

Havas-Kovács, Dominika

Vie de Saint Alexis : the elements of the antique novel live on in a holy life

Graeco-Latina Brunensia. 2023, vol. 28, iss. 1, pp. 53-73

ISSN 1803-7402 (print); ISSN 2336-4424 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/GLB2023-1-4>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.78219>

License: [CC BY-SA 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

Access Date: 27. 11. 2024

Version: 20230621

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

***Vie de Saint Alexis*: The elements of the antique novel live on in a holy life**

Dominika Havas-Kovács
(University of Szeged)

Abstract

One of the most well-known legends of the Middle Ages, the life of Saint Alexius, has been immortalized in both Latin and French poetry. The story, known from Latin and French sources, has been combined from several previous versions into a single legend over long centuries. My essay analyses the earliest Old French version of Saint Alexius's story, showing how a relatively dryly written sacred life can transform into a narrative enriched by romantic turns and emotional lyrical inserts.

Keywords

Saint Alexius; legend; motifs; holy life; Byzantium

Introduction

In the preface of his Gesta song *The Song of the Saxons*, thirteenth-century author Jean Bodel divides the French works of the age into three groups according to their contents: “Ne sont que III. matieres a nul home antandant: De France et de Bretaigne et de Rome la grant.”¹ According to Bodel, Gesta songs are characterized by the “matière de France”, i.e. the topics related to Charles the Great and his French successors, while the novels of his time draw on the “matière de Rome” and the “matière de Bretagne”, i.e. the Roman and Celtic traditions. However, research shows that other sources of inspiration should also be taken into account,² including the direct and indirect influences coming from Byzantium.³ This previously unexamined factor is called “matière de Byzance” in the modern literature. A Byzantine influence can be observed in the French short stories of the Middle Ages in many forms, primarily within the genre of the novel. Topics typical of Greek/Byzantine romance and picaresque novels can be found in several works, in which, as opposed to court novels, the protagonist couple finds each other at the very beginning of the story, but they can only reunite following a long separation and numerous adventures. Examples for this structure include the novels *Floire and Blanchefleur*, *Erec and Enide*, *Aucassin and Nicolette*, or *Amadas and Ydoine*. These novels cannot be included in the genre of court novels due to this thematic feature.⁴ In another group of French novels, the story itself is set in Byzantium, for example, in the novels *Cligès Partonopeus de Blois*, or *Florimont*. The author of the latter must have spent a longer period of time in Byzantium and also acquired a knowledge of the vulgar Greek language. Of even greater interest may be the series of French novels that are based on the biography of a Saint (in most cases of Byzantine origin), which is complemented by the characteristic themes of Greek/Byzantine novels and develops into an exciting story of adventures and romantic turns. The story of *Tyros Apollonius*⁵ is the most well-known among them, which later had significant influence on the birth of the French novel. The Latin version is presumably the adaptation of a Greek novel, lost by now.⁶ There is a strong influence of Christianity in the work, and the story assumes an increasingly hagiographic character in the different versions. Thus, this work goes back and forth: it first changes from a Greek novel into the life of a saint, then it turns back into a family and picaresque novel. The close connection between hagiographic literature and the Hellenistic novel was already highlighted by István Kapitánffy. According to him, hagiographic literature can be regarded as the organic continuation of the Greek novel: partly as it inherits its motifs and partly due to its popular, playful nature, which also characterized sacred literature in spite of its

1 Bodel (1995: pp. 6–7).

2 Ferlampin-Acher (2016: p. 42).

3 Egedi-Kovács (2012: pp. 47–69).

4 See Vincensini & Galderisi (2009).

5 Delbouille (1969: pp. 1171–1204).

6 Kortekaas (2004).

religious content.⁷ The medieval French works include quite a lot of romantic narratives from sacred life stories. The earliest example is the life of Saint Alex, i.e. *Vie de Saint Alexis*. The literature also emphasizes the hagiographic nature of Gautier d'Arras's novel *Eracle* from 1176, where the protagonist is the Byzantine Emperor, who recovers the cross for his empire. The twelfth-century novel *Guillaume d'Angleterre* is a secular version of Saint Eustache's legend, the central topic of which is the separation of family members and their reunion after various adventures and tribulations. The story of Barlaam and Josaphat also falls within this category, as it includes all the thematic and structural features of romantic novels.⁸

My essay analyses Saint Alexius's story in the earliest Old French poem from the eleventh century and the Latin poem (*Pater deus ingenite*) from the eleventh-twelfth century, comparing it to the tenth-century Greek prose version of the legend. The essay shows how a relatively dryly written sacred life can transform into a narrative enriched by romantic turns and emotional lyrical inserts, and how over the course of centuries it has transformed back into a hagiographic work that emphasizes the ascetic lifestyle.

1. The Creation of a Legend and its Different Versions

One of the most well-known legends of the Middle Ages, the life of Saint Alexius, has been immortalized both in Latin and in French poetry. Over the course of many centuries, the tale, which is recorded from Latin and French sources, has been combined into one narrative from the various earlier versions.

In the first half of the fifth century, there was a poor man living in Edessa, Mesopotamia, who was known for his piety, faith, and goodness.⁹ He begged every day, but he handed out all that he received to the poor people in the church. No one knew who he really was, where he came from, except for the sacrist in the church, who knew the stranger's life story: he was born in Constantinople, as the only son of a rich, noble family. The parents wanted their son to get married, but on the evening of his wedding day he ran away from home, and he reached Edessa, where then lived as a beggar, without anyone recognizing him. His father sent his servants to find his son. Although the servants did reach Edessa, and they met the young man, they did not recognize him. One day, however, the young man unexpectedly fell ill, and the church servant nursed him in vain – the young man died. After his death, his body was placed in a common grave. The sacristan, who knew that he was God's man, contacted bishop Rabbula and told him the secret he knew. The temple servant then asked the magistrate to not let the holy man's remains lie in a common grave. The bishop granted the request, but they only found a cape in the grave, the man's body had miraculously disappeared.

7 Kapitány & Vangelio & Szabó (1989: p. 53).

8 Jouanno (2000: p. 61).

9 Storey (1968: pp. 18–19).

This story quickly spread in the Syrian language in and around Edessa, under the title *Mar Riscia*, which stands for ‘The Man Of God’. A noteworthy character in this version of the legend is Rabbula, a bishop and ecclesiastical writer in the fifth century, who is assumed to be the first person to have recorded this story. Since Rabbula served as bishop between 412 and 435, it is likely that the original story was created between 450 and 475.¹⁰

As Margarete Rösler also highlights, we know a total of eight Syrian-language versions of the legend.¹¹ Six of the texts are found in the British Museum, and two are located in the Paris Bibliothèque Nationale.¹² The texts can be divided into two categories according to their content. The first group of stories might have been formulated directly after the life of the Saint, between the end of the fifth century and the beginning of the sixth century. The simplicity of the story dominates in these text versions: the death of the Saint occurs in Edessa, and like in Christ’s story, his body disappears from the common grave. The above summary of the story is presumably the earliest Syrian version, found in the codex referred to as ms. add. 17177 in the British Museum.¹³ As for the structure of the story, it is simpler than the subsequent texts, which are also part of the first group formulated not too long after the saint’s death. Taking all this into account, it can be assumed that this text version may be a copy of the manuscripts that were made shortly after the saint’s death.¹⁴

The four manuscripts of the second group were created between the ninth century and the middle of the thirteenth century. These manuscripts, similarly to the Greek-Latin legend versions, show the expansion of the story.¹⁵ After it is discovered that the young man is a saint, he runs away from Edessa, and thanks to the whimsical winds, he gets back to his homeland and asks for asylum at his parents’ house without revealing his identity. Here the parents do not recognize him, either. After 17 years, the young man becomes sick and asks for a papyrus and writing tools to immortalize his life story. Meanwhile, a heavenly voice is heard in the church, calling the believers to find a man of God. Although they find the saint, he is already dead. His parents and betrothed bury him, and marvelous things happen at his funeral. In the past, the Greek catholic church celebrated the anniversary of his funeral on 17 February, although today it is celebrated on 17 March, while the Roman Catholic church celebrates it on 17 July.

Since it is not known for certain where the hero of the story was born, the C(a)poly(m) reading in the earliest preserved Syrian fragment is open to interpretation. If the saint (the name Alexios was not yet present in the Syrian versions) was born in Rome, then the interpretation may refer to the Roman Capitol, but if it is “new Rome”, as Christo-

10 Storey (1968: p. 19).

11 Rösler (1933: p. 508).

12 Amiaud (1889: p. 1).

13 Rösler (1933: p. 508).

14 According to Margarete Rösler, the original, from which this version was copied, might have been created earlier. The following arguments are lined up to support this idea: people were looking for the original text for a long time in vain, and the text contains a number of spelling errors.

15 Amiaud (1889: p. 50).

pher Storey assumes, Constantinopolis i.e. Constantinople, is the correct interpretation of the fragment.¹⁶ Storey's interpretation is supported by the fact that after three to four hundred years, the story was well-known in the Byzantine territories, although it had undergone some changes. This version of the legend is an adaptation of the story of John Calybitis. St. John came from a prominent Roman family. At the age of twelve, a monk spoke to him about the ascetic way of life, which John liked very much, so he asked to accompany him when he next came. The hermit secretly took John with him, and the young man became a monk. His parents looked for him, but they could not find him. After seven years, a celestial voice called out to him and told him to ask for his parents' blessing before he died. He thus returned to his home, where his parents did not recognize him and accommodated him in the hut next to their house, as his mother was unable to withstand the sight of a beggar. This is where his name originates from: John Calybite = hut, in Greek: χαλύβη. Before he died, he revealed his identity to his parents and showed them their sacrifice and humanity. His parents built a chapel to replace the hut, which has preserved his cult to this day.¹⁷

A mixture of the Syrian *Mar Riscia* and the *St. John Calybitis* versions of the legend created the Greek-language version of the second group of manuscripts, *the legend of Saint Alexius*, which calls the saint by his real name.¹⁸ The Greek version, complemented by various elements characteristic of novels, may have been written in the tenth century, and it was examined and translated into Hungarian by Júlia Keresztény.¹⁹ Compared to the earlier Syrian versions, the other characters also receive a name in addition to Alexios (his father is called Euphémianos, his mother is Aglais). In this version of the legend, Alexius marries the bride chosen by her parents, but he bids her farewell on their wedding night and leaves his parents' house. Before leaving, however, he shares some secrets with his young bride (probably about a maidenly, pure life, as suggested by the French and Latin versions), and he gives the young girl presents: his belt, shawl, and ring, which constitute the 'anagnorisis' (ἀναγνώρισις, i.e. "recognition") in the Greek version. He then sails off from Rome. Arriving at Edessa, he finds accommodation in the church of the Virgin Mary, where a picture of Jesus is kept. Various opinions can be found in the literature regarding the origin of the image. According to some researchers, the former king of Edessa, Abgar or Abgarus, received a shawl from Jesus Christ that had an imprint of his own face.²⁰ This sacred object, called Sacred Mandylion, is still respected, and it looks like Veronika's shawls in many respects.²¹

16 Storey (1968: p. 19).

17 Storey (1968: pp. 19–20).

18 The oldest version of the Greek text is likely to have been recorded in the tenth century by Josephus Hymnographius, who created a hymn collection of odes that mostly consist of four verses. The compilation also contains three verses about the life of St. Alexius, translated and released in Latin by the Bollandists in Venice in 1639. Keresztény (2016: p. 176).

19 Keresztény (2016: pp. 173–186).

20 Amiaud (1889: p. 50).

21 Puskás (2005: pp. 50–51).

The name of Alexios's fiancée is mentioned in the ninth-century Latin language version for the first time, preserved in *Acta Sanctorum*: she is referred to as Adriatica. Considering that she is the only one to receive a Latin name among the actors, it is evident that this is a later, Latin insert. The emperors mentioned in the story (Arcadius and Honorius) and an unknown pope called Marcien can help date the legend. A different kind of Syrian version was probably expected in Byzantium, so Marcien's name was replaced with Innocent, who was a pope during Emperor Theodosius's reign. This version only spread in the West by the end of the tenth century.²²

The legend later became increasingly popular thanks to its Latin-language versions. These text versions, especially those dating back to the tenth century, were most likely nourished by Greek sources. This is evidenced by the Greek names of the characters (except for Alexius's wife, who was first named in the Latin-language legends) and the fact that Alexius's legend and cult was unknown in Rome until the tenth century. Greek sources are also indicated by the fact that respecting sacred images is of great significance in Greek rituals, and that some of the legend variants written in Greek, Latin, and later in New Latvian date Alexius's death to Good Friday, which is closer to the date celebrated by the Greek Catholic Church (17 March) than the one determined by the Roman Catholic Church (17 July).²³

The Latin-language text is theorized to have spread thanks to archbishop Sergius de Damas in 977, who had to flee for political reasons. Along with some Greek monks, he found asylum in Rome, in the Church of Saint Boniface on Mount Aventinus. Here he discovered the legend of St. Alexius, which he already knew well, although it was unknown to the Romans. The archbishop ordered the dissemination of the sacred story in Latin and that the saint's remains be laid to rest in the Church of Saint Boniface. This new Latin version became as popular in the West as the Greek-Syrian versions had been in the East.²⁴

The most famous Latin version of the text is *Legenda Aurea*, accessible in Jacobus de Voragine's legend collection of the thirteenth century, but it is also important to highlight the so-called "Münnich" variant of the Latin language Alex legends. The two variants tally from a historical aspect, but their viewpoints differ. *Legenda Aurea* underlines the dignity of clergymen, placing an emphasis on an ascetic, moral way of life, while the Münnich text is much more emotional, and the lyric scenes play a much stronger part. The Latin versions are less relevant from the point of view of the earliest Old French version, as these were all written later. An early, Latin-language versified version about the life of Saint Alexius was also preserved, beginning with *Pater Deus ingenite* and following the same metric form as the Old French *Vie de Saint Alexis*. The Latin poem has been preserved in three codices, in the Vatican manuscript of classification number No. 828, and I plan to explore this manuscript version in a later paper. Following the transcription, this paper compares the Latin text with the Old French text variant, providing an

22 Storey (1968: p. 21).

23 Keresztény (2016: p. 179).

24 Storey (1968: p. 22).

analysis of some of its philological aspects. This analysis might help identify whether the Latin version was written earlier and served as a model for the French text, or the other way around.²⁵ On the whole, the story changed significantly over the years, not only in terms of content but also in terms of form: the narration was simplified, but the story became more complicated and included more dialogues, hymns, and miraculous elements.

2. The Characteristics of the Greek Romantic Novel

Before analysing the Old French version, I would like to investigate the characteristics of the Greek romantic novel.²⁶ Lovers are typically in the centre of the plot of Greek/Byzantine novels, which is often even indicated in the title.²⁷ Both lovers are virtuous, immaculately clean. Their love ignites at first sight, but destiny intervenes right at the beginning and tears them apart. Then a long series of adventure follows, which tries their love and faith, until they find each other again at the end of the story. Hunger lists the elements of Greek/Byzantine novels in twelve points.²⁸ The most characteristic elements include marriage, solemnised at the beginning of the story, forced separation, wandering, a series of adventures (long voyages, being shipwrecked, surviving a storm, apparent death, etc.), then a happy ending, the blissful reunion of the family members. Several of these elements can be identified in *Vie de Saint Alexis*, although in a slightly transformed and reinterpreted form.²⁹

2.1 *Vie de Saint Alexis* and the Elements of the Greek Novel

Unlike in the later Latin versions, where similarly to the Syrian variant, religion and a teaching intention dominate, romantic elements and lyrical inserts full of emotions

25 Mermier & Melhado White (1972: pp. 56–59).

26 Hunger (1978; 1980); Beaton (1996²); Meunier (2007).

27 Szepessy (1987: p. 35).

28 Hunger (1978: pp. 123–125).

29 Hunger (1978); in this book collected the elements of the Greek/Byzantine novels in 12 points, with French terms: Egedi-Kovács (2012: p. 48).

1. La séparation des amants et leur réunion à la fin de l'histoire.
2. Toutes sortes de menaces et d'aventures qui s'abattent sur les amants.
3. La mise à l'épreuve des amants par d'autres personnages, parfois par la menace et la violence.
4. Voyages exotiques, paysages orientaux, récits de merveilles.
5. Amour au premier regard.
6. Oracles et songes qui font progresser.
7. Parents qui ramènent leurs enfants perdus à la.
8. Assassinat, tortures, brutalités – tentative d'empoisonnement, tentative de suicide, fausse mort.
9. Éros comme "Tyran".
10. Tyché comme influence hostile et omnipotente.
11. La faiblesse et l'extrême sensibilité du héros.
12. L'importance marquée de la fidélité charnelle de la part des deux.

become more prevalent in the Old French variant. Although the characteristics of the genre of the legend would suggest that it should tell the story of a Saint's life and their journey and arrival to God rather than the adventures of a couple in love, *Vie de Saint Alexis* seems to follow the characteristic agenda of romantic novels. The motifs of a wedding and the parting of the couple are present at the beginning of the work, although in a reversed order. Alexius only marries because he is pressured to do so by his parents, and the separation is not due to the caprice of fate, it is Alexius himself who decides to leave on his wedding night and chooses the service of God instead of matrimonial ties.

Puis en eissit de la cambre sum pedre,
Ensur<e> nuit s'en fuit de la contrethe.

[„Sur ce, il sortit de la chambre paternelle;
Au milieu de la nuit il s'enfuit du pays”.

With this, he departs from his father's home
and runs away from home in the middle of the night.]³⁰

At the end of the story, the pair reunites, although not on an earthly level: they unite in the love of God after their death.

Sainz est icil senz n<e>üle dutance,
Ensemblbe'ot Deu e la compaignie as angeles,
Od la pulcela dunt il se fist estranges:
Or l'at privee, ansemble sunt lur anames,
Ne vus sai dirre cum lur ledece est grande.

[„Saint Alexis est au ciel, nul doute,
Avec Dieu et en compagnie des anges,
Avec la jeune fille qu'il quitta si longtemps;
Maintenant il l'a avec lui, ensemble sont leurs âmes:
Je ne saurais vous dire quel est leur bonheur”.

There is no doubt that Saint Alex is in the heaven,
where he is with the God and the angels,
as well as the young girl, he had left behind,
and who he is now in love with:
I can't tell you how joyful is he.]

30 All ancient French quotations from Perugi (2000); Modern French translations: Mermier & Melhado White (1972). The Latin poem version are from the manuscript of the Pal. lat. 828. I translated the texts to English.

Some motifs at the beginning of the tale may be regarded as folklore motifs, such as the hardships preceding childbirth, the infertility of the pair. The theme of infertility reoccurs in other parts of the tale, and it can be interpreted metaphorically as the infertile nature of earthly love. The motif of infertility does not only appear at the beginning of the tale, Alexius's wife is also forced to live an infertile life by earthly standards: she remains alone after her husband leaves her, and beside not being able to bear a child, she is deprived of other forms of earthly joys as well. In the sorrow felt over Alexius's loss, his parents and his abandoned wife choose an ascetic way of life. Alexius's mother declares that they are prohibited happiness until they see their son again.

– Filz Aleïs, pur quei <te> portat ta medre?
 Tu m'ies fūit, dolente an sui remese,
 Ne sai le leu ne nen sai la contrede
 Ut t'alge querre, tute en sui esguarethe:
 Ja mais n'ierc lede, kers filz, nu l'ert tun pedre.

[– Fils Alexis, pourquoi ta mère te porta-t-elle?
 Tu m'as quittée, j'en suis restée dolente.
 J'ignore en quel lieu ou en quelle contrée
 Je puis t'aller chercher; j'en suis toute égarée.
 Je ne serais plus jamais heureuse, cher fils, ainsi que
 ton père.

Why was your mother carrying you out, my son Alexis?
 You left me, and now I'm left here in anguish,
 unable to locate you anywhere or in any area of the country.
 My dear son, neither your father nor I will ever be able to feel
 happiness again.]

In contrast with the rest of the variants, where the reader is informed about all this from the tale, in the Old French version the mother declares this poignant decision, which lends a dramatic nature to the text. In light of the main message of the work, this decision gains an additional dimension of self-denial undertaken voluntarily and a close spiritual community with the Saint, which finally leads them all to both salvation and a family reunion. Thus, the thematic elements of the romantic novel regularly appear in the tale, and even the topic of love is present, but on a higher plane of spirituality, in a new spiritual sense.

2.2 The Motifs of Parting and Embarking on a Journey

The motif of parting, followed by an ascetic way of life, appears in the other surviving variants, although its interpretation differs in some cases. In the Syrian, Latin, and

Hungarian variants, Alexius's self-inflicted punishment is not the sadness he feels due to their parting but that he is forced to live his life in poverty and deprivation. With his ascetic and self-punishing life, he wishes to prove to God that he has become suited for holy life, while also showing his neighbourhood that real happiness and joy can only exist in God and through the Love of God. This is the real message of the *exemplum*. In contrast, the French version does not exclude the need for earthly love, it just questions its method, and it is not evident how large a role Alexius's parting pain plays in his ascetic way of life.

In this reading, the motif of journey is dual: we may suppose that Alexius cannot choose between a monk's life and earthly love, so he escapes instead. Fate still chases him back to the house of his parents and wife, where he is finally persuaded that his wife has taken his advice, i.e. his faith is justified in the chastity of the maid, in her fidelity to him. This conviction is further strengthened when, after his death, only his wife can take the letter out of Alexius's hand. In contrast, in the other *exemplum* type of variants the motif of travel describes the process of becoming a Saint, its stations and accomplishment. The life of the Saint, which is filled with trials and tribulations, gains a real meaning through the teachings of the church. Thus, only the ecclesiastic and spiritual leaders of the country are allowed to read the story, and it is only the archbishop and the "kings" of Rome who can take the letter out of Alexius's hand.

2.3 Hardships and Threats

Alexius faces many conflicts. First owing to his parents, who do not understand him and want to dissuade him from his chosen path. Escape seems to be the only solution for Alexius, and he secretly leaves the house on his wedding night. The motif of escape, although reversed, repeats itself later in the story: with the exception of the Syrian variant, there is a scene in all the variants in which the church servant, thanks to divine inspiration, recognises the "man of God" in the miserable beggar. Considering Alexius's earlier decision, this could be a happy turn of events, as he had left everything behind to become a man of God.

Quant il ço veit quil volent onurer,
– Certes, dist il, n'i ai mais ad ester.

[Quand il voit qu'ils le veulent honorer:
– Certes, – dit-il – je n'y puis plus rester.

He recognized their desire to honor him when
Indeed – he said – I can't stay any longer.]

Although he experiences this as a threat and hurriedly boards a ship, owing to the caprice of the changing winds, he finds himself in Rome again. The characteristic feature

of Greek novels according to which threats and dangers lurk around the protagonist, and they are forced to escape repeatedly, also appears in this story, but again in an unusual way. The threat is never real, except in terms of Alexius's spiritual salvation. Journeys in this tale play a certain structuring role. The seventeen-year periods, which are separated by different voyages (Alexius spends 17 years in Edessa, then another 17 years at his parents' house without being recognised by anybody),³¹ give a certain periodicity to the tale. Another characteristic motif arises from a mistake: the actors, although they stay in the same place for a long time, still do not recognise each other.

3. The Narrative Technique of Saint Alexius's Legend

As mentioned above, only an early Latin variant and the Old French *Vie de Saint Alexis* were written in verse, all the other variants are prosaic texts. The chosen format is important, as poetry, as a lyric genre, creates the opportunity for a more effective unfolding of the emotional scenes. The much drier short story, written in prose, principally impresses the mind, calling attention to the moral of the legend, while the rhyming form, similarly to church hymns, impresses the heart, the emotions, it makes the reading/hearing of the Saint's life story both more visible and more enjoyable. Perhaps this was the goal when the variant in verse was prepared. The work contains interesting moments from a narratological point of view as well. The story proceeds on several different planes.

All literary variants, the exception of the Old French version, start by describing the family's circumstances and historical context. The Greek version is revealed who is the king:

Ἐγένετό τις ἄνῆρ εὐσεβῆς ἐν τῇ Ῥώμῃ ὀνόματι Εὐφημιανὸς ἐπὶ Ὁνορίου καὶ Ἀρκαδίου τῶν θειοτάτων βασιλέων Ῥώμης.³²

[There lived a devout man in Rome, named Euphemiatus, during the reign of Honorius and Arkadius, pious kings of the City.]

The Latin poetry, however, begins with these sentences:

Pater deus ingenite
terrae creator caelique,

31 Like Hunger, Carol Gesner examines several novel characteristics that are also present in the stories of Saint Alex. The *Fausse annonce de la death de quelqu'un* motif, which refers to Alex's parents' belief that he is dead following a fruitless search for their son, stands out among the themes. Alex resides at his parents' house without their realizing it, so there is also a case of *erreur d'identité*. He returns from Edessa to his native Rome, which Gesner refers to as *Naufnage*, rather than the planned Tarsis, as a result of a change in winds. Gesner (1970).

32 The Greek version is from: Cod. Baroccianus graec. 146 (XV. century). The Bollandists published this text in the XV. century, based on three codices: Cod. Parisinus graec. 1538 (X. century); Cod. Vaticanus graec. 866 (XII. century). See also: Gaiffier (1900: pp. 254–256).

tu, fili unigenite,
lumen verum de lumine,
sancte simul paraclite,
opem cantanti porrige.

[Eternally existing,
creator of earth and sky
you, only son
light from light
as from the Holy Spirit
this work was given to the singer.]

The reader is reminded of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed by these four lines.

Beside Alexius, only the parents have names. The narrative, written in third person singular, is sometimes punctuated by dialogues. After Alex escapes from Rome, the story continues in two directions. On the one hand, we can follow Alexius's journey from Rome to Edessa, and from Edessa back to Rome again, also seeing the life of his parents and his abandoned wife in parallel. The story becomes fascinating when Alexius returns to his parents' house, without revealing his identity. The two themes meet at this point, and from then on the narrator describes the events from Alexius's perspective. The culmination of the plot is Alexius's letter to his parents and his wife, where he tells them about all the trials and tribulations that he suffered after he left. The letter is a story within the story, a kind of mirror, or *mise en abyme*³³ in the French terminology. This story may serve several functions. On the one hand, by condensing the story, it can reinforce the message of the work, or just the opposite, it may also obfuscate what it wants to say. The Latin variants briefly describe the content of the letter in *Acta Sanctorum*.

Iço lur dist cum s'en fuït par mer
E cum il fut en Alsis la cité
E que l'immagine Deus fist pur lui parler,
E pur l'onor dunt nes volt ancumbrier
S'en refuït en Rome la cité.

[Et elle leur apprit comment Alexis s'était enfui par la mer,
Et comment il était allé en la cité d'Alsis,
Et que pour lui Dieu avait fait parler l'immagine,
Et que pour ne pas être encombré d'honneurs
Il était retourné en la cité de Rome.

According to the letter, he explained to them
how Alex managed to escape on the water

33 Daellenbach (1977); Bal (1978: pp. 116–128).

and how he got to Edessa.
 God appeared to him in a picture,
 and because he didn't want to be treated disrespectfully,
 he left and went back to Rome.]

However in the French variant the reader can only guess the content of the letter from the reactions of the parents and the wife.

Pater cum matre sponsaque
 non desistebant plangere.

[The father continued to weep
 alongside the mother and wife..]

The mirror story created by the letter is only important on the *diaegesis* level in this case, as the reader knows Alexius's story well, so it does not add any new information. It does not forecast the subsequent events of the story, nor does it throw a light on the deeper connections. Its only function is anagnorisis (ἀναγνώρισις), i.e. helping recognition, making sure that the actors find each other again. The letter is also a main element of the dramatic ending of the story. On the one hand, it consolidates the different periods of the life of the Saint, while also gradually preparing the painfully sad ending of the story. In the second part of his life, Alexius lives near his family, in humiliating circumstances, living as a beggar under the stairs of his own father's house, without being recognised by anybody. This scene largely deviates from the traditional anagnorisis of the Greek novels: a happy family reunion is out of the question, as Alexius is already dead when his letter is found. However, the family reunion is not missing completely. The French author, in contrast with the other variants, wants to mitigate the sad ending and mentions in the last lines of the work that thanks to Alexius, his parents and his wife will be saved after they die, and they will live happily ever after up in heaven.

4. A Comparison of the *Vie de Saint Alexis* with the Poem *Pater deus ingenite* and its Tenth-century Greek Prose Version

Based on the manuscript Admont 664, the text *Rhythmus S. Alexis* was first published in 1897 by the Abbey of Montecassino. According to philological research, the manuscript dates to the end of the eleventh century and may have been written by multiple authors at the beginning of that century. On folios 129–195, the text is presented in three columns separated by short lines, with every second line written in capital letters. Some of the annotations above the lines include “Rithmus pape Leonis VIII” and “Vita Alexii author Leo papa”. It is probable that all of these are references to Pope Leo XI. The first edition of the text was published by the Bollandists in the *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina* in 1897. In 1955, however, Erwin Ausmann discovered a second manuscript,

Codex Palatinus Latinus 828, which also contains the legend of Saint Alexius (ff. 173–174). In this instance, the line assignment is different, as this version of the legend is broken into stanzas of four lines, with every other line beginning with a capital letter. Philologists date it to between the eleventh and twelfth centuries, similarly to the first manuscript.³⁴

In the following, I will analyze the Latin poem *Pater deus ingenite*, which can be found in the Pal. lat. 828 manuscript, its prose Greek version from the tenth century, and its Old French version from the eleventh century. Before analyzing the Latin version, I would like to elaborate on the differences between these texts, especially the fundamental differences between the genre of the texts.

The Old French and Latin legends of Saint Alexius appear nearly identical at first glance, and it could almost be assumed that one follows the other. In contrast, the Greek text is written in prose. The differences between the two versions written in verse are as follows. First, although both utilize the form of the poem, their narrative perspectives on the essence of the legend are different. The Latin legend contains three lines with 348 syllables each. It consists of 58 stanzas, with the aabbcc formula for the six lines of each stanza.³⁵ In Old French, the life and trials of the saint are described in 625 lines and 125 four-line stanzas.³⁶ It follows from the respective scope of these two versions that, despite having been created at the same time, they do not share the same line of reasoning. In both versions, the story begins in an almost identical way: in the beginning, there was only God, and he created the universe. However, these beautiful ages passed, Christ redeemed us, and our ancestors became Christians. This is how a certain Eufémus/Eufémien lived in Rome; this is where Alexius's story begins. Similarly to the Old French text, neither the mother nor the wife is mentioned in the Latin version, although the father's name (Eufémus) appears eight times. In both stories, there is a narrator who in first person singular explains precisely what will be discussed. This scene appears in the last two lines of the second stanza in the Latin version, whereas it is not explained until the last line of the third stanza in the Old French version:

[De quibus unum eligo
de quo cantare gestio.

Whom I will choose
and about whom I intend to sing.]

Rices hom fud, de grant nobilitét:
Pur hoc vus di, d'un son filz voil parler.

[C'était un homme puissant, de grande noblesse.

34 Sprissler (1966: p. 8).

35 Perugi (2000: p. 56).

36 Remy & Gnändinger (1999: p. 387).

Je vous dis cela, car c'est d'un sien fils que je veux parler.

He was a wealthy nobleman:
I am telling you of this because
I wish to discuss his son.]

The Greek prose version of the story, which consists of eleven caputs, begins the legend by introducing Euphemianos and his wife, Aglais, rather than by mentioning God and the decline of the world. It is also interesting that the name of Alexius's mother is only mentioned in the Greek text. Consequently, the role of the narrator differs, as the narrator does not address the audience in this version:

[Εγένετό τις ἀνὴρ εὐσεβῆς ἐν τῇ Ῥώμῃ ὀνόματι Εὐφημιανός [...] Ἀγλαΐς γυνή. [...] συνέλαβεν <ἡ γυνή> κατὰ τὸν καιρὸν ἐκεῖνον καὶ ἔτεκεν υἱόν. Καὶ εὐφράνθη ὁ ἄνθρωπος καὶ σύμβιος αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τῷ Θεῷ.

In Rome, there lived a devout man named Euphemianus [...] his wife's name was Aglais [...] The woman conceived and gave birth to a son at that time. The man and his wife celebrated the divine intervention with joy.]

In addition to the linguistic differences, there are also variations in content. Although both the Greek and the Old French versions contain motifs typical of Greek/Byzantine novels, the moral and biblical motifs that define the prose version are absent from the verse versions. At the beginning of the Greek text, the house of Euphemianus is described with its three tables: one for orphans, one for widows, and one for strangers, wanderers, the sick, and beggars:

[Οὗτος εὐσεβῆς ὑπάρχων καὶ τὰς ἐντολὰς ποιούμενος ὁ τοιοῦτος ἄνθρωπος νηστεύων καθ' ἐκάστην ἡμέραν ἕως ὥρας ἐνάτης, καὶ τρεῖς τρᾶπεζαι ἐτίθετο εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτοῦ, ὑπὲρ ὀρφνῶν καὶ χηρῶν, ξένων καὶ παροδίτων, νοσοῦντων καὶ πτωχῶν.

Because he was a God-fearing man who observed the commandments, he fasted every day until the ninth hour. He maintained three tables in his home: one for widows and orphans, one for strangers and wanderers, and one for the sick and the beggars.]

Before running away, Alexius has a lengthy conversation with his wife on their wedding night, urging her to love God and to follow the path of abstinence. This motif, similarly to the infertility of the mother, is present in all the versions. The Latin text describes Alexius's exclamation and advice to his wife as follows:

[O mi dilecta sponsula
audi quae dico verbula!
Hunc tibi sume coniugem
qui primum fecit hominem,

cuius amoris gaudium
nullum cepit interitum!

Oh, my dear wife,
pay attention to what I am saying!
Accept him as your spouse,
for he is the one who first created man,
and your love for him will never fade.]

After his father leads him to his wife's bedroom in the Old French version, Alexius exclaims:

- E! Deus, - dist il, - cum fort pecét m'apresset!
Se or ne m'en fui, mult criem que tei <n>en perde.

[- Ah! Dieu, - dit il - comme le péché me presse!
Si je ne fuis maintenant, je crains fort de te perdre.

Oh my God, he exclaims, how much sin I hold!
If I don't run away now, I'm afraid I'll lose you.]

The text then continues similarly to the Latin poem:

- Oz mei, pulcele, celui tien ad espus
Ki nus raens de sun sanc precius:
An ices seclen en at parfit<e> amor,
La vithe est fraisle, n'i ad durable honur,
Cesta lethece revert a grant tristur.

[„Écoute-moi, pucelle! Tiens pour ton époux celui
Qui de son précieux sang nous racheta.
En ce monde il n'ya pas d'amour parfait:
La vie est fragile, il n'y a pas d'honneur durable;
Ici la joie se mue en grande tristesse.”

Listen to me, virgin! Your husband is the
One whose precious blood redeemed us;
There is no perfect love in the world.
Life is precarious and honor is not eternal:
Here, happiness becomes sorrow.]

Notably, while the simpler text of the Latin version does not explain Alexius's mental anguish, i.e. how difficult it is for him to abstain and reject his wife, his suffering appears in

a more pronounced manner in the Old French text. The rest of the story diverges here. According to both the Old French and the Greek versions of the legend, Alexius gives gifts to his new spouse. As explained above, by accepting and keeping these gifts, the wife indicates that she is happy about her remaining a virgin and her husband's loyalty. Alexius removes his golden ring and military belt, wraps them in a ribbon and a crimson scarf, and tells the girl "a Dieu li ad comandethe" (a gift from God). In the Greek text this is formulated as Προλαβοῦσα ταῦτα φύλαζον, καὶ ἔσται ὁ Θεὸς μέσον ἐμοῦ καὶ σοῦ, ἕως ἄν εὐδοκήσῃ Κύριος (Accept and keep these things! God will be among us for as long as the Lord deems it necessary). This scene is omitted from the Latin version, as is the description of Euphemianos's three tables.

Previous research has demonstrated that the Greek text emphasizes the saint's ascetic way of life by emphasizing the moments that educate for a virtuous life. However, this passage reveals something else as well. Alexius asserts that God stands between them for as long as he sees fit. Therefore, in the Greek text, God stands between Alexius and his bride: until he decides so, the lovers cannot be together. Similarly to the themes of the above-mentioned Greek romance novels, only when no one stands between the lovers can they truly be one another's, and in this sense, we once again encounter a transformed version of a familiar motif. In romance novels, if fate or other natural occurrences do not separate the lovers, then the evil schemes of a villain will force one of them to flee. In the Saint Alexius legend, however, it is God who stands in the way of love. Textually, this is all the more intriguing because this motif appears in the Greek text variant, which was written for instructional purposes. The Old French version states it as fact that these objects are God's gifts, and there are no additional reports or comments by Alexius.

A similar theme can be found in the holy life of Barlaam and Josaphat's novel. The motif of "love at first sight," as defined by Hunger, is also present in this legend, but the scene is infused with Christian ethics. Josaphat recognizes his spiritual guide in Barlám, who is in disguise, and he asks him to reveal himself. Barlaam removes his disguise, causing a soul-shattering shock in the young man that has no parallel in Greek literature. There is no doubt that the inversion of this "love at first sight" scene is what gives it its true power, as the shocking sight inspires awe, thus clearly referring to the most important teaching of Christianity, namely the significance of inner values. At the time of their parting, Josaphat requests that he and Barlaam exchange clothing and present each other with a gift. An exchange of clothing, which we also find in the legend of Saint Alexius, typically occurs between lovers (for instance, in the novel by Achilleus Tatiüs).³⁷ Holy lives always refrain from displaying sexuality, although it is still discernible from subtle hints, such as the one represented by a change in attire. In a similar manner, in *Vie de Saint Alexis* Alexius expresses his love and devotion to his wife by giving her gifts on their wedding night.

The conclusion of the story is once again full of twists and turns, with three distinct textual variations. The Old French version states that although Eufémien discovers the

³⁷ Jouanno (2000: p. 68).

letter, he cannot remove it from his child's grasp; only the pope, who does not read it but gives it to the chancellor, is able to do so ("Li cancelers"). He is the one who reveals Alexius's secret to the other characters, and through him they discover his life story. In the Greek version, the father is similarly unable to remove the letter from his child's grasp, although the kings of Rome are able to do so. They then give the letter to Aetos, the archivist of the church, and he is the one to announce the contents of the letter to the assembled crowd. Euphemius's refusal to reveal the letter also appears in the Latin text, but in this version Pope Innocentius denies himself the opportunity to read the letter, and he delegates the task to the chancellor: "... quam sanctus non negverat. / Hic dedit cancellario / legendam coram populo." (What the saint refuses / The chancellor receives / To be read aloud before the audience). Both the Greek and the Old French versions mention Alexius's miraculous healing of the sick:

Surz ne avogles ne contraiz ne leprus
 Ne muz ne clos ne n<e>üls languerus,
 Ensurn<e> tut neüls palazinus,
 N<e> üls n'i at ki n'alget malendus,
 Ne cil n'i vint ki n'en alget repus.

[Il n'est sourd, aveugle, contrefait ou lépreux,
 Muet, aveugle ou paralytique,
 Surtout aucun infirme
 Qui s'en aille malade,
 Il n'y en a un qui garde sa douleur.

He is neither deaf nor blind, nor does he distort it into a leper.
 He is also neither dumb nor lame.
 Especially no patients
 Whom he treats as a patient,
 He does not conceal his suffering.]

The Greek version of the same passage reads as follows:

Ἵσοι γὰρ ἐθεώρησαν αὐτὸν ἐλυτρώθησαν ἀπὸ πάσης ἀσθενείας· ἄλαλοι ἐλάλησαν, τυφλοὶ ἀνέβλεψαν, λεπροὶ ἐκαθαρίζοντο, δαίμονες ἀπελαύνοντο καὶ πᾶσα ἀσθένεια.

[Those who could only see were saved from their weaknesses, the deaf spoke, the blind regained their sight, the lepers were cleansed, and evil spirits and diseases vanished.]

Furthermore, nothing demonstrates the parallel between the legend and romance novels better than the conclusion of the story. As previously stated, the lovers in the *Vie de Saint Alexis* find each other again after their deaths, when, with God's "consent," their love is consummated, just as in the Latin version (*Pater deus ingenite*). The widow remains faith-

ful to her late husband and mourns his passing until her own passing. He is buried next to the saint after his death, and their love is consummated in heaven. In the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat, on the other hand, the motif of a shared grave clearly transforms the story into a love story, signifying that the relationship between the two characters is eternal and that Josaphat and his master are inseparable. All of this is emphasized more powerfully in the tale of St. Alexius; it is fated for them to be together forever.

The fulfillment of love is what is new about the Latin version, and the narrative in verse corresponds closely to the Greek text. The culmination of their love is described by stating “Sic ambo coram domino / coniunguntur perpetuo” (Thus, before the face of God, the two of you are united forever). The link between the two texts is that when Alexius leaves, the Greek version emphasizes that they will be apart until God wills it so, but this is resolved in the Latin version, where the text explicitly indicates (coram domino) that God has accepted this love, and in his circles they can be together forever.

Overall, it is clear that these texts influenced one another. It cannot be stated unequivocally that any of them only attempts to demonstrate a devotion to God and an ascetic lifestyle, but it is evident that all three narratives borrow from the motifs of the Greek romance novels.

5. Summary

Overall, Saint Alexius’s story is not a simple legend that solidified with an unchanged story over the centuries. The analyzed texts have influenced each other, the story has evolved, and it is clear that after arriving in Byzantium, the French and Latin language poetic versions incorporated some motifs from the Greek love novel. These motifs made it possible to create a legend version in which the focus is not on the story of a saint who glorifies and highlights his own ascetic lifestyle, but rather on entertainment, and the dominating legend version of Saint Alexius can almost fit in the line of the court novels.

The eleventh-century Old French variant shows many similarities with Greek romantic novels, reinterpreting several of their elements. The story begins with the wedding, followed by the separation of the couple. The couple’s reunion is not missing from the end of the story either, although it happens in a spiritual sense. Change, and the trials and tribulations accompanying it, is not evoked by Fate (Tyché), but the protagonist himself, and each hardship appears as part of his finding his path. The series of adventures are induced by a kind of inner motivation rather than through external interference. The letter takes on the role typically played by dreams and oracles in Greek novels, and it becomes a defining element in terms of the final outcome of the story. However, the happy ending familiar from Greek novels is missing, and the happy reunion of the actors can only take place on a spiritual plane.

My research was inconclusive as to whether the Latin or French verse version was composed first, but based on the similarities of their motif sets, they were almost certainly composed simultaneously.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Codex Baroccianus Graecus 146* [online available at <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/251e0e3f-ff8-428c-92aa-f96983da4921/>; accessed 20.04.2023].
- Mermier, G. R., & Melhado White, S. (Eds.). (1972). *La vie de saint Alexis, poème du XI^e siècle traduit de l'ancien français en français modern* (Traductions des Classiques français du Moyen Âge, 10). Paris: Champion.
- Perugi, M. (Ed.). (2000). *La Vie de Saint Alexis*. Genève: Droz.
- Rösler, M. (1933). Alexiusprobleme. *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*, 53, 508–528.
- Sprissler, M. (1966). *Das rhythmische Gedicht 'Pater Deus ingenite' (11. Jahrhundert) und das altfranzösische Alexiuslied*. Münster: Aschendorff.
- Storey, C. (1968). *La vie de saint Alexis: Texte du manuscrit de Hildesheim (L) publié avec une introduction historique et linguistique, un commentaire et un glossaire complet* (Textes littéraires français, 148). Genève: Droz.
- Vatikan, *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Pal. lat. 828, Sammelhandschrift* (ff. 173–174) [online available at https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/bav_pal_lat_828/0352/image,info; accessed 20.04.2023].

Secondary Sources

- Amiaud, A. (1889). *La légende syriaque de Saint Alexis l'homme de Dieu*. Paris: Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études.
- Bal, M. (1978). Mise en abyme et iconicité. *Littérature*, 29, 116–128.
- Beaton, R. (1996²). *The Medieval Greek Romance*. London – New York: Routledge.
- Bodel, J. (1995). *La chanson des Saisnes* (ed. A. Brasseur; Textes Littéraires Français, 369). Genève: Librairie Droz.
- Daellenbach, L. (1977). *Le récit spéculaire. Essai sur la mise en abyme*. Paris: Seuil.
- Delbouille, M. (1969). Apollonius de Tyr et les débuts du roman français. In *Mélanges offerts à Rita Lejeune* (Vol. II; pp. 1171–1204). Gembloux: Duculot.
- Egedi-Kovács, E. (2012). *La "morte vivante" dans le récit français et occitan du Moyen Âge* (Talentum sorozat, 3). Budapest: ELTE Eötvös Kiadó.
- Ferlampin-Acher, Ch. (2016). Vent d'Est, vent d'Ouest: de l'orientation de quelques navigations dans les premiers romans français au Moyen Âge. In E. Egedi-Kovács (Ed.), *Byzance et l'Occident III. Écrits et manuscrits* (pp. 41–56). Budapest: Collège Eötvös József ELTE.
- Gaiffier, B. de (1900). Note sur la date de la Légende grecque de S. Alexis. *Analecta Bollandiana*, XIX, 254–256.
- Gesner, C. (1970). *Shakespeare & the Greek Romance: A Study of Origins*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Hunger, H. (1978). *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner* (Handbuch der Altertumswis-

- senschaft, 12). München: C. H. Beck Verlag.
- Hunger, H. (1980). *Antiker und byzantinischer Roman*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag.
- Jouanno, C. (2000). *Barlaam et Joasaph: une aventure spirituelle en forme de roman d'amour*. *Prisma*, 16(1), 61–76.
- Kapitánffy, I., Vangelio, C. & Szabó, K. (1989). *A bizánci és az újjörög irodalom története*. Budapest: Gondolat.
- Keresztény, J. (2016). Szent Elek legendája. *Antik Tanulmányok*, 60, 173–174.
- Kortekaas, G. (2004). *The Story of Apollonius, King of Tyre: A Study of its Greek Origin and an Edition of the Two Oldest Latin Recensions*. Leiden – Boston: Brill.
- Meunier, F. (2007). *Le roman byzantin du XII^e siècle. À la découverte d'un nouveau monde?* Paris: Honoré Champion.
- Puskás B. (2005). A nem kézzel festett Krisztus-arc ábrázolások és a kárpáti régió középkori ikonfestészete. *Athanasia*, 20, 49–59.
- Remy, P., & Gnädinger, L. (Eds.). (1999). *Lexikon des Mittelalters* (Vol. I; p. 387). Stuttgart – Weimar: Metzler.
- Szepessy, T. (1987). *Héliodóros és a görög szerelmi regény*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.
- Vincensini, J.-J., & Galderisi, C. (Eds.). (2009). *Le Récit idyllique. Aux sources du roman moderne*. Paris: Classiques Garnier.

Dominika Havas-Kovács / kovacsd10@gmail.com

University of Szeged, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Egyetem u. 2., 6722 Szeged, Hungary



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-SA 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as image or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights

