

Shaping women's agency through temporality in *The life and activity of the holy and blessed teacher Syncletica*¹

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ABSTRACT: The present article attempts to discuss the relationship between two female characters, Thecla and Syncletica, against the wider theoretical background of temporality as it was perceived and construed through literary texts. Syncletica is portrayed as a 'disciple' of Thecla. However, while the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla* appear to be pervaded with an eschatological expectation, the *Life of Saint Syncletica* shows signs of a different temporality. The detailed description of the whole life of Syncletica, with an emphasis on the course of illness, reveals a temporality more focused on the stages of life. Building on this evidence, I aim to identify a set of key features that may define the influence of different notions of time on two women saints closely related to each other.

KEYWORDS: Apocrypha – Hagiography – Temporality – Asceticism – Gender

Introduction

The present article attempts to discuss the portrait of the female saint Syncletica and her relationship with another female hagiographical character, Thecla, against the wider theoretical background of temporality as it was perceived and construed through literary texts respectively. The association between the two aforementioned female characters has been clearly stated by the author of the *Life and activity of the holy and blessed teacher Syncletica*² (mid 5th century) – as is common in early Byzantine saints' Lives. In this narrative Syncletica is described as a 'true disciple of Thecla', here intended as the protagonist of the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (second half of the 2nd century). In both cases, in fact, asceticism as a privileged way to gain salvation represents the common religious motif underlying the narrative.

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² From now on in the short form *Life of Syncletica*.

However, despite the similarities, a different theoretical framework is evident. As Nathalie Delierneux clearly states, «Even if martyrdom continues to enjoy enormous prestige in Byzantine hagiography, in tribute to Christianity's early centuries, and many others exploit the theme to praise their protagonist, regardless of the nature of her suffering, the context for such torments is transformed. In the eighth to eleventh centuries, it is within the confines of her monastery or her own home that an exemplary nun or wife bravely faces hardships; we can see this as a means of reintegrating asceticism into a more social understanding of sanctity based on the sufferance of one's situation, whatever it may be» (Delierneux 2014: 381). While the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla* appear to be pervaded with the eschatological expectation which characterized second century Christianity on the grounds of a Pauline radical asceticism, the *Life of Synclitica* shows signs of a different temporality, also due to a different chronological framework. Fifth century Christianity was very different from the second century Christian world, and the changed religious setting appears entirely evident in the different religious motifs orienting the literary structure and narrative of the *Life of Synclitica*. The detailed description of the whole life of Synclitica, with an emphasis on the entire course of the illness, reveals a temporality more focused on all stages of life. In addition, the description of Synclitica's origins and family, with a strong relevance of 'material' details – such as marriage, inheritance, material possessions – marks a different approach towards present life, here conceived as more related to earthly dimension, albeit within an ascetical perspective. On the contrary, the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla* show signs of a more 'contracted' time urging Christians to reject entirely any connection to earthly existence. In this apocryphon, the focus is almost exclusively on life after death, the 'real' life, thus shifting attention towards a future, non-present temporality.

Building on this evidence, I aim to identify a set of key features that may define the influence of different notions of time on two women saints closely related to each other. More specifically, I will focus on how Synclitica, although motivated by a radical tendency toward asceticism, shows on her body the impact and various effects of a different form of temporality that is spread over the entire course of her lifetime. Indeed, while a distinction between different forms of female sainthood due to the passage from the early age of martyrdom to the monastic era has been repeatedly pointed out, the active role of the notion of time within the wider framework of this theoretical transformation has not received much attention.

Synclitica: a hagiographical portrait

Written in the middle of the fifth century,³ the *Life of Synclitica* is an articulate description of the life of a woman starting with her family origins up to her death, which was preceded by a number

³ See Castelli (1990: 265). I will refer here to Castelli's English translation of the Greek original text (PG 28, 1487-1588). There is also a more recent edition by Abelarga (2002). Castelli reports that the date of composition has been placed at the middle of the fifth century on the basis of the presence of individual sayings of the *vita* in sixth-century Latin collections of apophthegms. On the debated question of the author of the *vita*, spuriously attributed to Athanasius, see Bona (2002).

of diseases.⁴ The core of the narrative is an extensive and richly detailed collection of sayings and teachings about asceticism provided by Syncletica herself.⁵ On the basis of this plot construction we can argue that there are here two significant differences compared to the previous early Christian literature on female martyrs and saints, like Thecla for example: 1) the life of the female saint is described as a whole according to a chronological order, marking all most relevant stages in a lifetime;⁶ 2) the ascetic teaching has achieved a degree of a complete theoretical formulation and classification, thus starting to become a codified literary genre. A distinction between an early Christian female character like Thecla and a 'new' kind of female saint like Syncletica is expressly described by the anonymous author of the *Life of Syncletica*:

Καὶ ἦν ἰδεῖν τῆς μακαρίας Θεέκλης γνησίαν μαθήτριαν, τοῖς αὐτοῖς αὐτὴν ἐπομένην διδάγμασι. Καὶ γὰρ τῶν δύο εἷς μνηστήρ ἦν ὁ Χριστὸς, καὶ αὐτὸς ἦν τῶν ἀμφοτέρων νυμφαγωγὸς Παῦλος· οἶμαι δὲ καὶ τὸν θάλαμον αὐταῖς μὴ ἐναλλάττειν· εἷς γὰρ αὐταῖς παστὸς ἡ Ἐκκλησία, καὶ ὁ αὐτὸς Δαβὶδ μελωδεῖ ἐπ'ἀμφοτέρων τὰ σεμνὰ καὶ θεῖα ἄσματα. [...] Καὶ ἡ τῶν νυμφικῶν δὲ αὐταῖς περιβλημάτων μία τις ὑφή· Ὅσοι γὰρ εἰς Χριστὸν ἐβαπτίσθησαν, Χριστὸν ἐνεδύσαντο. Ὁμότροπος οὖν αὐταῖς ἦν ἡ πρὸς Κύριον ἀγάπη· τῶν γὰρ αὐτῶν ἠξιοῦντο δωρεῶν· ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς αὐτοῖς ἀγῶσιν ἠμιλλῶντο. Τὰ μὲν γὰρ τῆς μακαρίας Θεέκλης οὐδενὶ ἠγγόηται μαρτύρια, ὡς διὰ πυρὸς καὶ θηρίων ἀτιθάσσω αὐτὴν ἐνηθληκέναι· καὶ ταύτης τοὺς ἐναρέτους πόνους τε καὶ ἰδρῶτας οἶμαι τοὺς πολλοὺς μὴ λανθάνειν. Εἰ γὰρ εἷς Σωτὴρ ἦν αὐταῖς ὁ ποθούμενος, ἀναγκαίως καὶ εἷς αὐταῖς ὁ ἀντιτασσόμενος. Καὶ τῇ μὲν Θεέκλῃ πραυτέρους ὑπολαμβάνω τοὺς πόνους· καθήρητο γὰρ ἡ τοῦ ἐχθροῦ κακία, διὰ τῶν ἐκτὸς αὐτῇ προσομιλοῦντος· ἐνταῦθα δὲ δριμυτέραν ἑαυτοῦ τὴν κακίαν ἐπιδείκνυται, ἐκ τῶν ἔνδον διὰ τῶν ἐναντίων καὶ ὀλεθρίων ἑαυτοῦ λογισμῶν κινούμενος.⁷

This detailed and extensive comparison highlights both the common ascetic tendency orienting the religious agency of both women and at the same time the different nature of the suffering that they are asked to undergo. In fact, on the one hand, the biographer writes that «Christ was the one suitor of the two, and Paul himself was for both of them the guide to the Bridegroom»,⁸ thus alluding

⁴ On the main features and structure of the *vita* within the wider context of the hagiographical genre see Hinterberger (2014: 29-32). Hinterberger stresses how a *vita* «treats the life of a person who reaches sainthood not by means of death, but by his/her way of life, of their life in Christ», and how it should be defined «as a biography which extends from a saint's birth to death in a linear narrative» (Hinterberger, 2014: 29). More importantly, he also states that a chronological framework is one of major literary features of a *vita*.

⁵ On the combination between the genre of the saint's Life and that of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* in the *Life of Syncletica* see Constantinou (2006), who following the notion of 'hybridisation' conceived by Mikhail Bakhtin describes the 'Life' of Syncletica as «a single text which is produced when two different genres or types of texts are combined together» (Constantinou, 2006: 113). More importantly, Constantinou also adds that the saint's 'Life' and the *Apophthegmata* are two related genres because both fall under the broader hagiographical category (Constantinou, 2006: 116).

⁶ See Constantinou (2006: 121-130).

⁷ *V. Syncl.* 8: «It was possible to see in her the true disciple of the blessed Thecla following in the same teachings. For Christ was the one suitor of the two, and Paul himself was for both of them the guide to the Bridegroom. And I think that the bridal chamber was not different for them; for the church was the one bridal chamber for them, and the same David sang for them both holy and divine hymns. [...] And the weave of their bridal garments is one: "For as many as were baptized in Christ, have put on Christ". Accordingly, their love for the Lord was of like fashion; for they were deemed worthy of the same gifts; but they also competed in the same contests. For no one was ignorant of the martyrdoms of the blessed Thecla, as she struggled bravely through fire and wild beasts; and I think that many people will not escape noticing the virtuous and sweaty sufferings of this one [Syncletica]. For if the one Savior was the object of their desires, there necessarily was one opponent for them. And I understand the gentler sufferings to be Thecla's, for the evil of the enemy attacked her from the outside. But with Syncletica he displays his more piercing evil, moving from the inside by means of opposing and destructive thoughts».

⁸ The allusion to Paul refers both to the ascetic section of *1 Corinthians*, where the Apostle urges to adopt chastity as a privileged way to gain salvation because of the imminence of the end times, and to the list of macarisms uttered by Paul

to the rejection of an 'ordinary' marriage according to the traditional rules of ancient society;⁹ on the other hand, the anonymous author also stresses that both women had to face a radical suffering – as is common in the Lives of ascetics, both male and female – but Thecla's pain was considered more bearable because of its external action, while Synclitica's pain moved «from the inside».¹⁰ We can observe here a theoretical shift from a previous notion of asceticism, entirely based on an exterior battle, to a subsequent more inwardly-folded ascetic attitude.¹¹ More specifically, Thecla's asceticism depends on her martyrdom,¹² while Synclitica's ascetic life is a long series of corporeal practices and deprivations. It is true that «martyrdom and asceticism, the two dominant and most highly revered forms of piety in the first centuries of Christianity, demanded the complete engagement of the human body» (Castelli 1992: 137) – and in this sense both Thecla and Synclitica move along the same lines –, but the description of asceticism in the *Life of Synclitica* appears as more detailed and corresponding to a well-defined theoretical formulation and classification. Ultimately, for the

himself at the very beginning of the narrative in the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. There is however a difference between the two texts where Paul is the main protagonist and a teacher. Although in *1 Cor 7* Paul declares that celibacy and chastity were preferable conditions within the eschatological expectations shaping early Christianity, however marriage was not officially rejected; on the contrary, in *A. Paul. et Thecl.* V-VI continence (ἐγκράτεια) is more strictly conceived as a bodily precondition for eternal salvation. On the relationship between eschatology, asceticism and afterlife in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* see Zamfir (2010). On the resurrection in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* see Lalleman (1996).⁹ On the importance of marriage as a traditional social norm see *A. Paul. et Thecl.* XII, where Thecla's mother, Theocleia, so said to her daughter who decided not to get married after listening to Paul's preaching on continence and resurrection: Διὰ τί οὐ γαμεῖ κατὰ τὸν Ἰκονιέων νόμον τῷ Θαμύριδι; Ἡ δὲ εἰστίκει Παύλῳ ἀτενίζουσα· τῆς δὲ μὴ ἀποκρινομένης, Θεοκλεία ἡ μήτηρ αὐτῆς ἀνέκραγεν λέγουσα· Κατάκαιε τὴν ἄνομον, κατάκαιε τὴν ἄνυμφον ἐν μέσῳ θεάτρου, ἵνα πᾶσαι αἱ ὑπὸ τούτου διδασκόμεναι γυναῖκες φοβηθῶσιν («'Why dost thou not marry Thamyris according to the law of the Iconians?'. But she stood there looking steadily at Paul. And when she did not answer, Theocleia her mother cried out, saying: 'Burn the lawless one! Burn her that is no bride in the midst of the theatre, that all the women who have been taught by this man may be afraid!»). I quote here the English translation by Schneemelcher (2003); for the Greek text I refer to Vouaux (1913). On the same family attitude see *V. Syncl.* 7: Καὶ γοῦν οἱ γονεῖς ἀσμένως προετρέποντο τὴν νέαν εἰς γάμον, αὐτὸ τοῦτο ἐπείγοντες, ὡς ἐξ αὐτῆς τὴν τοῦ γένους διαδοχὴν αὐτοῖς φυλαχθῆναι. Ἡ δὲ σώφρων καὶ γενναία τῷ φρονήματι, οὐδόλως συνεντίθετο ταῖς τοιαύταις τῶν γονέων συμβουλίαις· ἀλλὰ γάμον ἀκούουσα κοσμικόν, γάμον θεῖον ἐφαντάζετο· καὶ πολλοὺς μνηστῆρας παρορῶσα, εἰς μόνον τὸν οὐράνιον νυμφίον εἶχε τὸ νεῦμα («And certainly her parents gladly urged the young girl toward marriage, urging this so that through her the succession of their line would be protected. But the wise and noble-spirited woman did not at all arrange things according to these counsels of her parents; hearing worldly marriage, she imagined divine marriage; and overlooking many suitors, she possessed the inclination for the divine Bridegroom alone»). Both passages show a respectful attitude toward marriage as the core of social structure (see especially the emphasis on 'law' in *A. Paul. et Thecl.* XII). However, in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* the focus is more on the radical disapproval by Thecla's mother; on the contrary, in the *Life of Synclitica* there are no clear signs of condemnation by the family, but only a tendency to adopt marriage as a strategy to safeguard the lineage and as a consequence also the inheritance. This difference highlights a first and fundamental change in the perception of temporality: in the *Life of Synclitica* there is a return to a temporality which is more inscribed within history, with great attention to preserving the value of the family line over time.

¹⁰ On this difference see a detailed analysis in Petorella (2019). In addition, the association between the two women on this ground is also strengthened by the fact that Thecla did not go a real martyrdom – like Synclitica – because no fire and no animals touched her and actually she did not die as a martyr.

¹¹ See Petorella (2019: 421): «Even though he does not accurately clarify the meaning of the Devil's behavior (after all, how could he?), the 5th century biographer makes a distinction between two different conceptions of bodily pain: on the one side, the ancient ideal of martyrdom, the heroic gesture of the Christian soldier, who undergoes 'exterior' persecutions, offering his/her own body to the executioner's sword in order to save his/her soul; on the other, the Late Antique concept of asceticism, which implies daily self-inflicted pains and diabolic temptations, an 'interior' martyrdom in an age when the 'exterior' Pagan oppression no longer exists».

¹² Here the allusion is to an episode narrated in *A. Paul. et Thecl.* XXVI-XXVII: Thecla joined Paul and followed him as far as Antioch. Here a young man, Alexander, after seeing Thecla immediately fell in love with her, but she rejected him and ridiculed him by ripping off his cloak and taking off the crown from his head. Therefore, Thecla was denounced and then condemned to the beasts.

anonymous mid-5th century biographer asceticism is no longer a general attitude expressing the core of a Christian rejection of earthly life,¹³ but a specific set of rules pragmatically defining a new Christian way of life in opposition to the ordinary secular life.¹⁴

In this sense, the portrait of Syncletica complies perfectly with the theorization of asceticism as it was conceived and transmitted from the late ancient Christianity onward. As Samuel Rubenson argues, «by the year 400 CE, monasticism was already firmly established throughout the Christian world; and, within the monastic setting, the theory, as well as practice of asceticism in Christianity was provided with a place to develop. From the fourth century onward, Christian asceticism cannot be studied separately from monasticism» (Rubenson 1998: 49). Therefore, monasticism inherited the earlier and broader ascetic background which marked the outbreak of Christianity from its very beginning. However, although monasticism was rooted in early Christian asceticism, it has come to be defined as an established institution governed by a strict and well-defined set of rules.¹⁵ Averil Cameron pointed out how the institutionalization of monasticism also can be described in terms of 'discourse' and discursive practices: a text can be identified as ascetic when a specific set of key terms and concepts regularly occur, even when there is not in the text itself a direct and explicit allusion to asceticism (Cameron 1998: 151). These key terms and concepts all generally refer to the motifs of «renunciation, temptation, denial, spiritual progress or ascent in the spiritual life, and the specialized use of Greek terms such as *porneia*, *erōs*, *logismoi*, *aktēmosynē* would be a fair indicator» (Cameron 1998: 151), and also the allusion to demons can be defined as a key factor within the rhetorical process of self-definition of ascetic text, as attested by the paradigmatic model of the *Life of Antony*.¹⁶

Therefore, the portrait of Syncletica is a perfect example of this 'new' hagiographical genre, as well as the literary expression of a 'new' form of codified asceticism. Like Thecla, she has a traditional family urging her to get married,¹⁷ she rejects marriage and family,¹⁸ she lives completely in chastity,¹⁹ she assumes a 'male' appearance by, for example, cutting her hair.²⁰ However, with respect to Thecla she suffers a different form of 'martyrdom' no longer due to a persecution against

¹³ On asceticism in early Christianity see Derrett (1998).

¹⁴ For a broader discussion on this see Valantasis (1995).

¹⁵ I refer here to the definition conceived by Rubenson, who describes 'monasticism' as «the creation of a community permanently separated from ordinary society» (Rubenson, 1998: 50).

¹⁶ For a detailed analysis of the role and significance of demons in the *Life of Antony* see Stewart (2011). Stewart stresses how «In the *Life of Antony*, as in other monastic literature, demons are hard at work trying to foil the monks' efforts to practice the "discipline" (*askesis*) believed to restore the original human condition intended by God. Demons in these stories play both a theological and a psychological role. Theologically, they represent forces of evil that linger even after the Incarnation and the Resurrection, now robbed of real power but highly skilled at deception and able to play on the weakness and fears of vulnerable human beings. Psychologically, demons represent the mix of memories and passions that subvert a monk's spiritual intentions by suggesting alternatives to the harsh disciplines of monastic life. By externalizing and objectifying these powerful counter-forces as "demons," one can fight them more successfully» (Stewart, 2011: 266). More importantly, Stewart suggests that Evagrius Ponticus was influenced by the monastic tradition represented by the *Life of Antony*, especially in terms of therapeutic techniques to adopt in order to fight demons/evil thoughts. This association between Evagrius Ponticus and the *Life of Antony* is particularly relevant here because - as we will see in the following pages - there are many similarities between the *Life of Syncletica* and Evagrius' works; these similarities show how the anonymous author of the *vita* shares the same theorization of asceticism described by Evagrius. For the image of the fight against the devil in the *Life of Syncletica* see for example *V. Syncl.* 18-19; 27-28; 44-46; 49; 81; 85; 87-88; 98; 100; 104; see also here the paragraph *Narrating illness: a body consumed by time*.

¹⁷ See *A. Paul. et Thecl.* X; XII, and *V. Syncl.* 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *A. Paul. et Thecl.* XXV, and *V. Syncl.* 11.

Christians. Syncretica undergoes another kind of pain, that of a prolonged physical deprivation.²¹ In this sense, although the ascetic matrix appears to be the same, the religious practice is completely different. I argue that this change of perspective is dependent on a new temporal perception affecting late ancient Christianity compared with the eschatological time which oriented religious agency in the first two centuries of Christian era.

To prove this theoretical shift, in the following paragraph I will analyze the most relevant passages in the *life of Syncretica* where an emphasis on a series of ascetic practices seems to show a different relationship between female holiness and temporality.²² More specifically, the evidence of a self-perception and self-knowledge of a body undergoing ascetic deprivation and practice will be addressed as a sign of the impact and influence of a time that is more inscribed within history with respect to an earlier eschatological Christianity, where the imminence of the end of times led to a sudden and radical interruption of any relationship of the body with earthly existence.²³ In fact, the end of times is situated outside history and it is excluded from the rhythm regulating social life. In this sense, an eschatological expectation breaks the linearity of a life cycle. As a consequence, since the end times were approaching, following the traditional stages of a 'natural' life cycle was no longer considered relevant. This is the reason why in early Christian texts, such as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, the emphasis is on a radicality affecting every renunciation experienced by Thecla; on the contrary, Syncretica also embraces a complete continence, but the use of her body in this process of ascetic deprivation reflects a reintegration of the body itself within the 'natural' progress of a lifetime.

In this regard, it is to be noted that this 'new' form of asceticism is common also to male ascetics counterparts, like for example in the *Life of Antony*. However, temporality has a stronger impact on women because there is a major difference with respect to gender between the way time is perceived and construed by women with reference to their social conduct and how it affects men's life and activities. This difference is related to the closer connection of women's social agency to the physiological cycles of their body.²⁴ In this sense, women's body tends to construe a 'cyclical time' - as a consequence of the recurrence of procreation - thus eliciting a 'domestic' role of mothers (and wives). However, asceticism, by promoting a rejection of both a typical female appearance and a traditional social role as mothers and wives, allows women to be finally included within the linear time of progression of history.

²¹ For a comprehensive and well-detailed description of the long trajectory of Christian sainthood in terms of both diachronic reconstruction and categorization of different typologies of saints see Narro (2019a). See especially chapters 1 and 2 for an analysis of the evolution of sainthood from the age of martyrdom to a literary phase more focused on the Lives of saints. See also Narro (2019b) for an interesting analysis of the construction of Thecla as a character through a series of progressive religious stages in her path to sanctity.

²² I use here the term 'temporality' according to the definition provided by Kattan Gribetz (2019: 339): «We use the term 'temporality' as an alternative to 'time'. 'Temporality' is useful as a term because of its relative unfamiliarity, which can help to highlight the unfamiliarity of temporal ideas that might pass unnoticed if we only use the more intuitive word 'time'. In this article it denotes concepts, perspectives, orientations or ideas related to time that do not necessarily operate with an explicitly defined idea of what 'time' actually is. [...] Contrary to the term 'time', which describes a more circumscribed idea, the term 'temporality' presumes blurred boundaries and conveys greater conceptual instability and volatility than 'time'». For a general overview of the notions of 'time' and 'temporality' in New Testament Studies see Moss Bahr (2020).

²³ On eschatology in early Christianity see Lehtipuu (2015); Grant (1917). See also Gauthier (2013).

²⁴ See Kattan Gribetz (2017).

A 'new' no longer eschatological temporality in Syncletica's asceticism: the body as a yardstick

The *vita* appears to be characterized by a narrative traditionally organized on the basis of a chronological order. It starts by describing Syncletica's family origins, the transfer from Macedonia to Alexandria, and the family composition. In this regard, it is interesting to observe how Syncletica's brothers are described from the very beginning as prepared for the most religious life.²⁵ It is evident here that in fifth century hagiographical narrative a sharp distinction between secular and religious life had been regularly established; as a consequence, the choice to officially embrace a religious life was no longer conceived as something 'against the law' and the custom.²⁶ Thus, the acceptance of an institutionalized religious life (here conceived as the monastic one) is a first and fundamental sign of a reintegration of radical asceticism within the ordinary time of history. This does not mean that marriage was no longer considered a preferable choice, especially in terms of economic security and as a strategy to safeguard the lineage and consequently the inheritance;²⁷ however, a preference for a religious life was something no longer considered 'against the law'. Therefore, Syncletica was urged toward marriage by her parents, but her choice to substitute the 'worldly marriage' with a 'divine marriage' was not conceived as an outrage.²⁸

So, after opting for a strictly ascetic life, Syncletica is said to have departed from her paternal home.²⁹ Then, after having sold her possessions she decided to donate all her property to the poor; at that point, after having asked one of the elders to attend, she also decided to cut her hair – which at that time was called 'κόσμων' (i.e. something which belongs to the world) - as a symbol of purity and simplicity.³⁰ Three details are particularly relevant here: 1) Syncletica departs from her paternal home and sells all her property; 2) she cuts her hair, thus performing a symbolic act of renunciation of κόσμος;³¹ 3) the above-mentioned symbolic act is performed only in the presence of one of the elders. They are all signs respectively of: 1) rejection of normative society where marriage and property are considered a fundamental regulating structure; 2) rejection of female appearance; 3) official acceptance and further codification of a specific set of ascetic practices.³² It is precisely this third key-point which gives to the other two points their full meaning: asceticism still means a complete rejection of all the structures regulating social life; however, this rejection appears now to be accepted by religious authorities and regulated by a set of specific rules expressly theorized. Acceptance and theorization are clearly signs of appropriation and reintegration of a 'deviance' into the normative structure and, as a consequence, into 'ordinary' time. In this sense, by choosing to remain virgin in

²⁵ *V. Syncl.* 5.

²⁶ On the contrary, Theocleia, Thecla's mother, sharply criticized her daughter while realizing that she completely rejected marriage. See here footnote 9.

²⁷ See *V. Syncl.* 5, where the author writes that one of the brothers of Syncletica was exhorted into marriage by his parents, who in this regard also 'completed the contracts'. See also *V. Syncl.* 7, where it is stressed how many men were attracted by the wealth of Syncletica and her family.

²⁸ See *V. Syncl.* 7.

²⁹ *V. Syncl.* 11.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ On this see Castelli (1986: 75-76); for a more general overview of the shift between female and male appearance see Castelli (1991); Giannarelli (2010).

³² See in this regard the case of the Council of Gangra in the mid-fourth century where, as a consequence of a condemnation of Eustathius of Sebaste and his followers, it was stated that women could not cut their hair and dress in the manner of men (see Di Berardino, 2006: 292-294).

order to embrace a complete chastity, Syncletica – like Thecla - evidently breaks the logical expectations of her life. However, against the wider background of a monastic asceticism, a logical interruption in the three-phases process (*virgo, sponsa-mater, vidua*) of a woman's life within the traditional conception of the Graeco-Roman society is widely accepted. This is attested, as previously mentioned, by the fact that Syncletica was urged toward marriage by her parents, but her choice to remain virgin is not contested. On the contrary, Thecla is sharply criticized when she decides to reject marriage.

At that point, the anonymous biographer focuses accurately on a detailed description of Syncletica's asceticism, more specifically on the physiological basis of those ascetic practices she performs. This section starts with a meaningful similitude where the female body is depicted as follows: after deciding to devote all of her life to continence and chastity, Syncletica closed all the doors of her body.³³ In this sense, doors are a metaphor alluding to the physiological access paths to the sense of 'perception' - as the Greek text explicitly describes³⁴ - but also to the availability of a female body to a man through marriage. Syncletica performs a complete corporeal closure, so that nothing from outside can enter through the access provided by her sensory organs.³⁵ Similarly, she decides to live as a recluse,³⁶ and to avoid social life from youth until her prime.³⁷ A first chronological indication to contextualize the extensive description of Syncletica's life is evident here. The progression of ascetic practice is described on the basis of the progression of life stages. This narratological structure³⁸ is also evident in *V. Syncl.* 13, where it is said that Syncletica starts her 'new' solitary life only after rejecting anger and the memory of past injustice (*μνησικακία*). This temporal detail builds the narrative highlighting a chronological progression from a past characterized by evil and sin to a present where feelings of quiet and forgiveness usher in a new period in

³³ *V. Syncl.* 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*: [...] και ὡσπερ θυρίδας τὰς πάσας αἰσθήσεις αὐτῆς ἀποκλείουσα [...]. A very similar image can be found in Evagr. Pont. *cap. pract.* 19 (for the Greek text I refer here to Guillaumont - Guillaumont, 1971). The many similarities (I will address further examples in the following pages) between the *Life of Syncletica* and Evagrius' works show how the anonymous author of the *vita* shares the same theorization of asceticism described by the main representatives of late ancient Christian asceticism (see in this regard Alciati, 2018b, where a detailed comparison in this sense between Evagrius and Cassian is addressed).

³⁵ See in this regard Douglas (1966). Douglas suggests that corporal margins should be interpreted as culturally constructed symbols of danger and power, on the grounds that both limits and borders traditionally represent both contamination and alteration: «[...] all margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolize its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body. So also have bodily parings, skin, nail, hair clippings and sweat» (Douglas, 1996: 122). On the notion of 'ascetic body', especially with reference to the ascetic practice as an instrument to control the human body's functions, see Alciati (2018a). On the notion of the body as a primary place of religious experience see Petridou (2017). More specifically, on asceticism as a self-knowledge involving the entire perceptual apparatus see Alciati (2018b). With the same aim, but also taking into consideration relevant data from physiological and neurological research to demonstrate that ascetics are 'body specialists', see Gilli (2018).

³⁶ *V. Syncl.* 12. Here the author uses the verb ἡσυχάζω, which means, as Castelli states in her commentary, 'to be quiet'; however, Castelli (1990: 271) states that the verb is also used as «a technical term alluding to the solitary life of a hermit».

³⁷ *V. Syncl.* 16.

³⁸ On how the religious message of the author can be construed also in terms of technical arrangement and construction of the time on the level both of the story narrated and the narration itself see Ciolfi (2018). More specifically, Ciolfi states that an author can recur to specific narratological devices which privilege some details at the expense of others and, by breaking the chronological linearity of the story, they contribute to underlining a religious message of a non-linear temporality. On the contrary, in the case of Syncletica we can observe an opposite narratological construction: the chronologically progressive order of the events evokes the experience of a linear temporality.

Syncretica's life. It is precisely this continuous oscillation between past and present, both corresponding respectively to secular and ascetic life, temptation and resistance, which construes and reinforces the literary motif of a chronological progression towards religious perfection:

Καὶ γὰρ οἱ ναυτιλλόμενοι, χειμῶνος καὶ κλύδωνος καταλαβόντος, ἄσιτοι διαμένουσι, πᾶσαν τὴν παρ' ἑαυτῶν τέχνην τῷ πρὸ ὀφθαλμῶν κινδύνῳ ἀντιτιθέντες· ὀπηνίκα δὲ τύχῳσι τοῦ ζῆν, τότε τῆς δευτέρας σωτηρίας ποιοῦνται τὴν φροντίδα· καὶ οὐχ ἅπας αὐτῶν ὁ χρόνος πρὸς τὸν σάλον τῆς θαλάσσης καταναλίσκεται· ὥσπερ δὲ ἀνάπαυλαν δέχονται τῶν πόνων τὴν βραχυτάτην γαλήνην· καὶ οὐδ' οὕτως ἀμερίμῳς διάγουσιν, οὔτε μὴν ὑπνῷ βαθεῖ καθέλκονται, πείραν ἐσχηκότες τῶν ἀπελθόντων, καὶ ἔννοϊαν λαμβάνοντες τῶν μελλόντων. Εἰ γὰρ καὶ ὁ χειμῶν ἐκόπασεν, ἀλλ' ἡ θάλασσα οὐ μεμείωται· καὶ εἰ παρήλθε τὸ δεύτερον, ἀλλ' ὅμως τὸ πρῶτον [τρίτον] μένει· εἰ καὶ τὸ γενόμενον κεχώρισται, ἀλλὰ τὸ ποιοῦν πάρεστιν. Οὕτως οὖν καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ παρόντος, εἰ καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς ἐπιθυμίας ἀπήλασται, ἀλλ' ὅμως ὁ ἐξουσιάζων τούτου οὐ μακρὰν τυγχάνει.³⁹

A continuous sequence of images organized through chronologically progressive stages is clearly evident here, starting from what happened in the recent past (danger) to the present time (saving and quiet); more specifically, the cyclical repetition of this same binary sequence produces experience and, as a consequence, knowledge, so that in the present time one already knows what will happen in the future. Therefore, the narratological construction of the narrative evokes and reproduces the temporality perceived by Syncretica herself: her asceticism improves through progressive levels, just as the image of the saving depicted in the similitude above.⁴⁰ More importantly, the chronologically progressive stages defining the path from an 'old' life to a 'new' one go hand in hand with the progression towards religious perfection, thus framing the vertical ascetic ascension within the horizontally oriented flow of time.⁴¹

It is so that:

Τοῦ δὲ χρόνου προϊόντος, καὶ τῶν ἀρετῶν αὐτῆς ἀνθουσῶν, ἡ εὐωδία τῶν εὐκλεεστάτων αὐτῆς πόνων εἰς πολλοὺς διέβαινε.⁴²

Therefore, she was admired by many, who also asked her for more information about salvation, but she:

³⁹ *V. Syncl.* 19: «For sailors, when overtaking a stormy wave, persevere without eating, opposing with all their own skill the danger before their eyes. Once they are alive, then they give attention to the secondary saving. All of their time is not spent on the swelling of the sea. Just as they accept the shortest calm as a rest from toils; but they do not spend it without anxiety nor are they dragged down into deep sleep, but having had an experience of things that have gone away, they receive some idea of things about to happen. For although the storm abated, the sea has not become weaker; and if the second passed, nevertheless the third remains. And if the event has been banished, that which causes it is still present. It is thus in the present situation: even if the spirit of desire has been cast out, likewise the one exercising power over it is not far away».

⁴⁰ See what the author immediately adds in *V. Syncl.* 19: Ἡ οὖν μακαρία, ἀκριβῶς εἰδυῖα τὸ παρὸν ἐν τῷ βίῳ κλυδόνιον, καὶ προβλέπουσα τὰς τῶν πνευμάτων ζάλας, ἐπιμελῶς ἦν οἰακίζουσα τὸ ἴδιον σκάφος τῆ εἰς Θεὸν εὐσεβείᾳ («Therefore the blessed one having seen accurately the little wave present in life, and foreseeing the surgings of the spirit, she was carefully steering her own ship toward devotion to God»).

⁴¹ See in this regard Evagr. *Pont. cap. pract.* 33.

⁴² *V. Syncl.* 21: «as time went on and when her virtue blossomed, the sweet fragrance of her most glorious sufferings passed on to many».

[...] στενάξασα βαρὺ, καὶ δακρύων πλήθος ἀφεῖσα, εἰς ἑαυτὴν ἐχώρει, καὶ ὡσπερ διὰ τῶν δακρύων τὴν ἀπόκρισιν ποιησαμένη, δευτέραν σιωπὴν ἤσκει. [...] Ἐπὶ πολὺ δὲ τῆς μακαρίας ἐκβιαζομένης, μετὰ χρόνον ἰκανόν, πολλῆς ἡσυχίας γενομένης, ταπεινῇ τῇ φωνῇ τὸ γραφικὸν ἐκεῖνο ἔφη ῥῆμα τό.⁴³

Once again, there is a chronological progression, this time also combined with an emphasis on a gradual corporeal exercise: as time goes by Syncletica prolongs her silence and abandons the external world looking inwards and focusing on herself. This idea is repeatedly stressed a few lines later, when the author closes the paragraph by writing that: ἐπιπολὺ πάλιν ἡσυχία ἐγένετο.⁴⁴ The cyclical repetition of a series of ‘silences’, the dilation of silence over a long time period, the ἡσυχία produced by both the prolonged practice of silence and the rejection of the external world are all details that describe a form of ascetism which is the result of a corporeal enhancement exercised over time, thus acquiring meaning through the temporal duration and the length of time itself.

Then the author introduces the long section of spiritual teachings uttered by Syncletica. So, she speaks:

Οὐκ ἀγνοεῖτε τὴν ἐν τῷ Εὐαγγελίῳ παραβολὴν περὶ τῶν ρ´, καὶ ξ´, καὶ λ´· ἡ μὲν οὖν ἑκατοντάς ἐστι τὸ ἡμέτερον ἐπάγγελμα· ἡ δὲ ἑξακοντάς ἐστι τὸ τῶν ἐγκρατῶν τάγμα· ἡ δὲ τριακοντάς τῶν σωφρόνως βιούντων. Καὶ ἀπὸ μὲν τῶν τριάκοντα ἐπὶ τὰ ἐξήκοντα καλὸν μεταβῆναι· ἀπὸ γὰρ τῶν μικρῶν ἐπὶ τὰ μείζονα καλὸν προκόπτειν· ἀπὸ δὲ τῶν μειζόνων ἐπὶ τὰ ἐλάττωνα κατατρέχειν, ἐπικίνδυνον. Ὁ γὰρ ἅπαξ νεύσας ἐπὶ τὰ χεῖρω, οὐδὲ ἐν τοῖς ὀλίγοις στήναι δύναται· ἀλλ' ὡσπερ ἐν βυθῷ τῆς ἀπωλείας φέρεται. [...] Ὁ γὰρ ἐκ τῶν μειζόνων ἐπὶ τὰ ἐλάττω ἀγόμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ ἐναντίου βάλλεται [...] Δεῖ οὖν, καθὼς προεῖπον, ἐκ τῶν ἐλαττόνων ἐπὶ τὰ προσβαίνειν.⁴⁵

Syncletica opens her series of spiritual teachings by stressing the importance of progression from the lesser to the greater passing through a set of gradual levels: only this single direction is valid, otherwise corporeal enhancement cannot be gained. Asceticism is a way to perfection, and perfection can be reached only through ascension. Once again, we find here an idea of advancement which entails a series of ascetic practices spreading over time through gradual steps. Therefore, Christians should avoid any sort of temptation and sin, organized by the devil as a series of traps:

Τίνες δὲ ἦσαν αὐτοῦ αἱ πρῶται παγίδες; Δῆλον, ὡς γαστριμαργία, φιληδονία, πορνεία. Ταῦτα γὰρ μάλιστα τὰ πνεύματα ἐπὶ τῶν νεωτερικῶν ἡλικιῶν συμβαίνουσιν. Ἐπακολουθεῖ δὲ τούτοις φιλαργυρία, πλεονεξία, καὶ τὰ τούτοις ὅμοια.⁴⁶

In this path to purification and ascension, some sins are strictly associated to a first stage of life, youthfulness; in this sense, there is a ‘before’ conversion - coinciding with youthful years - affected

⁴³ V. Syncl. 21: «[...] having sighed heavily and let flow a multitude of tears, withdrew into herself, and as if she had made an answer by means of the tears, she practiced a second silence. [...] and the blessed one, having been compelled for such a long time, after sufficient time, and after a great silence, spoke in a humble voice».

⁴⁴ V. Syncl. 21: «again she became silent for a long time».

⁴⁵ V. Syncl. 23: «You are not ignorant of the parable in the gospel concerning the hundred, the sixty, and the thirty; the hundred represents our profession [of the religious life]; the sixty is the division of encratites; the thirty the rank of those who live the married life moderately. And it is good to pass over from the thirty to the sixty, because it is good to make progress from the lesser to the greater; but it is dangerous to pursue the lesser from the greater. For the one who has once descended to the worse is not able to stand among the few but is borne into the depth of perdition. [...] For the one who is led from the greater to the lesser is thrown under the opponent. [...] Therefore it is necessary, just as I said before, to ascend from the lesser toward the [greater]».

⁴⁶ V. Syncl. 49: «But what are his first traps? Clearly, gluttony, love of pleasure, fornication. For these spirits come together mostly in youthful years. Love of money follows after them, then covetousness, and the things like them».

by guilt and temptation, and an 'after' conversion – coinciding with mature age – when the soul should be liberated from all the evil traps. Liberation from vices proceeds together with growth, thus integrating ascetic practices and spiritual advancement into the ordinary course of time.

Then, in the extensive analysis of all the vices affecting the soul in the course of corporeal and spiritual purification, Syncletica also talks about anger, saying that:

Καὶ τὸ μὲν ὀργίζεσθαι ὡς ἐν κακοῖς ἔλαττον· ἡ δὲ μνησικακία πάντων ἐστὶ βαρυτέρα. Ὁ γὰρ θυμὸς ὥσπερ καπνὸς πρὸς ὀλίγον θολώσας τὴν ψυχὴν διαλύεται· ἡ δὲ μνησικακία, ὥσπερ ἐναποπαγεῖσα τῇ ψυχῇ, θηρίου αὐτὴν δεινότεραν ποιεῖ [...] ὁ δὲ γε τῇ μνησικακίᾳ κρατούμενος οὐ παρακλήσει πείθεται, οὐ τροφῇ πραΰνεται, οὔτε μὴν ὁ πάντα μεταβάλλων χρόνος τὸ πάθος τούτου ἰάσατο. [...] Καλὸν μὲν οὖν τὸ μὴ ὀργισθῆναι· εἰ δὲ καὶ γένηται, οὐδὲ μέτρον σοι ἡμέρας πρὸς τὸ πάθος συνεχώρησεν, εἶπε γὰρ μὴ ἐπιδῦναι τὸν ἥλιον. Σὺ δὲ ἐκδέχη, ἕως ἂν ὁ πᾶς σου χρόνος δύῃ. Οὐκ οἶδας εἰπεῖν· Ἀρκεῖ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἡ κακία αὐτῆς.⁴⁷

The key-term *μνησικακία*, which occurred for the first time in *V. Syncl.* 13 – as we have already noted – is also here the semantic basis of the entire passage. The necessity to avoid the memory of past evil and injuries reinforces the idea of moving forward and advancing toward a future, on the basis of the shaping force of time which changes everything. In addition, emotions are here chronologically measured: anger must last no more than a day. Therefore - the author seems to suggest – there is no need to procrastinate or temporize: past is behind, and one should not linger in the present; progression and ascension are all that matters.⁴⁸

The emphasis on past as a life stage affected by sin - thus to be rejected in order to purify body and soul and ascend toward perfection – is especially stressed when talking about chastity and marriage. Syncletica states that God created two classes of inhabitants upon the world: those who need to get married in order to produce children, and those who live like angels in complete chastity.⁴⁹ This second group is so described:

Σταυρὸς ἡμῖν ἐστὶ τὸ τρόπαιον τῆς νίκης. Τὸ γὰρ ἐπάγγελμα ἡμῶν οὐδὲν ἄλλο ἐστὶν ἢ ἀποταγὴ βίου, μελέτη θανάτου. Ὡσπερ οὖν οἱ νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐνεργοῦσι τῷ σώματι, οὕτω καὶ ἡμεῖς. Ὅσα γὰρ ἦν δι' αὐτοῦ ἐπιτελέσαι, πεποιήκαμεν ὅτε ἤμεν νήπιοι. Φησὶ γὰρ ὁ Ἀπόστολος, ὡς Ἐμοὶ κόσμος ἐσταύρωται, κἀγὼ τῷ κόσμῳ. Τῇ ψυχῇ ζῶμεν· αὐτῇ τὰς ἀρετὰς ἐπιδείξομεν· κατὰ διάνοιαν ἐλεήσωμεν· Μακάριοι γὰρ οἱ ἐλεήμονες τῇ ψυχῇ.⁵⁰

Here asceticism – according to the more general meaning of spiritual life - is considered to be something restricted to the second and last stage of life: the mature age; on the contrary, a corporeal

⁴⁷ *V. Syncl.* 63-64: «To be angry is a lesser of the evils; but the remembrance of injuries is the weightiest of all. For anger, like smoke, having disturbed the soul for a little while, is dissolved. But the remembrance of injuries, fixing in the soul, performs more terribly than a wild beast; [...] But the one ruled by memories of past injuries is not persuaded by consolation, nor tamed by food, and time that changes everything does not cure this emotion. [...] Therefore it is good not to be angry, but if it happens, he did not allow the space of a day to the emotion, for he said 'do not let the sun set'. And you wait until your whole time sets. Do you not know how to say: 'The day's own trouble is sufficient for the day'?».

⁴⁸ For a significant theoretical overlap between the two movements – a vertical ascetic ascension and the horizontally oriented progression of time – see Evagr. *Pont. cap. pract.* 67.

⁴⁹ *V. Syncl.* 75.

⁵⁰ *V. Syncl.* 76: «The cross is the trophy of victory to us. For our profession is nothing but the renunciation of life, the rehearsal of death. Therefore just as the death do not operate in the body, so neither do we. Forasmuch as was accomplished by the body, we have done it when we were infants. For the apostle says, 'The world is crucified to me, and I to the world'. We live in the spirit. We demonstrate virtue through it; we are merciful in accordance with the mind; for 'blessed are the merciful' in soul».

life can be experienced only during the initial life stages, within the wider background of youthfulness. Once again, we find here the idea of asceticism as a progressive ascension from sin to purity, corresponding respectively to young age, on one hand, and adulthood, on the other. A few lines later, talking more specifically about the ascetic teaching, Syncretica underlines how only those who have been led διὰ πρακτικοῦ βίου⁵¹ can teach, otherwise teaching is consumed and disappears over time:

Ἡ μὲν γὰρ ψιλὴ τῶν λόγων ἔκθεσις ἔοικε γραφαῖς διὰ χρωμάτων εὐαποπτῶτων συνιστάσαις, ἄστινας σμικρότατος χρόνος διέλυσεν ἀνέμων ῥιπαῖς καὶ ὑετῶν σταγόσι· τὴν δὲ ἐμπρακτον διδασκαλίαν οὐδ' ὁ πᾶς αἰὼν διαλυῖσαι δυνηθείη. Τὰ γὰρ στερεὰ τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκκολάπτων ὁ λόγος, αἰώνιον ἄγαλμα Χριστοῦ τοῖς πιστοῖς δωρεῖται.⁵²

Teaching through words is considered as something affected by instability and therefore subjected to the action of time and quickly dissolved; on the contrary, a practiced teaching is more stable and resistant, so that it cannot be dissolved and can last forever.⁵³ The relationship between practice and duration highlights the relevance of the repetition of acts in asceticism: the latter becomes effective only as a consequence of a bodily practice repeatedly reiterated through time, thus acquiring a status of eternity. Words are a temporary acquisition, while practice proceeds together with time and becomes eternal, as similarly stated a few paragraphs later:

Τοῦ γὰρ πρώτου ὡς πρὸς τὴν τάξιν μὴ ἐπιλαβόμενοι, τοῦ δευτέρου ἠστόχησαν. Ὡσπερ γὰρ οἱ τῷ ἄλφα στοιχείῳ ἐντυγχάνοντες, πρῶτον αὐτοῦ τὸ σχῆμα ὀρῶσι, καὶ δεύτερον τὸ ὄνομα διδάσκονται, καὶ οὕτως τὸν ἀριθμὸν μαθάνουσι, καὶ τὸ τελευταῖον τοὺς τόνους παραλαμβάνουσιν. Εἰ οὖν ἐπὶ τοῦ πρώτου στοιχείου τοσαύτη χρεία τριβῆς καὶ τέχνης, πόσω μᾶλλον ἐπὶ τοῦ Δημιουργοῦ ὀφείλει πόνοσ καὶ χρόνος προηγεῖσθαι εἰς τὴν τοῦ ἀξιουμένου θεωρίαν τῆς ἀνεκφράστου δόξης; [...] ἔκκοψον τὰ παλαιὰ, ἵνα νέα φυτεύσῃς.⁵⁴

The focus on the acquisition of eternity through a progressive path proceeding from evil and sin to purification and divine knowledge reaches a full significance when Syncretica describes the opposition between life on earth and the eternal life:

Ἐν γὰρ τῇ γῆ ταύτῃ ὡς ἐν δευτέρᾳ μητρῷα κοιλίᾳ τυγχάνομεν. Ὡσπερ γὰρ ἐν ἐκείνοις τοῖς μυχοῖς οὐ τοιαύτην ζωὴν εἶχομεν· οὔτε γὰρ τῶν τοιούτων στερεμνίων τροφῶν ἀπελαύομεν ἐν ἐκείνοις τοῖς χωρίοις ὡς νῦν· οὔτε μὴν οὕτως ἐνεργεῖν ἠδυνάμεθα ὡς ἐνταῦθα· καὶ γὰρ τοῦ ἡλιακοῦ φωτὸς καὶ πάσης ἀγῆς ἐκτὸς ὑπῆρχομεν· ὥσπερ οὖν ἐν ἐκείνοις τοῖς ταμείοις οὔσαι, πολλῶν τῶν ἐνταῦθα ἐλειπούμεθα· οὕτως καὶ ἐν τῷ νῦν κόσμῳ πλεονεκτούμεθα πρὸς τὴν τῶν οὐρανῶν βασιλείαν. Ἐλάβομεν πείραν τῶν ἐνταῦθα τροφῶν, τῶν θείων ὀρεχθῶμεν. Ἀπελάυσασμεν τοῦ ἐνταῦθα φωτὸς, τὸν ἥλιον τῆς δικαιοσύνης ποθήσωμεν. Τὴν ἄνω Ἱερουσαλήμ ἡγησώμεθα ἑαυτῶν πόλιν τε καὶ

⁵¹ *V. Syncl.* 79: «[...] by means of a life of activity [...]».

⁵² *Ibid.*: «For the unfortified exposition of words is like letters composed from colors that easily fall off, dissolved in the least amount of time by gusts of wind and drops of rain; but the teaching that is practiced all eternity cannot dissolve. For the word, carving out substantial things on the soul, bestows forever an image of Christ in the faithful».

⁵³ On unstableness and uncertainty, with a special focus on the need to take note and measure the attacks of evil thoughts in order to control them, see also *V. Syncl.* 88.

⁵⁴ *V. Syncl.* 86: «Having not undertaken the first thing in an orderly way, they failed to achieve the second thing. For just as those who encounter the letter 'alpha' see first its form, then are taught its name second, and thusly they learn the number, and finally they apprehend the accents. Therefore if there is such a need of practice and art for the first letter, how much more labor and time is needed for the creator, being led into contemplation of the one deemed worthy of inexpressible glory? [...] Cut off the old, that you might grow the new».

μητέρα· πατέρα δὲ τὸν Θεὸν καλέσωμεν ἑαυτῶν. Ζήσωμεν ἐνταῦθα σωφρόνως, ἵνα τῆς αἰωνίου ζωῆς τύχωμεν. Ὡσπερ γὰρ τὰ ἐν μήτρᾳ βρέφη, τελειωθέντα ἐξ ἐλάττονος τροφῆς τε καὶ ζωῆς, διὰ τούτου καὶ πρὸς τὴν μείζονα φέρονται σωτηρίαν· οὕτως καὶ οἱ δίκαιοι ἐκ τῆς τοῦ κόσμου διαγωγῆς πρὸς τὴν ἄνω πορείαν ἀναχωροῦσι κατὰ τὸ γεγραμμένον· Ἐκ δυνάμεως εἰς δύναμιν. Οἱ γε ἁμαρτωλοὶ, ὥσπερ τὰ κατὰ γαστρὸς ἔμβρυα ἐν τῇ μήτρᾳ τελευτήσαντα, ἐκ σκοτόυς σκοτεῖ παραδίδονται. Καὶ γὰρ ἐν τῇ γῆ νεκροῦνται τῷ πλήθει τῶν ἁμαρτημάτων κεκαλυμμένοι· καὶ ἀπαχθέντες δὲ τοῦ βίου, εἰς ζοφώδεις καὶ ταρταρώδεις τόπους καταφέρονται. Τρίτον τῷ βίῳ τικτόμεθα· ὧν ἡ μὲν πρώτη ἐστὶν ἢ ἐκ τῶν μητρῶων κόλπων πρόοδος, ὀπηνίκα εἰς γῆν ἀπαγώμεθα ἐκ γῆς· αἱ δὲ λοιπαὶ δύο ἐκ γῆς ἡμᾶς εἰς οὐρανοὺς ἀνάγουσιν· ὧν ἡ μὲν μία ἐστὶν ἐκ χάριτος, ἢ διὰ τοῦ θεοῦ λουτροῦ ἡμῶν προσερχομένη· καὶ γὰρ ταύτην ἀληθῶς παλιγγενεσίαν καλοῦμεν· ἢ δὲ τρίτη ἐκ τῆς μετανοίας ἡμῶν καὶ τῶν ἀγαθῶν πόνων προσγίνεται. Ἐν ταύτῃ νῦν ἡμεῖς ἐστήκαμεν.⁵⁵

Four key-points appear strikingly relevant here: 1) the literary use of functions of female body as a metaphor to describe the perception and agency of time;⁵⁶ 2) the opposition between the current world and the kingdom of heaven: the former is described just as a preliminary laboratory to be used only as a sort of preparation for the second and real life, the future eternal life in heaven; 3) the substitution of earthly family ties with a consequent recreation of a new family structure within the Christian faith (the Jerusalem above is like a new mother, and God like a new father);⁵⁷ 4) the tripartition of human life into three different progressive stages: first we come into the world passing from the womb to the external current world - thus proceeding from earth to earth without interruptions; a second stage is provided by baptism, which is considered a second birth allowing us to pass from sin (i.e. earth) to heaven (through a purification); then there is a third and final stage, the 'saint' life where we are called to perform good works after conversion - thus entering a final phase of the second part of 'heavenly' life on earth.

In particular, the idea of substituting earthly family ties with a consequent recreation of a new family structure within the Christian faith is further explored in the following paragraph, where Syncretica establishes a comparison between the worldly marriage and the heavenly one: brides usually prepare their bodies for marriage by executing baths and anointings with oil and varied

⁵⁵ V. Syncl. 90-91: «For on this earth it is as though we are in the second maternal womb. For we do not have such a life in those innermost parts. For we did not enjoy such solid food in those places as now; we were not able to work as we can here; for we do not enjoy the light of the sun and all external rays. Therefore just as occupying those receptacles, we were lacking many things of the world; thus in this current world we covet the kingdom of heaven. We took a taste of the food from here, yearning for divine food. We have enjoyed the light here, longing for the sun of justice. We believe the Jerusalem above is our city and our mother. We will call God our father. We will live here wisely, in order that we might have eternal life. For just as the fetuses inside their mother, perfected from diminished food and life, and because of this are brought to a greater security; likewise the righteous withdraw from the ways of the world for the higher journey, according to what has been written: 'from power to power'. Sinners, like the embryos dead in the womb in the mother, are handed over from darkness to darkness. For they die on earth, covered in the multitude of their sins; and led away from life, they are borne down to dark and hellish places. We are born into life three times. The first is the going forth from the maternal bosom, when we pass from the earth to the earth. The two remaining pass us from earth to heaven: one is out of grace, which comes to us through divine Baptism, for we call this truly a regeneration; the third accrues out of our conversion and good works. In this one we stand now».

⁵⁶ See in this regard Kattan Gribetz (2017: 178), where she notes that «the nine months of pregnancy followed by labor and birth was employed to demonstrate the linear progression of teleological history».

⁵⁷ On this – although with a specific focus on the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* – see Moss (2010): she stresses how the rejection of family of origin is functional to re-creating a new family on common religious grounds. For a very detailed analysis of the articulated dynamics of transition from the family field to the religious field through the act of conversion – also here with Perpetua as a case study - see Urciuoli (2012).

ornamentations;⁵⁸ similarly, those who wish to marry the 'true Bridegroom' should wash the body not with water and oil but with ascetic practice, virtues, faith, hope, charity, humility, chastity, voluntary poverty, prayers and psalms.⁵⁹ This «exchanging spiritual garments for bodily ones» emphasizes the rejection of the body as a symbol of worldly life; nevertheless, the body still remains the focus of the 'new' ascetic life, because all the above-mentioned purifying practices have to be performed through the body itself. This 'new' form of asceticism does not aim to completely reject the body or dissolve its physical agency; on the contrary, the body is the primary agent of ascetic practice.⁶⁰ In addition, although marriage is considered a major symbol of a worldly societal structure, it is not fully rejected, but rather becomes an ideal to be imitated.⁶¹ This shows a tendency to reintegrate the basic structures regulating social life into the ordinary time of history.

Narrating illness: a body consumed by time

After an extensive central section devoted to a long series of teachings explained in detail by Syncretica herself, the author takes the floor once again to narrate the final part of the story, where the devil attacks the saint by inflicting pain on her. Most specifically, the author repeatedly states that the devil deliberately decided to attack Syncretica not externally, but grasping her internal organs,⁶² so that the pain could be more acute:

Καὶ πρῶτον μὲν τὸ ἀναγκαιότατον ἐν ζωῇ πλήττει μόριον, τὸν πνεύμονα, καὶ διὰ νόσων ὀλεθροφόρων κατ' ὀλίγον ἐξάπτει τὴν κακίαν. Ἐνεχώρει μὲν γὰρ καὶ ἐν ὀλίγῳ διὰ τῆς ἐξαιτήσεως συντεμεῖν αὐτῆς τὴν τελευτήν· ἀλλ' ὥσπερ αἰμοβόρος δήμιος, διὰ πληγῶν πολλῶν καὶ χρόνου μακροῦ τὴν οἰκείαν δεινότητα ἐνδείκνυται. Κατὰ μικρὸν γὰρ ἀναλύων τὸν πνεύμονα διὰ τῶν ἀναγομένων πτυσμάτων, τοῦτον ἀπέβαλλε. Παρήσαν δὲ καὶ πυρετοὶ ἀδιάλειπτοι, ῥίνης δίκην ἀποδαπανῶντες τὸ σῶμα.⁶³

The description of the illness inflicted by the devil emphasizes both a time dilation and a postponement of death here conceived as the final stage of human life. The devil is allowed to

⁵⁸ *V. Syncl.* 92.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ See Constantinou (2006: 129): «In the ascetic life taught by Synkletike the body is both rejected and invested with significance. On the one hand, bodily needs and pleasures are suppressed, and, on the other hand, the body is in focus since it becomes the site of religious self-formation. It is through the body that the soul can be cured and elevated». On this extensively see also Castelli (1992: 142-144).

⁶¹ *V. Syncl.* 92. On this see Constantinou (2006: 128), who stresses how «while, on the one hand, Synkletike continuously asks her disciples to forget the world, on the other hand she prevents them from doing so, since she constantly reminds them of the world through the examples she uses in her teachings». On the contrary, in the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla* marriage is completely rejected because in the contracted final time of early Christian eschatology all social norms and structures gradually lost importance (see for example Paul's macarisms listed in *A. Paul. et Thecl.* V-VI, where the focus is exclusively on the renunciation of the world because of the imminent end of times and, as a consequence, on purity and chastity – also within marriage- as the only current earthly conditions allowing Christians to gain future salvation).

⁶² *V. Syncl.* 104.

⁶³ *V. Syncl.* 105: «He first smites the most necessary organ in life, the lung, and through illnesses that bring ruin, bit by bit he fastens his malignancy. For he allowed in a short time through intercession to shorten her death; but just so the bloodthirsty executioner displays through many blows and much time his own severity. For breaking up the lung into small pieces by means of spittle that brought them up, he cast it out. Unceasing fevers were present, consuming her body after the manner of a file».

accelerate this process; however, he proceeds by slowly tormenting the woman, so that a long-lasting pain can make more effective the punishment. This focus on a long duration continues immediately after:

Ὀγδοηκοστὸν ἦγεν ἔτος, ὅτε ὁ διάβολος τὰ τοῦ Ἰὼβ ἄθλα εἰς ταύτην μετέφερεν· αὐταῖς μὲν γὰρ καὶ τότε ἐκέχρητο ταῖς μάλιστα· ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τοῦ παρόντος συντέμνει τὸν χρόνον, φορτικωτέρας ποιούμενος τὰς ἀλγηδόνας. Πέμπτον μὲν καὶ τριακοστὸν ἔτος ὁ μακάριος Ἰὼβ ἐν τῇ πληγῇ πεποίηκεν· ἐνταῦθα δὲ ὁ ἐχθρὸς, ὥσπερ ἀπαρχὰς τινὰς τούτων δεκάδων χρόνους ἀποσυλήσας, πρὸς τὰς πληγὰς συνάπτει τῷ ἱερῷ ταύτης σώματι. Τρία γὰρ ἡμισυ ἔτη διὰ τῶν εὐκλεῶν τούτων πόνων τῷ ἐχθρῷ ἀπεμαχήσατο.⁶⁴

The author explicitly quantifies both the duration of the sufferings and the exact moment in life when both Job – here used as a term of comparison – and Synclética experienced the infliction of pain. Synclética is an old woman when she had to fight devil's attacks, and Job had to suffer for thirty-five years. These two chronological details highlight both the importance to set the final religious battle within the final stage of human life and the intensity – expressed in terms of time duration – of pain. In addition, it has to be noted that human life is always associated with pain, here conceived as a distinctive feature of the earthly dimension which will cease only after the end of times.

And the focus on pain itself continues in the second section of the paragraph:

Οὐχ οὕτως οἶμαι τοὺς γενναιοτάτους ἐνηθληκῆναι μάρτυρας, ὡς τὴν ἀοίδιμον Συγκλητικὴν. Ἐκείνους μὲν γὰρ ἐκ τῶν ἔξω προσήει ὁ παλαμναῖος. Κἂν τε γὰρ ξίφος, κἂν τε πῦρ αὐτοῖς προσέφερεν, ἠπιώτερον ὑπῆρχε τῶν παρόντων αὐτῇ πειρατηρίων. Ἄντι μὲν γὰρ καμίνου πεπυρωμένης τὰ σπλάγχνα αὐτῆς ὑπέκαιεν, ἐκ τῶν ἔσω τὸ πῦρ κατ' ὀλίγον ἐξάπτων· καὶ ῥίνης δίκην διὰ μακροῦ χρόνου ἀπεδαπάνη τὸ σῶμα [...] οὕτως οὖν καὶ ὁ ἐχθρὸς ἐκ τῶν ἔνδον, ὥσπερ ὑποσμηχόμενον τὸν πυρετὸν κινῶν, ἄπανστον ἐν νυκτὶ καὶ μεθ' ἡμέραν ἐποιεῖτο τὴν τιμωρίαν.⁶⁵

The already mentioned association between martyrdom and asceticism⁶⁶ - which has its roots in the conception of asceticism as a training for martyrdom, as it can be observed, for example, in Origen's *Exhortatio ad martyrium* - returns here once again, so that the entire narratological structure appears to be included within the wider framework of this relationship. Thus, as in *V. Syncl.* 8, also here the author clearly stresses the difference between a martyr's sufferings and the pain experienced by the ascetic, the latter described as more intense because of its longer duration in time. This pattern

⁶⁴ *V. Syncl.* 106: «When she turned eighty years old, the devil transferred to her the contests of Job. For he made use then of the same scourges. But in the present he cuts short the time, making the sufferings more burdensome. The blessed Job endured in the plague thirty-five years; here, the enemy, as though stripping off some first fruits the time of ten years, to attach the plagues to the holy body of this one. For three-and-a-half years, through famous sufferings, she battled against the enemy».

⁶⁵ *V. Syncl.* 106: «Thus I do not think that the oldest martyrs struggled more bravely than the famous Synclética. For the abominable one attacked them from the outside. For whether he brought to them death by the sword, or fire, they were gentler than the present trials of Synclética. For instead of a fiery furnace burning her inward parts from below, the fire is burning from the inside bit by bit. And in the manner of a file over a very long time, her body wastes away. [...] thus the enemy from the insides made her punishment by causing the smoldering fever unceasing night and day». On this difference between the oldest martyrs and ascetics in terms of a different form of suffering within the long path to sanctity see Narro (2018). Narro stresses how in some Byzantine Lives of female saints new forms of martyrdom emerge. For example, domestic violence becomes a reason – among many others - to achieve sanctity. In this sense, the ascetic struggle of Synclética represents a new and wider tendency to substitute martyrdom with a series of new forms of suffering.

⁶⁶ See *V. Syncl.* 8.

is constantly reproduced in the final part of the narrative, as shown by the following passage, where the devil is said to have inflicted a severe pain on Syncletica's mouth:

[...] καὶ ἐν τεσσαράκοντα ἡμέραις τερηδονίζεται τὸ ὀστέον· καὶ μετὰ διμνηαῖον χρόνον, γίνεται ἔκτρησις. Μελανθέντες οὖν ἦσαν ἅπαντες οἱ πέριξ τόποι. Τὸ δὲ ὀστέον καὶ αὐτὸ φθαρὲν, κατ' ὀλίγον ἐδαπανᾶτο.⁶⁷

The linear and progressive course of the illness follows the linear and progressive course of time: it proceeds slowly, little by little, passing through old age and leading the afflicted woman toward her death, here conceived as the natural final step in a life cycle. More importantly, every single phase of this progression has been numerically quantified, so that detailed length and duration could make the weight of a time running slowly toward its end more effective. And this quantification is constantly repeated until the very end of the story, when Syncletica announces both the date of her death and also the exact hour of her departure from the current world:

Καὶ συντελεσθέντος τοῦ χρόνου, ἀπῆλθεν ἡ μακαρία Συγκλητική πρὸς τὸν Κύριον, ἔπαθλον τῶν ἀγόνων παρ' αὐτοῦ δεξαμένη τὴν τῶν οὐρανῶν βασιλείαν.⁶⁸

Conclusions

The anonymous biographer of the *life of Syncletica* opens his account by stressing the importance of Thecla as a model for the portrait of the protagonist of the story he intends to narrate: Syncletica. This explicitly stated comparison between the two female saints establishes a double relationship: on the one hand, there is a strict literary codependency between early Christian narratives of female saints (both in the apocryphal Acts and in martyrdom accounts) and the hagiographical portraits of the following centuries (starting from the 4th century onwards); on the other hand, there is a continuation of the religious motif of sainthood, although it undergoes a series of transformations related to a different stage of church history in late antiquity with respect to the early phase of persecutions and martyrdom. After the end of the era of persecutions, sainthood could no longer be gained through martyrdom but within the wider context of asceticism (Patlagean 1968: 107-108). On the other hand, asceticism was no longer characterized by an eschatological radicality, but following the process of institutionalization of the church it underwent structural changes by being included within the well-defined boundaries of monasticism.

The present analysis has shown that the narratological structure of the *life of Syncletica* explicitly reveals not only a new form of asceticism and sainthood but also – and more importantly – a new sense of temporality with respect to the eschatological time of Christian origins. This ‘temporal turn’ appears as a fundamental factor in the process of adaptation – and consequent transformation – of female sainthood to a ‘new’ post-martyrdom Christian era. The text of the *vita* is constantly permeated

⁶⁷ V. *Syncl.* 111: «[...] and in forty days the bone was worm-eaten. And within the space of two months' time there was a hole. The surrounding spaces were all becoming black. And the bone itself was corrupted, and little by little wasted away».

⁶⁸ V. *Syncl.* 113: «when the hour was complete, the blessed Syncletica went to the Lord, receiving the kingdom of heaven, the price for her struggles for him».

with temporal references to the various stages of Syncletica's life, which is thus narrated according to its natural chronological linearity and progression. In addition, the description of certain phases of the saint's life - such as illness – is construed through a strong emphasis on time dilation, cyclical repetition and excessive duration of the events, thus evoking the perception of passing time slowly running towards the final stage of life: death. On the other hand, the long series of ascetic practices performed by Syncletica reveal a high level of self-perception and self-knowledge of bodily functions. The ascetic body undergoes a series of ascetic exercises that have been repeatedly experienced and practiced, and this continuously performed repetition reintegrates the body itself into the ceaseless flow of time. All these details show that the focus was no longer on life after death, but on life on earth, and that sainthood had to be gained not through a premature and violent death, but with the acceptance of the incessantly consuming action of an ordinary and linear time on bodies, flesh and bones.

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