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# Arboreal Lives: Saints among the Trees in Byzantium and Beyond\*

*Thomas Arentzen*

Studying the past, we come with our own biases. This is natural, of course. When, for instance, questions of gender and sexuality burned in modern minds, we started paying attention to how ancients went about their gendered experiences and their sexualities. Saints' lives that had previously seemed dull or ordinary, all of a sudden came to life in new ways, because they showed ancient cross-dressing or close relationships between people of the same gender.<sup>1</sup> With Michel Foucault and the twentieth-century negotiations of madness, holy fools from Byzantium were increasingly capturing scholarly attention.<sup>2</sup>

Today we, as human societies, are struggling with our own being in the natural world. How can we relate to the environment around us in a healthy and ecologically sustainable manner? These questions have driven me, as a church historian, to explore how Christians in previous times situated themselves within their natural world. More precisely I am interested in how they lived with trees, interacted with trees, or were attracted to trees. Trees are ancient creatures, mostly outliving humans. We have a Norway spruce in Sweden, for instance, whose root system is estimated to be between 9 and 10 000 years old.<sup>3</sup> It is hardly surprising that trees might work as mythological symbols for life in Christian (and other) traditions. While trees certainly evoked a sense of awe in ancient and Byzantine people, the arboreal realm also induced a feel-

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<sup>1</sup> The examples are numerous, but among the most thorough treatments is Burrus 2007.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Ivanov 2006; Krueger 1996; Rydén 1963, 1995a, 1995b, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Öberg & Kullman 2011. The spruce is called Old Tjikko.

ing of recognition. Hence trees could represent humans in similes and metaphors. “You are young and in the blossom of youth like a beautiful tree!” exclaims Andrew the Fool’s disciple Epiphanius in Lennart Rydén’s translation.<sup>4</sup> Trees dominate what one might call the mythological landscape of Christian tradition, where history plays out in a dynamic tension between on one side the idyllic Garden of Paradise—with its Tree of Life and (transgression through the) Tree of Knowledge<sup>5</sup>—and on the other side the restoration through the Tree of the Cross.<sup>6</sup> In the following, however, I am not going to pursue mythological plants, but trees that narratives present as botanical rather than symbolical. Trees in these stories share their corporeal branches with Christian saints.

Medievalist Lynn White Jr famously stated that “to a Christian a tree can be no more than a physical fact.”<sup>7</sup> He means, I assume, that trees have no agency or spirit; they are merely useful as an inanimate resource for human exploitation. Although White was an historian, his generalizing statement fails to engage seriously earlier strands of the Christian tradition. Once we realize how early Christian authorities could talk about trees, White’s presupposition falls apart. The Latin Church Father Tertullian, for instance, was convinced that trees not only have souls, as Aristotle and Plato had argued, but even *rational* souls, *intelligent* souls.<sup>8</sup> The Greek Church Father Basil of Caesarea describes, in one of his homilies on Creation, an aroused sexual intercourse between palm trees.<sup>9</sup> Trees were indeed more than physical facts to these ecclesiastical authors.

The present article studies four literary texts and explores how the authors imagined their protagonists’ interaction with trees. How did the

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<sup>4</sup> Nikephoros, *Life of Andrew the Fool*; text and trans. Rydén 1995b, 160–61.

<sup>5</sup> Gen 2–3.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Gal 3.13.

<sup>7</sup> White Jr 1996, 12. Incidentally, I am not the first person to criticize what Virginia Burrus calls White’s “five-page manifesto” (Burrus 2019, 2); see e.g. Arnold 2013, 4–6.

<sup>8</sup> Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul* XIX.

<sup>9</sup> Basil, *Hexaemeron* V 7.37–48. Basil is part of a broader literary tradition here; for an elaboration on this and on the arboreal psychology of Tertullian, see Arentzen [forthcoming].

saintly characters—with various degrees of intimacy—share their lives with the arboreal other?

## Up in the Crown

I shall start up in the highest branches of the tallest trees, where the wind blows in the leaves and plays with the birds. Up there, overlooking the Flemish landscape down below, lived a woman called Christina in the thirteenth century. She was given the epithet *Mirabilis*, “the Astonishing”—and Christina was indeed an astonishing person. Like those Byzantine fools (σαλοί) to whom Rydén devoted much of his career, Christina shocked people. It would be no exaggeration to call her a fool for Christ—a fool, one might add, who even carried out Christ’s redemptive work. But what interests me here, is her peculiar affinity with trees, her longing to live a bird’s life.

The most famous version of Christina’s story these days was written by the Australian singer-songwriter Nick Cave early in the 1990’s.<sup>10</sup> But Nick Cave was not the first. Around the year 1232, the Dominican Thomas de Cantimpré (1201–1272) authored the life story of this remarkable woman from his own lands. When Thomas wrote it, Christina had recently passed away—for the second time. You see, her *vita* is not so much a life as an afterlife. Or perhaps something in between. Christina lends herself generously to scholars fond of speaking in the idiom of liminality;<sup>11</sup> her very direction points beyond categories, her determination consisting of escaping classification.

The dramatic story begins as Christina is lying in the coffin in church. An orphaned shepherd girl, she died too young. During the funeral service, however, odd things start to happen to this pious maiden: “suddenly the body stirred in the coffin and rose up and, like a bird, immediately ascended to the rafters of the church.”<sup>12</sup> Christina has awoken from the dead, and she soars straight up to the lofty places, to the rafters,

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<sup>10</sup> It is the fifth track on his 1992 album *Henry’s Dream*. Another version is Quade 2017.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Radler 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas de Cantimpré, *Life of Christina* 5 (18). Number in parenthesis refers to page in Margot King’s translation, which I have occasionally modified slightly.

where she, as it were, touches wood. Later she told her friends that she had been taken through purgatory on her way to paradise and seen people's suffering there. Christ had given her a choice: either stay with him in paradise, or go back and endure more earthly life, in order to save those people who suffer in purgatory. Christina decided to come back.<sup>13</sup>

The arisen Christina shared a meal with her sisters and behaved somewhat normal, but it soon became clear that she could not be around people. Since the time of Antony the Great, ascetics had fled human culture and escaped into deserts and wildernesses. Christina's hagiographer says that she "fled the presence of men with wonderous horror into deserted places [*in desertis*], or to trees [*in arboribus*], or to the tops of castles or churches or any lofty structure."<sup>14</sup> Thomas probably mentions deserts or deserted places here to emphasize a monastic connection—in reality, of course, Flemish areas do not feature many deserts, and Christina was hardly a nun in any conventional meaning of that word. Instead of fleeing to the horizontal outskirts, she sought the vertical ones; it was the high places that attracted her the most—primarily trees. From the moment she left her coffin and flew to the rafters, wooden material continued to entice Christina. To her, it seems, even small pieces of wood shared a unique vibrancy with living trees, similar to the power relics gain from the living person in whom they participate(d).<sup>15</sup>

People tried desperately to pull Christina down and chain her to the ground. Once when she was tied up in a locked room, she made a hole in the wall and "flew with her body (...) through the empty air like a bird."<sup>16</sup> Somehow she was always able to get away: "one night, with the help of God (...) she escaped and fled into remote deserted forests [*in remotis deserti silvis*] and there lived in trees [*in arboribus*] after the manner of birds."<sup>17</sup> The resurrected woman had become a tree-dweller.

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas, *Life of Christina* 6–7.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas, *Life of Christina* 9 (20).

<sup>15</sup> For a similar observation regarding ancient Syria and Palestine, see Jeffers 1996, 181–82.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas, *Life of Christina* 18 (25).

<sup>17</sup> Thomas, *Life of Christina* 9 (20).

Christina's corporeal self was extremely delicate—"Her body was so sensitive and light that she walked on dizzy heights and, like a sparrow, hung suspended from the topmost branches of the loftiest trees."<sup>18</sup> With the help of God, she was able to stay up in the branches for nine weeks without jumping down—not least because her own breasts miraculously started producing milk that she fed on.<sup>19</sup>

Yet we might ask: For what reason does Christina retract to trees? Why is she preferring their company to that of other people? The branches provide a refuge for her ornithic desire to escape human society, but what arboreal force pulled her magnetically into their midst? Unfortunately, Thomas fails to speculate about that, and much is left to the imagination of the reader. We can note, however, that Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who died around the time Christina was born, famously socialized with trees; according to the earliest *Life*, he had no other masters or teachers than the oaks and the beeches.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps a Medieval reader would immediately have grasped the pull of the arboreal? There developed a tree affinity—if undoubtedly ambivalent—in monastic forests of the Middle Ages. As Ellen Arnold has shown in her study of a Benedictine monastery in Ardennes, for instance, the monks' relationship with the wooded land in which they lived could be intimate and difficult at the same time, leading them to render it both as harsh wilderness and idealized pastoral.<sup>21</sup>

Christina, too, clearly enjoys arboreal company, even as the trees represent an escape. Ecofeminist readings often underscore that the literary desire to control women resemble masculine mastering of nature, the hunting of the wild beasts;<sup>22</sup> hungry men chase down women as game, their wild female nature tamed or "killed" by the contained strength of the male. In Christina's case, however, we encounter a woman who escapes the violent grip of oppression. Thomas allows no reader's gaze to really get to her, nor any sanitizing clutch to catch her. No

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas, *Life of Christina* 15 (24).

<sup>19</sup> Thomas, *Life of Christina* 9 (20).

<sup>20</sup> *Vita Prima Sancti Bernardi* (the first *Life of Bernard of Clairvaux*) I 23.

<sup>21</sup> Arnold 2013, 27 et passim.

<sup>22</sup> For a pertinent example, see Goldwyn 2018, esp. 85–190.

one is able to domesticate Christina. At least for a while, the text allows its reader to remain with Christina in the tree crowns, and not to pull her down, but to admire her astonishing ways. It is by becoming like the birds, by inhabiting trees, living among the branches, that she escapes human tyranny, be it male or female. Treetops grant her a hiding place from the sinfulness of humanity. While humans reek of depravity, trees seem untouched by evil in Thomas' narrative, and hence they form a decent refuge for a saint.

Although the author gives no sufficient answer regarding her concrete relationship with the trees, he does stress the wooden aspect of her existence throughout his narrative. While she favored the branches and her birdlike life, her sisters (who were embarrassed by their lunatic sibling) tried to capture her, and "they bound her fast with a heavy wooden leash [*ligneo vinculis*] and fed her like a dog."<sup>23</sup> A couple of lines later in the same paragraph the narrator repeats the adjective "wooden" when mentioning the *vinculum*, as if to highlight the irony: the material which to Christina meant a blessed airiness, they utilized to bind her and humiliate her.

Eventually—perhaps to please her sisters—Christina settles for a more down-to-earth lifestyle. This may seem as a termination of her arboreal engagement and her spiritual freedom; yet Christina returns to earth *with* her newfound freedom, an arboreal freedom subtly indicated by the author. He tells us that, although down on the ground, Christina carries the trees with her. They are, we learn, literally stitched into the very fabric of her otherwise white garments: "She was dressed in a white tunic and a white scapular which frequently was sewn with threads made from the inner bark of the linden tree or willow twigs or little wooden spikes."<sup>24</sup> Like a lover stitching a hair of her beloved into her clothes, Christina preserved the little pieces of tree close to her heart. Even when she stayed down on the ground it was wooden fibers that kept her together, and her arboreal integrity remained intact.

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas, *Life of Christina* 19 (26).

<sup>24</sup> Thomas, *Life of Christina* 25 (30).

## Between the Branches

Christina's story is truly astonishing, but as strange as her arboreal life may appear, it does not lack predecessors. Byzantines, too, resided in trees—some among the boughs and some inside the trunks. In a Syrian tale entitled *The History of the Great Deeds of Bishop Paul of Qentos and Priest John of Edessa*, the two devoted companions Paul and John lead a wandering ascetic life together in early Byzantium.<sup>25</sup> The text is preserved in both Greek and Syriac. Since their literary journeys takes place in the early fifth century and the oldest manuscript is from the late sixth century, the narrative must have been composed some time in this interval. From their base outside Edessa, Paul and John travel to lands and peoples in the Eastern Mediterranean. This late ancient narrative tends to be episodic in character, rendering not an abstract landscape, but a “richly layered sequence of *topoi*”, to borrow Veronica della Dora's words.<sup>26</sup> A sequence of two distinct arboreal episodes creates an almost visual contrast between a Pagan tree and a Christian tree, which are both located in relation to a particular mountain:

Arriving at the foot of Mount Sinai, the friends encounter a group of Arabs, who capture them and intend to sacrifice them to their god. This god turns out to be a tall palm tree.<sup>27</sup> Paul and John see a challenge in the situation; they initiate a battle to judge whose god is the strongest, the palm god or their god. The fight reveals beyond doubt that the former is no match for the latter, and thus the two Christian friends avoid ending up as human sacrifice.<sup>28</sup> The Pagan palm loses; the previously so powerful tree now withers away.

Is this an instance where the Christian God creates (*ex nihilo*) Lynn White's tree qua “physical fact”? Does the Creator God—*abracadabra*—turn powerful trees into dead wood? Not really. As is well known, late antiquity was accustomed to religious competition.<sup>29</sup> The scene fea-

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<sup>25</sup> For a survey both of the text and tree-dwellers more generally, see Smith 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Della Dora 2016, 2.

<sup>27</sup> *The History of the Great Deeds of Bishop Paul of Qentos and Priest John of Edessa* 23–27.

<sup>28</sup> *Paul and John* 27–28.

<sup>29</sup> See e.g. DesRosiers & Vuong 2016.



tures a typical my-god-is-stronger-than-yours contest.<sup>30</sup> The anonymous author wishes to demonstrate the supremacy of the protagonists' Christianity vis-à-vis the Arabs' Pagan practices, and the Christian text suggests that one should avoid treating palms as gods. Trees lack the kind of power that would allow them to be counted among deities. This does not mean, however, that they are devoid of life-force. They are not dead wood. Trees may still be alive, communicating, spirited—even spiritual. The episode hardly permit us to conclude that the text dismisses tree agency.

What, then, is there to say about a Christian tree—or what does it itself say?<sup>31</sup> With the grand palm spirited away, the story goes on to explore a more Christian leaning tree—or the arboreal being of human/tree assemblage. Making their way from Mount Sinai toward Edessa the two human friends pass another mountain one evening and discern a figure up on the hill: “on top of [the mountain] stood a tall tree (ܐܘܠܡܐ).”<sup>32</sup> While they came across the Pagan tree at a mountain's foot, this Christian tree looms on the top of a mountain. In the ancient Near East, both tall trees and mountain tops deserved reverence, and the reader must assume that the tree stood out as a lonely giant (not unlike the palm that they had previously encountered) since it caught the travelers' attention. They gaze intently at the plant up there; the text reads: “And, lo, there was the shadow of a man standing in the tree. When they saw it/him, they shouted to it/him from below, ‘Bless, O my lord!’ But it/he did not answer them.”<sup>33</sup> Paul and John perceive a tree, and simultaneously they notice some vague shadow blending in between its branches—limbs thin, we may imagine, as the arboreal boughs. As my slight adjustment of the English translation shows, the grammar of these lines itself contributes to the sieving of the human limbs into those of the tree; the word for tree like the word for man is grammatically masculine in Syriac, and for a brief moment, the reader does not know what he or she reads. Do

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<sup>30</sup> A well-known example is 1 Kings 18.20–40.

<sup>31</sup> Regarding the sounds of ancient Near Eastern trees (esp. in Old Testament texts), see Zakariassen 2019, 101–34; regarding the silence of a post-animist world, see Manes 1996.

<sup>32</sup> *Paul and John* 31; trans. Hans Arneson et al.

<sup>33</sup> *Paul and John* 31; trans. slightly modified by me.

the two men address the tree or the man in the tree—or perhaps both at the same time? When addressed, this ‘both-at-the-same-time’ fails to reply. Why? Is the man dumb? Or does the tree avoid speaking? The text is silent too.

Eventually, however, the tree-dweller opens his mouth and starts talking to them. How long has the old man been standing in the tall tree, the two travelers wonder. He answers:

“As you live, my brothers, I have stood in this position, lo, for thirty-five years and no man has noticed me except the two men who come to me from time to time to bring me provisions of bread and water. For a journey once called me, too, to pass by this place just like you. And I saw a man standing on top of this tree, a man heavy with white hair whom they called Abraham. (...) I climbed up and stood in his place, and, lo, I await God’s deliverance.”<sup>34</sup>

His forerunner in the tree bore the name of the Biblical patriarch whose life was closely associated with groves, and whose relationship with God was connected to trees.<sup>35</sup> The current tree-dweller, on the other hand, is not only difficult to spot, barely distinguishable from the branches among which he lives, but he also remains anonymous. He came from somewhere unknown to become unseen. The tree lends him his only identity. He is only that, a second-generation tree-dweller—no name.

That the old man “await[s] God’s deliverance” may be read as an allusion to Simeon, the old man who stayed in the Temple awaiting God’s consolation and salvation in the Christ Child, according to the Gospel of Luke.<sup>36</sup> Thus interpreted, the tree turns into the tree-dweller’s temple—located, like that of Mount Zion, on a hill. The tree allows the old man to anticipate the presence of the Divine; it becomes for him a space of living interaction with God. The tree offers “serenity”,<sup>37</sup> says the author,

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<sup>34</sup> *Paul and John* 31.

<sup>35</sup> Gen 12.6; 13.18; 18.1. For a study, see Zakariassen 2019, esp. 75–9. The Mamre oak outside Hebron was an Abrahamitic pilgrimage site in Late Antiquity; see Sozomen, *Church History* II 4.

<sup>36</sup> Luk 2.25–35.

<sup>37</sup> *Paul and John* 31.

while the man himself fades into the mesh of arboreal tissue and biblical allusions.<sup>38</sup>

John and Paul stay with the tree-dweller, and after three days, he dies. They take care of his body and his few belongings; then they prepare him for burial and lay him in a wooden coffin next to his Abraham.<sup>39</sup> The two tree-people lie peacefully side by side, buried in wood, but the tree remain on the hill, in the reader's mind. While it is true that the narrative wants us to venerate trees much less than the Pagan tribe did, the text does convey a sense of arboreal comradeship and affinity with the tree. Neither objects of exploitation nor objects of worship, trees may resemble us, as *strange strangers*, to use Timothy Morton's terminology.<sup>40</sup> This particular tree stays where it was. John and Paul do not replace the previous dweller. Yet this does not seem to bother the narrator. The tree lingers.

These ascetics are among the earliest attested '*dendrites*,' as tree-dwelling people came to be called. The Greek word δενδρίτης—which basically means a 'wooden' or 'arboreal' one—suggests a mingling of tree and human. Eustathios of Thessalonica seems to be the earliest writer who employs the term δενδρίτης to denote Christian ascetics. He talks about "the *dendrites*, the branches of the Tree of Life, who bloom in virtue, the beautiful fruits of the spirit."<sup>41</sup> The *dendrites* do not just reside *in* trees, but they *are* trees. Christina wanted to become a bird and dwell among twigs; the dendrites on the mountain, in contrast, wanted to blend in permanently. Like his predecessor Abraham, the anonymous dendrite endured in the tree-crown, swaying with it, we may imagine, as the wind blew on the hilltop, from the first time he set his foot in its branches. The holy man found his holy place among the leaves, and he remained in the grip of the tree for the duration of his days. Blending in with the branches, almost unnoticeable, like a shad-

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<sup>38</sup> Of course, one may detect a frail Christological allusion in this episode as well.

<sup>39</sup> *Paul and John* 32.

<sup>40</sup> Morton 2010, 277; "Strange strangers [i.e. other beings, non-human beings]," he says, "are uncanny in the precise Freudian sense that they are familiar and strange simultaneously. Indeed, their familiarity is strange, and their strangeness is familiar."

<sup>41</sup> Eustathios of Thessalonica, *Oratio (XXII) ad stylitam* 48 (pp. 189–90); my trans.

ow, staying in that same position on the mountain for a large part of his life, he himself virtually became tree. He found his death in wood. His passing away barely added up to a transition, for visually he had left this world already, when he became a dendrite. He had turned wooden. Both in his living tree and in his wooden coffin, he was hidden to the world.

The story of Paul and John reveals few details about human–arbo-real cohabitation, and it fosters few idyllic ideas about dendrite life. It tends toward an anthropocentric vision of the tree on the hill; the man in it seems to interest the travelers the most. The fact that the narrative leaves the tree, however, without any dendrite replacement suggests that the arboreal does not derive its worth from human presence entirely. When the travelers journey on and the unseen man in the tree is again not seen in the tree, things remain pretty much as they were before we heard the story. Yet as readers, we now know that trees hide holiness, and there is sanctity concealed in branches. We may see a flickering shadow, a lurch, or a very slight movement among the leaves. Never pass a tall tree casually, the tale suggests, for it may be a holy place! Trees no less than humans amount to deities, but they can be loci of sacred life, as they provide spaces for godly power. Humans, in turn, may live with trees and find serenity among their branches.

## Inside an Oak

Abraham's heir and Christina both preferred the crown of the trees. Others have found a habitation inside trunks.<sup>42</sup> Let us turn now to a ninth- or early tenth-century trunk-dweller. Like the more famous St David the Dendrite of Thessalonica,<sup>43</sup> Nicholas the Younger is said to have come from the east before settling in what is today central Greece.

The trees we have encountered so far are rendered quite anonymous by the hagiographers—as are their locations. Nicholas' tree is more distinct, and it inhabits a specific spot; the Nicholas stories convey a sense

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<sup>42</sup> An early example can be found in John Moschos, *Spiritual Meadow* 70.

<sup>43</sup> See *Life of St David the Dendrite* and Vasiliev 1946, and regarding visual representations, Della Dora 2016, 141.

of place.<sup>44</sup> Nicholas came to enjoy a close relationship with a large deciduous oak on a hill outside the city of Larissa, Thessaly. Oaks were, and continue to be, outstanding trees that might live for hundreds of years. The ancient Greeks regarded them as trees of Zeus, and Old Testament figures, including Abraham, maintained sacred connections to oaks.<sup>45</sup> Byzantines made particularly fine distinctions in their oak vocabulary.<sup>46</sup> Nicholas and his oak united to make a Byzantine matrix of healing.

Post-Byzantine legends say that each year on May 9<sup>th</sup> blood comes out of an oak tree at the place where Nicholas died.<sup>47</sup> But what do the Byzantine versions say? There are two early saint's lives that are clearly related: the anonymous *Martyrdom of Nicholas* composed in the tenth century and the slightly later *Encomium of Nicholas* written by a certain Presbyter Achaïkos.<sup>48</sup> Despite the fact that they resemble each other closely, they choose somewhat different strategies for interpreting the relationship between man and tree.

Nicholas was a Byzantine officer in Larissa. For a military man, however, he acted quite peculiarly. When the Avars attacked, Nicholas and his men abandoned the city and escaped to the hills of Ternavon, some ten miles northeast. In this idyllic place of “forests and woods,” the water is “splendid, delighting those who drink it as if it were wine.”<sup>49</sup> They hide and they pray—on a mountain where people are few and trees are more plentiful. This is Nicholas' first tree habitat. But the text does

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<sup>44</sup> For the ecology of place, see, e.g. Evernden 1996.

<sup>45</sup> Charalampidis 1995, 20; 27–28; see also the broader cultural sweep in Nagy 1990, ch 7.

<sup>46</sup> Olson 2016, 11–12.

<sup>47</sup> For contemporary Nicholas devotion, see *Ακολουθία Νικολάου τοῦ Νέου*.

<sup>48</sup> See introduction in Kaldellis & Polemis 2019, xi–xiv.

<sup>49</sup> *Martyrdom of Nicholas* 4. The chapter numbers for the *Martyrdom* and *Encomium* are given here according to Kaldellis & Polemis 2019, as there is no chapter division in Sophianos' critical edition, on which the former's edition and translation is based. All translations are taken from Kaldellis & Polemis, although I have modified them slightly. I should like to thank my fellow fellows at Dumbarton Oaks during the academic year 2018–19 for arboreal suggestions in or beyond the garden, and particularly Alice-Mary Talbot for her generous helpfulness, which included drawing my attention to Nicholas the Younger and his oak. I am deeply indebted, moreover, to stimulating arboreal conversations with Glenn Peers and participants in the Larceny symposium “Trees and More” in Syracuse 6 April 2019.

not specify how he lives in relation to this forest, nor does he stay there long, for the enemies soon hunt them down. The delight of the place silhouettes the horror of the Avars' behavior; the *Martyrdom* describes the torture in gruesome detail: "One was impaled on a pole, while some were hanged from a tree (...) but the martyrs, as if inhabiting others' bodies, endured it."<sup>50</sup> The text singles out trees, anonymous trees, which were utilized by these evil humans as torture instruments.

Nicholas never exploited trees. He managed to escape the terror; not hung on a tree, he fled deeper into the woody wilderness and the hilly country. "Soaring like a bird," the text says, he reached Mount Vounaina, a place located some 15 miles southwest of Larissa.<sup>51</sup> There he finds his second and final tree habitat. The *Martyrdom* relates: "The place he inhabited was like a grove—it had a cave and was shaded by a tall oak (δρῦς)—and formed a pleasing habitat."<sup>52</sup> In the mountainous wilderness, he settles down by a tree. Although the place is wild (like human bodies are indeed wild<sup>53</sup>), the man and the grove seem to fall into mutual peace with one another in the pleasing environment. The wilderness yields controlled beauty. Ernst Robert Curtius describes the *locus amoenus*—a *topos* of landscape description—as a site of natural delight shaded by one or more trees and watered by a spring.<sup>54</sup> Nicholas finds his locus in the shade of an oak which does more than cast its shade; together with the tree the saint lives happily—happily ever after, in fact.

From the *Martyrdom*, it is not clear whether he dwells in a cave next to the oak, making the huge tree his neighbor, or if he literally moves into the oak. According to the *Encomium*, on the other hand, Nicholas did not just live in the shade of the oaks' branches. He came to Vounaina, and "there found a huge oak and stood in its hollow (κουφώματι), offering his prayers to God."<sup>55</sup> Nicholas moves into the tree and resides in

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<sup>50</sup> *Martyrdom of Nicholas* 5.

<sup>51</sup> *Martyrdom of Nicholas* 6.

<sup>52</sup> *Martyrdom of Nicholas* 6.

<sup>53</sup> Snyder 1990, 17; this is not stated explicitly in the Nicholas stories, but Byzantine Christians would generally agree with Snyder on this point, for the harsh winds of the passions would rage through their flesh.

<sup>54</sup> Curtius 1954, 202–6.

<sup>55</sup> Achaïkos, *Encomium of Nicholas* 4.

it. The author says that “the cave of the oak held (...) the martyr.”<sup>56</sup> The tree embraces the man with its trunk as he finds his dwelling place in the “cave of the oak”, the hollow of the trunk. “To touch the coarse skin of a tree is (...) at the same time (...) to feel oneself touched *by* the tree,” says David Abram.<sup>57</sup> Although Achaïkos avoids elaborating on it at this point, there seems to be a loving reciprocity between the man and tree.

The officer had fled the murderous non-Christian military enemies. Nonetheless, in his life with the oak, “every day he prayed to become a martyr,”<sup>58</sup> and Achaïkos reiterates several times that Nicholas longs to obtain the wreath or crown (στέφανος) of martyrdom.<sup>59</sup> Martyrs are generally crowned, of course, so there is nothing out of the ordinary in that. But if we keep in mind that prize-crowns were often made of leaves, and Nicholas literally stands surrounded by foliage, we realize that his very position becomes a place of martyrdom; the oak itself participates in his martyrdom and becomes an inseparable aspect of it. In a certain sense, Nicholas is already crowned; the oak has already offered him his wreath—and his paradise.

Both legends were most likely written for urban audiences.<sup>60</sup> In the pastoral idyll of Mount Vounaina, the authors elicit the unconvoluted forces of violent evil in opposition to the godly and peaceful man who, like a returned Adam, has re-entered an Edenic arboreal realm. Other stories share the fantasy of an idyllic spot beyond the city limits, the delightful Arcadia. At least since Theocritus’ famous *Idylls* (third century BC) the rural delight had been a literary topos among urban authors. The presence of the violent urban realities in this *locus amoenus*, however, serves to undermine a purely idyllic reading. For, as one might expect, the Avars lurk in the vicinity. While the oak and Nicholas belong to the beautiful wilderness together, the Avar warriors pierce through its beauty.

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<sup>56</sup> Achaïkos, *Encomium of Nicholas* 5.

<sup>57</sup> Abram 1996, 68.

<sup>58</sup> Achaïkos, *Encomium of Nicholas* 4.

<sup>59</sup> Achaïkos, *Encomium of Nicholas* 4.

<sup>60</sup> These legends fit Terry Gifford’s broader definition of ‘pastoral’ as literature idealizing the countryside in contrast to urban life; see his second kind in Gifford 1999, 2.

Eventually they find Nicholas, and there on the mountain they brutally attempt to convert him to Islam. He refuses, and they kill him. The slaying sends his soul directly to Christ. But, says the *Martyrdom* story, the body remains on the ground among the trees:

His precious, martyred body that suffered so much became for us a treasury of miracles. It lay there, protected by God's grace: no force brought against it could weaken it. The tall oak he had previously occupied—growing even larger than before, as if at God's command—miraculously took the martyr's precious body within itself, and kept it intact, undamaged, and free from harm. That is how it happened.<sup>61</sup>

Christ takes care of the soul. The oak takes care of Nicholas' body—guarding it, protecting it, saving it. In the *Martyrdom*, Nicholas spends the last part of his earthly life next to the oak; still, when he dies, he ends up inside the trunk. Having passed away, the martyr is finally fully united with the tree, bodily embraced by it, in a relationship that transcends death.

Then both versions report how a certain governor Euphemianos of Thessalonica grew ill with leprosy and sought healing everywhere. According to the *Martyrdom*, the heavenly God appeared to the governor, after the latter had gone through many failed cures. God told Euphemianos to leave the city and go to Mount Vounaina: “[God:] ‘Inside a dense forest you will discover a tall oak, and outside it a clear spring, but inside the oak the long-suffering body of my martyr Nicholas.’”<sup>62</sup> Inside the oak, Nicholas' body emerges as an integral and inseparable part of the *locus amoenus* idyll.

Disease, implies the story, belongs to the urban world; whoever searches for healing must venture into the unpolluted wilderness. And so the governor goes to the mountain:

[He?] found the forest. He saw the clear spring, beheld the tall oak, and was filled with joy and happiness. Inside the oak lay the long-suffering

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<sup>61</sup> *Martyrdom of Nicholas* 8.

<sup>62</sup> *Martyrdom of Nicholas* 12.



body of the martyr, emitting a spiritual fragrance. It lay there completely intact, perfect, so that perhaps even the nature of the trees might be sanctified—whether they be pine, oak, or cypress. When the governor found what he was hoping for [i.e. supposedly the body in the oak], he was filled with joy, with more joy than one could say. He embraced it, kissing it, taking it in his arms, and drenching it with tears of joy.<sup>63</sup>

What precisely is Euphemia kissing and embracing? Is it the oak? Possibly. Or is it the body? Probably. The text does not specify this, but leaves it to the reader's imagination. In any case, the governor is there in the presence of the body's fragrance, a fragrance that evidently distributes healing<sup>64</sup>—as well as sanctification to all the trees. Nicholas has become a salvation to the arboreal realm. Even trees are in need of sanctification. It comes to them from this human-embraced-by-oak.

The *Encomium* tells the story a bit differently. Here the saint himself appears to the governor in a dream. Nicholas says enigmatically: "You will discover me there [on the mountain] next to something tall, lying under a big oak."<sup>65</sup> People from the city travel with their governor, and on the mountain they eventually find the tree: "They discovered that extremely tall oak. As soon as they came near it, their nostrils were filled with the fragrance that it emitted." And the author adds: "They also saw the body of the saint."<sup>66</sup> As we see, Achaïkos focuses more exclusively on the oak, and it is the tree itself that blesses its surroundings with the lovely scent. The people have come for the oak, while the saint appears as an appendix to the arboreal giant. But the author ensures us that "the mountain of Vounaina (...) hid the body of the martyr for many years and kept it intact and whole."<sup>67</sup> In this instance, then, the arboreal realm becomes salvation to Nicholas and the humans.

Nicholas' oaken place resembles in certain respects the paradise that St Andrew the Fool experienced in a dream: "[Andrew:] 'The beautiful trees there were filled with a wonderful fragrance that surpassed all the

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<sup>63</sup> *Martyrdom of Nicholas* 13.

<sup>64</sup> For healing incense and fragrance, see Harvey 2006, 147 et passim.

<sup>65</sup> Achaïkos, *Encomium of Nicholas* 7.

<sup>66</sup> Achaïkos, *Encomium of Nicholas* 7.

<sup>67</sup> Achaïkos, *Encomium of Nicholas* 7.

aromas of things terrestrial, making me forget the holy and wonderful things which I had passed and enjoyed earlier.”<sup>68</sup> Both Andrew and the people in Vounaina found healing, sanctifying qualities in wooden scent—as did the neighboring trees. The same seems to have been true for Christina, who fled to the trees to escape “the stench of men”, as her hagiographer puts it.<sup>69</sup>

The human versus natural environment dichotomy crumbles in these stories—if not entirely so at least partially—as Nicholas bleeds into oak and vice versa. The man-and-tree cohabitation emerges, perhaps unintentionally, as an icon of the radical interrelatedness of beings.<sup>70</sup> Nicholas’ holy life and his death take place *by* or *in* the tree. The anonymous author of the *Martyrdom* lets the oak pull Nicholas deeper and deeper into its inside. Achaïkos lets tree and man live a symbiotic life from the outset. Both stories reach a telos where man and oak attain their full potential as part of the other. There are indistinctive trees in the beginning used for hanging dead bodies on, but the Tall Oak is different. It amounts to a sacred tree that embraces a saint, shelters him, takes care of his dead body, and (in the *Encomium*) emanates a pleasant odor. The tree itself constitutes his very victory crown. Although the narratives disagree slightly regarding Nicholas’ precise placement in the oak or regarding the origin of the sanctifying fragrance—where does human body start and where does tree trunk end—the two beings are branched into one another in ways that hallow trees and humans around them.

Many Byzantine hagiographers presented monks’ caves as dark and gloomy, evoking the forces of death with which monks struggled.<sup>71</sup> Like so many ascetics before him, Nicholas lived in an uncultivated wilderness. Rather than a harsh desert dwelling, however, he found himself a lovely spot, a beautiful and attractive place. He did not aim for mortification—at least not in his choice of habitat. To be sure, the convergence of wild and beautiful in a *locus amoenus* is not alien to ascetic literature; already Athanasius placed St Antony under trees, on a mountain, by a

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<sup>68</sup> Nikephoros, *Life of Andrew the Fool*; text and trans. Rydén 1995b, 50–51.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas, *Life of Christina* 9 (20).

<sup>70</sup> For the ecological and ecocritical notion of inter-relatedness, see e.g. Evernden 1996.

<sup>71</sup> Talbot 2016.

spring.<sup>72</sup> Still, the Nicholas stories highlight the pastoral idyll more than for instance Athanasius did. Nicholas does not need to fight demons or wild beasts. Only human intruders can threaten his peace. Otherwise his wilderness is wonderful.

Terry Gifford draws attention to the *return* as a vital aspect of the pastoral in literature. When the characters or the readers have ventured into pastoral idylls, they must eventually return to the anti-idyll of the normal.<sup>73</sup> In the lives of St Nicholas, the protagonist and the oak never return; only the reader, along with the people from Thessalonica, will ever see the city again. And the authors are unwilling to let readers go easily. Unreturned, St Nicholas pulls the reader out into his locus, for Mount Vounaina is an actual place, and (we learn) a place of healing. What distinguishes Achaïkos' tale from for instance Theocritus' *Idylls*, where "bees fill their hives and the oak trees are taller,"<sup>74</sup> is not only that the latter is less wild and less haunted by Avars, but that Achaïkos designates a concrete place beyond the city toward which the reader is supposed to gravitate. His text does not expect the reader to make a full return to the city. The Nicholas stories render a Mount Vounaina that emerges as more real than Thessalonica. While Theocritus projects a countryside dream in the distance, and Athanasius tells of an inaccessible place somewhere yonder in the desert, Mount Vounaina is local, and most likely (although this of course remains a speculation) there was, even outside the text, an oak in place when the stories were composed; Vounaina was a reachable place in Thessaly welcoming readers as pilgrims. The hagiographies complicate the status of the city, for only by the oak can true healing transpire; only by the help of this posthuman plant may the city of Thessalonica, represented by its governor, find itself rehabilitated. The lives of Nicholas interpret the wild countryside as an indispensable center of gravity, the *other pole*, positioned around the trunk of an oak.

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<sup>72</sup> Athanasius, *Life of St Antony* 49–50. For this and other early loci, see Burrus 2019, 99–106. And, as has been argued recently, the Byzantines seem to have cherished their actual woodland much more than previous scholarship has assumed; see Olson 2016.

<sup>73</sup> Gifford 1999, 81–115.

<sup>74</sup> Theocritus, *Idyll* 8; trans. Hopkinson, 141.

## Shaking the Tree of Exploitation

In his *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*, Douglas Christie surveys early Christian ascetic traditions, pursuing a diction for a new (or ancient) intimacy with the non-human. We need, he says, a language “that honors the earthy, embodied reality of our physical, material existence.”<sup>75</sup> The arboreal lives encountered in the present article offer no new language as such, but they imagine saintly existence as intimately and corporeally engaged in the more-than-human world around them. While the narratives may not provide us with recipes for ecologically sustainable lives in the Anthropocene, they display other ways to dwell with the living world. Embraced by trees, these holy people eschew exploitation.

As the lives of fools indirectly pose the question “what is sanity?”, the lives of tree-dwellers may be read as asking “how do you live with trees?” The three protagonists embody three different ways: Christina sought the leaves and the rustling treetops where she was free to live like a bird. The anonymous dendrite was solidly settled between boughs and branches in a mountain-top tree associated with prophets, patriarchs, and holy space. Opposing inclinations to worship trees, the author of *Paul and John* promoted companionship between tree and human. Nicholas, on the other hand, was drawn to the beauty of the forest and was planted within a stem, sharing in the wooden fragrance of redemption. The four authors may not tell us all we might have wished to know about how they envisioned the relationships between tree and human. It is clear, however, that to the tree-dwellers in their tales, trees represented more than arbitrary matter. Something vital crops up in trees; there is vibrancy in the branches. These saints sought living beings instead of the grave-like chamber of caves; they sought the shaded beauty together with the tree, the sacred serenity that an arboreal life provided, or the secluded aloofness that the crowns offered. They chose to live together with arboreal creatures and their scent.

The holy fragrance wafting through the grove, between the trees, the trunks and the leaves, is of course not the only smell that reaches us from Byzantine and Medieval Christianities. There is no reason to

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<sup>75</sup> Christie 2013, 226.

idealize the past. And yet, conversely, there is no doubt that to many Christians—historically—a tree has been much more than timber or “a physical fact”.<sup>76</sup> Christian tradition does not provide an excuse for exploiting other beings in the Anthropocene. Today, as modern scientists are (re)discovering and (re)learning that trees are not just wood, but living creatures that communicate through a so-called “wood wide web” of fungus-relations,<sup>77</sup> maybe it is time to re-learn history too. Maybe, to turn the proverb around, we have not been able to see the trees but for the forest. Maybe these four stories, along with other legends and lives,<sup>78</sup> can remind us that there are more intimate ways of interacting with trees than we are accustomed to in our own little corner of history.

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<sup>76</sup> For contemporary Christian tree cult in the Mediterranean area with a potentially long history, see e.g. Carr 2006 and Warren 1994.

<sup>77</sup> See e.g. Giovannetti et al. 2006.

<sup>78</sup> In addition to the *Life of David the Dendrite* and the tree-dweller in the *Spiritual Meadow* 70, which I have already mentioned, John of Ephesus tells of Maro who lives in a tree (*The Life of the Eastern Saints* 4); see Whitby 1987.

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