

Self-Baptism in Late Antique Hagiography of Female Saints

[El autobautismo en la hagiografía tardoantigua de las santas]

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Abstract

The 2nd century *Acts of Paul and Thecla* introduces a scene of self-baptism, a practice that garnered criticism from Tertullian in his *De Baptismo*. The text, describing the conversion, martyrdom, and liberation of a young non-Christian woman, serves as a foundational narrative, influencing subsequent portrayals of female martyrs or saints in general. The scene of self-baptism is reimagined and incorporated into the martyrdom accounts of Euphemia of Chalcedon, Barbara, and Charitine, as well as into the *Life of Apollinaria*. While maintaining its symbolic significance, this practice raises intriguing questions about the ritualistic structure of baptism and the assertion of individual agency within religious performative acts. This study explores these narratives, offering insights into the evolving conceptualization of self-baptism and the representation of female sanctity in late antique hagiography.

Keywords

Self-baptism, women, ritual, martyrs, Thecla, Barbara, Apollinaria

Resumen

Los Hechos de Pablo y Tecla, del siglo II, introducen una escena de autobautismo, una práctica que suscitó las críticas de Tertuliano en su *De Baptismo*. El texto, que describe la conversión, el martirio y la liberación de una joven no cristiana, sirve de relato fundacional e influye en las posteriores representaciones de mártires femeninas o de santas en general. La escena del autobautismo se reimagina e incorpora en los relatos del martirio de Eufemia de Calcedonia, Bárbara y Caritina, así como en la *Vida de Apolinaria*. Al tiempo que mantiene su significado simbólico, esta práctica plantea cuestiones intrigantes sobre la estructura ritualista del bautismo y la afirmación de la agencia individual dentro de los actos performativos religiosos. Este estudio explora estas narraciones, ofreciendo perspectivas sobre la evolución de la conceptualización del autobautismo y la representación de la santidad femenina en la hagiografía de la Antigüedad tardía.

Palabras clave

Autobautismo, mujeres, ritual, mártires, Tecla, Bárbara, Apolinaria

1. *Baptism in Early Christianity and Thecla's unusual case*

Baptism, a fundamental ritual practice in Christian doctrine, has its roots in both conceptions of the purifying use of water in Greco-Roman culture and certain customs among different Jewish communities. This influence is perfectly reflected in the significance of Jesus' baptism in the Gospels and the confirmation of its initiatory nature for early Christianity, as clearly observed in the *Acts of the Apostles* or in the epistles of the New Testament.¹ In all these cases, including that of Jesus himself, the act of baptism follows a clear pattern in which a presbyter or, in any case, an individual with certain religious authority, immerses the person undergoing the ritual in water, as an unequivocal symbol of conversion and renewal of their spirit and life's purpose. For this reason, from the beginning, the Greek verb βάπτω and especially its derivative βαπτίζω were used to describe this practice, which, according to the *LSJ* dictionary, carries the sense of 'dip' or 'plunge', and, in a specialized context, 'to baptize'.²

An 'unusual' scene, as Ferguson himself defined it in his seminal study on baptism in early Christianity,³ is that of Thecla's self-baptism in Antioch during her second martyrdom, as depicted in the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (=APTh), a text that enjoyed widespread circulation from the late 2nd century onward, particularly in the late antique period.⁴ Within a typical martyrdom scene where the martyr is condemned to die by being devoured by wild beasts (*damnatio ad bestias*), a series of miracles occur preventing the beasts from carrying out their task and killing the young woman. Amidst the chaos of the beasts and the uproar of the audience present in the amphitheater, Thecla notices a pool filled with water containing sea creatures –identified by the author as seals–⁵ and she plunges into it with the intention of baptizing herself, presumably before an imminent death that the young woman perceives. The scene unfolds as follows:

¹ For a general survey of these questions, see Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church. History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 2009).

² s. v. βαπτίζω in *The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon* (<https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lsg/>).

³ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, p. 230.

⁴ Ángel Narro, *Tecla de Iconio. La santa ideal, un ideal de santa* (Reus: Rhemata, 2021), pp. 105-121.

⁵ On the problematic identification of the beasts in the pool of Antioch as seals, sharks or other marine animals, see: Bruno Lavagnini, «S. Tecla nella vasca delle foche e gli spettacoli in acqua», *Byzantion* 33 (1963), 185-190; Jocelyn M.C. Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), pp. 205-206; Gilbert Dagron, *Vie et Miracles de Sainte Thècle* (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1978), p. 251, n. 5; Horst Schneider, «Thekla und die Robben», *Vigiliae Christianae* 55 (2001), 45-57; Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, *Animals, Gods and Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman, and Early Christian Ideas* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 191-195; Janet E. Spittler, *Animals in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

τότε εἰσβάλλουσιν πολλὰ θηρία, ἐστώσης αὐτῆς καὶ ἐκτετακυίας τὰς χεῖρας καὶ προσευχομένης. ὡς δὲ ἐτέλεσεν τὴν προσευχὴν, ἐστράφη καὶ εἶδεν ὄρυγμα μέγα πλήρες ὕδατος, καὶ εἶπεν· νῦν καιρὸς λούσασθαί με. καὶ ἔβαλεν ἑαυτὴν λέγουσα· ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ὑστέρᾳ ἡμέρᾳ βαπτίζομαι. καὶ ἰδοῦσαι αἱ γυναῖκες καὶ πᾶς ὁ ὄχλος ἔκλαυσαν λέγοντες· μὴ βάλῃς ἑαυτὴν εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ· ὥστε καὶ τὸν ἡγεμόνα δακρῦσαι, ὅτι τοιοῦτον κάλλος φῶκαι ἔμελλον ἐσθίειν. ἢ μὲν οὖν ἔβαλεν ἑαυτὴν εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ· αἱ δὲ φῶκαι πυρὸς ἀστραπῆς φέγγος ἰδοῦσαι νεκρὰ ἐπέπλευσαν. καὶ ἦν περὶ αὐτὴν νεφέλη πυρός, ὥστε μῆτε τὰ θηρία ἄπτεσθαι αὐτῆς, μῆτε θεωρεῖσθαι αὐτὴν γυμνῆν. (APTh 34)

Then they sent in many beasts, while she stood and extended her hands and was praying. But as she was completing the prayer, she turned and saw a great ditch full of water, and said “Now is time for me to wash myself”. And she cast herself into water, saying, “In the name of Jesus Christ I baptize myself for the last day.” And looking on, the women and all the crowd cried out saying “Do not cast yourself into the water,” so that even the governor was weeping, because seals were about to eat her. But Thecla therefore cast herself into the water in the name of Jesus Christ. But the seals looking upon a light of fiery lightning floated up as corpses. And there was a cloud of fire around her, so that neither the beasts could touch her, nor could they see her naked.⁶

The scene has been analyzed from multiple perspectives. In addition to the series of miracles surrounding this scene, which draw upon certain elements from the Old Testament,⁷ certifying, according to Barrier,⁸ divine approval of Thecla’s action, the focus must necessarily be on the self-baptism itself. Thecla’s action has been interpreted as the *mise en scène* of the baptism for the dead as preached in 1Cor. 15:29, serving as a culmination of the request by Falconilla, the deceased daughter of queen Tryphaena who sheltered Thecla to protect her virginity before the exposition to the beasts.⁹ Nevertheless, besides the implications it has for Falconilla’s soul,¹⁰ there is no doubt that the scene also marks a significant turning point in Thecla’s own life journey. Firstly, it is necessary to observe the complete performative sequence within its context. Secondly, attention will be focused on the vocabulary and language used both

⁶ Translation in Jeremy W. Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), pp. 160-161.

⁷ Ángel Narro, «The cloud of Thecla and the construction of her character as a virgin (παρθένος), martyr (μάρτυς) and apostle (ἀπόστολος)», *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 16 (2019), pp. 119-121.

⁸ Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, p. 164.

⁹ David Lincicum, «Thecla’s Auto-immersion (APTh 4.2-14 [3.27-39]) A Baptism for the Dead?», *Apocrypha* 21 (2010), pp. 203-213.

¹⁰ On the episode of Falconilla and its implications concerning capital concepts such as baptism or resurrection, see: Pieter J. Lalleman, «The Resurrection in the *Acts of Paul*», in Jan N. Bremmer, (ed.) *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), pp. 126-141.

in the description and in the words spoken by the protagonist of the scene, Thecla.

Focusing exclusively on Thecla, it is important to remember that, despite her request to Paul in *APTh* 25 to receive ‘the seal in Christ’ (ἡ ἐν Χριστῷ σφραγίς) —a formula referring to baptism—, he had refused. Consequently, although Thecla had been converted to Christianity *de facto*, she had not undergone the symbolic entry ritual characteristic of the Christian community. The context in which Thecla’s self-baptism occurs is a typical martyrdom scene. Faced with the release of numerous wild beasts, Thecla perceives her life to be in extreme danger. This explains her reaction: she extends her arms and prays in the customary manner of early Christians, as evidenced by various contemporary iconographic testimonies.¹¹ After her prayer, she spots the pool into which she will plunge to complete her self-baptism and die. Given the dramatic nature of the scene, this act appears to be one of desperation, a way to fulfill the conversion ritual to the Christian faith just before what she perceives as her imminent death. Subsequently, Thecla experiences miraculous salvation, with a cloud shielding her body from the seals and her nakedness from the spectators, emphasizing the text’s advocacy for chastity.¹² In any case, there is no doubt that Thecla resorts to self-baptism as an extreme and desperate measure.

Regarding the language, as Ferguson highlights,¹³ the text employs vocabulary commonly used in baptismal scenes in early Christianity, such as the term λουσασθαί, spoken by Thecla right after finishing her prayer, where she declares that it was the appropriate moment (καιρός) to bathe herself (λουσασθαί). Thecla’s words should be interpreted in relation to the earlier scene in *APTh* 25, where Paul, for reasons not entirely clear beyond the narrative context, denies her the seal in Christ. Additionally, her words are connected to her second direct intervention, which is much more controversial in the eyes of modern critics.

Here, Thecla utters a clear and customary baptismal formula in the name of Jesus Christ (ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ὑστέρᾳ ἡμέρᾳ βαπτίζομαι), which was often alternated with the Trinitarian formula, invoking the Son, the Father, and the Holy Spirit.¹⁴ Controversies have primarily arisen concerning the verb βαπτίζομαι, spoken by the young woman, which Dunn interpreted as a

¹¹ Adalbert Hamman, «La prière chrétienne et la prière païenne, formes et différences», *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 23 (1980), pp. 1190-1247 (esp. 1213-1215).

¹² Willy Rordorf, «Quelques jalons pour une interprétation symbolique des Actes de Paul», in David H. Warren, Anne Graham Brock & David W. Pao (eds.), *Early Christian Voices in Texts, Traditions and Symbols. Essays in Honor of François Bovon* (Boston & Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 253-254; Gail C. Streete, *Redeemed Bodies. Women Martyrs in Early Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 45.

¹³ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, p. 230.

¹⁴ Antonio Piñero & Gonzalo del Cerro, *Hechos Apócrifos de los Apóstoles, Vol. II, Hechos de Pablo y Tomás* (Madrid: BAC, 2005), p. 765, n. 169.

passive form,¹⁵ due to the exceptional use of the middle voice with this verb. In his view, God Himself would be performing the baptismal action on Thecla, who would be a mere passive object in the scene. However, as Barrier rightly points out,¹⁶ with whom I fully agree, both the narrator's voice and that of the crowd of female spectators favoring Thecla emphasize that she intended to plunge herself into the pool with the seals, using the verb βάλλω and the reflexive pronoun ἐαυτήν. The presence of this latter formula aligns with the use of a middle voice, which is further reinforced by Thecla's desperate situation. This is evident as she alludes to her final moments in this life (ὕστέρῳ ἡμέρῳ) to conclude her brief prayer just before coming into contact with the water. In conclusion, there is no doubt that Thecla's intention in this scene is to self-baptize and die, without the need for a presbyter, as a last-minute, desperate measure in the face of her imminent death.

2. Tertullian's Censure and the Meaning of Her Action

The passage from *APTh* 34 is unequivocally alluded to by Tertullian in his *De Baptismo* (18), a work that was likely composed towards the end of the 2nd century, demonstrating the significant impact achieved by *APTh* by the end of this century. Although the action of self-baptism is probably the most striking aspect of the scene, the bishop of Carthage focuses on his discussion of the passage regarding the supposed authority conferred by the text and, by extension, by Paul to women to administer baptism. According to Tertullian, this supposed ecclesiastical authority granted by Paul to women according to *APTh* would contradict the apostle's view expressed in 1Cor. 14:35, where he prohibited women from speaking in Christian assemblies and recommended that they keep their concerns for the privacy of the home.

Indeed, despite Tertullian's criticisms, there is no doubt that the text narrating the story of Thecla enjoyed a fluid transmission and her figure garnered significant cult status both in the East and the West.¹⁷ In fact, over time and within the context of the development of the first hagiographical literature, we can observe how her self-baptism ends up being praised and considered a heroic act, which, moreover, gradually sets the standard for inspiring new narratives of holy women, especially martyrs. As the starting point of this tradition, it is important to highlight the *Life and Miracles of Saint Thecla*, from the 5th century.

¹⁵ Peter W. Dunn, *The Acts of Paul and the Pauline Legacy in the Second Century* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1996) [PhD dissertation], p. 66.

¹⁶ Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, pp. 162-164.

¹⁷ See, for example Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of St Thecla. A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Narro, *Tecla de Iconio*, pp. 157-236; Ghazzal Dabiri & Flavia Ruani, *Thecla and Medieval Sainthood. The Acts of Paul and Thecla in Eastern and Western Hagiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

The first part of this narrative, the *Life of Thecla* (= *LTh*),¹⁸ is simply a paraphrase of *APTh* in which most of the scenes are expanded, and all sorts of details are incorporated with the aim of embellishing the narrative and giving it a markedly rhetorical character.¹⁹ As expected, the episode of Thecla's self-baptism in Antioch during her second martyrdom is also incorporated into the narrative and reinterpreted in a certain way by the author of the text. He imagines the prayer that Thecla would have silently uttered just before catching sight of the pit filled with water where she would carry out her peculiar baptismal action (*LTh* 20, 5-6: οἶμαι δὲ ὡς καὶ τοιοῦτοις τισὶν ἐχρήτο ῥήμασι σιγῆ καὶ ἐφ' ἑαυτῆς εὐχομένη). Thus, in the usual tone of the narration, he includes a long prayer that prepares Thecla for her bold action.

In relation to the original scene in *APTh*, the hagiographer omits the first direct intervention that the text records, in which Thecla stated that it was time to bathe. Interestingly, in one of the few examples where he preserves the literalness of the original text,²⁰ he echoes the baptismal formula pronounced by Thecla in *APTh* 34 (ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί σου, Κύριε, ὑστέρα ἡμέρα βαπτίζομαι), with the sole addition of the vocative κύριε, which gives the scene an even more solemn tone. The hypothesis that Thecla's action was a desperate last-minute measure to which she resorts just before what she perceives as her final moments of life during her martyrdom is confirmed by the author of the *LTh*, who even goes further. He emphasizes how Thecla sought not only her confirmation as a Christian through baptism by plunging into the pool of sea creatures, but also her death (θάνατος), as if she were committing suicide in search of the 'fulfillment' (τελείωσις) of her martyrdom and her 'liberation' (ἀνάλυσις) mentioned in the text (*LTh* 20, 32-34: ἐνήλατο τῷ ὕδατι τούτῳ, τῆς διὰ τοῦ θανάτου λοιπὸν ἐρώσα τελειώσεως καὶ πρὸς Χριστὸν ἀναλύσεως). The words of the hagiographer follow the same line as those of the chorus of women in the original scene, who cry out for Thecla not to throw herself into the water to avoid her death. In any case, the *LTh* is much more explicit in directly alluding to the death of the young woman, which she herself desired (ἐρώσα).

3. Other 'Self-Baptisms' in Late Antique Hagiography

From the 5th century onwards, with the evolution of hagiographical literature in the late antique period towards an adoption of a rhetorical way of composition and a typification of this discourse specialized in the praise of holy men

¹⁸ The Greek text can be found in Dagon, *Vie et Miracles de Sainte Thècle*. For a Spanish translation, see Ángel Narro, *Vida y milagros de santa Tecla* (Madrid: BAC, 2017).

¹⁹ On the rewriting techniques used by the hagiographer in the text, see Scott F. Johnson, *The Life and Miracles of Thecla. A Literary Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 67-112.

²⁰ On this particular, see Narro, *Vida y milagros de santa Tecla*, LIII-LXVI.

and women,²¹ the model of Thecla will be resorted to as an example to follow when creating new narratives about holy women (*imitatio Theclae*).²² Different scenes and motifs present in *APTh* are used in these narratives, which are reinterpreted and incorporated into the profiles of other female martyrs, virgins, or ascetics.²³ The focus will not always be placed on the same elements, nor will all the motifs present in Thecla's story have the same impact. In fact, narratively speaking, the scene of her self-baptism will be one of the least productive, probably because of the strangeness and novelty of describing a woman performing by herself and without anyone else present such a well-typified ritual act from the early days of Christianity. However, despite Thecla's self-baptism being a peculiar and undoubtedly unusual scene, it is not the only case recorded by hagiographical sources, which also exploit this scene in the stories of other martyrs, inspired by and emulating the woman who was considered the first martyr among women at the time, the protomartyr (πρωτομάρτυς) Thecla. As in her case, scenes of this sort have a significant symbolic character, and although it does not always occur under the same exact circumstances of martyrdom and drama depicted in *APTh*, it typically signifies a turning point in the martyrdom or life journey of the protagonist.

In the *Martyrdom of Euphemia of Chalcedon* (*BHG* 619d) (=MEuph), specifically in the so-called 'ancient passion', a scene is included that, while not considered an act of self-baptism, is clearly inspired by the model of Thecla in *APTh* 34. In this martyrdom account, we observe a classic structure in which the woman is arrested for refusing to perform sacrifices to the pagan gods, in this case to the god Ares, as required by the local authorities. Numerous narrative elements inspired by the story of Thecla can be detected in this account,²⁴ whose composition was dated by Halkin between the 5th and 7th centuries,²⁵ among other compelling reasons, due to the existence of a Latin version from the late 8th century.

In this case, the scene takes place during an endless sequence of tortures and punishments faced by the martyr in the amphitheater of Chalcedon. Like in the case of *APTh*, there is a pool full of sea beasts into which the martyr will cast herself. However, the context, the arrangement of elements, or the very purpose of Euphemia's action differ greatly from that of Thecla's scene. Additionally, the ritual initiatory character of baptism is entirely excluded, as Euphemia is presented from the beginning of the narrative as a pious young woman who, in the context of the persecution against Christians in the city of Chalcedon, becomes practically their spiritual leader.

²¹ See the major contribution of Thomas Pratsch, *Der hagiographischen Topos. Griechische Heiligenviten in mittelbyzantinischer Zeit* (Berlin – New York: De Gruyter, 2005).

²² On the definition of this concept, see Narro, *Tecla de Iconio*, pp. 237-241.

²³ For the different female saints imitating Thecla, see Narro, *Tecla de Iconio*, pp. 242-320.

²⁴ Narro, *Tecla de Iconio*, pp. 270-279.

²⁵ François Halkin, *Euphémie de Chalédoine. Légendes byzantines* (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1965).

Ὁ δὲ πάλιν κελεύει βόθυνον ὀρυγέντα περιτειχισθῆναι καὶ ὕδωρ πολὺ ἀφεθῆναι ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ σαρκοφάγα θηρία βληθῆναι ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ ἐμβληθῆναι τὴν ἁγίαν Εὐφημίαν, ὅπως προσπηδήσαντα τὰ θηρία καταφάγωσιν αὐτήν. ἡ δὲ γνοῦσα τὸ ἔργον γεγενῆσθαι, πρὸ τῆς κελεύσεως τοῦ ἀνθυπάτου ἔδραμεν καὶ ἔστη ἐν τῷ τειχίσματι· καὶ πρῶτον μὲν ἀποσεισαμένη τὸ τῆς ὀσμῆς καὶ ἀσυμφώνου κηλίδος ἔγγραφον ὡς οὐδέν, ἐπισπασαμένη δὲ τὸν θεὸν καὶ κοσμήσασα ἑαυτὴν πρὸς τὸν νοερὸν καὶ ἔνθεον πολίτευμα οὕτως λέγει· ἀνόσιε καὶ πάσης ῥαδιουργίας πεπληρωμένε διάκονε τοῦ σατανᾶ Πρίσκε, δικαίως τὸ ὄνομά σου προσήλωταί σοι· πιστῆρες γὰρ οὐράνιοι εὐτρεπίζονται σοι, ὅπως ὑποδεξάμενοι ἄψωνταί σου, ὅτι παρεπίκρανας τὸν θεὸν τὸν χορηγὸν τῆς ζωῆς καὶ τοὺς τῆς ἀληθείας καὶ σεμνότητος τοῦ Χριστοῦ στρατιώτας ἐνύβρισας. καὶ εἰποῦσα ταῦτα, σφραγίσασα ἑαυτὴν δεξιά τε καὶ εὐώνυμα φωνεῖ τὸν ἴδιον δεσπότην λέγουσα· τὸ φῶς μου, Χριστέ, συνέισεθέ μοι ὡς συνεισηλθες τῷ Δανιήλ ἐν τῷ λάκκῳ τῶν λεόντων καὶ τῷ Ἰωνᾷ ἐν τῷ κήτει τῆς θαλάσσης. καὶ ἔρριψεν ἑαυτὴν ἡ ἁγία εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ καὶ προσῆλθον πάντα τὰ θηρία καὶ ἐβάστασαν αὐτὴν ἐπὶ τοῦ ὕδατος, ὡσπερ τροφὸς τὸ ἴδιον τέκνον, δουλούμενα τῷ φόβῳ τοῦ θεοῦ. ἰδὼν δὲ ὁ ἀνθύπατος ὅτι μεγάλα θαυμάσια γίνεται λέγει τῷ Ἀπηλιανῷ· τί ταῦτά ἐστιν; τίς ἐστὶν ὁ βοηθῶν αὐτήν; καὶ λέγει τῷ ἀνθυπάτῳ· ἐν τῷ ἄρχοντι τῶν δαιμονίων κατέχεται καὶ μαγεύει πάντα. ὁ δὲ ἀνθύπατος λέγει· καὶ πῶς οὐκ ἀμύνονται αὐτὴν οἱ θεοὶ ἡμῶν; Ἀπηλιανὸς λέγει· διὰ τὸ εὐμενὲς αὐτῶν. (*MEuph* 13b)

Once again, he ordered a pit to be dug and constructed, into which much water was poured, and ferocious beasts were set loose, with the intention that the holy Euphemia would be thrown in so that the beasts would quickly devour her. Aware of the impending action, she ran before the proconsul's command and stopped at the wall. First, she shook off the inscription of the scent and the discordant stain as if nothing, and after invoking God and adorning herself for an intellectual and spiritual act, she spoke thus: "Impious and full of self-satisfaction, minister of Satan, Priscus; rightly this name has been added to you, for the heavenly sawyers intercept you, so that they touch you and attack you, since you have rebelled against God, the chorus leader of life, and insult the soldiers of truth and the dignity of Christ." And when she said these things, she sealed herself from right to left, like her own Master, and said: "My light, Christ, come for me as you came for Daniel in the lion's den and for Jonah in the sea monster." The saint threw herself into the water. And all the beasts came and lifted her upon the water, as one raises their own child, for they were enslaved by the fear of God. And when the proconsul saw that great marvels were occurring, he said to Apellianus: "What is this? Who is her savior?" And Apellianus said to the proconsul: "In the prince of demons, everything is retained and magical." And the proconsul said to him: "And why do our gods not reject her?" Apellianus replied: "Because of her goodwill". (My own translation)

As can be clearly observed, the construction of a sort of pool with sea beasts is yet another of the trials to which the martyr is to be subjected in order to end her life. The text plays with the valor of the martyr and defines her action as an act of courage (ἀνδρεία), in the customary vein of these martyrdom

narratives where this concept is clearly employed.²⁶ Like Thecla, Euphemia decides to throw herself into the pit (καὶ ἔρριψεν ἑαυτὴν ἢ ἁγία εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ), but in this case her goal is neither self-baptism nor death, but rather to invoke God and demonstrate His infinite strength and assistance in favor of those who believe in Him, thereby challenging the proconsul and the torturer Priscus, as pagan authorities of the city. Therefore, in her prayer, she openly requests to be protected and evokes the renowned scenes of Daniel in the lion's den (Dan. 6) and of Jonah in the belly of the whale (Jon. 1-2), both recounted in the books of the Old Testament but extensively used in late antique martyr literature as demonstrations of divine intervention in favor of the faithful.

The final outcome of the scene with the seals lifting the maiden upon the water, «as one raises their own child» (ὡσπερ τροφὸς τὸ ἴδιον τέκνον), being subjected to the will of God, underscores that element of ordeal and competition between the power of the deities defended by pagan authorities on one hand, and Christian martyrs on the other, which is part of the habitual repertoire of these martyrdom texts. As a thaumaturgical action, it is a recurring scene within hagiographical sources,²⁷ intended to demonstrate the submission of the beasts to the will of the martyr or saint through divine intervention, recalling the universal peace between humans and animals, as if it were a return to the primordial paradise referred to by the prophet Isaiah (11:6-9; 65:25). Furthermore, Apellianus's final reflection on the magical nature of divine intervention in favor of Euphemia also constitutes yet another highly recurrent literary motif in the hagiographical genre,²⁸ where there is a constant portrayal of incomprehension in the face of miracles by those not initiated into Christian doctrine and faith.

The second example to consider appears in the *Martyrdom of Charitine* (BHG 299z) (= *MCh*), certainly composed sometime before the 10th century, the date of the only manuscript in which the text has been found so far: Franzoniana Library (Urbani 33).²⁹ Her martyrdom was edited by Delehaye³⁰ and recounts the passion and death of this woman, which supposedly took place in the city of Korykos, in the region of Cilicia. Despite being a martyr relatively unknown to the general public, her cult enjoyed significant local tradition in late antique

²⁶ On the display of the tension between ἀνδρεία and ἀσθένεια in the early Christian narratives focused on female martyrs, see Adele Monaci Castagno, *L'agiografia cristiana antica. Testi, contesti, pubblico* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2010), pp. 84-88.

²⁷ Symeon Paschalidis, «Saints et animaux : anticipation du Royaume dans la littérature byzantine», in Michele Cutino, Isabel Iribarren & Françoise Vinel (eds.), *La restauration de la création Quelle place pour les animaux?* (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2018), pp. 213-230.

²⁸ Gabriele Marasco, «L'accusa di magia e i cristiani nella tarda antichità», *Augustinianum* 51 (2011), pp. 367-422.

²⁹ The discovery of this saint is attributed to Professor Arabella Cortese of the Universität Regensburg, to whom we extend our gratitude for her kind guidance regarding the text.

³⁰ Hippolyte Delehaye, «Les Actes inédits de sainte Charitine, martyre à Corycos à Cilicie», *Analecta Bollandiana* 72 (1954), pp. 5-14.

Cilicia.³¹ This was the same region where the great sanctuary dedicated to the protomartyr Thecla was located in Late Antiquity, whose structure, customs, and practices are described in the aforementioned 5th-century *Life and Miracles of Saint Thecla*. This circumstance decisively influenced the *MCh*, which clearly drew on the literary motifs and martyrdom scenes described in the *APTh*, following the parameters of the *imitatio Theclae*, frequently employed in the creation of new martyr narratives centered on female figures.³² Among the various scenes in the *MCh* where the influence of the story of Thecla can be observed, there is also one of self-baptism. Although the circumstances and context differ significantly, this scene appears to be a symbolic and clear homage to the protomartyr venerated in the nearby city of Seleucia.

As is often the case in martyrdom accounts, an edict is issued in the region requiring sacrifices to the pagan gods, which the various Christian communities of the region oppose. The young Charitine is introduced as the daughter of a nobleman, Klaudianos, a member of the city council, and she refuses to perform the mandated sacrifices. From the outset, Charitine is depicted as a fervent Christian who resolutely stands her ground and even challenges the judges conducting her interrogation. In response to her steadfastness, they condemn Charitine to martyrdom, which, as is customary, unfolds in a series of sequential tortures. Among these, the following scene stands out, where her symbolic self-baptism is described:

ὁ δὲ κόμης ἐκέλευσε-δήσαντες αὐτῆς τὰς χεῖρας καὶ τοὺς πόδας, σκορπίου τρόπον περίθετε λίθον τετρημένον περὶ τὸν τράχηλον αὐτῆς·καὶ ῥίψαντες αὐτὴν εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν ἴδωμεν εἰ βοηθεῖ αὐτὴν ὁ Χριστὸς αὐτῆς. ἡ δὲ τάξις τὸ κελευσθὲν αὐτῇ ταχέως ἐξετέλει. Ἡ δὲ ἁγία Χαριτίνη εἶπεν·αὐταῖ εἰσὶν αἱ βάσανοί σου; Ἐπινόει τοίνυν χαλεπώτερα βασανιστήρια·ἡ γὰρ θάλασσα οὐ δέχεται με συνδούλη γὰρ αὐτῆς εἰμι. καὶ ῥιπτομένη εἰς τὸ μέσον τῆς θαλάσσης εἶπεν·ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος σήμερον βαπτίζομαι ἐν ἡμέρᾳ ἀναστάσεως. Λυθέντων δὲ τῶν δεσμῶν αὐτῆς ἔδυνε τὸ τρίτον· καὶ ἀναδύσασα προῆγε τὸ σκάφος περιπατοῦσα ἐν τοῖς ὕδασι· ὡς ἐπὶ ξηρᾶς. (*MCh* 3, 6-18)

And the *comes* ordered: “Bind her hands and feet and place a perforated stone around her neck, as if it were a scorpion. Throw her into the sea and let us see if her Christ will save her.” The soldiers swiftly carried out the orders. Saint Charitine said, “Are these your punishments? Then you must think of more forceful instruments of torture. For the sea will not receive me, as it is my fellow-slave.” And as she was being cast into the middle of the sea, she said, “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, today I baptize myself on the day of the resurrection.” Freed from her bonds, she immersed herself

³¹ Arabella Cortese, *Cilicia as Sacred Landscape in Late Antiquity. A Journey on the Trails of Apostles, Martyrs and Local Saints* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2023) pp. 132-140.

³² On the case of Charitine, see Arabella Cortese, «Female martyrdom in late antique Cilicia: the Acts of St. Charitine of Korykos in the shadow of St. Thecla of Iconium», in Jacob A. Lollar & Ángel Narro (eds.), *Imitationes Christi and Women Martyrs* (Leuven: Peeters, 2025) [forthcoming].

three times. Each time she emerged, she rose higher than the ship's deck and began to walk on the water as if on solid ground.' (My own translation)

The first notable difference between the scene of Thecla's self-baptism and that of Charitine lies in the aquatic setting and the role it plays in their respective martyrdoms. In Thecla's case, the scene takes place in the amphitheater of Antioch, where she observes a pit or pool containing marine beasts. In Charitine's narrative, the scene unfolds in the sea, with the intention of drowning the martyr by tying a stone weight around her neck to drag her to the bottom. This motif is likely adapted from the *Martyrdom of Eugenia* (BHG 607w),³³ which recounts how this woman is tied to a large stone and thrown into the Tiber River.³⁴ Similar to Charitine's experience in *MEug.* 32, her bonds are broken, the stone falls away, and the martyr is carried by the divine power above the water.

Secondly, it is uncertain whether Charitine has been previously baptized or not. All indications suggest that she was, given that she has asserted earlier her Christian faith during her interrogation. Nonetheless, the baptismal formula she uses is different from that uttered by Thecla, opting here for the Trinitarian one. Additionally, Charitine exhibits a clear certainty that a miracle will occur, which explains why she challenges the *comes* with her words in the dialogue before being thrown into the water. The miracle indeed happens, and emphasizing the Trinitarian aspect, Charitine immerses herself three times in the sea, emerges higher than the ship from which she was thrown, and even walks on the water, clearly reminiscent of the gospel scene of Jesus walking on water (Mt. 14:22-33; Mk. 6:45-52; Jn. 6:16-52).

Finally, the reference to the resurrection in Charitine's baptismal formula, which adapts Thecla's reference to her final day (ὕστέρῃ ἡμέρῃ), anticipates the martyr's own death and reaffirms her belief in the resurrection. In conclusion, there is no doubt that the hagiographer who composed this text employs the *imitatio Theclae* to craft this scene but adapts it to Charitine's particular context. The hagiographer reinforces specific doctrinal elements, notably a well-

³³ For the critical edition of the text, see Stefani Apserou, *To Αγιολογικό dossier της Αγίας Ευγενίας* (BHG 607w-607z) (Ioannina: Πανεπιστήμιο Ιωαννίνων, 2017) [PhD dissertation], pp. 290-326. For a Spanish translation of the text, see: Carmen Sánchez-Mañas, «Martirio de Eugenia de Roma (BHG 607w)», in Álvaro Ibáñez Chacón & Ángel Narro (eds.), *Martirios de santas cristianas* (Reus-Córdoba: Rhemata-UCO Press, 2024) [forthcoming].

³⁴ My hypothesis of Charitine's text depending on Eugenia's, rather than the other way around, is based on the latter's earlier origin, likely dating back to the 6th century, and its wider circulation not only in Greek but also in other languages such as Latin and Syriac, from which an English translation exists: Agnes Smith Lewis, *Select Narratives of Holy Women from the Syro-antiochene or Sinai Palimpsest* (London: Clay, 1900), pp. 1-35. A recent translation of the Greek metaphrastic version of the text (BHG 608) can be read at: Stratis Papaioannou, *Christian Novels from the Menologion of Symeon Metaphrastes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), pp. 183-261.

defined orthodoxy that explicitly emphasizes the defense of the Trinity and the belief in the resurrection.

The third case study occurs in the *Martyrdom of Barbara* (BHG 213),³⁵ in a scene laden with symbolism and initiatory ritual, although outside the martyrdom context in which the episodes of Thecla or Euphemia were situated. On this occasion, there does seem to be a significant component of self-baptism, as the text presents Barbara as the daughter of a wealthy non-Christian man, and no other details are included to explain her prior conversion. The text is difficult to date, although the *terminus ante quem* is considered to be the 9th century, the time at which the oldest manuscripts containing her story are dated.³⁶

The scene is set at the beginning of the narrative when Barbara's father orders the construction of a tower to imprison and protect her from potential suitors. Beneath the tower, he builds baths adorned with statues of pagan deities. Barbara is left alone in these baths, where she immerses herself in the water. Upon emerging from the water, she spits at the statues of the gods in which her father believed, clearly displaying her Christian allegiance:

Ἄναπατοῦσα δὲ ἡ ἄμεμπτος καὶ ἀμίαντος Βαρβάρα ἐν τῷ κολύμβῳ, ἀπελθοῦσα κατ' ἀνατολάς, ἐπέστησεν ἐν τοῖς μαρμάροις τῷ δακτύλῳ αὐτῆς τὸν τίμιον σταυρόν. καὶ ἔστιν ὁ τύπος τοῦ σταυροῦ μέχρι τῆς σήμερον ἡμέρας πρὸς κατάνυξιν τῶν ὀρώντων. εἰσελθούσης δὲ αὐτῆς ἐν τῇ κόγχῃ, ἔνθα καὶ τὸ ἐκτύπωμα τοῦ τιμίου ἑαυτῆς ποδὸς ἐστάθη εἰς ὃ πάντες πρὸς ὑγιείαν καὶ σωτηρίαν μέτρον λαμβάνουσιν. τοῦτο γὰρ τὸ λουτρὸν ὁμοιοῦται τῷ Ἰορδάνῃ, ἐν ᾧ ὁ παντοκράτωρ Θεὸς καὶ δεσπότης Χριστὸς ὑποκλίνας τὴν ἄχραντον κορυφὴν ἐδέξατο τὸ ἅγιον βάπτισμα ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀκριδομελιτρόφου καὶ κήρυκος προδρόμου καὶ βαπτιστοῦ Ἰωάννου. τοῦτο τὸ λουτρὸν ὁμοιοῦται τῇ πηγῇ τοῦ Σιλοάμ, ἐν ἧ ὁ ἐκ γεννητῆς τυφλὸς νιψάμενος ἀνέβλεψεν. τοῦτο τὸ λουτρὸν ὁμοιοῦται τῇ προβατικῇ κολυμβήθρᾳ τῇ θεραπευσάσῃ πᾶσαν νόσον καὶ πᾶσαν μαλακίαν. αὕτη ἔστιν ἡ κολυμβήθρα τὸ ὕδωρ τὸ ζῶν, ὃ ἡ Σαμαρεῖτις γυνὴ ἠτήσατο παρὰ τοῦ κυρίου. διὰ τούτου οὖν τοῦ ἱαματικοῦ λουτροῦ διερχομένη ἡ μάρτυς τοῦ Χριστοῦ Βαρβάρα, ὄρᾳ τὰ εἶδωλα, ἅπερ ἐσέβετο ὁ πατὴρ αὐτῆς, καὶ λαβοῦσα τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον, τὸ κύριον καὶ ζωοποιόν, πολυμερές, εὐκίνητον καὶ φιλάγαθον, εὐεργετικόν τε καὶ βέβαιον, ἀσφαλές καὶ ἀμέριμνον –περιῆλθεν γὰρ ἐπ' αὐτὴν ἡ χάρις τοῦ κυρίου καὶ ἡ τοῦ παντοκράτορος Θεοῦ δόξα– αὕτη οὖν ἡ γενναιοτάτη μάρτυς τοῦ Χριστοῦ, πίστει κατακεκοσμημένη ἐνίκησεν τὸν διάβολον. αὕτη οὖν ἰδοῦσα τὰ ἀναίσθητα εἶδωλα ἐνέπτυσεν εἰς τὰ πρόσωπα αὐτῶν λέγουσα· ὅμοιοι ὑμῶν γένοιτο οἱ ποιοῦντες ὑμᾶς καὶ πάντες οἱ πεποιθότες ἐφ' ὑμᾶς. καὶ ἀνελθοῦσα ἐν τῷ πύργῳ αὐτῆς, ἣν ἐκεῖ προσευχομένη. (MB 4)

³⁵ For the text, I am using a recent edition by Jordi Davó and Ada Porras, «Martirio de santa Bárbara (BHG 213)», in Álvaro Ibáñez Chacón and Ángel Narro, (eds.) *Martirios de santas cristianas* (Reus-Córdoba: Rhemata-UCO Press, 2024) [forthcoming].

³⁶ Joseph Viteau, *Passions des ss. Écaterine et Pierre d'Alexandrie, Barbara et Anysia* (Paris : Librairie Émile Bouillon, 1897) pp. 89-99.

After the irreproachable and pure Barbara entered the baths, she turned towards the east and traced the venerable cross on the marble with her finger. And the sign of the cross remains there until this day, to the amazement of those who observe it. When she plunged into the pool, there also remained the imprint of her venerable foot, through which all receive what is necessary for health and salvation. This bath resembles, therefore, that of the Jordan, where Christ, almighty and sovereign God, bowing his immaculate head, received holy baptism from the one who feeds on honey and locusts, the precursor messenger and baptist, John. This bath resembles that of the pool of Siloam, where the blind man, after being purified, regained his sight. This bath resembles that of the pool of Bethesda, which healed all sickness and weakness. This is the pool, the life-giving water, which the Samaritan woman asked the Lord for. When the martyr of Christ, Barbara, passes through the other side of the healing bath, she sees the idols her father worshipped and, having received the Holy Spirit, Lord and giver of life, almighty, graceful, kind, beneficial, firm, secure, and carefree –for she was surrounded by the grace of the Lord and the glory of almighty God– then she, the very brave martyr of Christ, adorned with faith, overcame the Devil. Thus, upon seeing the foolish idols, she spat at their faces, saying, “Those who have created you are like unto you, and all who have been seduced by you!” And, after ascending to her tower, she remained there praying. (My own translation)

From a strictly performative standpoint, the scene is a clear initiatory bath, a self-baptism from which Barbara will become an active Christian and reveal her condition to her own father, who, in the end, will lead her to martyrdom. Although Barbara does not utter a baptismal formula beforehand, akin to how Tecla did in *APTh* 34, there are a series of elements that indicate it is a ritual bath in every sense. First, the presence of the cross (ὁ τύπος τοῦ σταυροῦ) that she miraculously draws on the marble stone herself and the footprint she leaves in the pool, which, moreover, according to the hagiographer, would have remained for centuries and would have been used as a temple for the healing of the sick. Second, among the comparisons with places where water appears in the New Testament that the hagiographer includes in his excursion about the place (the Jordan River [Mt. 3:1-17, Mk. 1:4-11, Lk. 3:1-22.]; the pool of Siloam [Jn. 9]; the one of the flock, in allusion to Bethesda [Jn. 5] or the well of the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman [Jn. 4:1-26]), it is symptomatic that the first reference is precisely to the Jordan River and the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. Furthermore, the element that efficiently proves the auto-baptism-scene is Barbara’s disdain shown just after leaving the bath for the statues representing the pagan deities, at which she spits and directs words of contempt. The scene closes with the indication that Barbara began to pray right there, thus confirming her full conversion as a Christian, certified by that ritual bath in the pool built by her father in the baths adjacent to the tower where Barbara was to be enclosed.

4. A sacred metamorphose: Apollinaria in the swamp

Although it cannot be considered a self-baptism *stricto sensu* like the previous cases, there is another scene with significant baptismal symbolism marking a turning point in the protagonist's life in the *Life of Apolinaria* (BHG 148) (=LA).³⁷ The text narrates the life of this noble girl, who decides to embark on a pilgrimage during which she discovers the virtues of the monks living in the monastery of Scetis, in Egypt.³⁸ Fascinated by their way of life, she escapes from the supervision and watchfulness of the slaves accompanying her, changes her clothes for those of a monk, and enters a male monastery. Her life, therefore, falls within the biographies of the so-called 'transvestite' or 'cross-dressing saints',³⁹ which enjoyed great popularity especially during the late antique period.

The scene under analysis is precisely that of her escape and subsequent adoption of the monastic habit and a somewhat masculine appearance. It all takes place at night, beside a swamp into which the young girl ventures to escape from the litter in which she was being transported by a eunuch and a slave at her service. There, in that wetland, she lives for a long time until her body physically transforms due to mosquito bites, facilitating the concealment of her true female nature. The definitive moment when she must leave this ritual, initiatory, and transformative place is announced by God, who also provides her with a new name, a male one, Dorotheus, so she can be identified as a man.

περὶ δὲ τὸ μεσονύκτιον ἔφθασεν τὸ ἔλος σύνεγγυς λιβάδος ἣτις μέχρι τοῦ νῦν λέγεται ἢ λιβάς Ἀποληναρίας. καὶ ἀνακαλύψασα τὰς πύλας τοῦ λεκτικίου εὔρεν ἀμφοτέρους κατ' οἰκονομίαν Θεοῦ κοιμωμένους καὶ ἀποδυσασμένη τὰ κοσμικὰ ἱμάτια ἐνέδυσεν ἑαυτὴν τὰ μοναχικὰ λέγουσα· ὁ ἐναρξάμενος με τυχεῖν τούτου τοῦ ἀγίου σχήματος ἀξίαν με ποιήσον ἐκτελέσαι αὐτὸ κατὰ τὸ θέλημά σου, κύριε. καὶ κατασφραγισαμένη ε καὶ εἰσῆλθεν ἐν τῷ ἔλει. [...] τῆς

³⁷ The only edition of the Greek text available to date appears in James Drescher, *Three Coptic Legends. Hilaria - Archellites - The Seven Sleepers* (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1947), pp. 152-161.

³⁸ On literary aspects of this text, see Ángel Narro, «La Vida de Apolinaria / Doroteo (BHG 148). Una santa travestida de origen copto», in Lourdes Bonhome & Mireia Movellán (eds.), *Del relato martirial al género hagiográfico en la tardoantigüedad. Personajes y espacios liminales* (Madrid - Oporto: Sindéresis, 2022), pp. 77-103.

³⁹ On this typology of women saints with the focus on the cross-dress, see: Marie Delcourt, «Le complexe de Diane dans l'hagiographie chrétienne», *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 153 (1958), pp. 1-33; John Anson, «The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism. The Origin and Development of a Motif», *Viator* 5 (1974), pp. 1-32; Evelyne Patlagean, «L'histoire de la femme déguisée en moine et l'évolution de la sainteté féminine à Byzance», *Studi Medievali* 17 (1976), pp. 597-623; Nathalie Delierneux, «Virilité physique et sainteté féminine dans l'hagiographie orientale du IVe au VIIe siècle», *Byzantion* 67 (1997), pp. 179-243 ; Julie Van Pelt, *Saints in Disguise: Literary Performance in Greek Late Antique Hagiography* (Ghent: Universiteit Gent, 2019) [PhD dissertation].

δὲ μακαρίας μεινάσης ἐν τῷ ἔλει ἔτη πολλά καὶ ἀθλούσης γενναίως κατὰ τοῦ διαβόλου, γέγονεν τὸ σῶμα αὐτῆς ὡς χελώνης δέρμα. ἐγένετο γὰρ βοσκόμενον ὑπὸ τῶν κωνώπων. αὐτὴ δὲ κατετάκη ὑπὸ τῆς ἐγκρατείας καὶ τοῦ κανόνος οὗ ἐδίδαξεν ἑαυτήν. ὅτε δὲ ὁ δεσπότης Χριστὸς ἠβουλήθη ἀξίαν αὐτὴν ποιῆσαι τοῦ στεφάνου τῶν ἁγίων πατέρων, ἐποίησεν αὐτὴν ἐξελθεῖν ἐκ τοῦ ἔλους, ἀγνώριστος οὖν γέγονεν πᾶσιν ὅτι γυνὴ ἦν, εὐνοῦχος ἐνομίζετο· ὥφθη δὲ αὐτὴ τις ἐν ὄραματι λέγων ὅτι ἐὰν ἐπερωτηθεῖς τίς καλῆ εἰπέ ὅτι Δωρόθεος. (LA 11, 14)

At around midnight, she arrived at a swamp near a spring, which is still called to the present day the “Spring of Apollinaria”. As she opened the curtains of the litter, she found both [the eunuch and the litter-bearer] asleep according to God’s plan, and after taking off her secular clothes she dressed herself in the monastic garment and said: “My Lord, you who arranged for me to receive this holy habit, make me worthy to put it to use according to your will”. And she made the sign of the cross, hopped off the litter and entered into the swamp. [...] As the blessed one had remained for many years in the swamp and she contended bravely with the devil, her body became as the skin of a turtle, since it was devoured by mosquitoes. She wore herself out by her asceticism and the monastic practice she taught herself. When the Lord Christ wanted her to become worthy of the crown of the holy fathers, he made her depart from the swamp. Then, it became unknown to anyone that she was a woman. Instead, she was considered a eunuch. And He appeared to her in a vision and told her: “If you are asked «What is your name?», say «Dorotheos»”. (My own translation)

In the sequence where Apollinaria enters, lives in, and eventually leaves the swamp, spanning many years, there are several elements reminiscent of the earlier scenes, aiming to endow Apollinaria’s transformation into a monk with a certain solemnity and significance before her entry into the Scetis monastery. Thus, when she finds the eunuch and the litter-bearer asleep, according to God’s plan (κατ’ οἰκονομίαν Θεοῦ), she makes the sign of the cross (κατασφραγισαμένη) and throws herself out of the litter (ἔρριψεν ἑαυτὴν ἐκ τοῦ λεκτικίου) to enter the wetland, in a formulation that clearly recalls the scene of Thecla throwing herself into the pool in Antioch (APTh 34: ἔβαλεν ἑαυτὴν) and, more specifically, those of Euphemia (MEuph 13b: ἔρριψεν ἑαυτὴν) and Charitine (MCh 3: ῥίψαντες αὐτὴν εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν / ῥιπτομένη εἰς τὸ μέσον τῆς θαλάσσης).

The presence of water, not only in the wetland but also in the spring located next to the swamp, which according to the text eventually receives the saint’s name (ἡ λιβάς Ἀποληναρίας), is another element that links the scene to a certain baptismal symbolism. Furthermore, Apollinaria’s physical metamorphose due to the mosquito bites and her spiritual transformation due to her ascetic training in preparation for adopting a monastic lifestyle precede her definitive change of personality. This is marked by the use of a different name, Dorotheos, provided by God in a vision, signifying Apollinaria’s change of identity, gender, and way of life. Ultimately, this peculiar scene with certain baptismal undertones highlights the transformative nature of Apollinaria’s stay in the swamp.

5. Final remarks

After the journey proposed from the *APTh* to the *LA*, the first clear conclusion is that the self-baptism of Thecla, although unique and imbued with much deeper and symbolic connotations due to the chronology, the context of its appearance, the nature of the text, or its subsequent literary influence, is not the only instance of such characteristics. It is true that Thecla's case presents a series of elements that make it exceptional, such as Paul's prior denial of the seal of Christ and the resort to self-baptism as a last-minute measure before a perceived imminent death—a death that Thecla's very act might hasten, almost akin to a case of suicide. However, over time, this scene also proved productive to be adapted and incorporated into the hagiographic repertoire focused on female figures, just as other key scenes or motifs present in the *APTh*, such as the scene of the fire⁴⁰ or the lioness licking the young woman's feet,⁴¹ had been.

One of the multiple literary manifestations of the *imitatio Theclae* seems to underlie, therefore, the evolution and adaptation of these scenes within the female hagiographic discourse of late antiquity. However, the ritual element of baptism as a symbolic initiation moment into the protagonist's full Christian life is only found in the scene from the *MB*. Here, the young Barbara's bath is accompanied by a belligerent and contemptuous attitude toward the pagan deities in which her father believed, along with the occurrence of the usual miracles provoked by the divinity, which imbue the scene with special symbolism. Furthermore, the hagiographer's comparison of Barbara's bath with some symbolic scenes of the Gospel, especially the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, confirms this ritual symbology.

Regarding the cases of Charitine and Euphemia, these can be viewed from a unified perspective as scenes that clearly imitate the model of Thecla, despite notable differences between both cases and Thecla, as well as differences between Charitine and Euphemia themselves. In both instances, the protagonists are presented as recognized Christians by the text, thus eliminating the element of conversion and the need for prior requests or references to baptismal practices as in Thecla's case. Nonetheless, the connection between their martyrdom accounts and the *APTh* is indisputable.

In Charitine's case, the influence of Thecla's cult in the region justifies the adaptation of one of the most famous scenes from her story into that of Charitine.⁴² Although Charitine immerses herself in the sea, she pronounces a Trinitarian baptismal formula and makes an allusion to the resurrection to emphasize specific dogmatic distinctions. In Euphemia's case, the scene serves a

⁴⁰ On this motif, see Juan José Pomer, «Focs que no cremen en l'hagiografia tardoantiga i bizantina», *Studia Philologica Valentina* 20 (2018), pp. 141-174.

⁴¹ See the examples of Polyxena, Euphemia, or Tatiana in Narro, *Tecla de Iconio*, pp. 260-263; 278-279; 291-292.

⁴² Cortese, *Cilicia as Sacred Landscape in Late Antiquity*, pp. 132-146.

common function in martyrdom narratives: it demonstrates, on one hand, the martyr's courage in the face of pain and the trials of martyrdom, and her boldness before the pagan torturer; on the other hand, it shows God's support, as He does not hesitate to perform a miracle to save the martyr from the punishment she has been subjected to.

Regarding the *LA*, the scene where Apollinaria enters the swamp undergoes a triple transformation in lifestyle, gender, and name, invoking significant symbolism with echoes of baptism. Moreover, the use of lexicon closely resembling that used in the self-baptism scenes of Thecla, Charitine, and Euphemia further aligns the description of Apollinaria's transformation into Dorotheos with the context under discussion. If Thecla has often been considered a precursor to the cross-dressing saints,⁴³ among whom Apollinaria is included, this scene demonstrates the flexibility and variability of late antique hagiographic discourse in adapting various literary motifs present in the earliest texts about holy Christian figures.

Consequently, this final testimony illustrates how Thecla's self-baptism, like many other scenes from the *APTh*, became an important source of inspiration for later hagiography.

⁴³ Julie Van Pelt, «Thecla, the first cross-dresser? The Acts of Paul and Thecla and the Lives of Byzantine Transvestite Saints», in Ghazzal Dabiri & Flavia Ruani, *Thecla and Medieval Sainthood. The Acts of Paul and Thecla in Eastern and Western Hagiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 197-232.