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The Life of Saint Thaïs in Bulgarian Translation

Written by Michel De Dobbeleer

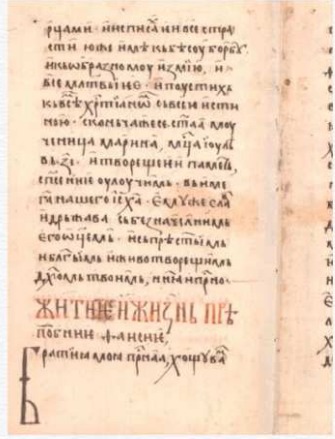
Image Gallery

The *Life of Saint Thaïs* is the shortest of the three vitae in the 1360 *Vidin Miscellany* that are devoted to so-called 'holy harlots'. By presenting the first English translation of this medieval Bulgarian hagiographic text, this contribution wants to give the reader an idea of how such texts looked like and functioned.

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Roughly one fourth of the *Bdinski sbornik*, well-known among palaeoslavists as the finest exponent of the Orthodox Slavic women's miscellanies, consists of vitae of holy harlots: the opening vita about Mary, the niece of Abraham, the concluding vita about Mary of Egypt, and in the middle of the Ghent-based manuscript the shortest one, devoted to Thaïs (folios 106v-111r). As can be read in the translation, the plot of Thaïs's story – playing in Egypt and featuring Anthony the Great († 356) – is a typical example of a vita in two contrasting stages: a very sinful and a very pious one. In the first stage Thaïs, a ravishing beauty, is selling her body, albeit under compulsion. The second stage is full of repentance, which will ultimately lead to her state of holiness. A plot element shared with the *Life of Mary, Abraham's Niece* is the role of a male intercessor and rescuer coming to the brothel, here father Paphnutius ("Pafnot" in the Bulgarian text).

This 'helper' (in terms of Greimas's actantial model) is a character who in the original, fifth- or sixth-century Greek vita was called 'Serapion'. Although the name Paphnutius seems to have entered the *Life of Saint Thaïs* since the translation into Latin, probably still in the sixth-century, this does not imply that this Bulgarian text has been translated from the Latin. More likely, it has been translated from the Slavic and the



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Learning from and Reading about a Holy Harlot: The Life of Saint Thaïs in Bulgarian Translation

Michel De Dobbeleer (Ghent University)

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Whereas it is far from certain whether *Thaïs* was a historical person, it is clear that her *vita* and all other medieval Christian stories about holy harlots refer to the passage in the *Gospel of Luke* (7:36-50) where Jesus meets and forgives the anonymous sinful woman who wets his feet with her tears. Like the Gospel passage, *The Life of Thaïs* teaches the reader that no sin is so grave that it cannot be forgiven. At the same time, and more in line with the less extraordinary lives of the average medieval recipient of such texts: one does not have to be a strict ascetic to become an example of contrition. As the second sentence reads: “for those who really want to repent their sinful deeds, this story is both useful and humbling”. This obviously will have applied for the audiences of the sermons containing *Thaïs*’s wonderful example. And surely the entourage of the intended private reader of the *Vidin Miscellany*, Theodora of Wallachia (the mother of the Vidin tsar Ivan Sratsimir, whose wife Anna commissioned the miscellany), will also have wanted that this and other *vitae* would be instructive for her – and maybe even diverting.

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As its above-mentioned Latin translation suggests, the Egyptian-based *Life of Thais* was also successful in the West. *Paphnutius*, one of the Latin dramas by the tenth-century German canoness Hrotsvit von Gandersheim (Hrotsvitha Gandeshemensis) – who in the meantime has received a lot of scholarly attention –, deals with the story of Thais. Later in the Middle Ages, we know of English, French and Spanish versions, whereas the story became widely popular with modern audiences thanks to the French novel *Thais* (1890). This fairly voluminous work, by the future (1921) Nobel laureate in Literature Anatole France, is of course an adaptation of the medieval story. Here, the rescuing hermit Paphnutius (“Paphnuce”) dramatically falls in love with the title hero. Whether instructive or not, France’s brothel-themed novel in its turn inspired several other fictional works of heterogeneous quality: from Jules Massenet’s French opera *Thais* (1894) to Ryszard Ber’s shocking late communist Polish costume film of the same name (*Thais*, 1984).

The following translation [see <https://sesdiva.eu/en/virtual-rooms/popular-saints/item/189-life-saint-thais-en> > Text (trans. Michel De Dobbeleer & Alexandre Popowycz] has been made with the help of the 1973 edition by Scharpé and Vyncke and the high-resolution scans from the [Ghent-Pittsburgh *Bdinski sbornik* collaboration](#).

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image captions

1. The vita of St Thaïs in the *Vidin Miscellany*
2. First folio of the first vita (Mary, Abraham's Niece) in the *Vidin Miscellany*
3. Editio princeps of the *Opere Hrotsvite* (1501; ill. Albrecht Dürer)
4. Anatole France's *Thaïs* (1890)
5. Original poster for Jules Massenet's opera *Thaïs* (1894)
6. Saint Thaïs (modern icon [PravIcon.com])