

St. Nicholas of Sion: Evidence of Rural/Urban Tension in Early Byzantine Anatolia

The Life of St. Nicholas of Sion describes the life of a rural holy man who lived in mid-sixth century Anatolia, had great influence with the local population, and eventually became a bishop. In the course of relating these events, the document recounts stories of miracles, moralistic parables of faith, and in general follows the distinctive patterns of most Byzantine hagiographies. Among these familiar religious homilies, we can also find evidence of significant social tensions that existed between the rural and urban populations in the region of western Anatolia the text describes. These social tensions manifested themselves in various ways: through frequent comparisons of varying degrees of religious faith and commitment between communities, which portrayed the urban residents in a negative light; through actions on the part of the saint which were intended to preserve the status quo in the rural villages; and most especially in the ways in which the rural saint was slighted by the urban clergy despite his eventual elevation to the office of bishop. In many respects St. Nicholas of Sion, though widely revered in the rural countryside in which he lived and worshipped, was still perceived as an outsider by members of the urban Christian hierarchy.

Comparisons of religious faith occur in the text with some regularity. In almost every case, the rural peasantry is elevated by the author as being of inherently higher moral status than the urban dwellers. In an early vignette, St. Nicholas put out a call for workmen to assist him in cutting up the felled 'sacred' (demonically possessed) cypress tree - he first tried to rally workmen in Myra, the nearby 'metropolis,' and found no takers. These urban workmen ostensibly objected to the size of the 'sacred' tree, claiming "We will not be able to cope with such a

tree.”¹ In order to find obedient and faithful volunteers, he was forced to go to a smaller, rural ‘village,’ Karkabo. There he found five men who would do the work with him, supported by the power of his prayers.² In this story, the urban dwellers were portrayed as fearful, weak, and less open to the saint’s influence. Paired with other parables related later in the document, whose intentions were to emphasize the importance of belief in and support of saintly figures in addition to the Christian deity,³ this distinction was made to disparage the lesser faith of the urban population. By contrast, the direct and personal connection to local saints was clearly critical for the rural populations’ belief.

The differing moral value of specific locations is also mentioned in the text. It was said that God valued the rural location of one of the shrines in Sion “as greatly as if it were God’s paradise,”⁴ and the author even described it as the “counterpart of Holy Sion in Jerusalem.”⁵ In this comparison, the rural shrine was raised in stature in the eyes of the local people and other readers of this text, and their own local landmark took precedence over the other distant and urban sacred locations that were frequently referenced in many religious contexts. The next chapter also highlighted the value St. Nicholas gave to this rural location, even after his first visits to Jerusalem and Myra, by designating it as a place he “loved” and where many visions had occurred.⁶ By directing the rural population’s faith towards local sacred places,⁷ St. Nicholas may have been referencing an understanding of traditional peasant spiritual practices, and he certainly

¹ Ševčenko & Ševčenko, The Life of St. Nicholas of Sion, p. 39.

² Ševčenko & Ševčenko, The Life of St. Nicholas of Sion, p. 39-40.

³ Ševčenko & Ševčenko, The Life of St. Nicholas of Sion, p. 43-44, p. 59.

⁴ Ševčenko & Ševčenko, The Life of St. Nicholas of Sion, p. 31.

⁵ Ševčenko & Ševčenko, The Life of St. Nicholas of Sion, p. 31.

⁶ Ševčenko & Ševčenko, The Life of St. Nicholas of Sion, p. 31-32.

⁷ As well as towards local religious figures such as himself...

was effective in grounding their Christian faith in specific, local places rather than stories of distant and distrusted urban regions.

St. Nicholas also used his influential position in rural villages to enforce an adherence to the status quo, and prevented change which it was felt would disrupt the balance of the rural communities. This was especially evident in his actions regarding the quarrying of stone used for construction of one of the churches: unsupervised digging in the ground was strongly resisted by St. Nicholas, who halted the quarrying of stone when he planned to leave on a pilgrimage for the holy land. In so doing, he said that “God granted me this grace, the stone obeys me, and I do as I wish.”⁸ His brother began the work again against his explicit instructions while he was gone, but found that he was unable to turn a block over, even with the help of many men. When St. Nicholas returned, he was able to turn it over with far fewer men, and thereby demonstrated his power over the digging process. However, the main point of this story is that St. Nicholas essentially wanted the excavation stopped, especially while he was away and could not maintain control over the situation. Digging in the ground in any form was associated with the search for wealth, and the saint had to be present in order to keep the focus on simply acquiring stones for the building of churches: this was a proper devotional pursuit which enhanced the pride of the rural communities and fostered unity, rather than the social discord which might arise from discovered wealth.

The principal tensions, however, can be seen in the descriptions of the relationship between St. Nicholas and the urban clergy. Several stories and homilies in the text explain the religious position of the saints in Anatolia, establishing the essential balance of belief in both God

⁸ Ševčenko & Ševčenko, The Life of St. Nicholas of Sion, p. 69.

and in the saints.⁹ The effect of this localization of faith was that the peasants listened directly to St. Nicholas in many important decisions, key among them the decision to cut off the local metropolis of Myra from supply during a plague.¹⁰ In this case St. Nicholas revealed to the peasants the essential dependence of the urban population, magnifying their importance in physical terms as well as in those of faith. His tour of the local villages, performed both to avoid capture by the authorities of the archbishop and to rally the support of the rural people through massive feasts, was a clear and effective demonstration of his power and influence among the rural population to the institutional church.¹¹ Despite their obvious anger at him for disobeying their orders, this same urban clergy decided to appoint him bishop shortly thereafter. In making this decision, the urban clergy had realized the importance of co-opting St. Nicholas as their local representative rather than allowing him to remain a rival for their power.

Immediately before he was appointed bishop, St. Nicholas saw a vision of the Holy Spirit “pointing to a seat of honor and a garb of priesthood, bidding him be seated in that seat...” and he interpreted this vision as an “overshadowing” that made him anxious.¹² This reaction definitely reveals some of the separation that such a rural saint felt from the urban clergy and priesthood who has so recently tried to bring him to the city in chains. When the archbishop ordained him, the reader is not told of St. Nicholas’ reaction directly, but the change clearly did not eliminate the ongoing conflicts between the rural saint and the institutional church. Soon after his ordination, the city magistrates and the clergy attempted to prevent Nicholas from building a

⁹ Ševčenko & Ševčenko, The Life of St. Nicholas of Sion, p. 43-44, p. 59.

¹⁰ Ševčenko & Ševčenko, The Life of St. Nicholas of Sion, p. 83.

¹¹ Ševčenko & Ševčenko, The Life of St. Nicholas of Sion, p. 85-87.

¹² Ševčenko & Ševčenko, The Life of St. Nicholas of Sion, p. 101.

church dedicated to the Virgin Mary.¹³ Even though he was now a bishop, he was still seen as an outsider and not entirely respected within the urban communities, even though he still commanded the respect of the rural peasantry. His attempt to simply create a new sacred space, which had previously been welcomed by the rural population,¹⁴ was resisted and modified by the urban clergy, who forced him to “purchase the hallowed spot” after “vigorous litigation,”¹⁵ rather than allowing him to simply identify a site as chosen by God and begin construction. These events reveal the restrictions placed on St. Nicholas by the institutional church: far from the respected position he had enjoyed in the villages, in this new context he was an outsider on probation. He offered the church influence over rural communities, but he was not to interfere outside of that role.

As in the almost contemporary case of St. Theodore of Sykeon, St. Nicholas provides a key example of a type of religious figure who bridged the rural and urban communities of Byzantine Anatolia. These local saints created an uneasy alliance between populations who, though they lived and worked in fairly close proximity, viewed each other with distrust and harbored intense local pride. This relationship was successful in the eyes of the author of The Life of St. Nicholas of Sion, who described how just before his final illness St. Nicholas “went down to the metropolis of Myra to take part in the Synod...and having enjoyed the [company of] the holy men and of the venerable fathers, who were his co-celebrants at the holy Synod in Christ, he embraced them all, gave [the kiss of] peace to all...”¹⁶ Despite the author’s positive view of the final outcome of the partnership, the tensions that existed in that relationship were quite evident.

¹³ Ševčenko & Ševčenko, The Life of St. Nicholas of Sion, p. 103.

¹⁴ Ševčenko & Ševčenko, The Life of St. Nicholas of Sion, p. 31-32.

¹⁵ Ševčenko & Ševčenko, The Life of St. Nicholas of Sion, p. 103.

¹⁶ Ševčenko & Ševčenko, The Life of St. Nicholas of Sion, p. 109.

Regardless of his nominal membership high up in the institutional church hierarchy, St. Nicholas was not allowed free reign for his activities in his own community, and neither was the urban clergy allowed direct influence among the village population. The essential nature of the partnership was that it created a truce following the divisive incidents during the plague, with compromises made on both sides.