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A SELF-MADE LIVING SAINT? AUTHORITY AND THE TWO FAMILIES OF THEODORET OF CYRRHUS

Ville Vuolanto

In the course of the fourth and early fifth centuries, asceticism and the angelic life¹ became identified as embodiments of the distinctively Christian way of living a good life. It became important for those yearning for ecclesiastical authority to associate themselves with asceticism, ascetic values, and, even more specifically, with the ascetics themselves, whether virgins at homes or hermits in the desert. Ascetic discourses were used to form hierarchies of distinction in Christian communities all over the Mediterranean, and an ascetic lifestyle became one of the most effective sources for ecclesiastical power.²

In this essay, I will approach the self-promotion of ecclesiastical writers through links with ascetic networks and praxis from the point of view of one individual, Theodoret of Cyrrhus. My study tracks the ways in which he built his spiritual authority especially through the representation of his own childhood and youth. A point of comparison is furnished by Theresa Urbainczyk's recent study. According to her, Theodoret wilfully depicted himself as enjoying a special authority, respect, and influence among the Syrian ascetic holy men, by showing himself as having been educated by them and still having links with them.³ Urbainczyk claims that Theodoret needed this picture of himself as a tool in the doctrinal

* I am grateful for the very fruitful comments of the anonymous referee.

¹ On ascetics seen as "angels" in the fourth century, see e.g. Conrad Leyser, "Angels, Monks and Demons in the Early Medieval West," in *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages*, ed. R. Gameson and H. Leyser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 11-14.

² See e.g. Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity. The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 137-152; and David Hunter, "Rereading the Jovinianist Controversy: Asceticism and Clerical Authority in Late Ancient Christianity," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33/3 (2003): 453-470, esp. 466.

³ Theresa Urbainczyk, *Theodoret of Cyrrhus: the Bishop and the Holy Man* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 19-20, 93-94, 146-151. See also Hartmut Leppin, "Zum kirchenpolitischen Kontext von Theodorets Mönchsgeschichte," *Klio* 78 (1996): 212-230.

disputes between the Alexandrians and the Antiochians over the heritage of Nestorius – the message being that in fighting against Theodoret, the Alexandrians also fought against those holy men of God.⁴ On the other hand, Claudia Rapp has recently presented a new model of episcopal authority in Late Antiquity. According to her, it consisted of pragmatic authority, expressed through public activity for others; spiritual authority, which was a personal but God-given characteristic, visible institutionally in episcopal ordination and calling, as well as on a personal level, in deeds inspired by the Holy Ghost, such as preaching and miracle working; and ascetic authority, which stemmed from personal religious efforts and served as a link between the other two.⁵ Thus, Urbainczyk's interpretation of Theodoret's position and strategies highlights what Rapp calls ascetic authority while overlooking the possible claims of spiritual and (to a lesser degree) pragmatic authority.

As for pragmatic authority, Adam Schor has richly demonstrated how effectively Theodoret assumed and performed the role of patron for his friends and community, and how this was propagated by and linked with his doctrinal network of support.⁶ According to him, this made Theodoret the leading figure of the Antiochian side in the Christological debates over Nestorianism in the 430s and early 440s.⁷ This phase of his life also formed the context for his writing a collection of biographies of the Syrian hermits, most often referred to as *Historia Religiosa*, to be dated to the mid-440s at the latest.⁸ The particulars of Theodoret's own childhood and youth are carefully interwoven in these stories, and they serve as the main source for my study.

Focusing on Theodoret's representation of his background has a double function in my study: firstly, by making it possible to see how far the conceptual framework of Rapp's model is applicable to the specific case

⁴ Urbainczyk, *Theodoret*, 23-8 and 146-147.

⁵ Rapp, *Holy Bishops*, 16-18.

⁶ Adam M. Schor, *Theodoret's People. Social Networks and Religious Conflict in Late Roman Syria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), esp. 153-155, 172-179. See also Philip Rousseau's analysis of the relationship between ascetics, bishops, and patronage in "Eccentrics and Coenobites in the Late Roman East," *Byzantinische Forschungen* 24 (1997): 35-42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 106-109. However, Theodoret ended up being considered dogmatically controversial. The reasons for this are beyond the scope of the present study; see Schor, *Theodoret's People*, 110-130. For a more traditional account, concentrating on the doctrinal struggles, see Paul B. Clayton, *Christology of Theodoret of Cyrus. Antiochene Christology from the Council of Ephesus (431) to the Council of Chalcedon (451)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁸ The work is usually dated either to 440 or to 444; see Urbainczyk, *Theodoret*, 33.

of Theodoret. Moreover, I am interested in the question of why the stories of childhood and youth played such an important role in the context of forging Theodoret's rhetoric of the self. To answer this, and to contextualize Theodoret's autobiographical sketches, I will compare his narrative with other contemporary autobiographical depictions. It is clear that these texts should be interpreted with caution, as autobiographic writing in Late Antiquity took part in elaborate discourses that used different narrative strategies for self-promotion and apology.⁹ In ancient autobiographic texts, three interlinked aims can be identified which would have taken precedence over any "unmasking of the self" which would nowadays be connected with memoirs: the preservation of memory; portraying oneself as an exemplary figure; and justifying one's specific deeds or ideas.¹⁰ However, specifically because of these features, autobiographic writing is useful in directing the modern scholar's attention to discourses on values and authority – and self-claimed sanctity.

Theodoret the Chosen One

In a letter from 448, Theodoret needed to defend his orthodoxy and dogmatic authority in a difficult situation. His intent was to strengthen both his leadership and his orthodox position by appealing to an array of justifications and sources. First of all, he backed his claim to his ascetic authority by emphasizing his love of monastic quietness and by referring to his time spent in the monastery. He also used his pragmatic authority by referring to his extensive patronage program in Cyrhus, claiming to have built porticoes, baths, and bridges from the revenues of the see, and to have taken care of the community's water supply, while simultaneously pointing out that he did not accept any gifts for himself or for his household. Further reference to his traditional civic virtues was his claim that during his twenty-five years of episcopacy there had been no lawsuits in which he was involved. Naturally, he also made references to his

⁹ This has not been self-evident in research: see e.g. Clayton, *Christology*, 7-10, and Pierre Canivet, *Le monachisme syrien selon Théodoret de Cyr* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977), 39-48, who accept as facts all the details Theodoret gives about his childhood and parents.

¹⁰ See especially Simone Follet, "A la découverte de l'autobiographie," in *L'invention de l'autobiographie d'Hésiode à Saint Augustin. Actes du deuxième colloque de l'Équipe de recherche sur l'hellénisme post-classique*, ed. M.-F. Baslez, P. Hoffmann, and L. Pernot (Paris: Presses de l'École normale supérieure, 1993), 326 (conclusions to the volume); and Marek Starowieyski, "L'autobiographie dans l'Antiquité chrétienne," in *Chartae caritatis: Études de patristique et d'antiquité tardive en hommage à Yves-Marie Duval*, ed. B. Gain, P. Jay, and G. Nauroy (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 2004), 37-54.

institutional spiritual status: as a bishop (unwillingly consecrated, he is careful to add, linking himself to a long list of likewise reluctant ascetic bishops¹¹), he had always defended orthodoxy and fought against heresy, taught the Gospel, and ordained priests. Thus, what we have here is a list of all forms of episcopal authority presented in Claudia Rapp's model. However, Theodoret backed his apology with two further points: firstly, that his parents had promised him to God even before his birth, and secondly, that they had indeed vowed him to God and educated him accordingly.¹² What kind of authority was he claiming by referring to this family background?

Theodoret was born around 393 C.E.¹³ to a prosperous Antiochian family.¹⁴ After nine years of marriage, the future mother of Theodoret was twenty-two years old, but still childless. According to Theodoret, even if she took her childlessness calmly, the response of his father to the situation was different. He was "going around everywhere to beg the servants of God to ask for children from God."¹⁵ Eventually, the hermit Macedonius promised to him that the couple would have a child. When three more years had passed without any signs of pregnancy, the husband visited the hermit again, and this time Macedonius asked for Theodoret's mother, whom he told that a child would indeed be born, but it should be given to God. She promised this, and her humbleness led Macedonius to promise that the child would be a son. The following year she was pregnant, but during the fifth month, a miscarriage threatened the mother and the unborn baby. She sent Macedonius a message, and the hermit arrived, restating the need of consecrating the child to God. She assured him again that this would happen. After that Macedonius gave her some water, her health recovered, and the child was born at the expected time.¹⁶

Some researchers have claimed that the story shows the reluctance of Theodoret's mother to have any children, as she was more eager to live

¹¹ For the recurrence of this *topos* in contemporary narratives, see Rapp, *Holy Bishops*, 141-147.

¹² *Theodoret de Cyr. Correspondence II*, ed. and trans. Yvan Azéma, Sources Chrétiennes 98 (Paris: Cerf, 1964), Ep. 81.

¹³ Also 386 C.E. has been suggested, but without further evidence; see Clayton, *Christology*, 7, with notes. See also Canivet, *Le monachisme*, 39.

¹⁴ *Théodoret de Cyr. Histoire des moines de Syrie vol. I-II*, ed. and trans. Pierre Canivet and Alice Leroy-Molinghen, Sources Chrétiennes 234 and 257 (Paris: Cerf, 1977-1979), 9.6; and Urbainczyk, *Theodoret*, 21, 150.

¹⁵ Theodoret, *Religious History*, 13.16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

ascetically than have a child.¹⁷ However, the story as Theodoret tells it concentrates on highlighting the piety and humbleness of the mother rather than her reluctance to have any children at all. As Derek Krueger notes, the narrative of a barren woman giving birth “not only interprets his mother’s experience in light of Sarah, Hannah and Elizabeth, but provides Theodoret a biblical gloss on his whole life.”¹⁸ Moreover, the thrice-repeated motif of making a vow also served as a mnemonic device, and a way of linking these promises to yet another biblical exemplum: after all, Peter had to promise three times that he would “feed the lambs” of Jesus (John 21:15-19).

It was a common feature in Roman autobiographic narratives that some dramatic change would take place before one’s real self, vocation, and divine favor could be unveiled.¹⁹ In Late Antique biographies, this motif is pronouncedly frequent. Earlier in Theodoret’s narrative, his mother started a new phase in life when her eye disease was miraculously cured: she had been living in luxury until, afflicted by a serious eye disease, she contacted a hermit, Peter the Galatian, who lived on a nearby mountain south of Antioch. Peter managed to cure her, convincing her at the same time of the superiority of the ascetic lifestyle.²⁰ Likewise, according to Gregory of Nyssa, it was the death of her fiancé that made his sister Macrina dedicate herself to virginity; in Gregory of Nazianzus’ story about his sister Gorgonia, her miraculous recovery from illness and a cart accident were the events that revealed her hidden holiness; and in the *Confessions*, Augustine presents the garden scene as the initial turning point which culminated in his baptism. Augustine also writes that he was almost baptized when he was ill at a young age – the only context in which his childhood religiosity is directly mentioned in his text.²¹ The motif of divine favor was not

¹⁷ Canivet, *Le monachisme*, 41-43; see also Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 324.

¹⁸ Derek Krueger, “Writing as Devotion: Hagiographical Composition and the Cult of the Saints in Theodoret of Cyrrhus and Cyril of Scythopolis,” *Church History* 66/4 (1997): 707-719, at p. 710.

¹⁹ Mireille Hadas-Lebel, “Le double récit autobiographique chez Flavius Josèphe,” in *L’invention de l’autobiographie*, ed. Baslez, et al., 127.

²⁰ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Religious History*, 9.5-8.

²¹ Grégoire de Nyse, *Vie de sainte Macrine*, ed. and trans. Pierre Maraval (Paris: Cerf, 1971), 3; Grégoire de Nazianze, *Discours* 6-12, ed. and trans. Marie-Ange Calvet-Sebasti (Paris: Cerf, 1995), *Oration* 8.15-18, with Virginia Burrus, “Life after Death: The Martyrdom of Gorgonia and the Birth of Female Hagiography,” in *Gregory of Nazianzus. Images and Reflections*, ed. Jostein Børtnes and Tomas Hägg (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), 162-163; Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. James J. O’Donnell (Oxford: Clarendon Press,

limited to Christian discourse: Libanius, in his *Autobiography*, is constantly depicting himself as the favorite of Fate (*Tyche*) and a virtuous intellectual hero.²² Acts of divine intervention were understood as showing special favor to the individual for whom they occurred.

However, the story of Theodoret most closely resembles that which Gregory of Nazianzus wrote about himself. Gregory tells that his mother, Nonna, had dedicated him to God at his birth, after a miraculous dream in which his name was also announced. However, the turning point in his life happened only later: in Gregory's interpretation, he redeemed his mother's promise by taking baptism and dedicating himself to God's service after having nearly drowned in a stormy sea at about twenty years of age. In this instance, he was saved because of his own and his mother's prayers, even claiming that a boy on the ship had seen Nonna walking on water and directing the ship through the storm. This event functioned as a final climax in his narratives on different kinds of divine favors in his life.²³ Such miraculous stories of recovery and deliverance from danger were utilized to highlight the divine intervention in the lives of their protagonists, and thus include references to being chosen by God. Indeed, Susanna Elm even characterizes Gregory's self-portrait as creating a picture of a man predestined to become a messenger of the Logos.²⁴

Theodoret's story is different in one point: he presents the dramatic change and "conversion" in his own life as having taken place even before his own birth. In fact, Theodoret's birth was a multiple miracle; not only was it a response to his parents' prayers, but also his sex was due to his mother's piety, and, moreover, he wondrously survived the danger of miscarriage. Thus, Theodoret presents himself as "chosen" even before his birth. Accordingly, he depicts his later childhood and life as a young man as a logical continuation of this early dedication to spiritual

1992), 8.12.28 and 9.6.14, with James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine, Sinner and Saint: A New Biography* (London: Profile Books, 2005), 53. On Augustine's illness and his intended baptism as a child, see Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.11.17.

²² Libanius, *Autobiography (Oration 1)*, ed. and trans. A. F. Norman (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), with Bernard Schouler, "Libanios et l'autobiographie tragique," in *L'invention de l'autobiographie*, ed. Baslez, et al., 317-319.

²³ Grégoire de Nazianze, *Oeuvres poétiques*, vol. 1/1, *Poèmes personnels (II, 1, 1-11)*, ed. André Tuilier and Guillaume Bady, trans. Jean Bernardi (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2004): 2.1.1.118-122, 308, 320 and 424-444; 2.1.11.51-94 and 121-209. See also Raymond Van Dam, *Families and Friends in Late Roman Cappadocia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 88-93, on Gregory and his mother.

²⁴ Susanna Elm, "Gregory's Women: Creating a Philosopher's Family," in *Gregory of Nazianzus*, ed. Børtnes and Hägg, 189-191.

life: depictions of religious practices and education are present throughout Theodoret's narrative about his childhood.

Theodoret as an Apprentice to the Hermits

Theodoret claims he was well socialized into ascetic Christianity from his youth, especially because of his frequent visits to the holy men of the family, Peter the Galatian and Macedonius, who were responsible for the miracles which had occurred in the household. Theodoret's mother sent him to Peter the Galatian once a week to obtain his blessing, and as a child he often sat on the knees of Peter, who gave him bread with raisins. He also frequently met Macedonius to have his blessing and to listen to his teachings. These ascetics also visited their home occasionally. Theodoret tells how Macedonius used to remind him about the promise made by his mother and Macedonius' own efforts in praying for his birth, thus urging him to live virtuously "as a sacred offering to God." Theodoret was consecrated to spiritual life.²⁵ Still a child, he also joined his mother to see the renowned hermit Aphrahat. According to Theodoret, even though his mother was a rich lady with a direct relationship to ascetics, and acted as an intercessor between the living saints and her household and network of family friends, she could only briefly communicate with the hermit through the door. Theodoret, however, was allowed to enter his cell and receive a blessing.²⁶

Theodoret also continued these visits on his own, depicting himself as an apprentice to the hermits. He refers to his experiences at the shrine of Simeon the Stylite as a bishop; much earlier, in the early 410s, he had lived for a week with the ascetic David in Teleda, some fifty kilometres from Antioch. Theodoret was then a student and served as a reader in the Antiochian church. He also sought advice from the hermit Zeno, and conversed with him for a long time about the ascetic life. At the end of their meeting, the ascetic asked Theodoret to pray for him. To Theodoret's surprised reaction Zeno explained that in the kingdom of God he was a civilian, whereas Theodoret was a soldier because he was a reader in the

²⁵ In general, see Theodoret of Cyrillus, *Religious History*, 13.1; visits to Peter: *Religious History*, 9.4; visits to Macedonius: *Religious History* 13.18; home: e.g., Macedonius in Theodoret of Cyrillus, *Religious History*, 13.3; Peter in Theodoret of Cyrillus, *Religious History*, 9.14. On the language Theodoret used for his own status as a consecrated offering, see also the commentary by Canivet and Leroy-Molinghen in *Théodoret de Cyr. Histoire des moines de Syrie*, vol. 1, 507.

²⁶ Theodoret of Cyrillus, *Religious History*, 8.15; Aphrahat died most probably in 407, when Theodoret was thirteen or fourteen: see Canivet, *Le monachisme*, 160.

church. Theodoret points out that he was still quite young then: only recently had there appeared a slight growth of down on his cheek. Thus, the story was crafted to show both the humbleness of Zeno and the respect Theodoret enjoyed among the hermits when still a young man – as well as the spiritual authority inherent in the ecclesiastical office.²⁷

Theodoret's intent was to combine his early life and later career into one continuous and inevitable whole, in which his early vow led to constant interaction with the ascetic living saints, and finally to the monastic life: according to his own words, soon after his parents had died he sold his family fortune and started living in poverty. In another instance he claimed that he had lived in a monastery for years preceding his ordination as the bishop of Cyrrhus in 423.²⁸ From these short accounts it has been inferred as self-evident that Theodoret spent the time between his parents' death and his ordination as a monk, having entered the monastery sometime between 413 and 416, when he was twenty to twenty-three years old.²⁹ However, he himself does not claim that he lived in a monastery for the entire period, nor does he anywhere give the number of years he spent there – even if these details would fit very well into his argument in those apologetic letters in which he recollects his career.³⁰ Even the date of his parents' death is far from fixed to the proposed years. On the other hand, curiously but appropriately for the literate profile Theodoret created for himself, he never mentions his secular education – even if it is clear that he acquired a very extensive classical knowledge during his adolescence.³¹ Indeed, it is tempting to propose that Theodoret did not enter the monastery in his early twenties, but only later, having finished his secular studies first.

Theodoret seems to have felt, though, that he had to explain to his readers why he did not become an ascetic desert dweller in his youth. He

²⁷ On Simeon the Stylite, see Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Religious History*, 26.14-16; David: *Religious History*, 4.10; Zeno: *Religious History*, 12.4 (see also Urbainczyk, *Theodoret*, 140). On these visits, see also Canivet, *Le monachisme*, 55-56 (esp. for their dating) and Cornelia B. Horn, "Children as Pilgrims and the Cult of Holy Children in the Early Syriac Tradition: The Cases of Theodoret of Cyrrhus and the Child-Martyrs Behnâm, Sarah, and Cyriacus," in *Pilgrimages and Shrines in the Syrian Orient. Proceedings of the ARAM Twenty First International Conference, University of Oxford, 6-8 July 2005* (Oxford: ARAM Society, 2007), 449.

²⁸ Theodoret, *Correspondence II-III, Epp.* 81 and 113. For chronology, see Canivet, *Le monachisme*, 57-58. After all, he seems not to have been ordained priest before he was elected bishop (Ibid., 61).

²⁹ See e.g. Canivet, *Le monachisme*, 58; Clayton, *Christology*, 10; István Pásztori-Kupán, *Theodoret of Cyrus* (London: Routledge, 2006), 4-5; Schor, *Theodoret's People*, 6.

³⁰ Theodoret, *Correspondence II-III, Ep.* 113 with *Ep.* 80 and *Ep.* 81.

³¹ On Theodoret's learning: Clayton, *Christology*, 6 and 9-10; Urbainczyk, *Theodoret*, 18-19.

seeks to clarify this by telling a story about how he once heard a conversation between Peter the Galatian and his servant-apprentice Daniel. Daniel remarked, in referring to the miracles around Theodoret's birth, that Theodoret would also be worthy to serve Peter. Peter, however, responded that this could not happen because Theodoret's parents were much too attached to the boy.³² This explanation sought moral support in the dominant Greco-Roman family values: Theodoret would have become an ascetic disciple of Peter, if only his parents had not been so attached to him.³³ This claim includes at least two moral statements: firstly, Theodoret himself was virtuous enough not to challenge his parents, and to show proper piety towards them. He had time to wait. Secondly, his parents had the weakness of attaching themselves to earthly things – to their only son.

Theodoret as a Family Man

Theodoret was, however, careful not to accuse directly his parents – or rather his mother. He shows his father as a rather worldly character, anxiously running around the mountains of Antioch in his yearning for progeny: after this episode, he disappears from Theodoret's story. His mother, however, is depicted as near to an ascetic saint as a housewife can get. According to Theodoret, after Peter the Galatian had cured her eyes, she was also spiritually cured, so that she threw away her cosmetics, no longer used her golden ornaments, began to dress in a simple manner, and sought the company of ascetics. He also tells that her diet, suitable to her ascetic lifestyle, was so strict that on one occasion only a clever story told by Macedonius made her take some food as a cure for her illness.³⁴

Not only did the mother send Theodoret as a child to converse with ascetics, but also, like the mother of Gregory, she took care of his religious education in other respects. Often she told him stories about the ascetics and the miracles they had accomplished. Many of the stories concerned the family traditions that I have already referred to.³⁵ There were also stories about other close acquaintances of Theodoret, such as the exorcism story about a peasant whose grandmother was Theodoret's nurse,

³² Theodoret, *Religious History*, 9.4.

³³ For the centrality of *pietas* in Roman thought, see Richard P. Saller, *Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 105-114. For the importance of familial piety in Late Antiquity, even among the ascetic writers, see Andrew S. Jacobs, "Let Him Guard *pietas*: Early Christian Exegesis and the Ascetic Family," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11/3 (2003): 265-281.

³⁴ Theodoret, *Religious History*, 13.3 and 13.16.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.9-10; 9.14; and 13.3.

or a cook from his parents' household, both of whom were cured by Peter after the intervention of Theodoret's mother. The mother is also said to have visited Symeon the Elder, obtaining his blessing, and to have told many stories about the hermit to her son.³⁶ Moreover, it was she who used the prophylactic girdle of Peter to cure her husband, her son, and herself. She also loaned this miraculous belt to family friends, and, according to Theodoret, was always eager to "make known the power of the grace which was in [Peter]."³⁷ The story about the spiritual conversion of Theodoret's mother also underlines the wealth and the high social status of the family – which is further elaborated in Theodoret's claim that, when he sold the family property after his parents' death, it was a well-known story throughout the Orient.³⁸ An heir to great riches and earthly status, he chose to exchange them for spiritual nobility.

In Theodoret's stories, his relationship with the ascetics is not only free from all conflict or disputes of authority (a rare situation, if we take Theodoret's words at face value),³⁹ but he also depicts himself correcting the excesses of the ascetics later in his life – and they always yield to his episcopal authority, at least temporarily: Marana and Cyra admit him to their cell and cease to wear their heavy iron chains; Polychronios accepts assistants to accompany him; Jacob complies by lying down in shadow instead of the midday sun and putting away his load of chains.⁴⁰ Thus, while Theodoret guarantees the orthodoxy of these ascetics, he simultaneously asserts a special influence over them. If Zeno wanted Theodoret the lector to pray for him, Simeon the Stylite orders the pilgrims to seek benediction from Theodoret the bishop for spiritual profit.⁴¹ Also, in a broader sense, he gives an impression that the ascetics were under the general control of ecclesiastical authority: except for his own episcopal authority, he depicts Simeon the Stylite as accommodating himself to the control of his monastic superiors and that of the *chorepiskopos* Meletius, and the hermit Baradatos came out from his cell after an intervention by Theodotos, archbishop of Antioch.⁴²

³⁶ Theodoret, *Religious History*, 9.9-10; 6.14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.15; later, the girdle was stolen from the family.

³⁸ Theodoret, *Correspondence III*, Ep. 113.

³⁹ See Urbainczyk, *Theodoret*, 20, 56, 68, 151, with McLynn, "A Self-Made Holy Man," 469.

⁴⁰ Theodoret, *Religious History*, 29.5; 24.4; 21.6-8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 12.4 and 26.14. See also 20.4 for Maris receiving the Eucharist from Theodoret and claiming that this was the most joyful event of his life.

⁴² Theodoret, *Religious History*, 26.5-7, 10; 27.3. For competition in acquiring recognition by the monks, and efforts invested in the "domestication of holy men," see also McLynn, "A Self-Made Holy Man," 480-482.

For Theodoret, extreme ascetic practices are something that an orthodox ecclesiastical authority must intervene against, and he himself stands for moderate and cultured asceticism. Nevertheless, he makes it clear that the practices are in themselves admirable and wondrous: the point in these stories is the humbleness of these ascetics and their willingness to obey people who are invested with authority, rather than censuring the practices as such.⁴³ Thus, as soon as the authorities in question have left the ascetics, Theodoret depicts them as either returning to their old ways, or inventing some other, equally strict means of self-mortification.⁴⁴ It is only in his letters, which are more closely bound to the living reality, that the ascetics are shown to have actual influence on Theodoret:⁴⁵ *Historia religiosa* shows the way in which Theodoret hoped his authority would shine out, not how it actually turned out to be.

Likewise, ascetics are depicted as aiding Theodoret when he was in need: thus, Jacob of Cyrrhestica's miraculous powers helped him to fight against the Marcionites in his own bishopric at Cyrhus.⁴⁶ Not surprisingly, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Theodoret gives monks in general – and monks related to him in particular – extensive roles, not only as miracle workers, but also as agents in various ecclesiastical and political affairs. Macedonius, for example, is depicted as intervening for Antioch when Emperor Theodosius – according to Theodoret – threatened to destroy the city because of disputes over taxation.⁴⁷ Even more generally, as Theresa Urbainczyk notes, those holy men who were most closely connected to Theodoret, were also presented as the most efficient miracle workers.⁴⁸

⁴³ Cf. Urbainczyk, *Theodoret*, 135-136, and Rousseau, "Eccentrics and Coenobites," 36-38.

⁴⁴ See also Niketas Siniossoglou, *Plato and Theodoret: The Christian Appropriation of Platonic Philosophy and the Hellenic Intellectual Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 135-138 (with notes) on Theodoret "never renouncing the extremes of unnatural asceticism but tolerated them and expressed his admiration for his 'athletes'."

⁴⁵ Especially when in 434 Baradatus, Jacob of Cyrrhestica and Simeon the Stylite intervened to make Theodoret change his mind (Theodoret, *Correspondence IV*, Ep. 27 [in *collectio conciliaris*]). See also Theodoret needing the prayers of an archimandrite – and the comments of another (Theodoret, *Correspondence II*, Ep. 50 and Theodoret, *Correspondence I*, Ep. 4). On the importance of monks in the doctrinal disputes of the fourth and fifth centuries, see further Richard Finn, *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 151-153.

⁴⁶ Theodoret, *Religious History*, 21.15-18.

⁴⁷ Macedonius: *Tbéodoret de Cyr. Histoire ecclésiastique*, ed. and trans. L. Parmentier, G. C. Hansen, Pierre Canivet, et al., 2 vols. (Paris: Cerf, 2006-2008), 5.19; other Syrian ascetics: *Ibid.*, 2.19; 2.26; 4.22-26; 5.35. See also *ibid.*, 5.36. And see Derek Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 24.

⁴⁸ Urbainczyk, *Theodoret*, 90 and 93.

Indeed, miracles surrounded Theodoret, his family, birth, and early life. But he not only depicted his youth and childhood as encircled by holy people; he was also ordained by the ascetics: Peter the Galatian cut his long belt in two and girded his loins with the one part while girding Theodoret with the other. This, again, is a reference to Jesus, who girded the Apostle Peter and authorized him to become a preacher of the new faith.⁴⁹ Indeed, Theodoret continued the spiritual lineage of his ascetic friends, different only because he was to enter an ecclesiastical career.

Requirements of an Autobiographic Childhood

Theodoret is not an exception in the tradition of autobiographic writing in Late Antiquity, as he combines the typical features of ancient autobiography with the rhetoric of sainthood, presenting himself as a virtuous and authoritative eyewitness, observer, and ascetic chosen by God. The most evident example is Gregory of Nazianzus, whose autobiographical works aim at explaining and justifying his past deeds, presenting him as a saintly intellectual, at first as a fugitive local cleric and later as a church politician and patriarch forced to retire, hand-picked by God right from his birth.⁵⁰ Indeed, as it is evident from my very title, this study forms a kind of parallel to Neil McLynn's magisterial article on Gregory of Nazianzus as a self-made holy man. McLynn starts his discussion on Gregory by contrasting him to Syrian asceticism as presented in Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa*, associating Gregory with a cultured,

⁴⁹ Theodoret, *Religious History*, 9.15. John 21:18: "... when you were younger you girded yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will gird you and lead you where you do not want to go" (translation from New International Version, with modification). For Theodoret's self-comparison with Moses, and his positioning himself "as an author-creator whose work is analogous to God's work," see Theodoret, *Religious History*, 1.1, with Krueger, *Writing and Holiness*, 30-32. See also Rapp, *Holy Bishops*, 128, and Horn, "Children as Pilgrims," 447, comparing the event with Elijah placing his mantle on Elisha, initiating him into prophetic asceticism. On Theodoret as a divinely ordained bishop, see also Urbainczyk, *Theodoret*, 142.

⁵⁰ McLynn, "A Self-Made Holy Man," 463-483. For Gregory's writing as an apology, see Jean Bernardi, "Trois autobiographies de saint Grégoire de Nazianze," in *L'invention de l'autobiographie*, ed. Baslez, et al., 159-161. See also Elm, "Gregory's Women." Similarly, Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions* deal only with those instances in his life through which specific theological points and ideological statements could be made (Jean-Claude Fredouille, "Les Confessions d'Augustin, autobiographie au présent," in *L'invention de l'autobiographie*, 168-169, 177-178). The same can be said about the figure of young John appearing as the main protagonist in the frame narrative of John Chrysostom's *On Priesthood* (Jean Chrysostome, *Sur le sacerdoce {Dialogue et homélie}*, ed. and trans. Anne-Marie Malingrey [Paris: Cerf, 1980]).

refined, and comfortable asceticism in opposition to the “huts, caves, and cisterns of Theodoret’s heroes.” In this, however, McLynn bypasses Theodoret himself, who offers a point of comparison regarding Gregory’s strategies of self-promotion and claims to holiness.⁵¹

Gregory of Nazianzus’ rhetorical strategy was to create a philosophical family of parents, siblings, and spiritual children in order to show himself as a family man whom “*eugeneia* had predestined [...] towards the divine” and as a messenger of the Logos.⁵² For Theodoret, it was his mother’s religiosity and especially her nearness to the holy hermits that he wanted to associate himself with. Indeed, he explicitly presented this as a guarantee of his piety and apostolic faith: “for I received the apostolic nourishment from my mother’s breast and the creed laid down at Nicaea by the holy and blessed Fathers.”⁵³ As Gregory, also Theodoret depicted himself as set apart⁵⁴ from other people.

Another important similarity to Gregory is the way in which Theodoret depicts the influence of his mother. Gregory tends to show his father as subordinated to his wife, and eagerly depicts himself as beyond the reach of paternal authority.⁵⁵ As shown above, also the central role of the mother in the dramatic change of his life is similar. Indeed, this role of mothers, or women of the family more generally, as crucial to the spiritual life and future of the male protagonists, is a recurrent theme in late Roman autobiography: both Emmelia and her daughter Macrina, for example, were depicted as having crucial influence on the education, spirituality, and the subsequent episcopacy of their sons and brothers Basil of Caesarea, Peter of Sebaste, and Gregory of Nyssa. Basil, moreover, highlighted his contacts with his grandmother as a guarantee of his orthodox family heritage – and as a link to the ascetic authority of Gregory Thaumaturgus. In the West, the way in which Augustine depicted Monica’s crucial influence upon his life is a well-known story.⁵⁶

⁵¹ McLynn, “A Self-Made Holy Man,” 463, states that “Gregory’s first-person perspective creates one obvious difference between *de vita sua* and Theodoret’s biographies”. See also *ibid.*, 465.

⁵² Elm, “Gregory’s Women,” 189-190.

⁵³ Theodoret, *Correspondence II, Ep.* 88 (trans. Pásztori-Kupán, *Theodoret of Cyrus*, 4). Indeed, Theodoret’s mother is presented not only as a “suitable parent of a future bishop” (Urbainczyk, *Theodoret*, 135-137), but also as a suitable mother of a saintly ascetic.

⁵⁴ For a similar strategy in Gregory, see McLynn, “A Self-Made Holy Man”, 466, 470-473.

⁵⁵ See especially McLynn, “A Self-Made Holy Man,” 472. Gregory shows his father “only in company of and subordinate with his wife, the genuine olive upon whom he was crafted.”

⁵⁶ On Emmelia and Macrina, see Van Dam, *Families and Friends*, 100-113. On Basil and his grandmother: Saint Basile, *Lettres*, ed. and trans. Yves Courtonne, 3 vols. (Paris: Les Belles

On a more general level, in his autobiographical notes Theodoret depicts himself as having chosen both filial piety and ascetic values: he stayed with his parents until their death, but still obeyed his mother's vow. This feature of proper familial *pietas* and references to the appropriate family background and education also appear in two influential Late Antique treatises dealing with the nature of priesthood: Gregory of Nazianzus' *Oration 2* and John Chrysostom's *On Priesthood*.⁵⁷

Why make claims of holiness through stories of one's childhood and youth? Firstly, in this kind of narrative the author has more freedom to represent himself as being beyond the control of contemporaries, since his relationships were for the most part things of the past – Theodoret's actual ascetic relations and network would have been more difficult to present as self-evidently subjected to his authority. Moreover, it seems that the Greco-Roman understanding of childhood has relevance here: children were thought to be born innocent (in the sense of being pure and not involved in adult intrigues) and ready to be moulded by their educators. Thus, childhood would in many ways predestine the future character of an individual.⁵⁸ To show that one has had a proper education with the right sort of (orthodox) influences as a child was to guarantee one's constancy and proper (orthodox) mind-set as an adult. Thirdly, what clearer assurance would there be of the person's priestly and episcopal dutifulness than previously performed filial dutifulness?

Moreover, in weaving himself and his mother tightly into the hermit stories, Theodoret gives an impression that ascetics themselves were his family members right from birth. He links himself not only to the lineage and inheritance of his biological father, but also to the ascetic succession: he was a child of the hermits. On the other hand, he also makes

Lettres, 1957-1966), *Ep.* 204.6, see also *Epp.* 210.1 and 223.3; Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.4.7-8 and 9.9-9.13. See also Libanius, *Autobiography*, 4-5, 12 and 27. Further Ville Vuolanto, "Family Relationships and the Socialization of Children in the Autobiographical Narratives of Late Antiquity," in *Approaches to the Byzantine Family*, ed. Shaun Tougher and Leslie Brubaker (Farnham: Ashgate, forthcoming 2013).

⁵⁷ Grégoire de Nazianze, *Discours 1-3*, ed. and trans. Jean Bernardi (Paris: Cerf, 1978), *Oration 2*.102-103, with Rapp, *Holy Bishops*, 43, and Chrysostome, *Sur le sacerdoce*, ed. and trans. Malingrey, 1.3-1.5.

⁵⁸ On innocence, see Ville Vuolanto, "Faith and Religion," in *A Cultural History of Childhood and Family in Antiquity*, ed. Mary Harlow and Ray Laurence (Oxford: Berg, 2010), 148-149. On the child as a *tabula rasa* for the educators of the (late) Roman world, see e.g. Jean Chrysostome, *Sur le vaine gloire et l'éducation des enfants*, ed. Anne-Marie Malingrey (Paris: Cerf, 1972), 20-29; and Teresa Morgan, "Ethos: The Socialization of Children in Education and Beyond," in *A Companion to Families in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, ed. Beryl Rawson (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 515.

the claim that the lifestyle of the local elites is a feature of his long gone, pre-ascetic life, while at the same time reminding his readers of this family background and elite education.⁵⁹ That is a strong claim, again parallel to that of Gregory of Nazianzus: he is a cultured ascetic (even if his angelic friends were perhaps not), and therefore a competent mediator between the ascetics and “the world.”

This formed a firm basis for his self-promotion as an ascetic and holy bishop in the midst of the ecclesiastical struggles of the 430s and 440s. As Adam Schor proposes, the *Historia Religiosa* aimed at reinforcing the links between the Syrian ascetics and the Antiochene theological network in this critical period.⁶⁰ Moreover, Theodoret “comes to resemble his saints”⁶¹ and is at the same time sanctified through his narration – a result that Theodoret himself would have hardly missed.

However, interpreting Theodoret’s self-portrait only through the need of a direct response to the ecclesiastical and political struggles between the Antiochians and the Alexandrians, and narrowing Theodoret’s aims down to his wish to depict himself as a person of influence and connections among the Syrian holy men, a leader of “a monk army,” would mean appreciating only a part of the story at the most: it could be misleading to read Theodoret’s autobiographic notes in the *Historia Religiosa* merely as texts aiming at network building.⁶² Indeed, writing hagiography was also an act of devotion for Theodoret.⁶³ Moreover, the fact that he was born, as his name implies, both as God’s gift and a gift to God,⁶⁴ and his wish to proclaim not only his present influence on the ascetics, but also his childhood and youth experiences and relations, seems to have been central for Theodoret’s self-understanding.

⁵⁹ Compare with Gregory of Nazianzus’ problems in setting himself apart from the traditional elite of a small city and his obligations to the relatives: McLynn, “A Self-Made Holy Man,” 466-467.

⁶⁰ Schor, *Theodoret’s People*, 119.

⁶¹ Krueger, “Writing,” 712.

⁶² Similarly, see Krueger, *Writing and Holiness*, 23. Cf. Urbainczyk, *Theodoret*, 147 and 149-150; Schor, *Theodoret’s People*, 118-20. Indeed, it would not do justice to ecclesiastical writers to explain their interest in asceticism as being motivated primarily by their aim of building up their own authority and power, or that of the Church, see also for example Brown, *Body and Society*, 345, on Ambrose of Milan.

⁶³ Krueger, “Writing,” 711-713 and 719.

⁶⁴ For Theodoret’s statements on this, besides the above-cited passages in *Religious History*, see Theodoret, *Correspondence II*, Ep. 81, lines 4-7.

Conclusions: Theodoret, a Bishop with Two Families

How did Theodoret seek to justify his claims of authority and sanctity? To categorize the findings of my study I will return to Claudia Rapp's model of the sources of episcopal authority. In the stories of the *Historia Religiosa*, the pragmatic authority stemming from his activities as a local bishop and benefactor played only a secondary role. Instead, Theodoret built a picture of his life as a spiritual enterprise continuing the heritage of the hermits, programatically highlighting his closeness to ascetic sainthood. Later, he continued this tradition by living "with the labours of a monk and the cares of a bishop," as he claimed Abraham of Carrhae had been able to do. Episcopal and coenobitic elements combined not only in Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa*, but also and especially in his own person.⁶⁵ His claim to leadership and unparalleled spiritual authority was, therefore, backed by his status as a man chosen by God to become a bishop and by his personally performed and propagated links to ascetic sanctity.⁶⁶

Theodoret, however, stresses one further source of authority, not mentioned in Rapp's model: he justified his status as a dogmatic and orthodox leader with claims based not only on his pragmatic or ascetic authority, or his "charisma" or status as an ordained bishop, but also by invoking his childhood and youth. He stressed clearly that he was acquainted very early with the proper values and a certain way of life. In this, Theodoret was not alone in his time, even if the extent to which he refers to his childhood experiences and education is exceptional among his contemporaries.

Therefore, if pragmatic authority is linked to the bishop's patronage and his public and communal contacts, spiritual authority to the ecclesiastical and transcendental spheres, and ascetic authority to the

⁶⁵ Theodoret, *Religious History*, 17.1, with Rousseau, "Eccentrics and Coenobites," 38-42. For more on Theodoret and the monk-bishops in Syria, see Rapp, *Holy Bishops*, 148 and 297. Only in the early fifth century did ascetics begin to be ordained as bishops in Syria – and Theodoret himself was among the first.

⁶⁶ Even if my study here concerns rather Theodoret's claims to authority and its sources, whereas Adam Schor is more concerned about the Antiochian network and the actual reasons for the rise and fall of Theodoret's influence, it still seems to me that his study would have benefited from exploring the justifications for his claims to leadership. Using Claudia Rapp's concepts, I might say that Schor explains Theodoret's authority mainly as based on its pragmatic side (especially on social strategies), paying only minimal attention to his claims of ascetic authority. On ascetic authority in Schor, see *Theodoret's People*, 118–119. See also Schor's Figure 4 (on p. 47) and Figure 10 (on p. 66) on the Antiochian ascetic networks. The latter, however, does not include Theodoret himself.

personal and individual performance, there still was a further component in his authority, which was linked to the familial sphere, necessitating the propagation of a personal tradition. This aspect cannot be overlooked when studying the dynamics of ecclesiastical authority – as shown in the present study. In Theodoret's case, the family discourse had two facets: firstly, he claimed a spiritual lineage through the family of the living saints, the ascetics, by whom he was educated and whose heir he was. On the other hand, he evoked his mother as a guarantee of his character and authority, claiming to have revealed his real self through the stories of his childhood and youth. Theodoret had two saintly families, both of them necessary for his claim to authority.

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John S. Ott
and
Trpimir Vedriš



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Zagreb, September 19, 2012

On the feast day of Remigius of Rheims

Abbreviations

Apart from the following, most frequently used titles, all works are cited in full at the first reference and subsequently in short-title form in each paper. Well-known sources (such as the Bible or the Church Fathers) are cited in their commonly accepted abbreviated forms. Other, more specific abbreviations (used by a single author), are given in the footnotes of the particular text.

<i>AASS</i>	<i>Acta Sanctorum</i> , Antwerp – Brussels.
<i>AB</i>	<i>Analecta Bollandiana</i> , Brussels.
<i>BHG</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca</i> , Brussels.
<i>BHL</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina</i> , Brussels.
<i>CCSL</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina</i> , Turnhout.
<i>CSEL</i>	<i>Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i> , Vienna.
<i>MGH AA</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica Auctores Antiquissimi</i> , Berlin.
<i>MGH EP</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica Epistolae</i> , Berlin.
<i>MGH SS</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica Scriptorum</i> , Hanover.
<i>MGH SRM</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica Scriptorum rerum Merovingicarum</i> , Hanover.
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Graeca</i> , Paris.
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina</i> , Paris.