The Hagiological Study of the Biography of Ayia Elesa

Research Thesis

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Chapter

Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to provide the first historical and literary analysis of Saint Elesa contextualizing within the modes of discourse typical of martyrologies and Byzantine hagiography.[1] First, the origins of the biography of Elesa are speculated through an examination of cultural inventions, in particular oral tradition and folk stories. The reason behind the construction of the vita of Elesa is explored in connection to a local church and monastery. Then, a historiographical approach focused on literary criticism is applied to the written document about Saint Elesa. The hagiography is assessed from a poststructuralist perspective in order to determine the ways in which the biographies of earlier saints influenced the author of the vita of Elesa. Through the use of a translated hagiography, literary themes and motifs present in the text conclude that Elesa embodies aspects common to ancient Christian martyrology and Byzantine hagiography.

Elesa is a female saint venerated on the island of Kythera, which is located off the coast of the Peloponnese peninsula in Greece. As a local saint, she has a church and monastery built in her honor. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, Saint Elesa has a fixed feast day on August 1st. During my extended stay on Kythera, I learned from conversations with residents their opinions about her life. Most of the knowledge cited by the locals was learned from religious services on her feast day. Today, the local church and monastery serve as the source of information about Elesa. Although her vita is listed in the Synaxarion, a database containing names and information about Eastern Orthodox saints, no community outside of Kythera venerates her. All knowledge about the saint is recorded on a single primary document, which has no known renditions or prior references. In addition, the author of her biography, along with the date of the text, is unknown.

[1] Anthony Kaldellis, personal communication via email, 2013.

The one manuscript documenting her entire life and death is identified as a hagiography. The term "hagiography" is applied to a biography of a saint, as well as the word "vita" (Latin for "life"). A hagiography serves as a tribute to the memory of a saint and his/her accomplishments. In modern scholarship, historians study hagiographies for a variety of information (e.g. cultural, political, geographical, etc.). The following study is categorized in historical scholarship as hagiology, the historical study of biographies of saints.[2] This methodology examines the literary makeup of Elesa's manuscript to determine what frameworks she encompasses found in the Christian tradition of hagiography.

My methodology addresses the literary motifs and themes prevalent in the vita of Elesa in order to relate her hagiography to earlier saints' vitae. The biography of Elesa is dissected for literary components that are actually manifestations of earlier genres in hagiography. Elesa models the virtues emphasized in different periods of hagiography. The author writes in the tradition of early Christian hagiographers despite the text being composed at a later time in history, raising several questions concerning its origins. Methodology utilized in this thesis measures intertexuality among a group of vitae and the vita of Elesa in order to calculate what themes and motifs permeated the narrative of Elesa. The following chapters put into practice the methodology used to analyze the vita of Saint Elesa.

Chapter one proposes cultural influences that may have inspired the vita of Elesa, and how they serve as an indication of the purpose for its composition. Even though the hagiography of Elesa is a literary work, the author could have been influenced by cultural discourses, mainly oral tradition and folk elements. In addition, the author could have also been aware of a different saint, Markella of Chios, whose story might have been known to the island of Kythera. The

[2] Alice-Mary Talbot, ed., *Byzantine Saints' Lives in Translation: Holy Women of Byzantium*, (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996), vi.

analysis points out how cultural elements are slipped into the text during the composition of hagiographies. Further, it highlights the purpose of the hagiography's creation, which is either to provide an explanation for an event or to affirm an identity of a place and/or people.

Chapter two provides a brief overview of hagiography and how literary criticism is a developing field in hagiographical inquiry. The section introduces poststructuralism and intertextuality as the approach used for analyzing the hagiography of Elesa. In doing so, it discusses typical literary components to the vitae of saints, in terms of themes and literary frameworks. Subsequently, I conduct a literary analysis of Elesa in chapter three and four and relate the content of her hagiography to earlier genres: asceticism and martyrology.

Chapter three examines the theme of martyrdom in the hagiography of Elesa. The death of Elesa, along with the events proceeding up to it, resembles early Christian martyrologies. In the beginning of the vita, the audience learns Elesa is a martyr, and her feast day is shared with those killed at the Pergia of Pamphylia. Similar to the martyr Blandina, Eugenia, the mother of Elesa, represents the mother found in the book of Maccabees who encourages her children to receive the crown of immortality (i.e. the heavenly reward for martyrdom).[3] Recognizing the occurrence of intertexuality between the vita of Elesa and earlier martryologies highlights the literary topos common to Christian literature in its nascent stages.

Chapter four explores the genre of asceticism. The purpose of this chapter is to expose relevant themes that the hagiographer incorporated into the story of Elesa. The occurrence of asceticism being practiced by all ranks of society along with being adopted by the protagonists in hagiographies is a prevalent subject in early Christian literature. Accounts about ascetic figures are one of the earliest forms of hagiography. The writings preserved evidence of a small trend

[3] Stephanie L. Cobb, *Dying to be men: gender and language in early Christian martyr texts*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 113-115.

happening even among women in aristocratic circles. Elesa represents asceticism through her vow of chastity, isolation, and asceticism. I compare her texts to that of St. Mary of Egypt and Theokiste of Lesbos. These two saints, although a debatable controversy, are two figures cited by historians as notable female ascetics.[4] The same process of analysis is applied in chapter three on martyrdom.

Although Saint Elesa is a case study, this thesis demonstrates on a broader scale how a poststructuralist approach with a focus on intertextuality exhibits the overlapping influence saints' narratives facilitated on one another. This comparative method, focused solely on the character and narrative, points out what topos hagiographers were incorporating into these biographies. Hagiographers would likely draw from prior and/or coinciding sources so that the audience would identify the saint as belonging to a specific paradigm, or genre, of hagiography. Passages pulled from the vita of Elesa and from other biographies of different saints exemplify this phenomenon.

Summary of the Vita of Ayia Elesa

A noble woman named Eugenia was struggling to conceive a child with her husband, Helladious. After praying to God for mercy, Eugenia conceives and delivers her daughter, Elesa. After Elesa is baptized by Sophronios, who is an ascetic, she is educated in the Christian faith with the guidance of her mother. Although Helladios is a pagan, he permits out of love for his wife and daughter to practice their faith. When Elesa is older, Eugenia grows ill and on her deathbed advises her daughter to remain devoted to the Christian faith even while in the care of her pagan father. Following her mother's death, Elesa is designated mistress of the household and manages the estate. However, her passion for the Christian religion only grows stronger in

[4] Talbots, 96.

the wake of Eugenia's death. Despite Helladious' affection for Elesa, he is annoyed by her intense adoration for Christ. He appeals to his daughter to consider marriage, believing it would make her happy and fulfilled. As reward for her potential marriage, he offers to allow her to choose the groom and pass on his wealth and property to her. She brushes off his proposal and asks to discuss the matter later. Secretly, Elesa desires to take a vow of chastity and live the life of an ascetic.

When Helladios leaves on campaign, Elesa hands out alms (her materials possessions and money) and flees to Kythera with only a few of her female servants. Once the boat reaches the island, she disembarks with a group of travels. A poisonous snake bites a man in the group, and the man dies shortly after. Here, Elesa performs a miracle and resurrects the stranger from the dead. The crowd is awed by the event, however, they depart the island, leaving Elesa and her maidservants. News of the event spreads to mainland Greece and reaches her father's ears after having returned home to find his daughter gone. Helladious find passage to the island and travels there in search of his daughter. In a wretched state, he finds her asceticizing alone.

Confronting her, Helladios demands Elesa to abandon her practices and return with him to the mainland. Elesa declares herself a Christian and refuses to go back home because he is a pagan. Helladious becomes angry, and in his rage he tortures and murders Elesa. Divine intervention, though, resurrects her back to life. Again, she attempts to flee from her father when divine intervention temporarily ceases Helladious' attacks by cracking the earth in half. Despite another miraculous intervention, he eventually catches Elesa and beheads her. Afterwards, Helladious leave Greece with her servants. Unknown to Helladious, an unnamed maidservant witnesses all of these events from a hidden spot. The girl stays behind and weeps for forty days and nights after burying Elesa's body on the mountaintop where she was martyred.

The servant departs from the island and spreads the word of her mistress' martyrdom. Visitors then travel to the island and visit Elesa's resting place, where a church and monastery is erected. That church and monastery still stand today in her honor.[5]

Origins of the Biography of Ayia Elesa

The origins of the vita of Saint Elesa are left to speculation due to a lack of information regarding the creation of the hagiography. In addition, the authorship regarding the vita of Saint Elesa is postulated as well due to the biographer's anonymity and the unknown date of the text. To determine the inspiration for the story of Elesa, distinctive passages that do not follow hagiographic rhetoric are sorted out from the rest of the narrative and are inspected for indicators of cultural inventions, in particular oral tradition and folk stories. These passages may reflect clues as to how the hagiography of Elesa could have been motivated by local influences (cultural inventions). Using Bill Carher's analysis of Osios Theodore of Kythera, the intended purpose of Elesa's hagiography is assumed to establish the founding of a local church and monastery affiliated with her martyrdom. Furthermore, cultural diffusion is also suspected to have influenced the composition of Elesa's biography. Comparing Ayia Markella of Chios to Ayia Elesa of Kythera illustrates how the vita of Markella may have directly influenced the biography of Elesa.

The identity of the author of Elesa's vita is unknown but is best deduced by following the profile of known hagiographers. Likely candidates are those who had resources to construct such a text and had the authority to promote its authenticity as a legitimate vita with church approval. Based on the identities of known hagiographers, the author is likely a male cleric, as

[5] Luke Gorton and Kyle Shimoda, trans., "The Vita of Ayia Elesa," (Columbus, Ohio: Unpublished Translation, 2013).

modern scholars agree that there are few known female hagiographers.[6] In addition, the sermon at the end of Elesa's vita corroborates that the author held a position in the church. Due to his knowledge of the geography of Kythera and the location of the church, the author may have visited the island, or he might have even been a resident. If the later, he was likely a local cleric who held some prestige in the community. Clerics sometimes had access to education and collections of scholarly works. In particular, some monks were educated in biblical writings and religious scholarship, such as early Christian writings ranging from bishops' letters to martyrologies, and saints' biographies.[7] The dialect of the text confirms the author's education and shows he could write in Classical (Attic) Greek and Medieval Greek.

The language of the hagiography of Elesa is Attic Greek with traces of Medieval Greek. This indicates that the author recorded the manuscript sometime after the eighth century.[8] An example of medieval usage in the text is found on page three of the vita with the verb "ἦτο," which is the third person singular, imperfect form of the verb "εἶμι" meaning "to be."[9] The Attic Greek form would have been "ἦν." In addition, modernisms are also present with the absence of the infinitive[10] and the use of a periphrastic phrase[11], which places the date of composition to a more recent period. Therefore, the language traces of medieval usage and modernisms situate the text sometime in the sixteenth to nineteenth century. The text makes no reference to any earlier biography of St. Elesa. Assuming this is the only literary work composed about her and that it is a reasonably recent composition, it is likely that the text we have originated from local oral tradition. That is, of course, not to say that Elesa actually lived in the 4th century, but that

[6] Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred fictions: holy women and hagiography in late antiquity*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 1-13.
[7] Coon, 1-13.
[8] Luke Gorton, Kyle Shimoda, Anthony Kaldellis, and Timothy Gregory, personal communication, 2012-2013.
[9] Luke Gorton, personal communication, 2013.
[10] The infinitive is a verb form.
[11] A periphrastic phrase is "formed by a group of words rather than an inflection." Dictionary.com/ (March 10, 2013).

some knowledge of her most probably existed before the creation of the present text in the 16th-19th century.

The date of Elesa's martyrdom is designated using the "Christian Era" system - A.D., or Anno Domini, is a dating classification constructed in 532 C.E. by Dionysius Exiguus. Despite its creation in the sixth century, the Eastern Orthodox Church referred to the "Era of Constantinople" calendar system until the late eighteenth century.[12] The prevalent use of the Anno Domini system correlates with the modernisms present in the text - it is likely that the composition of the vita is dated sometime within the past few centuries. However, the author could have depended on a prior vita regarding Elesa; he could have converted the date of her martyrdom from the Era of Constantinople to the Christian era calendar. Certain passages in the manuscript regarding Elesa also indicate another source of inspiration: cultural inventions.

Oral traditions are cultural inventions, defined by Jan Vansina as "verbal testimonies which are reported statements concerning the past."[13] One product of oral tradition is folklore, which are stories transmitted orally and textually within a group of people and are meant to communicate a moral lesson. Folklore is not limited to a specific time, location, or social complexity; it is still practiced in many cultures today. The term "folklore" was invented by Briton William John Thoms in 1846, although folklore studies were a prevalent area of research long before.[14] Folklore is often used to describe artistic stories and entertaining tales; oral tradition in general is stories of explanation and is often applied to edify lessons.[15] Both terms are often used interchangeably since their disparities are relatively insignificant.[16] Oral tradition

[12] E.G. Richards, *Mapping time the calendar and its history*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999),106-109.
[13] Jan Vansina, *Oral tradition: a study in historical methodology*, (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1965), 19.
[14] Thomas A. Green, *Folklore: an encyclopedia of beliefs, customs, tales, music, and art*, (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 1997), 331-332.
[15] Green, 357 -364.
[16] Folklore and oral tradition are applied interchangeably throughout this chapter.

often penetrates written sources, including religious texts, due to authors being influenced by their own culture.

Elesa's story may be an example of oral tradition being present in a written account. Anomalies in the text are often assumed to have originated from cultural invention, which are the abstract products of a culture (e.g. local folk stories). Following other studies, I identify hagiographic, classical, and biblical motifs by process of categorization; whatever remains is assumed to be a result of cultural invention. One might object to organizing the material in this way because it may overlook what are potentially cultural influences. Hillary Powell explains that hagiographic motifs could conceivably be folk elements integrated by the authors.[17] However, cultural inventions are usually recycled as hagiographic motifs or thrown out altogether, which eliminates any cultural affiliation. The vita of Elesa may have preserved some of the cultural influences that inspired the composition of her vita because her biography is not reshaped by numerous renditions and mediations from a vast number of authors. Therefore, assumed traces of oral tradition, folklore, and cultural diffusion are distinguishable enough for analysis.

The account of Elesa could be a result of a folk story communicated through oral tradition in the communities of Kythera. The story may have originated as a local story, thus explaining why there is an absence of a reference prior to 16th century. Hagiographies are thought to have incorporated folk stories so that the audience would embrace the texts as a result of its familiar context.[18] Consider, for example, the story about St. Elizabeth of Hungary and the ring her husband entrusted to her before leaving on expedition; the ring carried a stone that would break if some tragedy befell upon the donor. This motif about a magical ring occurs in

[17] Hilary Powell, ""Once upon a time there was a saint...": Re-evaluating folklore in Anglo-Latin hagiography," vol. 121, *Folklore*, (2010), 173-176.
[18] Powell, 173.

other stories outside of hagiography.[19] Before universal access to education in Greece, the Kytheran community likely depended on oral tradition for spreading what the culture recognizes as historical truth.[20] Tradition is treated as "fact," and contradictory evidence is understood as false. For something to be viewed as valid, it must be applicable to a paradigm of what is already accepted truth.[21] When a folk story is written and presented to a group of people, the author must adhere to the original content of the cultural inventions during the conversion from verbal narrative to a written work.[22] In relation to the vita of Elesa, the characters' names are indicators of folk elements.

The characters' names in the vita regarding Elesa are a pattern of puns that represent a social status or virtue. The phenomenon of the "meaningful" names may have arisen from folk influence.[23] The name for the character Helladios (who is a Greek pagan) stems from the Attic Greek word "Ἕλλην," which literally translates as "Greek (man)." However, in the Byzantine period the word "Ἕλλην" meant "pagan." So, the name could be translated as either meaning. In the same manner, the name for the character Eugenia who is a noble woman is derived from the Greek word "εὐγενής," which translates as "well-born." Likewise, the name for Sophronios (who is an ascetic) is derived from the Greek word "σωφροσύνη," which means "moderation." The name Elesa is from the Greek word "ἔλεος," which means "mercy." However, it is possible that a folk story may not be the source of this pattern. In fact, the author may have been influenced by classical literature, which often transformed names of characters into puns (e.g. Socrates' writings).[24] Whatever the case, the audience would have been entertained by the

[19] Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legend of Saints*, (University of Notre Dame Press, 1961), 29.
[20] Vansina, 102-104.
[21] Vansina, 99-106.
[22] Powell, 182-183.
[23] Green, 357 – 364, and Luke Gorton, personal communication, 2013.
[24] Eugene S. McCartney, "Puns and Plays on Proper Names," Vol. 14, *The Classical Journal,* (1919), 343-358.

names' usage. Unlike the other characters, Elesa's name correlates with the events surrounding her conception. Eugenia prayed to God for "mercy" so that she could conceive a child. God answered Eugenia's prayer, and she became pregnant with Elesa. At her baptism, Elesa received a new name from Sophronios: "Ελεησα" with the words "God has had mercy on you."

The name "Ελεησα" might be a reference to "Eleousa," which is a term that can either refer to an icon of the blessed Virgin, or the Virgin herself.[25] The name transformation from "Elesa" to "Eleousa" is odd because Elesa, according to the vita, is a young female ascetic and martyr. Oddly, the author does not address Elesa as "Eleousa" again for the rest of the narrative, which is likely a result of wanting to avoid the audience mistaking Elesa as the Virgin or an icon of the Virgin. Icon veneration, which is a customary in the Eastern Orthodox Church, is prevalent on the island of Kythera since it hosts the "Panagia of Myrtidiotissa" ("Our lady of the Myrtle"). The Kytherian communities defend their island as being the source of this very specific portrait of Mary and Christ.[26] Whether or not there is a link between the Saint Elesa and Panagia of Myrtidiotissa is too difficult to detect. Figure one is an example of an icon of the "Panagia Eleousa," which is a depiction of the Virgin holding the infant Christ (see fig. 1).[27] This introduces the question as to why would the author include the term at all and not avoid this name change: the title "Eleousa" was referenced in order for the audience to recognize an affiliation with a local church.

"Eleousa" could have originally been connected to the founding of a local church. Religious folk stories sometimes involve holy figures such as the Virgin Mary, as seen in the

[25] John Thomas and Angela Constantinides Hero, eds., *Byzantine Monastery Foundation Documents: A Complete Translation of the Surviving Founders' Typika and Testament*, (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2000), 167-188.
[26] Timothy E. Gregory, et. al., *Archaeology and history in Roman, medieval and post-medieval Greece: studies on method and meaning in honor of Timothy E. Gregory*, (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008), 198-219.
[27] Icon of the Panagia Eleousa, http://th05.deviantart.net/fs51/PRE/i/2009/302/f/4/Panagia_Eleousa_by_teopa.jpg.

story "Our Lady's Child."[28] Oral traditions often allege a "causal link," which is the explanation of an event, place, etc. However, the hagiography of Elesa severs the causal link between the oral tradition regarding "Eleousa" and the building. The written source provided a reason for the construction of the church (i.e. a causal link).[29] According to her manuscript, the church is assembled in response to Elesa's martyrdom. Prior to her hagiography, it is presumed no written-record disclosed the founding of the church. With written sources on hand to contradict otherwise, the hagiographer likely authored the account of Elesa as an "official" explanation for the local church despite a fixed oral tradition. The reason for the author's success in having the community accept the hagiography as a plausible account is the inclusion of church's geography.

Although the details of the vita are generally elusive, the author connects the church to Elesa by including a descriptive location of her burial place. According to the text, Elesa settled in the south region of Kythera on a mountainside. This description generally correlates with the location of the church mentioned in her hagiography. In addition, the local community believes the landscape around the church is evidence of the miracles mentioned in her narrative. In particular, the crack in the earth is a result of divine intervention that had helped Elesa to escape her father. Today, the church and monastery is a place for gathering and celebrating religious holidays. The story about Elsa is not only affiliated with a local church but is also a reflection to the cultural identity of Kythera.

The hagiography of Elesa describes how her death attracted visitors to Kythera, resulting in the colonization of the island. According to her vita, news of Elesa's death allured people to the island when her tale reached mainland Greece. Visitors traveled to her resting place and constructed a church in her honor. Eventually, people migrated to island and colonized Kythera

[28] Green, 359.
[29] Vansina, 104.

with small settlements. Figure three is a map of Greece and the island Kythera (see fig. 3).[30] Every year on August 1, the town celebrates her feast day at the church and monastery, and holds a service celebrating her sacrifice. According to a study by Bill Carher, the identity of Kythera is associated with the island's local saints. Carher points out that the geographical descriptions of Kythera in the vita of Osios Theodore are affirming a bond between the saint and the island.[31] In a similar manner, the narrative of Elesa connects the community and its religious structures to her death, thus securing a relationship between her and Kythera. She represents Kythera and its entire people; historical accuracy regarding the island's colonization is beside the point. This degree of veneration for an island saint also occurs on the island Chios regarding St. Markella. In fact, Markella's hagiography may have inspired Elesa's story.

The parallel texts of St. Elesa of Kythera and St. Markella of Chios exemplify cultural diffusion (the dissemination of customary practices from one culture to another) in hagiography.[32] An example of this phenomenon is the relationship between the biographies of St. Mary of Egypt and St. Theokiste of Lesbos. The hagiography of St. Mary of Egypt written in the seventh century C.E. directly inspired the story of St. Theokiste whose narrative is recorded in the tenth century.[33] The comparison of Markella and Elesa's vitae exhibit many similarities; one text was presumably the original and the other a replication. Figure 2 is the plot found in both vitae (see fig. 2).[34] A feature of both texts, the miracle of a rock cracking open in order to protect the saints from their fathers is also found in the accounts of St. Ariadne and St. Thecla.[35] Although a shared motif among a small number of biographies, the assumed relationship

[30] Map of Kythera, http://www.greeka.com/ionian/kythira/kythira-map/kythira.gif/ (March 10, 2013).
[31] Gregory, et. Al, 273-276.
[32] Richard K. Ormrod, "Adaptation and Cultural Diffusion", vol. 91, *Journal of Geography,* (1992), 258-62.
[33] Alice-Mary Talbots, *Holy women of Byzantium: ten saints' lives in English translation*, (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996), 65-95.
[34] *The Vita of Markella of Chios*, http://www.hotca.org/orthodoxy/43-life-of-st-markella-of-chios/ (March 5, 2013). The original translation of Markella's vita is inaccessible and only English summaries are available.
[35] Delehaye, 34.

between Saint Elesa and Saint Markella is an example of cultural diffusion due having a *direct* impact on one another's biographies. Markella died in the fifteenth century, her hagiography was recorded in sometime between the 16th-19th centuries as well.[36] Indeed, the dates of these hagiographies' composition correlate with one another. However, similar to oral tradition and folklore the actual role of cultural diffusion in the text's composition is still not certain and only left to speculation.

The inconsistencies found in Elesa's narrative show the author attempting to reconcile cultural influences with hagiographic literature. These fragments of cultural influence are distinctive in Elesa's text, ranging from the name "Eleousa" to the characters' names as puns, and the correlation of narratives between Markella and Elesa. While elements of oral tradition and cultural diffusion are certainly present in the text, the level of accuracy regarding the content of these devices cannot be concluded; the author could have misrepresented local traditions. Powell explains that hagiographers take into consideration the disparities when including or omitting cultural elements in a vita. Some cultural aspects are integrated to gain community's approval so it is not censored as a misrepresentation.[37] Overall, historical methodology is limited on how much information can be drawn about the underlying origins of Saint Elesa. The rest of the narrative follows the hagiographic tradition of Ancient Christian writings and Byzantine hagiography. To appeal to the audience, the author structured literary tropes common to Christian martyrology and early asceticism throughout the narrative of Elesa.

[36] http://www.hotca.org/orthodoxy/43-life-of-st-markella-of-chios/ (March 5, 2013).
[37] Powell, 182-184.

Hagiography: Historiographical Approach and Literary Analysis

Scholars have introduced a variety of historiographical approaches for analyzing the content of hagiographies. The vita of a saint can reveal information about sociology, geography, and political climate, even if the historicity of the account itself is questionable. However, the composition of the text can also provide insight into gender-specific themes and popular stylistic trends. The details shared amongst a group of vitae are not merely coincidental. Many biographies of saints mimic previous narratives, except for a few modified details. The study of intertexuality, the influence of previous/existing literature on another text, in hagiography has resulted in the creation of standard models of virtue. The purpose of this section is to explain hagiographical methodology as it relates to literary conventions, and explain poststructuralist approach and intertextuality as it is applied in the following chapters to reveal the vita of Saint Elesa as a personification of both early Christian martyrology[38] and early Byzantine hagiography.

Hagiography is the study of saint's lives through the examination of holy writings. Texts that recognize the trials, virtue, and suffering of an individual or group of people are considered a hagiography.[39] Hagiography examines all frontiers of "folklore and anthropology, mythology, and iconography, liturgy and ecclesiastical history, literary history and even literary criticism."[40] The first pioneer of hagiography, as a field of historical inquiry, is Hippolyte Delehaye with his book *The Legend of the Saints*. Although hagiography was previously referenced in a number of scholarly works, Delehaye's publication was the first to introduce a methodology and a historical approach specifically designed for this field of literary criticism. Although Delehaye's methods have been refined over the past decades through the critique of modern historians, his approaches

[38] The term "martyrology" is a specific type of hagiography and commonly recognized as one of its earliest forms.
[39] Delehaye, 1-11.
[40] Delehaye, 4.

in terms of principle have remained relatively the same. For my analysis of the vita of Elesa, I apply Delehaye's perspective on generic hagiographies.[41] The biography of Elesa cannot be analyzed for historic truth due to a lack of factual details - historic truth, in this context, is the plausible existence of peoples, events, or places in relation to a saint. Because the vita of Elesa is heavily masked with hagiographic tradition, verifying the details in her text would likely yield little to no information.[42] While this does not mean the vita of Elesa is fictitious, it is too difficult to determine the historical accuracy of her biography. The uncertainty concerning authenticity is the reason why intertextuality and literary criticism are the focus of the hagiography of Elesa.

Modern historiographical approaches now allow historians to recognize a variety of criterion for investigation, including literary content. Stephen J. Davis illustrates this modernization of historiography in his recent study, which examines the portrayals of the feminine identity and the virtue of transvestite nuns in the early Christian East. Davis found tenuous variations of the same discourse in hagiography: the theme of women cross-dressing in order to enter monastic life among males.[43] He studies these stories with an approach that was formerly identified as linguistic methodology but is now universal in many academic studies, including historiography. Davis argues that hagiographic literature sharing similar content, including themes and motifs, is a result of intertextuality. The term "intertextuality" refers to the alluding to prior or coinciding texts.[44] Even if writers believe their work is genuine, their accounts were, in reality, not original since their expertise in hagiography is reflected in their writings. Along with intertextuality, a poststructuralist approach is used when comparing passages from the vita of Elesa to early Christian hagiographies.

[41] Generic, in this context, refers to hagiographies with very similar plots that only differ in minor detail.
[42] Delehaye, 21.
[43] Stephen J. Davis "Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex: Intertexuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men." (Journal of Early Christian Studies, 2002), 5-6.
[44] Davis, 13.

Poststructuralism perceives all language and literature as unoriginal and as nothing but a product of influence from other sources. These "other sources" are pervaded by other components of culture as well. Therefore, no variant is omitted from being shaped by a structure of culture (e.g. language, religion, government, social complexity, etc.). Attempting to trace an original source in a sound, word, or text is theoretically impossible because the origin is beyond scholars' capacity to analyze.[45] The content of any manuscript is consequently a product of previous literature, regardless of the author's "originality." Although some linguists may prefer other theories for literary analysis, poststructuralism allows scholars to solely focus on the repetition of literary genre and motifs alone. The beginning of a literary structure is irrelevant to the study of Elesa, which only examines *immediate* sources as a whole that influenced the author's composition.[46] In doing so, intertextuality is an effective method for exhibiting the literary content that is repetitious in hagiographies.

A few historians have designed a classification system based on intertextuality that organizes hagiographies on account of literary content. However, cataloging hagiographies down to its most simplistic terms could mislabel material as biblical, classical, or cultural.[47] As previously discussed in chapter one, there are literary structures that do not correspond to standard hagiographical conventions in the vita of Elesa. Nevertheless, hagiography can at least be divided by genre. This genre can emphasize a principle virtue or plot (e.g. martyrdom, asceticism, monasticism, etc.). Saints can be categorized by miracles, vows of poverty, virginity, martyrdom, etc. Even though most saints display some if not all of these virtues, there is usually a central theme specifically communicated to the audience.

[45] Davis, 11-15.
[46] Other theories are deconstructionism and structuralism. Post structuralism branched off of structuralism. Graham Allen, *Intertexuality*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 95-99.
[47] For an example of this classification system, see Saints and Society by Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell.

Certain literary patterns in hagiography occur frequently in the story arcs and themes, and they often apply to both genders (e.g. desert fathers and desert mothers). Consider, for example, Matthew W. Dickie's examination of literary trends in male-specific accounts, in which he compares stories about magicians and their involvement in the lives of male saints.[48] Dickie points out that scholars often fall into the trap of evaluating a traditional narrative framework, rather than the saint as an individual. Although his study argues for the individualism of saints, his discourse actually gives credence to the claim that the biographies of saints are generally influenced by one or more predecessors. In these cases, scholars find it difficult to filter out the chronology of texts. Even if these stories are based off of real people and real events, they are often embellished or even fabricated in order to fit the literary trends that are common to that period.[49] These literary patterns can be found in varying genres, including romantic motifs.

The genre of romance provides a medium through which the author can communicate spiritually with the audience. According to the definition posited by William Robins, a romance is a narrative that introduces supernatural forces, such as divine guidance, into a situation in which the protagonist is spiritually changed.[50] Robins proposes three types of romance found in early hagiography: the romance of renunciation, the family romance, and the renunciation of romantic love. The appeal of romance made hagiography more entertaining, especially for those well versed in classical literature. The themes and literary motifs are likely to have originated from classical romances even though the texts themselves are distinctly Christian.[51] The vita of Elesa encompasses all three romantic motifs, thus imitating classical literature. The theme of

[48] Matthew W. Dickie, "Narrative-patterns in Christian hagiography," in *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies,* 40 (1), (1999), 83-98.
[49] Dickie, 97-98.
[50] William Robins, "Romance and Renunciation at the Turn of the Fifth Century" Journal of Early Christian Studies, 8 (4), (2001), 531-557.
51 Robins mentions how ancient narratives influenced Christian authors and their writings (e.g. Jerome). Robins, 533 and 546.

romance is frequently found in the hagiographies of female saints, specifically in relation to their gender.

Poststructuralism shows that the writings about female saints are likely the reflections of the authors' conceptions of an ideal Christian female. Historian Elizabeth Clark has entertained questions about which cultural discourses may have influenced writers' perspectives on women, and how that influence helped to shape their female protagonists.[52] By examining the author's tone or placement of praise, one can gain useful insight into his ideas regarding admirable habits and activities, especially as they relate to gender. More often than not, however, these views portray the female sex as inherently inferior, an obstacle which can generally only be overcome by taking on masculine traits.[53] These portrayals of saints are often a manifestation of the hagiographers' imagination and should be considered a figurative expression.

An over-analysis of such details can produce information that is generally considered principally impossible to reach, such as conclusions about the saints' psychology. In a study conducted by Gail Corrington[54], the analysis listed the factors, particularly emotional and mental, that contributed to the practice of asceticism among women and compared them to modern studies of anorexia.[55] The internal dilemmas of individuals cannot be addressed in psychoanalysis unless they are first-hand accounts, which are rare and usually flawed. Feminist researchers especially must confront the fact that most texts in hagiography are written by men

52 Post-structuralism views all literature to be biased because the author is always impacted by cultural discourse. Elizabeth A. Clark, "Ideology, History, and the Construction of "Woman" in Late Ancient Christianity". Journal of Early Christian Studies. 2 (2), (1994), 155-184.
53 See chapter three and four for more details.
54 Gail Corrington is cited in this thesis for an article and a book. Her book contradicts much of what is stated in her mentioned study about anorexia and asceticism.
55 Gail Corrington, "Anorexia, Asceticism, and Autonomy: Self-Control as Liberation and Transcendence". Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, 2 (2), (1986), 51-61.

and are devoid of an authentic female voice.[56] Corrington's study relies on male authors to interpret women's intentions in transforming their bodies into sexless, holy vessels. She fails to realize, however, that such hagiographical research is limited in its abilities to yield certain information.

The details about the saint are often embellished in order to bolster their reputation. The accounts of saints' lives often have their sources in either the author's personal acquaintance with the saint or the testimonies of eyewitnesses. Isocrates, an ancient Greek orator, highlighted three important rhetorical characteristics: clarity, brevity, and probability. The last characteristic is interesting because probability, the likelihood of these events, does not present an actual case for truth. Rather, it presents an argument for plausibility. Facts were sometimes deliberately slipped into these accounts for the purpose of convincing an audience that the entire account is true.[57] Aelius Aristides, a protagonist of the second sophistic, argues in book two of the *Rhetoric* that the recounting of a story can be considered "figuratively true" even if they contain fabrications or embellished details.[58] It is through the façade of truth that makes a story credible. An important consequence of this deceit is that the reward for bending the truth often outweighs the benefit of being wholly honest. Hagiographies are often assumed to be forgeries due to the many overlapping qualities in a group of vitae. However, if that is the case, every historical document could be called into question as being a forgery, and no scholar can give an absolute guarantee of veracity even if there is overwhelming credible evidence.

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[56] Elizabeth A. Clark, "Holy Women, Holy Words: Early Christian Women, Social History, and the "Linguistic Turn". *Journal of Early Christian Studies,* 6 (3), (1998), 413 -417.
57 Anthony Kaldellis, "Women and Eunuchs", Class lecture, (Columbus: Ohio, November 4, 2012).
58 Claudia Rapp, "Storytelling as Spiritual Communication in Early Greek Hagiography: The Use of Diegesis", Journal of Early Christian Studies, 6 (3), (1998), 431-448.

The authors mediate the content of hagiographies to correlate with previous depictions of saints.[59] Elesa's narrative comprises two paradigms: asceticism and martyrdom. Each hagiographic model has a number of vitae, which have subtle differences but are largely similar in themes and motifs. A paradigm, or model, involves biblical allusions, classical motif, and plot schemes that are components of that model. Consider, for example, the crown of immortality as a theme in martryologies. If the audience hears the words "crown of immortality," they identify the account, and recognize it to be a story about a Christian martyr. A number of saints remain icons in the Roman Catholic Church and/or the Eastern Orthodox Church today centuries after the composition of their vitae because they model ideal Christian behavior and virtue. If a hagiography deviated from an accepted tradition in hagiographic literature, it likely would not have been preserved throughout the passage of time. The audience would not be familiar with its themes, motifs, and plot. If the audience venerates on saint who displayed certain virtues and suffered certain trials, the authors would not risk publicizing a saint who is a contrast to those admired attributes.

The theory of poststructuralism and intertexuality is the theoretical approach applied to the hagiography of Elesa in order to compare her manuscript to other texts about early Christian martyrs and early ascetics. The individual saints to whom Elesa is compared are understood as representatives of a hagiographic genre. They are notable figures recognized in historical scholarship today investigating Christian asceticism and martyrdom. Their biographies are decorated with literary tropes common to these genres of early Christian literature. The next chapter "Martyrdom" assesses the vita of Elesa in comparison to prominent early female martyrs.

[59] Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints & society: the two worlds of western Christendom, 1000-1700*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

Literary Analysis: Martyrdom and the Vita of Saint Elesa

The vita of Elesa contains literary conventions typical to martyrology in order to associate her with early Christian martyrs. Elesa personifies female martyrs described in early Christian martryologies by sharing key characteristics with the renowned Perpetua and Thekla through demonstrating masculine virtues in the face of persecution. The narrative includes motifs that are gender-specific and are prevalent in the Acts and Passions of women. Thus, Elesa is recognized to be a martyr through her suffering and death. With the support of studies conducted by Gail P. C. Streete, Stephen J. Davis, and Stephanie Cobb, I dissect the text and analyze relevant passages and in doing so, illustrate how the martyrdom of Elesa imitates former martyrologies. The similarities between the account of Saint Elesa and early martryologies can be interpreted in such a way that the author modeled the narrative to be a martyrology so that Elesa could be recognized as an early Christian witness.

The term "martyr" in the following context is used to mean a person who is killed for refusing to renounce an ideology in spite of punishment. The word "martyr" comes from the Greek word "μάρτυς" meaning, "witness". Streete explains that the term "witness" is used in several ways: to watch, to make a spectacle, and to speak.[60] There are two types of accounts in martyrology: the Acts and the Passions. The Act is a recollection of a martyr's trial, proceeding, and death. These accounts are narrated from the perspective of a witness giving testimony or, when no such witness exists, second-hand testimony. This attests to the martyr and the events surrounding him or her. In comparison, the Passions are narratives that describe the last days of a saint. One example of these is the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas, which places focus on the

[60] Delehaye, 110-114, and Gail Corrington Street, *Redeemed bodies: women martyrs in early Christianity*, (Lousiville: Westminster John Know Press, 2009), 25.

enduring faith of martyrs.[61] The tale of Elesa, although a hagiographical account, is similar to an |Act with the inclusion of her interrogation, torment, and death. Christian martyrology started in the wake of legal persecution against Christians under Roman rule.

The Roman Empire persecuted Christians for refusing to worship and submit to the emperor. As a response to these persecutions, martyrologies were recorded and preserved. With the exception of John, Jesus' twelve disciples and the apostle Paul were executed as a result of their faith; however, this information is provided by Eusebius, a promoter of Christian theology, in *The Church History*.[62] Joyce Salisbury explains that the emergence of martyrdom began as a response to the persecution of Christians, which is traced back to the fire of Rome in 64 A.D. Initial rumors circulated that the emperor Nero had started the fires in order to make space for construction of a new palace. In order to diffuse the anger of the populace, Nero blamed the Christians for causing the fires and punished them. Nero castigated the Christians by means of torture and death so cruel that even the anti-Christian author Tacitus refers to these events as unjust.[63] The subsequent persecutions were sporadic with occasional periods of peace for Christians. However, controlling the religion and its followers did not become an empirical matter until the rule of Diocletian in 303 A.D.

Emperor Diocletian issued edicts against Christians, which robbed citizens of their legal rights and allowed authorities to torture indiscriminately. According to Roman law, citizens sentenced to death were executed by beheading. Passages from martyrologies and Tacitus reveal that legal rights were ignored, and citizens were lowered to legal status of slaves and forced to

[61] Joyce E. Salisbury, *The blood of martyrs: unintended consequences of ancient violence*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1-9.
[62] Eusebius, *The Church History*, translation and commentary by Paul L. Meir.
[63]. H. W. Benario, The *Annals*, in *A Companion to Tacitus*, (Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, UK, 2011), 114-155.

undergo torture.[64] Despite these brutal tactics, martyrologies generally do not separate the Roman citizen identity from their depiction of a Christian martyr. Increasing numbers over the late third and early fourth century show Christian conversions happening throughout all ranks of society.[65] Eventually the popularity of the religion gained the acknowledgement of Emperor Constantine, and the empire recognized it as a legal faith in 312 A.D with the Edict of Milan.[66] During and after these persecutions, martryologies circulated and were preached to Christians. Eventually martyrologies developed from their comforting spiritual message to a call for perseverance of faith in the face of persecution. By exploring the accounts of female martyrs, it can be argued that the depiction of Elesa's martyrdom was motivated by the rhetorical style and literary tropes of the time.

Martyrology is significant to the study of hagiography because it is the earliest form of Christian literature venerating a hero of faith outside the Bible. Historians approach martyrology from a range of historiographical focuses, and each method examines information only relevant to its area of interest. Joyce E. Salisbury studies the impact of martyrology from a cultural focus and determines martyrology impacted Roman society and gained new converts.[67] Through a feminist perspective, Stephanie Cobb studies martyrology for gender themes, in particular the depictions of female martyrs as men.[68] Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor study philosophical elements by tracing Judaic and Greco-Roman understandings of suicide versus voluntary death in the texts about Christian martyrdom.[69] The approach I use in this chapter is similar to that of Stephanie Cobb by dissecting the rhetoric found in the Elesa's text, along with other female

[64] Salisbury, 9-29.
[65] Cobb, 8-17.
[66] Salisbury, 153.
[67] Salisbury, 1-6.
[68] Cobb, 1-17.
[69] Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor, *A noble death: suicide and martyrdom among Christians and Jews in antiquity*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992), 1-14.

martyrs' accounts. However, I also discuss gender-neutral symbolisms and recurrent themes relevant to the analysis of martyrologies, and how they are a result of intertexuality. To begin, there is a plot set-up typical in martyrs' accounts. These systematic tribulations occur in the narrative of Elesa. My study reveals how the author replicated an early martyrology through Helladios, the father of Elesa.

The traditional story model for the accounts of a female martyr starts with her arrest. The woman is subjected to interrogation and possibly torture. The high official questions the martyr about her religious identity and then tries to pull her from her faith and convince her to pay tribute to the emperor. In the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas, the conversation between the procurator Hilarianus and Perpetua demonstrates the common dialogue found in martyrologies between officials and Christians:

> "And Hilarianus…said: 'spare the gray hair of your father, spare your infant son. Offer sacrifice for the health of the emperors.' 'I will not' [Perpetua] answered…then [he] said: 'Are you a Christian?' 'I am a Christian,' [Perpetua] replied."[70]

Similar to the exchange in the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas, Elesa affirms her faith to Helladios who begged Elesa to return home with him with promises of many worldly comforts. Helladios represents the high official present at the interrogations of early Christian martyrs. Helladios failed to convince Elesa, mocking her choice to be an ascetic and chastising her as being a "fool." After asking why she fled, Elesa confesses her faith:

> "I will tell you the truth, my father, and may it not seem bad to you, since you are of another religion. For I am a Christian…. and it is not right that I should live you…".[71]

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[70] Hefferman J. Thomas, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 128.
[71] Gorton and Shimoda, 8.

The confession of being a Christian is a common event in martryologies.[72] Even after the official resorted to threats of torture and death the martyr remained defiant and accepted any punishment. Likewise, Elesa is not terrorized by threats and is resolved with her choice. Often, torture would ensue after the trial, either in the games by beasts, or in the prisons, or at the hands of the antagonist.

The torture inflicted on the martyr is an allusion to the suffering of Christ and how the martyrs share in their savior's torment.[73] Torture is mental and physical pain inflicted upon the victim before death. The responses to the punishment indicated from the martyrologies that they did not feel the pain, which authors accredited to divine intervention, and the prisoners sometimes even abetted the torturers for more punishments.[74] In the Martyrdom of Lyon and Vienne, the slave girl Blandina endures several rounds of torture, however, still manages to encourage her fellow Christians to accept their fate of martyrdom as "…they underwent again the lashes of whipping, the violence from the beasts, as well as all other kinds of tortures…Yet, from Sanctus they did not hear anything other than the confession he used to say from the beginning onwards."[75] Blandina encourages her comrades to endure the torments as she herself was bound to a wooden beam cross as beasts attacked her. Likewise, Elesa remains strong in her faith as she undergoes torture in Kythera at the hands of her father.

The abrupt change of Helladios' character from a loving father to a man who tortures and executes his own daughter shows that author includes filicide, an uncommon theme in martyrology, out of desperation to transform Elesa into a traditional martyr. As a consequence for her refusal to return home, Elesa is then subjected to torture:

[72] Droge and Tabor, 135, 141-142.
[73] Droge and Tabor, 119, 131.
[74] Salisbury, 23-28.
[75] Droge and Tabor, 120-125.

> "But he became angry and seized her by the hair and pushed her to the ground and began beating her with sticks until he had given her a good beating…But seeing that she was not changing her mind, Helladious twisted her hands behind her back and hung her by her hair from a tree, and tortured her with little instruments…"[76]

A person of significant relation to the victim rarely carries out torture in early Christian martyrology, and there are only a few known exceptions, such as St. Barbara who was beheaded by her pagan father.[77] However, the actual death of the martyr is usually saved for the arena.

Criminals were marked for death by facing beasts in the amphitheaters, or arenas. In these martryologies, the beasts were wild animals meant for entertainment at the arena's games, and martyrs were exposed to these beasts for the crowd's amusement.[78] At the last moment, divine intervention would prevent the attacks of the animals. An occurrence of miracles before a martyr's death is a common event. Although not a martyrology, miracles in the Acts of Paul and Thekla interrupt the attempted persecution and death of Thecla. In the arena, divine intervention ceases the attacks of beasts from killing Thecla:

> "But Thecla…was stripped and a girdle put upon her, and was cast into the stadium: and lions and bears were set against her. And a fierce lioness running to her lay down at her feet…[then]…a bear ran upon her; but the lioness ran and met him, and tore the bear in sunder. And again a lion, trained against men…ran upon her, and the lioness wrestled with him and was slain along with him…"[79]

While Elesa's death does not explicitly occur in the arena, the events still run parallel to the traditional sequence. Helladios represents the beasts used at the games as the author describes

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[76] Gorton and Shimoda, 9.
[77] Harry F. William, "Old French Lives of Saint Barbara," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society,* 119 (2), (1975), 156-185.
[78] Cobb, 36-37.
[79] M.R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Translation and notes. (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1924), 2:38.

him as "beastly" when he chases her. Before this event, Helladious murders his daughter by means of torture, however, she is miraculously resurrected from the dead: "[Helladios] released the body of the holy martyr and threw it to the ground; but the spirit of God came upon it, and she arose and sat up."[80] However, he still succeeds in his endeavors to kill his daughter, which symbolizes the final event in martyrologies: execution.

The final event in the martyrology is the execution, which is a result of either the beasts, the torture, or by other means if all else fails. In the cases of Felicitas and Perpetua, the execution is formal manner of death, which is a sword to the throat. The execution is a climatic event in martryologies as it represents the triumph of the martyr over evil. Helladios executed Elesa by decapitation, which is the official manner of execution for Roman citizens.[81] Beheading is the last resort if the martyr would not die by other means. However, there are few known martyrs that were immune to an extreme number of their assailant's attempts at execution. Divine intervention would interfere in rare instances; however, the martyr would eventually be killed.[82] Although, divine intervention is not the only miraculous phenomenon tied to the martyr's death. During the martyr's persecution, there would be miracles, or the belief of miracles, soon to come on behalf of the martyr's sacrifice.

Martyrologies contain miraculous events accredited to divine intervention on behalf of the martyr and their sacrifice. In the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas, Saturus dips a bystander's ring into his bloody wound after being attacked by a leopard and hands it back to the owner as a token of memory. The author interpreted the scene as Saturus blessing the ring in his blood and a tribute to his sacrifice. However, Salisbury views this scene as a martyr giving a relic. She argues that most martyrs believed in divine intervention, especially on their behest at such an

[80] Gorton and Shimoda, 9-10.
[81] Salisbury, 18-24.
[82] Salisbury, 58-62.

urgent time.[83] In contradiction to Salisbury's claim, it is evident in Elesa's prayer, instead of a relic, that she hopes for divine intervention on behalf of her name for the text reads "…I ask that you [God]…if any Christian calls upon you in my name, I ask that you give what is being asked." Although earlier martyrs did not state that they could perform miracles, they believed that divine authority was on their side.[84] While there is a set of events common to martyrologies, there are also literary tropes that accompany these events.

Biblical allusions are present in martryologies in order to make the account a continuation of the Bible. As a common theme in hagiography, they function through the lives of saints as the symbolic resurrection of biblical accounts. While most martyrologies do not include a long introduction with references to biblical passages and previous martyrs, such texts do make allusions to biblical peoples and events. In a passage from the book of Maccabees, there is a tale of a teacher, a mother, and her seven sons being tortured and executed for refusing to disobey the Law of God. King Antiochus had these Jews persecuted, tortured, and eventually executed in a horrific manner. The mother of the seven sons, despite her maternal bond to the young boys, encourages them to accept their fate and be strong in their stance.[85] The reference to Maccabees is found in feminine martryologies. As seen in the Martyrdom of Lyon, Blandina is a biblical allusion to the mother in the book of Maccabees on account of her encouraging her son to partake in martyrdom.[86] Likewise, Eugenia, the mother of Elesa, represents the mother in Maccabees. The author includes the biblical reference about the mother and the seven sons in Maccabees as a foretelling allusion to Eugenia, Elesa's mother, who advises her daughter to

[83] Salisbury, 58-68.
[84] Salisbury, 59.
[85] Jan willem van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie, *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian antiquity*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 66-70.
[86] Henten and Avemarie, 120-124.

"…keep [her] holy faith pure and blameless…thus [she] will receive the immortal crown."[87] The crown of immortality is a reference common in martyrologies, and represents the martyr's sacrifice and ultimate victory.

The immortal crown is a reward received by the martyr. As a reference to the crown received by athletes in the arena, it symbolizes the martyr's victory over the forces of worldly evil.[88] The first martyr to have received the crown of martyrdom is Stephen, a disciple of Matthias (who was a disciple of Jesus). Eusebius lists martyrs through out his Church History that received the crown of immortality, which probably encouraged its usage in other Christian literature.[89] Eugenia, symbolically the mother found in Maccabees, encourages Elesa to accept martyrdom and receive the immortal crown. The author refers to the crown of immortality several times in the text starting with the reference to Maccabees, then the Perga of Pamphylia, then the speech of Eugenia, and lastly, the sermon at the end of the text. Eugenia foreshadows Elesa's martyrdom, setting the stage for the events to come. Whereas these particular literary tropes are typical in both male and female martyrologies, female martyrologies are distinctive by means of gender framework and their depiction of the female heroine.

Martyrs exhibit masculine virtues at their trial, which contrasts the behavior of their enemies. Officials who regulate the trials of martyrs are portrayed as "feminine" in character, and their authority diminished in comparison to the "masculine" qualities displayed by the female martyr. Originating from the writings of Plutarch and Seneca, character flaws in the manner of irrational thinking, impulsiveness, being quick-tempered, are regarded as feminine "weaknesses."[90] Stephanie Cobb evaluates how the authors of martyrologies diminish the character of the

[87] Gorton and Shimoda, 6.
[88] Cobb, 57-59.
[89] Eusebius, 52.
[90] Cobb, 62-67.

antagonists through feminine attributes, which also depletes their authority over the protagonist. The antagonists are quick-tempered and impulsive where as the martyrs' maintain control over their emotions. Hence, authority shifts from the imperial official to the Christian on trial demonstrating the moral strength of the protagonist.[91] Elesa is superior in authority over Helladios through her masculine virtue whereas Helladious is inferior because of his "womanish" behavior. Helladios demonstrates many feminine qualities; he is submissive to the authority of his virtuous wife Eugenia, and is later shamed at Elesa's confession for being an idolater. Because masculine virtue is expected of female martyrs, a theme of female martyrology was the woman becoming a man.

Female martyrs displayed masculine behavior as a result of their virtuous attributes and endurance of physical agony. Their masculine character achieved victory over the pagans and they received the immortal crown.[92] However, they are not historical exemplars of social conduct expected of women, or to be confused as a depiction of what was culturally developing in Christian communities. Female martryologies are argued to be evidential of feminism in ancient Christianity. Women were subjected to similar persecution as their male companions and even suffered and died beside them. However, martyrologies are biased accounts, and the portrayal of women is directly influenced by the author's perspective. Even though female martyrs "become men", the church prevented followers from deviating against traditional gender roles by ruling that these martyrs, along with their texts, are to be venerated and not imitated.[93] In addition, the female martyrs embody masculine *and* feminine attributes as well.

The feminine qualities described of female martyrs pertained to their physical appearance and personal relationships. Cobb discusses how there is a balance of femininity with masculine

[91] Cobb, 97-102.
[92] Streete, 87-88.
[93] Streete, 30.

virtue.[94] The beauty of the martyr would have an affect on the crowds. As seen in the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas, the editor describes the women's' nakedness in the amphitheater and how Felicitas' lactating breasts and Perpetua's youth appalled the crowd. Likewise, the author mentions Elesa's beauty shortly before her death when her father speaks, "…you were so young and beautiful."[95] Stephanie Cobb reasons that mentioned appearance of women, particularly their physical forms, is to highlight their sex. The two-fold nature of representing women in martryologies is almost like a paradox. The female martyrs are represented as both "manly" in virtue and "feminine" in appearance. Masculine attributes displayed by Elesa are only pronounced during the dialogue exchanges with her father, Helladios. However, her feminine identity is acknowledged through her vow of chastity and being a bride of Christ.

The corresponding likeness of Elesa's martyrdom to early Christian martryologies reflects intertexuality among a group of relatable accounts. The events proceeding up to Elesa's martyrdom resemble the trials and executions of early Christian martyrs. Like Perpetua and Blandina, Saint Elesa displays a masculine character in the face of her ordeals on Kythera. Her defiance to surrender the Christian faith in submission to her pagan father earns her the crown of immortality. In addition, there are biblical allusions throughout the story. Eugenia represents the mother in the book of Maccabees with Elesa assuming the role of the children preparing to receive martyrdom. Lastly, the plot of the vita is similar to the series of events found in the Acts and Passions, ranging from confessing to be a Christian to enduring torture to being attacked by her" beastly" father and executed by beheading. Following suite, the next chapter applies a poststructuralist perspective with a focus on intertexuality to the vita of Elesa and early Byzantine hagiography.

[94] Cobb, 107-111.
[95] Gorton and Shimoda, 8-9.

Literary Analysis: Asceticism and the Vita of Saint Elesa

The vita of Elesa incorporates asceticism, a common theme to early hagiographies, in order to associate her with Christian ascetics. Asceticism is a popular avocation in early Christian writings and a prominent theme in saints' vitae, like the venerated St. Mary of Egypt and St. Theokiste of Lesbos. Similar to these ascetics, Elesa's narrative entails isolation in the wilderness and a vow of chastity, which were important aspects of the ascetic lifestyle. Her self-deprecating acts symbolize the cleansing of feminine sin and her becoming a bride of Christ. With the support of studies by Mary Alice Talbots, Vincent Wimbush, and Elizabeth Clark, I explain how Elesa's hagiography personifies the early ascetics' narratives by comparing and analyzing relevant passages from her text.

The word asceticism is derived from the Greek word "ἄσκησις," which translates to "exercise, training, or mode of life."[96] However, there is no short definition of asceticism that can adequately define what constitutes it as a practice, let alone as a concept.[97] As a historical, philosophical and/or religious concept, asceticism implies self-control over human desires and sensations. This idea may have had antecedents in the East, but it originated in the Mediterranean from Stoic and Platonist philosophies.[98] Human desires were understood as weaknesses that distracted the individual from concentrating on spiritual matters. Christianity utilizes these philosophies by additionally emphasizing that human needs hinder the ability of

[96] Originally meant athletic training
[97] Vincent L. Wimbush, Ascetic *behavior in Greco-Roman antiquity: a sourcebook*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press (1990), 1.
[98] Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: the making of asceticism in late antiquity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 66.

people to approach the divine.[99] An example cited for Christian asceticism found in gospels are the passages describing Jesus' wandering of the desert for forty days and nights and in his isolation, rejecting the devil's temptations.[100] In literature, asceticism continues to be discussed through the Christian tradition of hagiography and sermons. The surviving vita of Elesa, like virtually every work of Orthodox hagiography focuses heavily her meeting the customary expectations of a female saint in the Mediterranean.

Asceticism is present in Christian literature from late antiquity to the early medieval period, and the practice evolved from a recluse lifestyle to a supervised group practice known as "monasticism."[101] Asceticism developed into a church-regulated practice within monasteries and nunneries so it would remain under the domain of church authority.[102] However, its earliest roots in Christianity are traced back to the fourth century in Syrian Orient.[103] Anthony the Great is credited as having popularized the practice. Amma (mother) Sarah, one of the earliest ascetics in the East, is also believed to have inspired the habit among women, including Melania the Younger.[104] The earliest ascetics are often referred to as "desert hermits", "anchorites", "desert virgins", or "desert mothers," depending on their gender and/or status. Isolation as described in hagiographical texts was carried out in places such as a monastery cell, the privacy of a bedroom, the wilderness, or even in a tomb, as Amma Alexandra, an ascetic preserved by Palladius' writings, had done. [105] Clergy cautioned audiences that these texts described a lifestyle

[99] Elm, 5-34.
[100] Christ venturing into the desert and asceticizing in isolation.
[101] Asceticism without mention to monasticism occurs prior to the sixth century.
[102] Elm, 2-6.
[103] Wimbush, 35-50.
[104] Peter Brown, *The body and society: men, women, and sexual renunciation in early Christianity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 269.
[105] Coon, 75, and Alice-Mary Talbot, Holy *women of Byzantium: ten saints' lives in English translation,* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1997).

specifically for saints, and they were not to be strictly imitated by laypeople.[106] Nevertheless, both prominent figures and simple, poor individuals were known to have practiced ascetic ways.

In the culture of late antiquity, asceticism was practiced in the home, presumably by a small number of women. In addition, there were a few women "radicals" who fled from the safe confines of their homes ventured into the wilderness or desert. Chastity, a significant departure from the lifestyle of most women, was normal for an ascetic's life and brought the virgin's family admiration from the local community.[107] However, a vow of virginity could also lead to controversy within society. The two sexes interacted under the impression that male/female relations should prioritize a spiritual friendship. However, the patriarchs of the church pushed for a segregation of the sexes because women were viewed as objects of temptation despite promised chastity.[108] Another issue involved the benefits women received through the traditional family. Marriage and bearing children was the primary vehicle for a woman's social mobility, financial security, and protection. It was also the foundation of Christian communities in the early periods of Christianity, and helped spread the religion from community to community.[109]

Patriarchal figures, in particular Jerome Chrysostom and Gregory Nyssa, argue that there are social benefits in renouncing an earthly marriage for an eternal marriage with Christ.[110] Elizabeth Clark expounds on how patristic writers presented arguments to audiences targeting young women and men to preserve their virginity in hopes of spiritual and earthly benefit. Clark introduces a different understanding about the significance of these writings concerning sexuality

[106] Coon, 143-148.
[107] Brown 259-262.
[108] Brown, 266-269.
[109] Brown, 262-263.
[110] Elizabeth A. Clark, "Antifamilial Tendencies in Ancient Christianity," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*. 5 (3): (1995) 356-380.

and women. There was a division among the patriarchs in various Christian circles over the stance on sexuality, marriage, and virginity. Because virginity was advocated through sermons, church leaders aimed to convince young women to hold onto their chastity rather than facing the severe consequences of marriage and children.[111] They attempted to persuade audiences by crudely discussing how married women are subjects to their husbands' authority and their children's welfare. Some texts disputed that having children was beneficial for the faith.[112] Bringing more lives into the world meant bringing more death and suffering to mankind. In contrast, Roman society saw children as a way to continue living after bodily death. Through their offspring, parents "continued" their lives in the form of their descendants. Christianity, on the other hand, saw children as a "final" death. Some elite women who took vows of chastity are known to have reaped these benefits to their political and spiritual advantage.

Notable aristocrats who exemplified the ascetic lifestyle were St. Melania the Younger, St. Olympia of Constantinople, and St. Macrina. Normally reserved through the writings of relatives and friends, these stories praised the life of the ascetic for its purity and closeness to God, whether the woman was poor or, more commonly, wealthy. In the fact, the life of a wealthy female ascetic differed more significantly from that of her poor companion, and, not incidentally, it deprived the family that a well-placed marriage would normally provide. Peter Brown explained that these women were known to have faced familial opposition in their vows of virginity, even after being married. Unburdened by a husband's authority and childrearing, these wealthy virgins, however, exercised power over the church's charities and properties.[113] While the popularity of these writings and sermons remains unclear, ascetic practices were

[111] A minority of church leaders advocated this stance on marriage and women.
[112] Elizabeth Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion,* 2 (1) (1986), 61-88.
[113] Brown, 257-284.

undoubtedly happening at least by a small number of notable figures. However, there were specific practices pertained more so to women.

Based on homilies from late antiquity, certain ascetic principles are emphasized in terms of sex. In a text found in Syria from the fourth century, the unknown author addresses the topic of family and moral instruction. In particular, the father is instructed to protect the virginity of his offspring, and must do so for his children until they are married. However the author then addresses the daughters themselves, saying if a daughter chooses sexual abstinence for life, then the father must respect her decision. The sermon reads, "…The virgin who encounters resistance from her parents should imitate Thecla, the holy virgin who defied her family and the world to follow Christ."[114] The sermon addresses the female audience rather than the male audience stressing the importance of preserving their virginity. For the purpose of sexual abstinence, the homily suggests women exile themselves from their family if their decision to live a celibate life is opposed. However, the same action is not suggested or even mentioned to men. This gender specific behavior is not only found cultural literature but is also present in hagiography.

Asceticism in female hagiographies symbolizes the cleansing of feminine desire for luxury through self-deprecating acts.[115] It is a lifestyle adopted by the female protagonist as a submission to God. The practices associated with asceticism, however, ranges in extremity from constant prayer to induced starvation. Other habits exhibited by female saints involve sleeping on a rock or not bathing. This endurance through physical and spiritual suffering eliminates the confines of what the authors recognize as "humanness."[116] In the vita of St. Mary of Egypt, the desert mother shares with a traveling monk her mode of survival while practicing extreme asceticism:

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[114] Wimbush, 30.
[115] Coon, 25-60.
[116] Vincent L. Wimbush, 131-132.

> "For in only thinking of those evils from which he rescued me, I receive as exhaustible food the hopes of my salvation, for I feed and cover myself with the word of God Who governs the universe."[117]

In comparison to Mary of Egypt, Elesa explains to her father the reasoning behind her running away from home and practicing asceticism in the wilderness of Kythera:

> "…I worship and trust in the true God, who made heaven and earth and everything which is seen and unseen, and in his only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit…My love is reserved for him, nor do I put anything above my love for him, not even my life."[118]

Elesa's ascetic lifestyle demonstrates her submission to God, and she does not take into consideration any otherworldly matter, not even her wellbeing. Through ascetic ways, she cleanses herself of sin.

Because the authors viewed women as inherently "unclean", a woman who eliminates her femininity was a credit to her sex. Traits considered to be feminine are passion, impulsiveness, and irrational decision-making, qualities inherited from Eve. Hagiographies often praise women more than men for their ascetic achievements because they overcame not only the sinful nature of their humanity but also the impediment of their sex.[119] Virtuous traits deemed masculine are attributed to female ascetics.[120] This adoration is seen universally in early Christian narratives, such as the honorable recognition of female martyrs who demonstrate masculine qualities of courage in their trials leading up to martyrdom. In hagiography, women's bodies are destroyed physically along with their gender through asceticism.[121]

Ascetic practices result in the erosion of the physical body, leaving the saint's appearance changed. The tales of St. Mary of Egypt and St. Theokiste describe the women as having a

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[117] Maria Kouli, trans., "Life of St. Mary of Egypt," in Byzantine Saints' Lives in Translation: Holy Women of Byzantium, (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996), 87.
[118] Gorton and Shimoda, 8.
[119] Elm, 25-60.
[120] Coon, 61-75.
[121] Gender is a cultural identity; sex is a biological identification.

shocking, inhuman appearance. The women exile themselves in the deserts for decades without food or water; they scavenge from scarce vegetation and survive off of little resources. St. Theokiste of Lesbos describes her subsistence to a witness:

> "And since that time—a little over thirty-five years already—I have lived here, subsisting on lupine [seeds] and other herbs that grow in the wilderness…"[122]

After their clothes erode away, they are wandering naked in isolation. Over time, their skin turns black and their hair white; their appearance is no longer human due to the negligence of their bodies.[123] However, these women do not care for their human bodies because they argue to be fed, clothed, and nourished by God. Likewise, Elesa suffers from the wilderness by the time her father finds her on Kythera:

> "And how did you think that you could live here forever and not die from hunger or nakedness and wretchedness, since you were so young and beautiful and had no experience of such things?"[124]

By this means, asceticism eliminates the gender of the female protagonist by cleansing them from their inherent sin, which is the first sin of man initiated by Eve.[125] The vitae of desert mothers describe the transformation of a woman, limited in gender and physical body, to a soul that is limitless. The female saint overcomes the earthly confines of her gender as defined by the dominant culture, and also transcends human needs as defined by her physical body. Nevertheless, other literary themes and elements reinforce the contemporary socio-cultural limitations placed on women, saint or not. Due to these restrictions, Elesa, like many other women of her time, must overcome the barriers of her femininity by immersing herself in complete isolation.

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[122] Angela C. Hero, trans., "Life of St. Theokiste of Lesbos," in *Holy women of Byzantium: ten saints' lives in English translation,* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1986), 111.
[123] Talbots, ed., 76 and 110.
[124] Gorton and Shimoda, 7-8.
[125] Coon, 146.

The objective of isolation for an ascetic is to tend to one's soul without disruption. As a literary motif, the desert and the isolation represent the death of humanness, and become the setting for many narratives. The desert originally functioned as a refuge for male ascetics so they could avoid interaction with women. However, deserts are also a barren, dead place where savage animals and demons dwell.[126] In the vita of Elesa, there are two isolated ascetics mentioned within the text: Sophron, a holy man "who secretly dwelled" somewhere, and the heroine Elesa. The name "Sophron" comes from the Greek word "σωφροσύνη", which means "moderation."[127] The protagonist Elesa fled to Kythera, described as a wilderness, accompanied by a small following of women. The saint removed herself from all outside human contact, including her family. This isolation removed any threat to her vow of chastity because there was no temptation from men. The author explained Elesa's choice as Kythera for isolation: "…They were sailing there…they reached the island of Cytheros, where there was a remote place well-suited for asceticism since it had no men, only beasts and snakes."[128] The desert symbolized the waiting period for death because the saint has almost no physical existence during their self-isolation. Desert ascetics are with God in mind and spirit, waiting for their physical bodies to die.[129] Isolation also helped the ascetic preserve their vow of chastity by avoiding the company of the opposite sex.

The exaltation of a woman's choice to preserve her virginity at whatever cost is a rhetorical speech in hagiographic literature. In hagiography, chastity purified the saint from inheriting the sin of Eve. As punishment for Eve's disobedience against God, her husband became her master, and she began to suffer the pains of childbirth. One interpretation is that

[126] Elm, 253-276.
[127] Keller, Andrew and Stephanie Russell. Learn To Read Greek. Yale University Press: London. 2012. A24.
[128] Gorton and Shimoda, 6.
[129] Elm, 253-276.

Adam and Eve were "demoted" from being "masters" of the animal kingdom to being a "member" of the animal kingdom. Like animals, they now partook in sex and gave birth to offspring. When a woman decided to remain chaste for life, she escaped the inherited punishment of Eve.[130] Instead, she became a bride of Christ as a reward for her sacrifice. This results in the authors lauding the saints for their betrothal. Elesa's hagiographer praises her virginity, proclaiming that the "… children of Cythera will exalt the divine Elesa, the incredible bride of Christ…"[131] The choice to become a bride of Christ is often met with hostility from the antagonist. When Elesa rejects Helladios' wishes for her to marry, she risks the wrath of her father.

The choice to remain a virgin is commonly met in these texts with opposition from an antagonist. Throughout early Christian hagiography, there are famous but limited accounts of women and the repercussions they faced from choosing virginity against their parents wishes of marriage. In the Acts of Paul and Thecla, there are numerous repercussions for Thecla's vow of chastity. One punishment is instigated at the hands of her mother and her insulted ex-fiancé named Thamyris. Thecla is condemned for her actions and sentenced to the beasts. However, she is miraculously protected by a female-lion in the arena. [132] During persecution, Eusebius mentions examples of women being subjected to sexual violence and brothels as a form of punishment for taking vows of chastity. In late antiquity, Christian hagiographers recorded holy women who remained virgins as a form of asceticism, despite facing tensions with their families.

Familial conflicts are often a result of the protagonist's decision to practice asceticism. Elesa abstains from earthly delights and from fulfilling her basic needs even with her father's opposition. Other than her vow of chastity, it is not clear how Elesa went about practicing

[130] Coon, 72-75.
[131] Gorton and Shimoda, 23.
[132] Streete, 81-84.

asceticism. However, her father Helladios criticizes her changed appearance as being a result of ascetic practices in isolation on Kythera. The renouncement of blood family in favor for a spiritual family originated in the New Testament when Jesus asks, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" (Matt. 12:48; Luke 8:20-21) and when the disciples separate from their families to travel on ministry with Jesus.[133] Elizabeth Clarke interprets these events as the foundation of Christian asceticism in separating from blood relatives. Elesa referred to these passages, praying to God when departing her homeland saying, "I too am leaving my fatherland and family, riches and expected fame on account of love for Christ." Other early Christian literature introduces asceticism and familial tensions as a theme in narratives having a female protagonist. This conflict is found in hagiography, and the heroines' resistance out of devotion for Christ is highly praised by the their authors.[134]

The theme of virginity acts as the main catalyst in the vita of Ayia Elesa when she rebukes her father Helladios' proposal of marriage. After this confrontation with Helladios, Elesa prays the following:

> "To you, my Lord Jesus Christ, I hand over my soul, and you, my Christ, govern me as you will, and keep me so that my soul may be saved and so that I might keep my virginity intact, and give me endurance to endure the words of my unbelieving father."[135]

Elesa's death was ultimately the consequence of her refusal of her father's wishes for marriage, and of her desire to live an ascetic life. However, the only safe way to preserve her virginity was to enter either the desert or a female monastery (as they were referred to in late-antique sources). Unlike famous Roman elite women who took a temporary vow of chastity, such as the Vestal Virgins, Elesa faced both alienation and violent opposition from her father. While she has been compared to Melania the Younger in regards to birth, status, and Christian morals, Elesa became

[133] Clark, 356-380.
[134] Clark, 356-380.
[135] Gorton and Shimoda, 5.

a virgin martyr, which is something seen predominantly in the earlier periods of Christianity before and during the Great Persecution. .

Comparing the vita of Elesa to early Byzantine hagiographies shows intertextuality at work and is a result of the circulation of literary motifs and plots in Christian literature. Through a poststructuralist perspective, one can recognize the exchange between cultural discourses of women practicing asceticism and the composition of hagiographies about ascetic saints. Indeed, it proves the transmission of influence between varying structures within culture (i.e. religious customs to literature and vice versa). Asceticism is a prevalent theme in early hagiography that the author of the vita of Elesa included for the sake of shaping her hagiography into this early paradigm. As a gender-fixed theme, female ascetics must overcome the sinful nature of their sex. If accomplished, they are transformed into a vessel of the divine. Elesa adopts an ascetic lifestyle in order to preserve her virginity and be closer to God. In doing so, she flees to Kythera to purify herself in isolation, which is a common plot element found in many early ascetic tales. The audiences listening to this story would have been accustomed to such recourses in a saint's vita and indentify Elesa as a saint of early Byzantine hagiography.

Conclusion

The biography of Elesa is dated to sometime around the sixteenth to nineteenth century. Evidence to support this hypothesis is the Medieval Greek usage and the modernisms present in the manuscript. Moreover, the date given by the author for Elesa's martyrdom is in the Annio Domini calendar, a system that was not adopted by the Eastern Orthodox Church until the late eighteenth century. The origins of the biography of Elesa are left to speculation as well. Cultural inventions, such as folk stories and oral tradition,

possibly influenced the narrative. Her vita provided a historical explanation for a local church named in her honor. The biography of Elesa affirms the cultural identity of Kythera with reference made to the church and to the island itself. However, the main focus of this thesis is to recognize how the narrative of Elesa assimilates into the literary tradition of early Christian martyrology and Byzantine Hagiography.

A poststructuralist approach with emphasis on intertextuality exposes the ways in which the vita of Elesa is comprised of literary conventions from earlier genres in hagiography. Intertexuality perceives all literature to be shaped by prior and/or coinciding texts. In hagiography, intertexuality reveals what literary motifs, tropes, and frameworks diffused within a group of texts and produced biographies of saints who shared virtues and trials of faith with little distinction from one another. Biographers followed this rhetoric in their writings regarding saints in order for them to be assimilated as a traditional figure of virtue. The vita of Elesa serves as an exemplar to this phenomenon through its resemblance to both martryologies and early Byzantine hagiography.

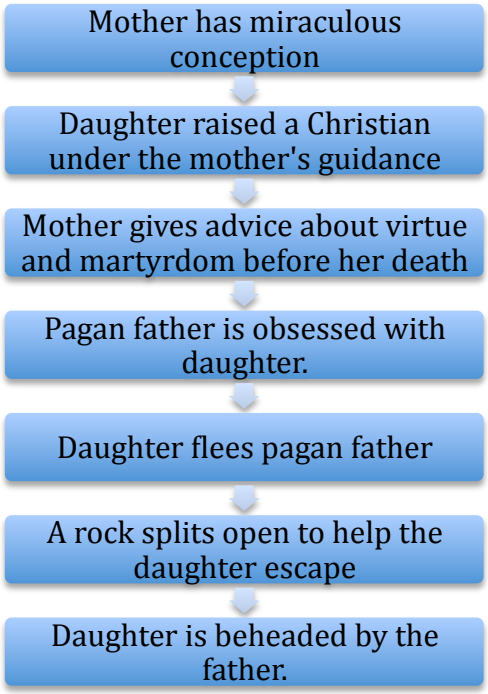
Literary tropes related to ancient Christian martyrology are heavily mentioned in the vita of Elesa. Refined methodology in historical inquiry has allowed historians to study the character portrayals of female saints in hagiography. Saint Elesa encompasses masculine virtues through her self-control and acceptance of martyrdom. In comparison, Helladios loses his authority over Elesa by lacking masculine virtue and displaying feminine weakness. Other literary conventions referenced in the vita of Elesa are the crown of immortality and the Maccabees mother. Both symbolize the oncoming penalty of death in the name of faith. The vita of Elesa makes several remarks about the crown of immortality. Eugenia, who symbolizes the mother found in Maccabees, even foreshadows

her daughter receiving the crown. Finally, the series of events that unfold directly before the death of Elesa are parallel to those found the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas and the story of Blandina. In a similar manner, the author of Elesa also adheres to the literary structure typical of early Byzantine Hagiography.

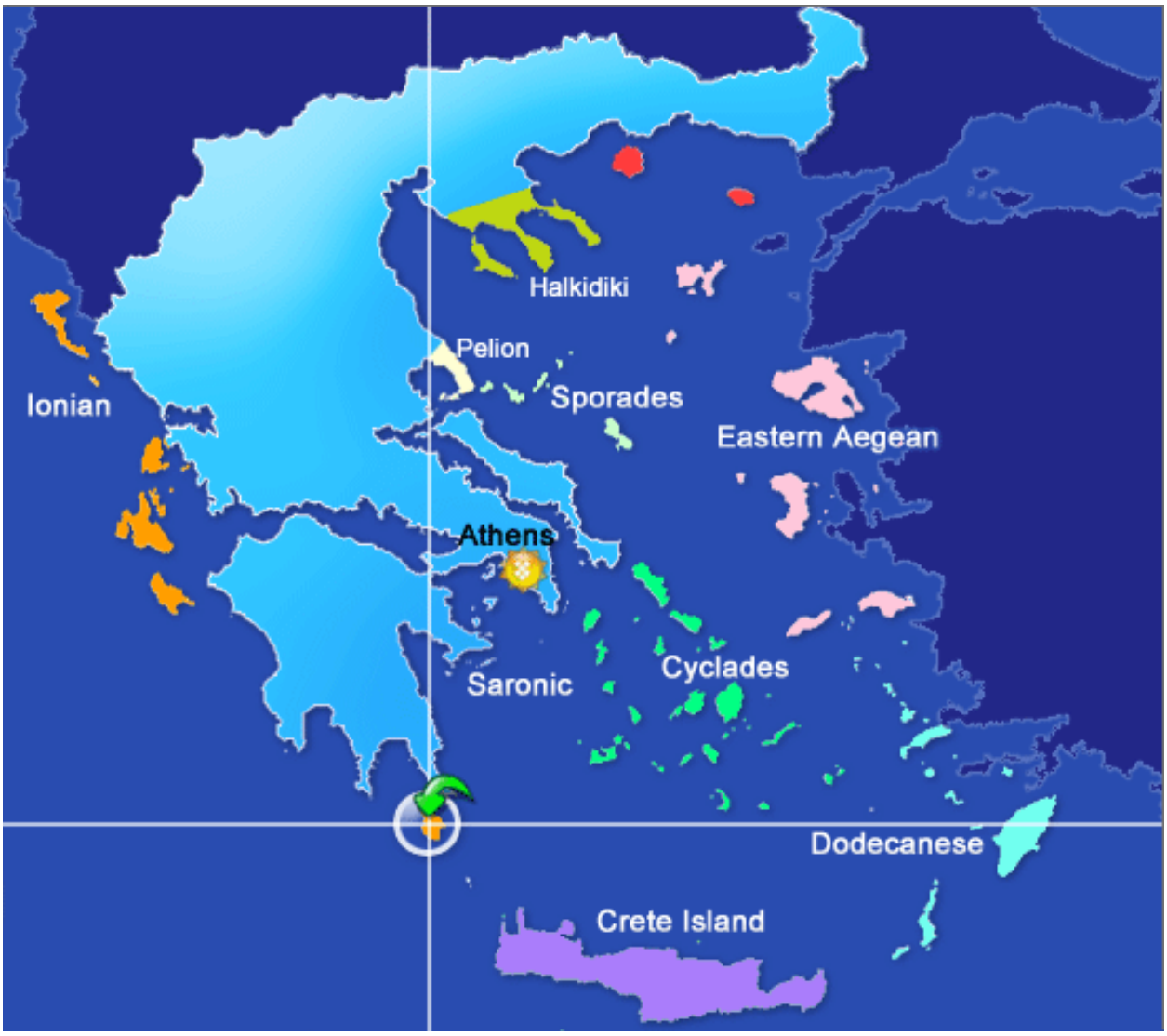
Ascetic themes and motifs are integrated into the text of Elesa so that she is recognized as a Byzantine ascetic. Elesa adopts several practices of asceticism, ranging from a vow of virginity to the renunciation of family to the giving away of alms, and lastly, isolating herself in the wilderness on Kythera. These ascetic habits symbolize the purging of her sinful nature in order to become a vessel of purity for God. Allusions to the purging of sin through asceticism are circulated in Byzantine hagiography through a variety of practices. The biographer of Elesa's hagiography, like so many hagiographers, was influenced by previous and/or coinciding accounts of saints. In order for their saint to be embraced by a group of people, they must be assimilated into the already accepted paradigm. Potential research projects that can build off from this analysis can observe the cultural impact of saints' biographies on the audience.

Future endeavors could investigate the cultural impact of saint veneration, modern or historical, due to the preservation of hagiographies. Reflecting back on the locals' perception of Elesa, her vita left a lasting impression of bravery. The details of her account were rarely mentioned. The audiences' collective memory of her as an individual was masked as a generic saint, possibly due to how she was presented in a religious service. A solid approach to this future study would entail cultural anthropological methodology along with a background in hagiology.

(Figure 1: Panagia Eleousa, Icon.)



(Figure 2: Plot of Elesa and Markella)



(Figure 3: Map of Kythera, Greece)

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