

The *Vita* of the Sasanian Martyr Golindoucht and the Lore of Dragon-Slayer Saints

This paper examines the diverse understandings of Christian saints and dragon encounters. The beast subdued or annihilated by the saint represents the triumph of Christianity over other religious affiliations (Casas Olea 2019, 90), and this depiction develops to the manifold representations of these episodes in Byzantine hagiography (White 2008). By the Middle Ages, iconographic and textual portrayals of saints defeating dragons became highly recognisable scenes for Christian communities (Leclercq-Marx 1994; Narro 2020) and decisive frames for broadcasting a Christian religious identity in confrontation with other affiliations.

Taking this into consideration, the paper will examine the *Vita* of Golindoucht, a Zoroastrian aristocrat convert to Christianity whose death occurred in 591, under the reign of Khusraw II (r. 590-628). Her story is preserved in various accounts, being the most important the Greek (*Pass. Gol.*^a) and Georgian (*Pass. Gol.*^b) texts, written by the beginning of the sixth century and the eleventh century, respectively. After her publicly announced conversion and capture, Sasanian authorities throw the saint to a pit inhabited by a giant people-eating dragon, “venerated as a god” by them and “as an enemy of the Christians” (*Pass. Gol.*^a 12 [p. 159, 1/2]). Despite her fear, Golindoucht tames the dragon and cohabits with it over a period of three months, being brought out of the pit completely unharmed, thus demonstrating the power of her faith (*Pass. Gol.*^a 12/13 [p. 159/160]).

Embracing varying conceptualisations of these encounters in the hagiographical lore, the paper examines this non-aggressive subjugation in which the saint uses her voice to control the dragon and moves herself away from the military and heroic association so recurrent in other hagiographies (see Ogden 2019, 43-45; Riches 2003). The association between the Sasanian authorities and the dragon, and the steadfastness of the saint become highly relevant components for the religious development of the Christian communities that heard these stories and developed their identity in a landscape where Zoroastrianism occupied the hegemonic political, economic, and religious spheres.

By examining the various intersections between narrative, tradition and social context, the paper draws a fascinating frame through which to contemplate the agonistic relationships and frameworks of religious and cultural recognition of Christian communities in the Sasanian Empire and Medieval Georgia.

References

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