
BRENDAN OSSWALD, *L'acoluthie de Sainte Théodora d'Arta* par Job Melés (Sources et documents publiés par l'École française d'Athènes 3). Athènes : École française d'Athènes 2024. XVI, 323 pp. – ISBN 978-2-86958-614-7

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Few publications are as welcome to Byzantinists – and to historians more broadly – as a new critical edition of a primary source. The publication and translation of the medieval *acolouthia* of St. Theodora of Arta constitutes a significant contribution to scholarship. It represents an important resource for researchers working on the history of the Despotate of Epirus, Byzantine hagiography, liturgical tradition, female sainthood, and monasticism in Byzantium.

BRENDAN OSSWALD's book is particularly valuable not only as an exemplary source edition but also as broader historical contribution. It sheds new light on the life and historical context of the thirteenth-century Byzantine aristocratic saint Theodora Petraliphina (PLP 5664). The study addresses her origins, biography, and the political and social circumstances that shaped her life, including her marriage and family background, her widowhood, and her subsequent monastic vocation. Furthermore, it explores the development of her cult in Epirus and the construction of her sanctity within a regional and dynastic framework.

The book is clearly structured and comprises a foreword, acknowledgements, a list of abbreviations, and a substantial introduction. Part I presents scholarly studies on St. Theodora, offering historical and contextual analysis. Part II contains the critical edition of the text, accompanied by a translation and detailed commentary. The volume concludes with an appendix, a chronology, a list of sources and bibliography, an index, and a list of figures and illustrations. Four maps appended to the volume following the introduction further enhance its usefulness, enabling readers to situate the places mentioned in the study more precisely and to contextualize the events within their broader historical and geographical settings.

Part I opens with a chapter devoted to the biography of Theodora (pp. 9–24), situating her life within the broader history of the Despotate of Epirus and the political activities of her husband, Theodore II Komnenos Doukas

(ca. 1230 – ca. 1267). The discussion is followed by a genealogical table of the couple and a brief examination of the limited evidence for Theodora's own participation in the 'foreign affairs' of thirteenth-century Epirus, as reflected in Byzantine chronicles. The chapter is undoubtedly useful in establishing the historical and dynastic framework of her life. From the perspective of gender and women's history, however, it may appear somewhat conventional in its predominant focus on political events and male rulership. This imbalance is, to a certain extent, redressed in chapters 4 and 6 of Part I, where the analysis turns more explicitly to questions of female sanctity and Theodora's image according to her *vita* (BHG 1736).

Chapter 2 (pp. 25–50) deals with the textual history of the *acolouthia*, whose unique manuscript witness is preserved at the Marciana Library in Venice under the shelfmark Cl. II, 50 [Diktyon [70212](#)]. A description of this codex is followed by a list of older printed editions (beginning with a Venetian one of 1772), accompanied by a table of discrepancies between them and the *Marcianus*. This meticulous examination, with its attention to minor linguistic differences, is highly valuable for researchers, even though some historian might find it excessively detailed.

The short Chapter 3 (pp. 51–56) summarises the content of the *acolouthia*, the liturgical service in honour of St Theodora. The following and more extensive Chapter 4 (pp. 57–74) analyses the characteristics of both texts – the *vita* and the *acolouthia* – placing them within the context of middle Byzantine hagiography. The author draws on the research of EVELYN PATLAGEAN, ALICE-MARY TALBOT, and PETRA MELICHAR on female hagiography, as well as on the standard analytical framework for the genre proposed by THOMAS PRATSCH.

Chapter 5 (pp. 75–86) discusses the authorship of the *acolouthia*, which in OSSWALD's view was written by the person who composed Theodora's *vita*, namely the monk Job Iasites (PLP 7959). The final chapter of this part (pp. 87–104), entitled *La naissance de la sainte*, examines the development of the cult of St Theodora of Arta, addressing its hagiographical, historical, archaeological, liturgical, and commemorative aspects.

The only critical point, in my view, concerns the relatively limited attention paid to Theodora's role as a female founder and patron. The foundation of the nunnery of St. George/St. Theodora in Arta constitutes one of the central elements of her cult. According to her *vita*, the completion of the monastery's construction gave her reason to live to an advanced age, underscoring the spiritual and symbolic significance of the foundation. This

aspect closely parallels patterns found in other Byzantine and Serbian hagiographical traditions concerning royal female founders. A particularly relevant comparison is the Slavonic *vita* of Helen of Anjou, where similar themes of pious patronage and dynastic commemoration emerge – similarities that OSSWALD himself briefly acknowledges (p. 67). However, although the author addresses the archaeological dimensions of the cult, his analysis focuses primarily on the saint’s tomb and on the monastery’s function as a mausoleum. Less attention is devoted to the convent as Theodora’s religious foundation and endowment, that is, as an active institutional and spiritual project shaped by female patronage. A more sustained engagement with this dimension would have further enriched the discussion of her sanctity and its material and institutional expressions.

Part II contains the edited text of the *acolouthia* of St Theodora based on the aforesaid manuscript, accompanied by a parallel French translation. Although the author states that his translation does not aspire to literary refinement, he has clearly invested considerable effort and time in it. The translation provides invaluable access to this middle Byzantine text – belonging to a genre that has been comparatively neglected by historians and Byzantinists – for scholars from a range of disciplines. The critical edition itself is complemented by extensive and meticulous commentary on the origins of individual passages, lexical choices, and textual features.

OSSWALD’s volume makes a substantial and lasting contribution to Byzantine scholarship. Its combination of careful textual criticism, historical contextualization, and accessible translation significantly enhances the availability of an important but previously underexplored source. The book will serve as an indispensable resource for future work on St Theodora, on the Despotate of Epirus, and on the liturgical articulation of female sanctity in Byzantium.

Keywords

Byzantine hagiography; Despotate of Epirus; female saints