference to Rom 1:11, where Paul longs to “share some spiritual gifts” (NSRV) (“ἐπιποθῶ γὰρ ἰδεῖν ὑμᾶς, ἵνα τι μεταδῶ χάρισμα ὑμῖν πνευματικόν”, NA28) with the Romans.

¹⁰ We follow the reading suggested by Trypanis who deletes θεῖα (“divine”) and ἔπειτα δὲ νῦν (“but now then”) in that line because it does not fit the metre, see Maas & Trypanis, *Cantica dubia*, 122 apparatus.

¹¹ John 10:1–18.

He himself gained victory, then,
 just as David against Goliath
 killing with a stone, and he struck down
 all deceitful heresies – those of Sabellius the terrible,
 Nestorius, Arius, and the other founders of heresy¹² –
the great initiate of God's grace.

¹² The “heresiarchs”. Term used for “leaders” or “founders” of heresies, Lampe s.v. αἰρεσιάρχης. Trypanis sees in this verse a further proof that the hymn cannot be by Romanos: the sixth century Melodist would never include Nestorius among the heretics that St Nicholas fought against, he argues: “No matter how inadequate Romanos’ theological training may have been (...) he would hardly have made such a mistake”, Maas & Trypanis, *Cantica dubia*, 204. n. 199. Scognamiglio likewise claims that the inclusion of Nestorius reveals a much later poet than Romanos, one with a poor training in dogmatics and history (“dalla formazione dogmatica e storica piuttosto superficiale”), who included the name for metrical causes, Scognamiglio, *Inni di Romano*, 26 n. 17. In the *Vita per Michaëlem*, only Sabellius and Arius are mentioned (*Vita per Michaëlem*, 27–29, Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos I*, 125–127) and the same goes for the encomium of Andrew of Crete (*Encomium Andreae Cretensis*, 5, *ibid.*, 423–424). However, in both cases the authors also condemn the heresies going against the dogma of the two natures in one hypostasis. The author of *Vita per Michaëlem* adds an explanation that clearly reflects the decisions of the sixth ecumenical council (680–681) which says that Christ has two separate wills and energies (*Vita per Michaëlem*, 27, see also Lothar Heiser, *Nikolaos von Myra: Heiliger der ungeteilten Christenheit*, Trier: Paulinus Verlag 1978, 138 n. 24); likewise, Andrew of Crete echoes clearly the language of the fourth ecumenical council in Chalcedon, when he lauds St Nicholas for wounding the Arians with the same spear as the heretics who do not understand that the two natures in Christ are neither mixed nor separated (ἀσύγχυτον καὶ παντελῶς ἀδι-ἀσπαστον, *Encomium Andreas Cretensis*, 5 end, see also Heiser, *Nikolaos von Myra*, 138 n. 33. Heiser furthermore hears an echo of the fifth ecumenical council in Constantinople in 553 in the condemnation of the heretics. For an Italian translation, see Scogniamiglio, *Inni di Romano*, 71–78). Against the harsh opinions of Trypanis and Scognamiglio, one could argue that the poet is faithfully following the tradition and the possible sources for the hymn, in which the heresies condemned at Chalcedon 451, Constantinople 553 and Constantinople 680–681 were merely variations on the positions of Sabellius and Arius. Moreover, the poet is already mixing the life of St Nicholas of Myra with his younger namesake from the Sion Monastery. The poet was writing encomiastic poetry, not history, and for the monastic circles in the ninth to tenth centuries from which this hymn most likely emerged it seems reasonable to assume that spiritual truth prevailed over historical accuracy in a liturgical celebration.

5

Visibly putting on the vestment of virtue
 as another Moses,¹³ great in grace,
 you entered the darkness,¹⁴ father Nicholas,
 into the innermost parts. Entirely airy, you passed through,
 most glorious one, illuminated by divine glory.
 And with Aaron and Samuel and Levi,
 according to their order,¹⁵ you serve as priest
 of Christ the redeemer of all, acclaimed initiate of the sacred.
 Thus being in light you congregate with angels,
the great initiate of God's grace.

6

Now is the time to proclaim your divine works of greatness,
 but no one can sufficiently express your fame,
 because you have emerged as Christ's perfume-vase,¹⁶
 anointing all who run to you with the ointment of grace
 of the most Holy Spirit, sacred one,
 the ointment of the mind, the ointment that enlightens
 those who anoint themselves with this faith
 and truly rub themselves with the divine ointment of Christ.
 For that reason, hierarch, you are known as the protector of Myra,
the great initiate of God's grace.

7

You appeared as another Moses, most holy one,
 when you entered the darkness of wonders, divinely inspired one.

¹³ Ex 28:2.

¹⁴ Ex 20:21.

¹⁵ Heb 5:5–6.

¹⁶ This is among other things an allusion to the sacrament of chrismation, where the faithful are anointed with consecrated perfumed oil, and to the sinful woman who anointed Christ with fragrant oil (Luke 7:36–50). The Greek text iterates words connected to perfume oil (μύρον, "myr-") seven times, connecting it indirectly to the name of the city Myra (Μύρα). Anrich assumes that this wordplay has been borrowed from another kontakion by Theodor the Stoudite, Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos II*, 363 n. 5, but there are no direct borrowings.

He received the divine law,¹⁷
whereas you, father, who received the whole Lord of the law,
divided him with innocent hands,
and shared divine rewards with the faithful,¹⁸
as you were a priest of Christ,
and stood before God, just like Aaron and Samuel.
Thus you shine forth and illuminate those in faith,
the great initiate of God's grace.

8

Holy to us is the precise teacher
who grants exact insight into his miracles,
the grace of imperceptible wisdom.
To all he apportioned, distributed, gave wealth,¹⁹
and those who implored he helped fully,
just as the divine father David cries out:
“His horn shall appear in glory
and be exalted with light,”²⁰ so *he* may be made to shine
with divine radiance and intercede with the Lord,
the great initiate of God's grace.

9

You, good one, who fixed the earth on the waters,²¹
make my mind firm, Lord, in fear of you,
so I may say and do what is beneficial to me
and recount the virtuous life of him who lived in Myra

¹⁷ Ex 24:12–17.

¹⁸ We have chosen the reading of manuscript T (Tauriniensis 11). Trypanis favors the reading in P (Patmiacus 212–213) which has μελέω, whereas T has μελίζω. As the stanza seems to refer to St Nicholas' priestly work, it makes sense to read μελίοντα as referring to the dividing of bread during the Eucharist. Cf. Maas & Trypanis, *Cantica dubia*, 124 apparatus. For some reason, Trypanis forgot to mention T in his *sigla* (ibid., xix–xx), but the manuscript is described in the introduction to the edition of the genuine hymns of Romanos, see Paul Maas & C. A. Trypanis, *Sancti Romani Melodi Cantica. Cantica Genuina*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1963, xxvii.

¹⁹ Psalm 112:9 (111:9 LXX).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Psalm 89.24 (88:25 LXX). Cf. also Psalm 136:6 (135:6 LXX)

and who made divine and fragrant ointment²²
 spring forth from his soul like a river
 anointing all those who in their souls
 have fallen ill with the stench of grave sins
 and sweetening the voices and the ways of those who cry:
“The great initiate of God’s grace!”

10

Born according to a predictive decree,²³ most saintly one,
 you stood up straight, Nicholas, directly on your feet²⁴
 showing by this that you would trample under foot
 the dragon’s puffed up pride²⁵ and hold back
 its immeasurable evil, so it cannot advance now
 against those who faithfully seek refuge with you
 and praise your sanctity
 and light-bringing feast,²⁶ which Christ magnified,
 he who called you, father, as priest and shepherd,
the great initiate of God’s grace.

11

Habakkuk was formerly sent to the prophet [Daniel]
 to bring food in the den, as is written,²⁷

²² Again, the poet plays with the Greek words for Myra (Μύροις) and perfumed ointment (μύρον).

²³ Possibly a reference to the *Vita per Michaëlem* which relates that Nicholas was born “according to God’s plan” (κατὰ θεοῦ βούλησιν ... τίκεται Νικόλαος, *Vita per Michaëlem*, 4, Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos I*, 115). In the short vita in the *Synaxarion of Constantinople*, a decree of God (ψήφω θεοῦ) is also mentioned. But this decree has to do with Constantine the Great becoming emperor and ending the persecutions, see Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos I*, 205, and bears no direct relation with our hymn.

²⁴ That Nicholas stood straight up on his feet is an influence from the life of Nicholas of Sion, see *Vita Nicolai Sionitae*, 2, in: I. Ševčenko & N. P. Ševčenko, *The Life of Saint Nicholas of Sion*, Massachusetts: Hellenic College Press 1984, 22.

²⁵ The word ὄφρυς can also mean eyebrow, and lifting one’s eyebrow signals pride or scorn. Cf. also Gen 3:15.

²⁶ The feast of St Nicholas is traditionally celebrated 6th of December, just before Christmas, Christ’s Nativity, traditionally the feast of light.

²⁷ Dan 14:31–39 (LXX).

whereas *you*, godly minded, completed a similar course
when you reached the city in which those condemned
by an unrighteous decision, just like in the den,²⁸
were now held horribly in prison,
and as you unchained them from death
you offered them life in place of abundant food;
thus unexpectedly saved they praise you,
the great initiate of God's grace.

12

When they had been delivered from the most unjust slaughter,
those who called upon your tremendous protection, honored one,
taught everyone to call your name when in danger,
and thus to be released from disasters and afflictions.
So rescue now also your servants
who cry out in your church:
“Do not forget about us, father, for to you
we have faithfully entrusted all our spiritual
and bodily care, and to you we sing hymns unceasingly,
the great initiate of God's grace.”

13

You became an imitator of Christ in all respects, wise man,
and gave up your soul for your flock, father,
always putting yourself in danger for their sake.
And so all those herded by the staff of your tongue,
hearing your sweet voice,
recognized it and followed you,
turning away from the hostile one,
and they faithfully sought shelter together in your dwellings.
Watch over us all, now, by your intercessions,
the great initiate of God's grace.

²⁸ This is a reference to the *Praxis de Stratelatis* where the three generals are thrown into prison because of a false accusation of high treason against the emperor Constantine the Great, *Praxis de Stratelatis*, 13–25, Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos I*, 71–77. Cf. Dan 6:6–9 (LXX) which also tells about an unrighteous decision plotted against Daniel by satraps and presidents.

14

The Tishbite²⁹ was once carried in a chariot
 but you, father, by your virtues as in a carriage
 mounted and ascended into the inaccessible places,
 and as another mantle you left your immaculate body,
 which has made the sea of sins part³⁰
 and doubled the rewards
 to your servants, just as the power
 of the Most Holy Spirit came doubly to Elisha.³¹
 You emerged as its vessel, wonder-bearer,³²
and a great initiate of God's grace.

15

With a figure of the cross,³³ Moses struck Amalek down
 as you too with the cross knocked down the devil:
 So the young man, whom he was about to kill,
 you raised up to life with prayers, Nicholas,
 and gave him back to his own country.³⁴
 When the people had seen him,
 they approached you with faith
 and a desire for your blessing, beseeching you fervently.
 And as you granted them grace, give it also to us,
the great initiate of God's grace.

²⁹ I.e. the prophet Elijah; for the chariot, see 2 Kings 2:11.

³⁰ Elijah strikes and divides the water with his mantle: 2 Kings 2:8.

³¹ 2 Kings 2:9.

³² Here we do not follow Trypanis but the Patmos Kontakarion, which has the word in vocative. This is the first instance in Greek where the word *θαυματοφόρος* is attested. It serves to accentuate the underlying comparison with the Theotokos and her annunciation. See also Karophilis Mitsakis, "The Vocabulary of Romanos the Melodist," *Grotta* 43 (1965), 171–197 (186).

³³ Ex 17:8–16. The sign of the cross is Moses' staff (*ῥάβδος τοῦ θεοῦ*, LXX).

³⁴ The episode is from the *Vita of Nicholas of Sion*, ch. 27–34. We follow the reading of manuscript T which has *ἔμελλεν* in stead of *ἤμελλον* in the Patmos Kontakarion (P), see the apparatus to the stanza in Maas & Trypanis, *Cantica Dubia*, 126.

16

You resembled the wise Joseph, honored one,
when you nourished and fed the people,³⁵
but greater than the former ones are the current deeds,
for he richly distributed grain to the needy,³⁶
while you, father Nicholas of godly mind,
wisely provided the word of Christ's assurance
in the hearts of the poor
by exclaiming "Mortals shall not live
on bread alone!"³⁷ Thus they faithfully praised you
as great initiate of God's grace.

17

You became the apostles' truthful companion, most esteemed one,
and dedicated yourself to their way of life,
father Nicholas, wise hierarch.
So having become all things to all people, you won all,³⁸
always in a strict way pushing
the rich to avoid evil deeds,
while also instructing the poor to endure
the trials with joy and to wait for the reward,³⁹
granted by the only merciful one, who glorified you,
the great initiate of God's grace.

18

Bound in the soul by lofty humility,
you never showed yourself, holy one,
angry with your neighbor.
Instead you refused and rejected mildly
the one who joined alien dogma to the faith
when you said to him next:
"Come, companion, let us be reconciled,

³⁵ *Vita per Michaëlem* 37–39.

³⁶ Gen 41:46–57; 47:13–26 (LXX).

³⁷ Matt 4:4, cf. Deut 8:3 (LXX).

³⁸ 1 Cor 9:22.

³⁹ Luke 6:20.23; Matt 5:3.12, cf. Luke 6:24.

so that the sun does not go down on our anger!"⁴⁰
Thus you were also revealed as a friend of the Lord,
a great initiate of God's grace.

19

You escaped the filth of life, dressed in chastity,
and – as David the great sings in the spirit –
you washed your hands in innocence, godly minded one,
wanting to go around the altar,⁴¹ which is venerable to everyone,
where you, father, were shown blamelessly
sacrificing the Lamb of God for the whole earth,
as another Aaron not washing his vestment,
but rather wiping off the offences of your most faithful people.⁴²
So, hurry and hasten, save us by your intercessions,
the great initiate of God's grace.

20

As the most diligent guardian of right dogmas
you drove those who tried to think differently
out of the Lord's courtyard, hierarch,
and you put them to death by the sling of your prayers;
thus you have also received renown from above;
while alive you appeared before the kings of the earth,⁴³
and after your end, as if alive, you arrive
and deliver from trials those who in danger
call your name with faith, for, Nicholas, you are
the great initiate of God's grace.

⁴⁰ Eph 4:26. This is the heretic known as Theognes in the encomium of Andrew of Crete who uses the same citation from Ephesians to show the mildness of St Nicholas, *Encomium Andrae Cretensis* 7, Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos* I, 425.

⁴¹ Ps 26:6 (LXX).

⁴² Cf. Lev 16 (LXX).

⁴³ St Nicholas appeared to the emperor Constantine the Great in a dream, *Praxis de Stratelatis* 20–21, Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos* I, 75. The verse may also be a subtle Christological allusion; like Christ he was greeted by the kingly Magi.

21

Do not hesitate to grant your protection, most esteemed one,
to those who with fervent faith are in need of it.

We all habitually put you forward
as protector and rescuer in every trial and crisis,
having experienced your swiftness
and your compassionate affection, holy one,
how, against hope, through dreams,
you rescued from prison men about to be killed
who kept in their memory only your name,⁴⁴
the great initiate of God's grace.

22

Great despondency has now overtaken us
from immeasurable evils, and there is no release.⁴⁵
But to us who are afflicted by despair and approaching Hades,
hasten to give strength, father Nicholas,
and prescribe the medicine of the grace you have in you,
God's blessed one, the sweet potion of repentance,
and relieve us instantly by the safe prospects
of hope, so that recovered we may praise you
as great initiate of God's grace.

23

We have bowed down to earth with both soul and body
and call upon your swift help,
for the sword of death constrains us,
and the bodiless enemies oppress us, holy Nicholas.
Having outrun these, expose as powerless
their treacherous and haughty intention

⁴⁴ Again a reference to the *Praxis de Stratelatis*, 18–21. In the prison, one of the generals, by the name of Nepotiaons, remembers that the generals witnessed how St Nicholas saved the three men from execution in Myra (cf. st. 3 n. 8) and subsequently these three call upon his help. Then St Nicholas appears in Constantine's dream and reveals that the accusation is false and that he should release the prisoners immediately.

⁴⁵ Ps 72:4 (73:4 LXX).

by raising up the horn of the lowly⁴⁶
among all who are faithfully praising your most holy feast
from the love of their hearts and are calling your name,
the great initiate of God's grace.

24

Nobody ever invoked you in their trials
without immediately receiving release, holy one.
Neither those at sea nor those on land
you cease saving at any time, you who are empowered
by the One who alone created all,
the God who now has given strength
to his servants, as the prophet
cries out loudly: "He will fulfill the will
of those who fear God."⁴⁷ And you are yourself one of them,
the great initiate of God's grace.

25

You do not accept a material crown, honored one,
for you were given the victory⁴⁸ prize
from God's hand, father Nicholas.
But as you are always full of love, receive this hymn,
which I have woven from helpless lips;
fill my whole fetid heart
with the fragrance of your prayers,⁴⁹
and water my mind with showers of the divine spirit,
so that you are glorified always, in ages and for ages,
the great initiate of God's grace.

⁴⁶ Ps 148:14 (LXX). Here we disregard the comma inserted by the editor. Scognamiglio (*Inni di Romano*, 45) translates κέρασ (horn) as "power" ("along with many modern versions" he states, p. 30 n. 25), keeps the comma and reads "ταπεινῶν κέρασ" as an apostrophe meaning "(you), power of the lowly".

⁴⁷ 144:19 (145:19 LXX).

⁴⁸ Again perhaps a subtle allusion to the name of the saint, see stanza 3 n. 7.

⁴⁹ Here again a subtle wordplay on Myra and myron (μύρω... καταμυρίζων).