

**BRIEF ARTICLE**

## SOME FURTHER NOTES ON THE- CLA IN SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper is a follow up to an earlier publication in which data related to the Syriac Acts of Thecla and to the cult of Thecla in Syria were provisionally collected and surveyed. Some further data are presented here. They are taken from Syriac literary sources: the letters of Severus of Antioch, a liturgical hymn, and the biography of John of Tella. In addition, the Armenian tradition of the Acts of Thecla is briefly mentioned as a witness to the early Syriac text.*

In an earlier issue of this periodical we made a first attempt to survey the Syriac manuscript tradition of the *Acts of Thecla* and to bring together various pieces of information illuminating the popularity of the *Acts* as well as of the cult of Thecla in Syria [Burris & Van Rompay 2002]. By doing so, we intended to pave the way for a more comprehensive study in the future, comparable to Stephen Davis' treatment of the Thecla cult in Egypt [Davis 2001]. After the completion of our earlier paper, a few more interesting data

have come to our attention which we would like to present here briefly.

Several of the data listed earlier are datable to the sixth century. Two manuscripts of the *Acts* originated in the sixth century, Severus' homily on Thecla can be situated between 512 and 518, and the explicit reference to the *Acts of Thecla* in the *Life of Febronia* probably belongs to the late sixth or to the early seventh century. Most of our new data can be related to the sixth century as well.

First, we return to Severus of Antioch, Syrian-Orthodox patriarch from 512 to 518, whose homily no. 97, delivered on Thecla's feast day (September 24), was briefly analyzed earlier. It is apparent in this homily that Severus was familiar with the Thecla shrine in Seleucia, where healings and miracles were performed. Now we can offer further evidence of that familiarity. Among the letters of Severus translated into Syriac in 668/69 by Athanasius of Nisibis, a letter is preserved, written to Solon, metropolitan bishop of Seleucia. The letter belongs to the period prior to Severus' election as patriarch, probably to the year 511 (shortly after the death of Bishop Constantine, Solon's predecessor). Like Constantine, Solon was an anti-Chalcedonian and turned to Severus for advice and encouragement. In his letter, Severus urged him to stand firm in the orthodox faith, thereby referring to the patron saint of Solon's city: "But assuredly the honorable in virginity and first of female martyrs, and skilled maker of these things, I mean the holy Thecla, will clothe you in such raiment to do honor to her vote concerning you." [Brooks I,1, 1902, 12–13—Brooks' translation: II,1, 1903, 12]. Solon's successor, Stephen, who must have been an anti-Chalcedonian in the beginning, but later, probably during the Chalcedonian restoration under Justin I (518–527), joined the imperial church, is explicitly mentioned as a Chalcedonian bishop in 532 [Honigsmann 1951, 85–88; Brock 1981, 117]. The Chalcedonian confession of the city's bishop did not detract from the sanctity of the shrine, and does not necessarily imply that anti-Chalcedonian worshippers would have lacked any access to it. In a much later letter Severus, writing about martyr shrines in general, expressed himself as follows: "Where the bones of holy martyrs have previously (i.e., before the Chalcedonians were in control) been laid, it is right to pray without hesitation: especially when the place is in silence, and the heretics (i.e., the Chalcedonians) are not unlawfully conducting services or singing inside." [Brooks I,2, 1904, 305—Brooks' translation: II,2, 1904, 271]

Our second reference is more loosely connected to Severus. A hymn devoted to Thecla is preserved in a collection which origi-

nally can be traced back to Severus, but which later was expanded to include hymns written by others. The original Greek collection was translated into Syriac by Paul of Edessa in the early seventh century. Paul's translation was thoroughly revised on the basis of Greek manuscripts in the year 674/75 by Jacob of Edessa, who for many words inserted alternative translations above the line, marked Paul's interpolations with red, and added all kinds of notes (a number of them dealing with scriptural references). It is only in Jacob's revised version that the work has survived. In his final note, Jacob says that two hundred and ninety-five (among the three hundred and sixty-five) hymns are by Severus and that the remaining hymns are by different authors. For those hymns that do not have an author's name it is impossible to ascertain whether or not they go back to Severus.

The collection of hymns has a small section devoted to "Holy martyrs who were martyred from among women". It contains hymns on Thecla, Drusis (two hymns), Euphemia, and Pelagia. The Hymn on Thecla deserves to be quoted in full [Brooks II, 1911, 620[208]–621[209]—Brooks' translation is largely followed here].

"The king shall delight in thy beauty" (Ps. 45:12).  
 Christ who speaks in Paul  
 – He who said: "I have come to put fire on the earth"  
 (cf. Luke 12:49–53) –  
 by inflaming with his love the soul of the holy virgin  
 Thecla,  
 He burned from her the bonds of fleshly brotherhood,  
 He preserved her virginity in purity,  
 He supported her in the combat of martyrdom,  
 He quenched the fire,  
 and placed a muzzle and a bit in the mouth of carnivorous  
 beasts,  
 He rendered the idolatrous bondmaid an evangelist and  
 apostolic,  
 preaching and proclaiming the word of life everywhere  
 amid all dangers.  
 By her prayers bestow, our Savior, upon men and  
 women alike  
 thoughts of chastity and thy great mercy.

Jacob's notes include a number of variants which do not affect the content of the text. Jacob also provides the reference to the Gospel of Luke, to which he adds a brief commentary. As for the two main terms used with regard to Thecla, "evangelist" (*msabbronito*) and "apostolic" (*šliḥoyto*, apparently a substantivized adjective), no vari-

ant is provided. Each of the sentences of the hymn refers to a specific event in the *Acts*, while the main lesson for later Christians seems to be that of chastity.

Since the hymn on Thecla, like the other hymns on female martyrs, is anonymous, we are unable to ascertain whether Severus or a later sixth-century poet is its author. We may assume that the Thecla hymn was part of the Greek collection when Paul translated it into Syriac and that Jacob of Edessa still found it in the Greek manuscripts which he used in his revision work.

A further most interesting reference to Thecla is found in the biography of John of Tella, one of the leaders of the anti-Chalcedonian movement in Syria after Severus' exile to Egypt. Born in 483, John was elected as bishop of Tella in 519. According to his biographer, Elijah (who wrote shortly after 542), John was of a well-off family in Callinicus (present-day Raqqa<sup>6</sup> in Syria). He lost his father at an early age and was raised by his mother and local priests until he was given a *paidagogos* when he was twenty. Under the influence of a local monk, he decided to lead an ascetic life, but his mother was able to persuade him to come back home. A second experience, however, decisively turned him away from the world [Brooks 1907, 42,15–43,2]:

And one day he took the book of the history of the blessed Thecla (*ktobo d-taš'ito d-tubonito Taqla*), who became the disciple of the blessed Apostle, and he was reading in it. And since he was a chosen vessel (Acts 9:15) and had not been struck by the burning arrows of the Evil one (Eph. 6:16), like the rest of the young men of his age who did not accept instruction, and (since he) was not ensnared by worldly desires, because he had been preserved by the divine grace as well as by the vigilance of his educators, the love of Christ settled with fervor in his soul. And he immediately took (the book of) the blessed Apostle and he was reading in it diligently. And as soon as in truth he had become a disciple of the blessed Apostle, like the blessed Thecla, he built in his apartment a small upper room and spent there all his time ... (in order to practice ascetic life).

The reading of the *Acts of Thecla* is presented here, in early-sixth century Callinicus, as the decisive factor which made John turn away from a worldly career and opt for a radical ascetic life. This brings to mind a parallel story in the *Life of Eugenia*, set near Alexandria, in which the reading of the Thecla narrative is at the origin of Eugenia's immediate and radical change of life (Davis 2001, 143–148, with references to the different versions of the *Life*, including the Syriac one). Our new example shows that such effects

were not the privilege of women, but also could be experienced by men!

Finally, an indirect witness to the prominent position of the *Acts of Thecla* in Syriac Christianity may be seen in the Armenian version of the *Acts*. Already in 1896, Conybeare suggested that the Armenian text was based on a Syriac rather than on a Greek original [Conybeare 1896, 54–55 and 59]. Valentina Calzolari, who prepares a new edition, has recently confirmed this suggestion. The translation most likely may be traced back to the early fifth century, while the figure of Thecla starts being incorporated into original Armenian literature from the late fifth century onwards (Calzolari 1996 and Calzolari 1997).

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