

prepared to renounce their wealth. The documentary material from specific regions indicates a wide range of family strategies in the period; the demographic profile of Egypt suggests that risk of fatherlessness or orphan-hood was great — the impact of this on children's lives can be seen in the petitions, private letters and other documents. The prominent adults in children's lives who spoke on their behalf in such documents were usually their widowed mothers, their guardians, their grandparents, or their siblings.

Under the cultural, religious and social changes surrounding the spread of Christianity, did the child's place within the family and wider society achieve a different significance? The Church and monasteries took on roles and responsibility in various aspects of children's lives: children, widows, physically disabled and the poor received help, spiritual and religious education. They also worked to secure freedom of children sold or stolen by slave traders. The monasteries like those in and around Oxyrhynchus were key components in transforming the everyday lives of children in Roman Egypt, and adult-child relationships and, far from 'de-marginalising' children, they served to re-frame aspects of children's vital cultural, social and economic roles, and assist their socialization within the social and cultural practices of populations of the province of Roman Egypt.

Source: Christian Laes, Katarina Mustakallio, and Ville Vuolanto, eds., *Children and Family in Late Antiquity: Life, Death and Interaction. Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion* 15; Leuven: Peeters, 2015

MARTYR-SAINTS AND THE DEMON OF INFANT MORTALITY: FOLK HEALING IN EARLY CHRISTIAN PEDIATRIC MEDICINE¹

Susan R. HOLMAN

1. INTRODUCTION

In modern public and global health research, where I do most of my work, the “demon of infant mortality” usually refers to the fatal diarrhea, dehydration, and electrolyte imbalances that are all too frequently associated with childhood malnutrition, untreated infections, and diseases of poverty.² This physical imbalance — often caused or aggravated by unclean water — likely played a role in the social realities in ancient Rome that prompted Celsus's well-known comment, that dysenteries in Antiquity killed children “mostly up to the age of ten” (*Med.* 12, 8, 30). A number of ancient medical texts, such as the seventh-century *Therapy of Children* by Paul of Aegina, offer recipes to treat “the diarrhoea that befalls children,” which they blame on various causes. Ancient writers often associate this symptom with the period of teething, which can indeed be a time of heightened risk for malnutrition and disease in some settings, in part because the teething period usually overlaps with

¹ This chapter has benefited immensely from discussion with other participants at the conference in Rome, as well as a colloquium session of the Boston Area Patristics Group. For the Boston discussion, I especially thank Bernadette Brooten, David Frankfurter, Ute Possekkel, Kelley Spoerl, Annevies van den Hoek, and Larry Wills. Errors that remain are entirely my own.

² For example, Joint Publication Research Service 1986, an epidemiology report from Brazil, includes a health report summary that noted, “Of the deaths expected this year 27 percent, or 87 thousand children, will be victims of diarrhetic diseases connected with malnutrition, which appears to be the most serious of the fatal sicknesses... [yet] less than 15 percent of families in the world [use oral rehydration therapy] to prevent and treat diarrhetic dehydration, the worst demon of infant mortality.” See also Schepher-Hughes 1992 for a stark and disturbing study of maternal attitudes toward child mortality among the poor in Brazil into the present.

weaning.³ As with modern treatment of dysentery today, late Roman medicine, both “professional” and “popular,” also focused on restoring the body’s balance of wet and dry through the application of basic physical substances.

Christians in Late Antiquity shared their neighbors’ desire to protect against threats to the health and life of their children. The responses found in early Christian texts often included pediatric medical interventions,⁴ but also extend beyond medical issues to include a broader range of multidimensional folk practices. Humoral balance is rarely mentioned, however, in the healing stories from that “most controversial part of medicine, that is, the part touching religion,”⁵ that is, hagiography, in which sick supplicants appealing to saints and martyrs for a miraculous cure have often already exhausted common medical options. These sources tend to focus, instead, on spiritual balance: good against evil; death inverted to eternal life; and homeopathic moral complementarity that assumes children’s innocence in the face of illness.

In this essay, I explore narratives that relate to three different aspects of Christian hagiography that speak of children’s illness: prayer amulets, martyred mothers, and healing shrines in Late Antiquity. I will look at how saints’ stories address concerns about infant mortality and how they are used to image a faith-based construction of Christian healing. The discussion here on Christian amulet scrolls will focus particularly on the Ethiopian tradition associated with S. Sisinnios against the “demon of infant mortality”. Second, I consider the concerns about child survival that are suggested in one early third century mother-saint narrative, the martyrdom account of Perpetua and Felicitas. This story, the earliest Christian martyrdom likely written (at least in part) by the mother of a young infant, is best known for its depiction of gender identity, and the health risk

of its three children has received little attention in the literature. The brief discussion on this story here focuses on how mothers and saints might image the survival of children who were otherwise expected to die. Third, and more broadly, I highlight examples illustrating the role that children’s illness and cure played in early Christian healing sanctuaries between the fifth and seventh centuries. Through the lens of these examples from across a broad historical spectrum, it is evident that Christian pediatric healing was constructed using common concepts, metaphors, and images. These include themes such as, for example, ‘right’ theological views, violence, innocence, and play. In exploring these ideas, I venture somewhat ‘outside’ traditional Roman boundaries in both space and time, mindful of the influence that many of these intersections continue to have on cultural responses to children’s health into the present.

2. AMULET SCROLLS: S. SISINNIOS AGAINST THE DEMON OF INFANT MORTALITY

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, one God. In the name of God the Creator, the living, the allwise. The prayer of the holy Sûs^{nyô}s for driving away diseases from children who are still at their mother’s breasts. And further it will bring help to any woman, so that her children will live — : let her *writte* [a copy of this prayer] and *wear* it...⁶

Thus begins an Ethiopian healing amulet scroll that appeals to an early Christian saint named Sisinnios for power against “the demon of infant mortality.” While this scroll, like most Ethiopic manuscripts, is not ancient,⁷ Ethiopic sources are particularly interesting to

⁶ Fries 1893: 65, my emphases. Spelling and transcription of this saint’s name in Greek, Coptic, and Ethiopic tradition has many variants; for consistency here I refer to him as Sisinnios. English translations are mine unless noted otherwise.

⁷ Fries does not date the text but describes it as a parchment roll written “in Ge’ez with an admixture of Amharic,” in a script suggesting something a little earlier than the nineteenth century. He compares it with two texts he studied in Berlin that were dated between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The scholarly value of Ethiopic sources is not in their age but in the way that they may preserve ideas and traditions from Christian Antiquity that are unattested in other sources. All of the spiritual healing scrolls catalogued in Haile *et al.*, 2009, for example, date

³ In other words, as children transition from exclusive breastfeeding to a diet of ‘table foods’, they start to drink water (which may not be clean), eat foods that may contain bacteria or insect products, and the nutritional balance of their diet (e.g., protein, vitamins, and minerals) may also change drastically. Illness in this setting can also result from a compromised immune system if their diet lacks necessary nutrients for normal childhood development once breastfeeding stops. For Paul of Aegina’s *Therapy of Children*, see Pormann 1999.

⁴ See Holman 2009 for a selective general bibliography.
⁵ Mercer 1997: 39.

scholars of Antiquity because Ethiopia has a long association with the Graeco-Roman world of Late Antiquity, and has played a recognized role in the preservation and transmission of early Christian traditions and stories otherwise lost.⁸ Indeed, the story and prayer tradition of Sisinnios exists in many variants that have in common a number of elements that fit this saint's depiction in art from Late Antiquity, discussed below. Witnesses to the Sisinnios tradition from Late Antiquity, medieval manuscripts, and saints' calendars is further enriched by iconographic scrolls, produced by trained scribes, that dominate Ethiopian folk medicine up to the present.⁹ The Sisinnios story offers, therefore, a provocative window into early Christian pediatric folk medicine as it relates to practices that many early Christians considered (and practiced or condemned as) "magic."

According to the story in three Ethiopian manuscripts published by Sylvain Grébaud in 1937,¹⁰ Sisinnios was originally a pagan from Antioch who converted to Christianity and was martyred at Nicomedia during the Diocletian persecution.¹¹ After his baptism, he learned that the husband and father-in-law of his sister, Ursula, were magicians, and that Ursula herself was demon-possessed and had a son by Satan.¹² Moreover, "whenever a small child was born among the children of the

between the seventeenth and the twentieth century. The oldest images in Mercier 1997 are from the fifteenth century.

⁸ Implicit in ongoing publication (now by Peeters-Leuven) of the series, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium (CSCO), Scriptores Aethiopiici*. For a summary of Ethiopia in Christian history, see e.g., Rainieri 1992: 289-91.

⁹ Best known to scholarship through the work of the French anthropologist, Jacques Mercier; see especially Mercier 1997.

¹⁰ Grébaud 1937. The scrolls were among 'magic' scrolls collected during an ethnographic and linguistic mission to Dakar-Djibouti between 1931 and 1933, deposited in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Grébaud dates the three that contain the Sisinnios story to the fifteenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For two illustrations of Sisinnios slaughtering the demon, a common feature of these scrolls, see Mercier 1997: 80 (Fig. 83, an amulet scroll), 83 (Fig. 86, from a psalter).

¹¹ Grébaud 1937: 177-83.

¹² The name "Ursula" follows Fries 1893; Grébaud 1937 as well as Haile *et al.* 2009 transliterate the Ethiopic to "Werzelya;" Basset 1894 has "Querzelya." In the scrolls catalogued by Haile *et al.* 2009, Sisinnios is also associated with conquest over other demons; I focus here on the Ursula story because of her consistently direct and explicit identification as the demon of infant mortality. Mercier 1997: 95 notes that "Satan, Gog and Magog, and Werzelya are among the demons most represented in the scrolls, though their inclusion is not systematic."

people of the city, she descended toward it, killed it by magic, and drank its blood."¹³ In a militant Christian response, Sisinnios killed them all: his sister, her husband, her father-in-law, and her son.¹⁴ His own father, perhaps understandably upset, informed the emperor of his son's conversion. Sisinnios was arrested, subject to gruesome tortures — beaten, hit with an iron, crushed with wheels, pounded on a threshing floor, then dragged through the city — and finally beheaded. Despite text variations, the amulet scrolls share as a common ending some aspect of a prayer that blesses Sisinnios and appeals to his god for personalized protection for a young infant.¹⁵ His feast in Western martyrologies is given as either November 23¹⁶ or April 21.¹⁷ He remains most popular today in the Ethiopian tradition, as evidenced by a sample tally from the Ethiopic Manuscript Imaging Project (EMIP)'s catalogue of 134 scrolls of Ethiopian spiritual healing, in which over half contain the Sisinnios story or prayer.¹⁸

The saint's demonic opponent is also depicted variously but with certain common characteristics. In some Ethiopic scrolls, she appears "as a bird or serpent;"¹⁹ in others as a woman or sometimes a Gorgon-like, detached head or eyes surrounded by wavy rays suggestive of snakes.²⁰ In one medieval Greek text,²¹ the saint is one of three brothers who restore life to six children of their sister, Melitene; in this version, the children were slaughtered by the demon named Gylou, and the saint is paired with the archangel Michael. Perdritzet (1922) argues, on the basis of name and place details, that the heroes in this text were Parthian or Persian.

¹³ Grébaud 1937: 182.

¹⁴ In some versions the story ends here, followed by the prayer and Ursula's promises to avoid those who use practice (write, speak, wear, or post) the prayer.

¹⁵ Grébaud 1937: 182-3.

¹⁶ Perdritzet 1922: 13 (note 6) and 14 (note 1).

¹⁷ Migne 1850: II, 1061, following Fries 1893: 56, identified "Susnée, (Saint) Susnaeus" as a martyr whose feast day, April 21, was honored by the Ethiopians and Copts.

¹⁸ Haile *et al.* 2009: 271: "Catalogue of Scrolls of Ethiopian Spiritual Healing."

¹⁹ Mercier 1997: 80 (the manuscript dates to the nineteenth century). Grébaud 1937: 183 notes that she may also take on the color of a serpent.

²⁰ See, e.g., Mercier 1997: 89 (Fig. 90). For her depiction as a serpent, see Mercier 1992: Fig. 129.

²¹ Published with translation in Perdritzet 1922: 16-19.

Sisinnios's ethnic identity as a non-Roman of Phrygian or Persian origin is further argued on the basis of his iconic attributes in the earliest known image: a sixth or seventh century fresco found shortly after 1900 in Chapel 17 at the ancient Hermopolite monastery of S. Apollo at Bawit in Egypt and published by M. Jean Clédart in 1906 (see Figures 1 and 2).²² Although the upper portion of the fresco was damaged during excavation, Clédart's detailed description as well as photograph and drawing of the image *in situ* reveal a blend of details that fit the later Ethiopic version of the story.



Fig. 1. S. Sisinnios, wall fresco from the Monastery of S. Apollo in Bawit, Egypt (photo). (Source: Clédart 1906: pl. 55).

Clédart describes the figure as clearly identified by an inscription that he saw written to the right of the head (both inscription and head now lost), CICCINNIOS. Mounted on a brown horse, he is dressed

²² Published in Clédart 1906; discussed at length in Perdrizet 1922; for archaeological context, see Clédart 1904.



Fig. 2. S. Sisinnios, wall fresco from the Monastery of S. Apollo in Bawit, Egypt (painted sketch), detail. (Source: Clédart 1906: pl. 56).

in what Clédart called Phrygian costume (perhaps suggested by a characteristic hat or cap in the part of the fresco that has been destroyed), armed with a lance that is piercing a woman who lies at his feet. Surrounding him are features that Clédart (and Perdrizet, following Clédart) identified with the myth of Horus: a hyena, two serpents, a scorpion, a crocodile, an ibis, a dagger, hachet, and possibly a louse. He also identified a young child (unnamed) to the left of the saint, positioned as if someone were holding it, both arms stretched out and grasping small red balls.²³

Associations with attributes from Egyptian myth as well as Jewish and pre-Christian Greek "magic" healing parallels are not surprising.

²³ Clédart 1906: 80-1; The image is illustrated in plates 55 (photograph) and 56 (color sketch). On early Christianity and the Horus tradition, see also Frankfurter 2009.

The personification of a female demon of infant mortality is a historical commonplace, found at least as early as the Mesopotamian *Attn-hais* epic²⁴ and fundamental to the Lilitith tradition.²⁵ The pre-Christian Greek tradition of a child-killing demon is also well attested.²⁶ Corinne Pache, for example, has explored how myths of murdered children were part of protection cults in ancient Greece and in sustained lullabies, dramas, and charm traditions.²⁷ Protective texts that survive often demonstrate personalization similar to that found in the Sisinnios scrolls, that is, by naming the mothers or infants who are to be protected through the symbolic or spiritual affirmation of this sibling sacrifice, both that of the female demon and her saintly martyred brother. A female demon is also evident in a mosaic series from Late Antiquity that is likely contemporary with the rise of the Sisinnios tradition, in two of the fifteen surviving mosaics (thought to be from Antioch) that tell the life story of a young boy named Kimbros; here the demon is explicitly identified as NOSOS, and appears as a grey-faced malignant female demon with wings who hovers behind the sick boy or young man.²⁸

As one of a number of mounted rider saints from Antiquity, Sisinnios is also occasionally elided, in Christian amulet tradition, with other holy riders, most notably King Solomon, who were also known for their apotropaic power over infant-killing demons.²⁹ Gary Vikan, for example, published two seventh or eighth century CE uterine amulets that depict a "barebreasted female who, beneath the hooves of the horse, is about to be impaled by the rider's lance."³⁰ Vikan identifies the victim in these amulets with the Gorgon-like female demon, named Abyzou, in the *Testament of Solomon* (13.1-7)

²⁴ See e.g., Lambert, Millard 1999.

²⁵ See e.g., Lesses 2001.

²⁶ See e.g., Johnson 1995.

²⁷ Pache 2004. I thank David Frankfurter for this reference.

²⁸ Marinnesca, Cox, Wachter 2005: 1269-77 (see esp. Fig. 3 and discussion on 1272-1273); and Marinnesca, Cox, Wachter 2007: 101-14 (see esp. Fig. 5.2 and 5.7).

²⁹ In addition to this tradition in the late (and possibly Christian) *Testament of Solomon*, there is also a strong heritage of King Solomon as 'patron saint' of healing in Jewish tradition. See Duling 1975, Duling 1985 and Duling 1988. I thank Larry Willis for these references. For further discussion of mounted riders, see also Horn in this volume.

³⁰ Vikan 1984: 65-86; the image is discussed on 78-9 and seen in figs. 9, 19, and 20.

(commonly dated around the second century CE), who there confesses that she loves to seek out and strangle newborn babies.³¹ Mercier has suggested a similar link between the *Testament of Solomon* and the Ethiopic Ursula tradition in his interpretations of amulet scroll drawings of a Gorgon-like figure, noting that "[t]he image must have come to Ethiopia very early."³² He adds that "since Sisinnios [sic] and Solomon are represented on the backs of some medallions bearing this face, it may have been identified with the evil eye; with some demon cited in the 'Testament of Solomon,' with Gyllou, killer of children; or with troubles of the womb."³³

Several scholars have also argued a link between the mounted Saint Sisinnios and the early Manichaeans, specifically Manes' immediate successor, also named Sisinnios. In 1894, René Basset noted a tenth-century Slavic variant of the prayer of Sisinnios preserved by "Jeremiah the Bogomil" that, he said, also exists in Ethiopic and Arabic. Since the Bogomils drew their theology from Manichaean dualism, Basset suggested, this purportedly fourth-century "orthodox" martyr may in fact represent a convenient conflation with this "heterodox" Sisinnios.³⁴ The Manichaean Sisinnios died sometime before 293 CE, since, according to the sources, his martyrdom resulted in a temporary truce between the Manichean church and the King's successor, Narses, who ruled from 293 to 302. A Coptic homily from about 400 CE titled "The Prayer and Martyrdom of Sisinnios (Mar Sisin)" though now badly fragmented, tells how this Sisinnios suffered a bloody and extended torture, interrogation by King Vahram of Persia, trial, and subsequent crucifixion.³⁵

Another prayer-hymn identified with the Manichaean Sisinnios is preserved in Chinese, in a manuscript found in the Dunhuang Caves,

³¹ Duling 1983: 935-87; for Abyzou, Obyzouth, see 973-4.

³² Mercier 1997: 99.

³³ Mercier 1997: 107, note 10. See Dasen, in press, for a new study on the amulet tradition, and Dasen, Speiser, in press, for more on the historical transmission of magic from traditions in late Antiquity.

³⁴ Basset 1894. His translation of the Sisinnios legend is at 38-42; his theory of a Manichaean source is at 16-18.

³⁵ The Coptic text, with German translation, is in Polonsky and Ibscher 1954: 79, 1-85, 34. A new critical edition of the Coptic codex of the homilies is Pedersen 2006. For an English translation by Sarah Clackson, see Gardner, Lieu 2004: 104-8.

and likely dated to the Tang dynasty (eighth century CE).³⁶ The hymn is titled, "In praise (or mourning) of Impermanence, attributed to Mo-Szu-hsin, the King of the Law, who was persecuted by the tyrant Prince," and Tsui Chi, who translated it into English, identifies this name as referring to "Mar Sisim, Mani's successor who was crucified."³⁷ Comparing Coptic and Chinese narratives, Iain Gardner and Samuel Lieu remark, "It is interesting to note that the bodily suffering resulting from persecution by secular authorities, which is so prominent and cogent in the Coptic version, had been spiritualised in the Chinese version into the eternal battle between spirit and body and between permanence and impermanence."³⁸

While Basset likely knew neither the Coptic nor Chinese text, he argues for a Manichaean association that would follow from comparable cross-cultural transmission:

[T]he presence of this legend in Arabic and Ethiopian literature, on one hand, and Slavic and Romanian, on the other, establishes incontrovertibly that it is borrowed from a common original that can only be Greek...it is probable that the legend, preserved in the popular tradition by the Manichaeans, came to present a series of miraculous events that doubtless came to be attributed, much later, by the orthodox and, thanks to the confusion about his name on account of the homonyms, the [the obscure Sousenyos or Sissimios] Martyr of Nicomedia.³⁹

Basset also suggests that the fourth-century *Disputation of Manes with Archelaus* further evidences Christian co-opting of the Manichaean saint and his healing tradition, citing chapter 51, where a follower of Manes named Sisinnios is said to betray his master and become a Christian. Whether fact or fiction, this does suggest that Christians as early as Late Antiquity were claiming a (formerly) Manichaean Sisinnios as one of their own.

While a theoretical Manichaean association is intriguing, the surviving evidence does not sufficiently 'prove' that Manes' successor

³⁶ On the story of the Dunhuang caves, see now especially Hansen 2012: 167-97.

³⁷ Chi 1943: 174-219; the translation of the Sisinnios hymn (lines 83-119) is at 183-6.

³⁸ Gardner, Lieu 2004: 104.

³⁹ Basset 1894: 16-17, my trans.

should be identified with either the Bawit fresco or the saint described in the prayer amulet scrolls. The Sisinnios prayer amulet tradition may have been known to both early Christians and Manichaeans (including the Bogomils),⁴⁰ but this need not mean that the 'ur-saint' Sisinnios was necessarily a Manichaean. Indeed, the Manichaean sources on Manes' successor bear no resemblance to the Sisinnios prayer amulet narratives. Neither the Manichaean Coptic text (though admittedly fragmentary) nor the Chinese hymn contains any hint of allusion, for example, to a child-killing demon, a mounted saint, or apotropaic power. Even the hero's garb in the Bawit Sisinnios fresco need not identify him as distinctly Manichaean,⁴¹ and the fresco might as easily refer to a Persian saint with the same name. Not all Christians named Sisinnios were foreigners.⁴² And there is (to my knowledge) no clear association between early Manichaean communities and those in early Christian Ethiopia. Thus while the prayer amulet tradition of S. Sisinnios in modern Ethiopia clearly has its roots in early Christian tradition and folk practices of child healing, it seems quite unrelated to any known Manichaean source.

The Sisinnios prayer amulet tradition does illustrate how the apotropaic power for pediatric health through amulet scrolls was a "therapeutic of the word," often both literal and as metaphor. Users brought the story into their bodies by writing it, wearing it, reciting it, displaying it, and thus physically participating in its images and text. Ursula as she dies, for example, swears to her brother, "I will not go where your image is, nor where your name is invoked, nor where the story of your life is told."⁴³ Mercier notes that "other versions" (which he does not identify) say, "I will not go to the church where your

⁴⁰ As Basset appears to hint in his reference to the prayer preserved by "Jeremiah the Bogomil."

⁴¹ The Old Testament prophet, Daniel, for example, is also often depicted in Persian or Phrygian garb in early iconography; see e.g. Ringrose 2003: 98.

⁴² For example, we know of a Novatian bishop of Constantinople around 407 (Socrates, *HE* 6, 22 and Sozomenus, *HE* 8, 1), and a popular local presbyter who became the Chalcedonian archbishop of Constantinople twenty years later, immediate predecessor to the infamous Nestorius (Socrates, *HE* 7, 26). Neither of these two is linked with either Manes or 'foreign' ethnicity.

⁴³ Mercier 1997: 83 (a nineteenth century psalter).

name is remembered, nor will I approach anyone who carries this writing."⁴⁴

While the amulet scroll is usually an inert object for domestic rather than liturgical use,⁴⁵ Mercier suggests that in Ethiopic tradition it may also be associated with blood sacrifice. One finds, he says, a

mirrorlike link between the patient and [her] scroll... [since], scrolls too involved a sacrifice and the parchment prepared from the animal's hide doubles for the patient's skin. (Is it not tailored exactly to the length of [her] body?)... The scroll is a symbolic limit to the body, a doubling of the corporeal envelope.⁴⁶

The physical link of a healing agent with the martyrs' blood and flesh, as an essential operative in the effective pediatric healing, is a theme that recurs in all three types of folk practice under discussion here. Around 400 CE, in Antioch, John Chrysostom (*De Stat.* 19, 14) condemned such practice where "women and little children suspend Gospels from their necks as a powerful amulet, and carry them about in all places wherever they go."⁴⁷ Yet even Chrysostom's condemnation contains an association between sick children and images of maternal martyrdom. For the mother who followed Chrysostom's view of proper Christian practice and chose *not* to use an amulet when her child was sick, Chrysostom says (*Hom.* 8, 5 *on Colossians*), "it is

⁴⁴ Mercier 1997: 85, n. 37. He adds (83-4), "This formula, translated from another language (probably Arabic) states the effectiveness of the substance of both image and text. In so doing, it suggests that these be carried, at least as much as that people pray." Fries 1893: 67 offers as another variant, "I shall not do any harm wherever your book is read or to anybody who wears [alt: possesses] this prayer." The prayer's protection was said to cover mother as well as child, in that wearing the scroll is said to protect the woman from "every demon, and from the Legion, from colic and from pain in the bowels, from apoplexy and from rheumatism, from the evil eye, and from delirium and from accidents and sunstroke, from typhus and epilepsy, from pleurisy and issue of blood, from spectres and the plague, from cholera and fever, from sorcerers and metalmelers and flashes and from a sore back. And from all evil spirits and from men who prepare harmful potions and from unclean ghosts." See Fries 1893: 65.

⁴⁵ "Among the martyred saints, Susenyos, protector of the newborn, appears much more often on scrolls... than on the walls of churches." (Mercier 1997: 83).

⁴⁶ Mercier 1997: 95.

⁴⁷ Trans. Stephens 1889: 470.

counted to her as martyrdom, for she sacrificed her [child] in her resolve... she chose rather to see her child dead, than to put up with idolatry."⁴⁸ While he seems to believe that the sick child was just as likely to die with or without an amulet, he emphasizes that a mother's religious obedience on this point has the value of a martyr's pain and spiritual benefit.

While the use of even saint-related amulets in Christian practice was controversial,⁴⁹ such use continued for centuries, at times with ecclesiastical blessing. In the sixth century, for example, Gregory of Tours relates that the woman Trophima, an early Christian convert in the *Acts of Andrew* who is thrown into a brothel after her conversion, was protected from sexual harm by wearing a Gospel.⁵⁰ And numerous Coptic texts used as amulets or charms draw on biblical stories and scriptural allusions.⁵¹ The Manichaean, who also officially censured "magical" practices in fact also resorted to prophylactic charms and amulets for health.⁵²

Chrysostom's praise for the mother who images and identifies with martyrdom for the best spiritual good of her sick child also leads us into the second type of pediatric protection for discussion here: the role of the mother-martyr in children's well-being, in the martyrdom narrative of saints Perpetua and Felicitas.

3. MOTHER-MARTYRS: PEDIATRIC RISK AND REDEMPTION IN THE MARTYRDOM OF PERPETUA AND FELICITAS

Belief in a 'demon of infant mortality' generates a power of fear only while a child lives. In the martyrdom story of Perpetua and Felicitas, we find this incipient terror inverted by reifying the sick or vulnerable child through associations with eternal continuity of relationships in the afterlife, such that death loses both power and sting.⁵³ While

⁴⁸ Trans. Broadus 1889: 298.

⁴⁹ See, for example, de Bruyn, Dijkstra 2011.

⁵⁰ Gregory of Tours, *Liber de miraculis Andreae* 23. I thank Bernadette Brooren for this reference.

⁵¹ See, e.g., Meyer, Smith 1994: 33 (text 7).

⁵² See, e.g., Gardner, Lieu 2004; also Mirecki 2001 and BeDuhn 2001.

⁵³ All translations of *The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* are from Musurillo 1972: 106-31. See also now Heffernan 2012.

scholars in recent years have focused most on the gendered relationships in this story, few have considered the health concerns that pertain to its three young children.

Felicitas and Perpetua were a slave and an upper class married woman, possibly associated with the Montanist Christian movement of Roman Phrygia,⁵⁴ who were martyred together in Carthage shortly after 200 CE. Both women were forced to negotiate a difficult separation from their infants to attain their ideal of spiritual wholeness. The slave Felicitas's separation is presented as a straightforward, but physically difficult eighth-month birth, followed by surrender of the baby to a Christian woman who "brought her up as her daughter."⁵⁵ While the author clearly accepted the popular view that eight-month babies usually died,⁵⁶ this story reverses life and death expectations with a narrative of spiritual victory for both mother and child.

Perpetua's separation from her son is more complex. As a firstborn male heir of high social standing, his health and existence was so important to the story's characters that even the governor in the trial mentions him.⁵⁷ Instead of Felicitas's daughter's simple relational transfer — from prison to new family — Perpetua's son bounces back and forth in a repeated volley of give and take. The narrative focuses on her father's charge that she should not put such a child at unnecessary risk of death and, as others have noted, the shift of her own attitude, from complementary interdependence to a distanced inversion of dependence and salvation. In chapter 3, Perpetua worries and attends to the fact that her son "was faint from hunger;" when they are together, she says, "I recovered *my* health;" happy baby, happy mother. In chapter 5, she begins a therapeutic inversion — her spiritual health directly proportionate to her separation from her son's body — even though, as her father reminds her (5, 3), the baby "will not be able to live once you are gone."⁵⁸ She strands her ground in

⁵⁴ On the text as Montanist, see Butler 2006 and Tabbernee 2007: 62-5. On the possible family associations in the text related to her son's father, see Osiek 2002.

⁵⁵ *Pass. Perp. et Felic.* 15, 7 (Musurillo 1972: 122-3). For a recent discussion on the community-based significance of Felicitas's daughter, see Ronse 2006.

⁵⁶ On the eight-month child, see e.g. Grensemann 1968; Joly 1970; Hanson 1987; Reiss, Ash 1988.

⁵⁷ *Pass. Perp. et Felic.* 6, 3: the governor says "Have pity on your infant son." (Musurillo 1972: 114-15).

⁵⁸ Musurillo 1972: 112-13.

6, 2, where her father, in charge of the infant, uses him visually to pressure her in court.⁵⁹ But only when he refuses to return the child to her does she say (6, 7-8) that the baby had no further desire for the breast.⁶⁰ While Perpetua implies this to be divinely assisted spiritual mastery over body functions, one would expect a nursing child, torn away from its mother in this world, to quickly die, as her father feared he would.⁶¹ Insofar as Perpetua may have been a historical person, we do not know what happens to her son; he simply disappears from the text. Yet the message that Perpetua clearly promotes for the text is, rather, that of a separation wholly victorious in its guarantee of true eternal life.

And yet, her underlying fears may account for the way Perpetua appears to transfer elements of her son's distress to her dream healing of the third child in the text: her deceased little brother, Dinocrates, who had died of an agonizing and disfiguring facial cancer. Judith Perkins has associated Perpetua's sorrow over her brother with the loss of her son, noting, "She comforts herself by experiencing her ability to aid another child in pain."⁶² And in 1965, E. R. Dodds, psychoanalyzing Perpetua's dream about Dinocrates, suggested that the boy "presumably represents an element in the Unconscious which is demanding attention."⁶³ Indeed, the dream centers on that very same nutritional crisis Perpetua had with her son: the agony of his thirst and the challenge to negotiate power to relieve it. Through the dream — a common tool of all healing saints — Perpetua effects what she understands as literal physical and in-the-present healing for her brother in the afterlife, in chapter 8, as her prayers enable her brother to drink from the heavenly fountain.⁶⁴ The victorious context for all three children is intricately bound up in the violent adult martyrdoms with which the text concludes, a death that creates Christian hero-saints known for their miraculous powers of heavenly intercession and healing. The resulting prayer-mediated wholeness in the afterlife

⁵⁹ Musurillo 1972: 112-13.

⁶⁰ Musurillo 1972: 114-15.

⁶¹ It would, for example, explain why her father's appeal, in 9, 2, is more distressed than ever but for the first time makes no reference to or display of the baby. Musurillo 1972: 116-7.

⁶² Perkins 1995:108.

⁶³ Dodds 1965: 51.

⁶⁴ Musurillo 1972: 116-17.

both assumes and assures an eternal relationship with children independent of their physical survival.

In these accounts of women who die for their religious beliefs, we find an intersection of theology, violence, healing, and play; at his healing, for example, Dinocrates “began to play as children do.” The spiritual power of martyrs to help others depended on them dying as a “faithful” witness for the “right” cause; beliefs mattered when it came to spiritual powers of healing. These themes lead us to the third type of pediatric healing for discussion: that experienced at late antique Christian healing shrines, where “right” religion is similarly linked to accidental and paradoxical dynamics that include surprise, delight, and a moral lesson for the adult audience.

4. PEDIATRIC THEMES IN EARLY CHRISTIAN HEALING SHRINES

In her dream of Dinocrates, Perpetua is a still-living saint who projects healing power — into the afterlife — for a dead child. In most late antique healing stories, it is the saint who acts from the afterlife to apply therapy, often forcefully, on the living. Cyrus and John, Cosmas and Damian, Thekla, Febronia, Artemios, Minas, and others are only a few of the best-known Christian medical saints associated with healing shrines in Late Antiquity.⁶⁵

Some of the best-preserved images depicting such saints are those found in Egypt. One example is that of a room of seventh- or eighth-century frescoes found in the monastery of Deir al-Surien.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ For editions and translations of these *anagyroi* (medical saints who healed for free), see Brock and Harvey 1987: 150–76; Crisafulli *et al* 1997; Dagrón 1978; Davis 2001; Deubner 1907; Festugière 1971; Gascon 2006.

⁶⁶ The Deir al-Surien frescoes of Luke, Cyrus, Cosmas, Damian, and an unknown Christian oculist dominate the walls at eye level in the *khurus* or transept of the church, between the nave and the high altar, in the space where the monks still today celebrate their daily prayer and liturgy. On the discoveries and restoration at Deir al-Surien, I have depended on a series of articles by Karel C. Innémeé and colleagues published in *Hingoye* between 1998 and 2002; for more about the room’s context in liturgy, see Innémeé 2011. Founded by monks from the nearby Deir Anbu Bishoi in the sixth century, Deir al-Surien remained a Greek and Coptic site until the eighth or ninth centuries, when Syrian monks took over until the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, when it gradually again became a home for Coptic monks.

On one wall, the three discrete images include a saint on horseback whose victim is usually interpreted as a royal personage,⁶⁷ the healing touch of an unnamed Christian saint-doctor treating blindness, and a full frontal portrait of Cosmas and Damian, each carrying over his shoulder a traveling medicine chest, the most common attribute for healing saints in seventh and eighth century Christian art.⁶⁸ We see the same portable chest looped around one shoulder in the image on the opposite wall, of saint Cyrus, whose shrine at Menouthis near Alexandria is now under water.⁶⁹ The Deir al-Surien image of S. Cyrus would have been created about a century after John Moschus’s friend, Sophronius (later bishop of Jerusalem) wrote his narrative of seventy healing stories from the Menouthis shrine (discussed further below). The final physician image in the room at Deir al-Surien depicts the evangelist-doctor, S. Luke, holding a gospel.

Eye disease, the focus of the largest central medical fresco at Deir al-Surien and the symptom that impelled Sophronius to the shrine of Ss. Cyrus and John at Menouthis, was a common complaint in many early Christian healing stories. The only miracle that Gregory of Nyssa relates in the life of his sister, Macrina, for example, was her surprise long-distance cure of a little girl’s blindness after she

The oldest church in the monastery, where we find the healing saint frescoes, is dedicated to the Virgin Mary and, while I have not here discussed the importance of food in ancient pediatric medicine (for which see e.g. Holman 1997), it may be notable that the earliest icon of Mary in the church at Deir al-Surien is that of the “Galaktrophousa”, or breastfeeding mother, which Innémeé 2011: 290 has dated to the sixth or seventh century, “very close to the style of painting in the Fayyoun portraits.”

⁶⁷ On the mounted horseman fresco in the room of *anagyroi* at Deir al-Surien, see Innémeé 1999. For the conservation team’s retouched image of this fresco, see Innémeé 2001: 260. Illustration 1, where it is the image on the left.

⁶⁸ Nordhagen 1968: 55–66 has suggested similar boxes in Rome in the eighth century frescoes in the “Chapel of the Holy Physicians” (*Diaconicon*) at S. Maria Antiqua; for the Roman frescoes, see Nordhagen 1990: 212–15 (adjacent to a discussion of a fresco of “Christ healing the blind man”); illustrated in Plate LIV. The composition of these boxes is uncertain and to date no examples are known to Roman medical archaeology (Dr. Pary Butler, personal correspondence). See Stacey 2011 and Jackson and La Niece 1986 for description and analysis of the small bronze cylindrical medicine containers that do survive (all small enough to perhaps fit into such carry-cases). For more on Roman surgical instruments, see Baker (n.d.); Küntz 1993, esp. Table 8; Milne 1907; Milosevic, Milosevic 1966.

⁶⁹ Gaddio 2007.

promised the child's parents a special ointment.⁷⁰ The role of healing ointment is suggested at Deir al-Surien, where a medicine cabinet stands in the background, its small red and green bottles associated with *myron*, or healing oil, the most common treatment applied and distributed to those who visited healing martyria.⁷¹

Not all children's healings at saints' shrines were so gentle. One example of a dramatic narrative that blends play with violence and cure is a story about Gregory of Nyssa's other favorite saint's shrine, that of Thekla in nearby Cilicia.⁷²

The fifth century shrine of Saint Thekla has been described as likely having "an atmosphere somewhere between that of the Mayo Clinic and the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception."⁷³ *Mir.* 24 tells of a nurse who came with a toddler, "barely weaned," whom we know only as the son of Pardamios and grandson of a priest from a nearby village (his mother is not mentioned). The boy had lost vision in one eye through a progressive affliction that also produced a facial deformity. While his nurse was praying to the saint, the child entertained himself by chasing the birds that gathered and fed in the courtyard. Suddenly, one of the cranes (*geranos*) turned on him, pinned him down, and used its beak to peck at his affected eye as if it were a grain of wheat. The child screamed, but the crisis was in fact, we are told, "the medication (*therapeia*) and remedy of the affliction (*pathos*):"

For the eye, as it was pierced by the physician, and skillfully incised, released all the opaque humor that had obscured the pupil — one might call it the 'eye of the eye' — and the child recovered his sight and gained the light in his eyes that he had lost. Moreover, his

⁷⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita S. Marinae*, in Callahan 1952: 410–14.

⁷¹ These small bottles with the oil of healing were so common at some shrines that one American monk visiting the monastery of St. Menas in the 1980s found the ground "littered with little green shards of glass splinters, which the monks [say] are the residue of old vessels in which the oil of St. Mina was once stored.... The number of pilgrims was so great and the number of glass vessels so numerous that even the accidental breakage of a few of them, here and there, littered the desert floor over the course of time with many signs of this past and popular devotion." Gruber 2002: 180.

⁷² *Mir. Thecl.* 11, in Dagron 1978: 312–5. On early Christian use of conventional medicine, see also Boudon-Millot, Ponderone 2005.

⁷³ Vilkan 1984: 66.

appearance had no more dissymmetry and he went home well made and whole, to the amazement of his city, his father, and his grandfather.⁷⁴

The bird's attack is explained by "the child hinder[ing] it from eating, or more likely because it had received the instruction of the martyr."⁷⁵

Similar thematic intersections are evident in the pediatric healing stories of Sophronius's *Miracles* of Ss. Cyrus and John.⁷⁶ In *Mir.* 11, the infant Maria's fall from a high window is blamed on her mother's inattention, but, thanks to the saints' intervention, she lands safely in the midst of some young piglets. In *Mir.* 34, nine-year-old Callinicus, who swallowed a snake's egg, is healed when the mother serpent enters the sacred compound and summons her baby snake out through the boy's mouth in a dramatic public scene. Although Callinicus was, Sophronius admits, a greedy boy who disobeyed his mother, he is considered to be in a state of original innocence, like Eve tricked by Satan because of their "immaturity due to age, still lacking the ability to discern good from evil."⁷⁷ In *Mir.* 41, eight-year-old Menas is a victim of unnatural violence, attacked at home in the night by a "demon" who pulled out his tongue. He is healed by natural violence, falling on the pavingstones at the shrine while playing with other children. In *Mir.* 44, twelve-year-old Anna's health crisis, when she accidentally swallows lizards while playing in the reeds, is excused "by reason of her young age... being the little girl that she was, she entered into the play of little girls."⁷⁸ Yet relief of her agony requires a visit to the tavern, where she's taken by a sympathetic "brother" (a monk or shrine attendant) and forced to drink and then violently vomit three jars of strong (undiluted) wine. And in *Mir.* 54, the healing of adolescent Isidore, violence is evident only

⁷⁴ *Mir. Thecl.* 24, in Dagron 1978: 350–3. On Thekla's shrine, see also Davis 2001 and Johnson 2000. For another discussion of this same healing story, see Horn 2013: 132–5.

⁷⁵ *Mir. Thecl.* 24.

⁷⁶ The most accessible translation is Gascou 2006. I have discussed background and context in more detail in Holman 2008 and specifically the children's stories in Holman 2009.

⁷⁷ *Mir. Cyr. et Ioh.* 34, 2. See also Doerfler 2011 on the innocence of children in texts from late Antiquity.

⁷⁸ *Mir. Cyr. et Ioh.* 44, 3.

in the symptoms of his disease: seizures explicitly said to be *not* caused by a demon. Isidore's healing depends on his mother renouncing her 'pagan' avoidance of pork, applied in practice by her ready willingness to massage her son's body with pig's fat.

Sophronius's text is an emphatically christianizing document, with a dominant emphasis on 'proper' theological beliefs as essential for true healing. Yet the Menouthis shrine had deep roots in 'pagan' Egyptian cultic healing as an Isis sanctuary, likely through the late fourth century, and not all early Christians recognized confessional conflicts. Coptic magical texts also associated with Horus and Isis were composed — like the Ethiopic amulets, to be read, worn, and personalized — well into Sophronius's day. In their synthesis, some even included Isis and Horus in texts that also invoked Christ.⁷⁹ David Frankfurter has suggested that the survival and transmission of such syncretistic documents was possible because they were (like the Sisinnios prayer), "part of everyday folk practice rather than [as with icons] part of official cult, priestly, or ecclesiastical traditions."⁸⁰

Moral metaphors run through most of these stories. Pediatric healing narratives illustrate an emphasis on the moral innocence of children that we also find in patristic sermons about children who have died. The fifth-century bishop, Severus of Antioch, wrote, for example, that children are "in no way injured [by death]."⁸¹ And in Jacob of Sarug's sixth-century homily "Concerning Children who Pass Away," he writes, "The little one departed the world without blemish and he snatched the crown without a struggle for righteousness...an astonishing victory...a victorious name."⁸² Even Augustine, in *Ep.* 166, dated among his early writings, spoke of "the bodily sufferings experienced by the little children who, by reason of their tender age, have no sins."⁸³ A similar association of children's incidental illnesses with moral metaphors intended for adults is found in Basil of Caesarea's first *Homily on Fasting*, where he notes:

For just as worms breeding in the intestines of children are utterly eradicated by the most pungent medicines, so too, when a fast truly

⁷⁹ Frankfurter 2009: 231.

⁸⁰ Frankfurter 2009: 238.

⁸¹ Trans. Doerfler 2011: 253; for the Syriac, see Duval 1906: 278.

⁸² Bedjan 2006: vol. 5, p. 804, lines 1-4; trans. Doerfler 2011: 247-8.

⁸³ Cited in Doerfler 2011: 243.

worthy of this designation is introduced into the soul, it kills the sin that lurks deep within.⁸⁴

Although Sophronius's stories differ from the references to children's distress found in the *Spiritual Meadow* of his friend, John Moschus, Moschus's tales also contain themes of moral guilt, causation, and childhood innocence, though never in a context of illness or disease. In Moschus, more often, it was a dead child who convicted (tale 166) or prayed for (tale 101 and tale 165) his or her murderers, on one occasion being brought back to life (tale 233), leading in each case to the adult's repentance; other children participated innocently in eucharistic practices that violated the "rules" in order to teach the adults powerful lessons of God's omnipotence and power to convert (tales 196, 197, 227, and 243).⁸⁵

5. CONCLUSION

The late Evelynne Patlagean understood hagiography as a mediation narrative in which the saint disrupts or inverts the world's broken social order and embartled relationships through a mediation that allows "a return to divine intention: the healing of physical, civic, or moral suffering."⁸⁶ In such a broken world, a child's survival in Antiquity was often a miracle against the odds. Thus parents and guardians tried all sorts of interventions in hopes of warding off the threat known across the ages as the "demon of infant mortality." This essay has explored this disruption or inversion, and social responses to it, in hagiographic narratives of child healing found in the prayer amulet tradition of S. Sisinnios, in a martyrdom story, and in early Christian healing shrines. All of these examples contain a voice of parental distress at the moral illness of young children, and shape

⁸⁴ Basil of Caesarea, *De Lein. Hom.* 1, 1 (PG 31, 165, trans. Del Cogliano 2013: 55). Centuries later, Martin Luther made the same analogy, writing about a woman who was excessively anxious: "Her illness is not for the apothecaries...nor is it to be treated with the salves of Hippocrates, but it requires the powerful plasters of the Scriptures and the word of God." (Cole 2008: 61).

⁸⁵ References to Moschus here follow the story numbering found in Wortley 1992.

⁸⁶ This paraphrase of Patlagean's structural analysis of hagiography follows Harvey 2008: 613.

response in the power of Christian identity. In the Ethiopian Sisinnios prayer amulets — quite literally healing by hagiography — mothers embodied prayer to shape their child's survival by their piety. The narrative of Perpetua and Felicitas suggests how even martyrdom that deprived an infant of its mother might save its life, “orthodoxy” and the prayer power of martyrdom ensuring true healing, whether one lived or died. As stories of children healed at saints' shrines shape moral lessons for the adult audience, the child, like the animals that are also present in many stories about children, serves as the saint's perhaps hapless yet often subversive tool for a broader social good.⁸⁷ Amulets, martyr stories, and the practices of healing shrines all shared a focus on physical contact with sacred power that, in Christianity, was also often joined to specific theological assertions about “correct” belief and practice, guilt, play, and innocence, with the child's life and healing a symptom of the parents' moral condition. Such stories witness to the intricate connection between folk beliefs and pediatric medicine that characterizes the culture of religious practice across time. Their intersecting themes persist today in many settings across the world, particularly communities in which effective modern health systems are absent or fail to serve the women and children in greatest need.

⁸⁷ For example: *Mir. Cosm. et Damian.* 4 (a paralytic youth whose father was a dishonest merchant); *Mir. Artem.* 34 (a girl, Euphemia, who is afflicted with buboes of the plague, devoted to the shrine, and whose mother is said to be a woman “of ill repute”); *Mir. Artem.* 38 (George, another child devoted to the shrine whose parents were dishonest in their way of life).

FROM THE ROMAN EAST INTO THE PERSIAN EMPIRE:
THEODORET OF CYRRHUS AND THE *ACTS OF MĀR*
MĀRĪ ON PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS AND
CHILDREN'S HEALTH

Cornelia HORN

1. SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE PRESENT STUDY

Mutual affection and care for one another are foundational characteristics of the relationship between parents and children across manifestations of the human family the world over. The willingness to seek the best for the other often is great among family members that are tied to one another by bonds of blood or adoption. During the early years of their lives, children are primarily at the receiving end of this relationship of caring and supporting. Affection for one another, however, may arise from either side, and often involves initiatives from both.

This article seeks to contribute to the discussion of the questions surrounding the experiences of boundaries and limits of the parent-child relationship in late ancient Christianity.¹ In particular, it asks how

¹ Work on parent-child relationships in the Roman world, for which the evidence considered may have included Christians, but not to any significant extent, includes contributions by Grubbs 2001: 92-128. For specific gendered subsets of such relationships see Hallert 1984; and for ancient Greece, see Foley 2004: 113-37. With regard to aspects of the question in ancient Judaism, see for instance Yarborough 1993: 39-59; and Reinhartz 1993: 61-88. Studies of relationships between parents and children from the perspective of biblical texts, either Jewish or Christian, or both, are somewhat more frequent. Recent ones include Fleishman 2011 for materials in the Hebrew Bible that address the sale of a daughter into slavery in Exodus 21:7-11, the question of a father's authority to commit his daughter to prostitution, and the prohibition against a priest's daughter. For discussions that focus on New Testament material, see for instance Balla 2003. For the post-biblical, ancient Christian material, the question of the shape and limits of the relationship between parents and children has not been the subject of concentrated and extensive discussion. Some aspects are addressed throughout Horn, Marrens 2009, and in contributions included in the volume edited by Horn, Phenix 2009.