

Title of Work: *The Vita of St George of Amastris (The Life and Encomium of Our Holy Father and Miracle Worker George, the Archbishop of Amastris (Βίος σὺν ἐγκωμίῳ εὐς τὸν ἐν ἁγίοις πατέρα ἡμῶν καὶ θαυματουργὸν Γεώργιον τὸν ἀρχιεπίσκοπον Ἀμάστριδος))*

Author: Anonymous/Disputed

Date of production: *Vita*: ninth or tenth century, disputed; manuscript: tenth century.

Geography: Amasra, Turkey (formerly Amastris, Paphlagonia)

Culture of production: Byzantine

Medium: Parchment

Dimensions: 19 folios

Current Holding Institution: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, France

Shelfmark: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, gr. 1452

Link to Object: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b11000020q/f60> [last accessed 28th July 2024]



Fig. 1. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, gr. 1452, fol. 57r. Source: [gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France](https://gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France).

alt="Grec 1452, folio 57r. This image shows the opening section of the Vita of St. George of Amastris, which begins: βίος σὺν ἐγκωμίῳ εὐς τὸν ἐν ἀγίοις πατέρα ἡμῶν καὶ θαυματουργὸν Γεώργιον τὸν ἐν ἀγίοις πατέρα ἡμῶν καὶ θαυματουργὸν Γεώργιον τὸν ἀρχιεπίσκοπον Ἀμάστριδος.”

Keywords: St George of Amastris, hagiography, Byzantium, trade, manuscript, local identity, port

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Preserved in a single manuscript, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, gr. 1452, fols. 57r-75r, the *Vita* of St. George of Amastris offers a gold-mine of information on provincial Byzantine life. It provides rare glimpses into the operation of a Medieval Black Sea port, the relationship between a provincial city and its rural hinterland, the psychology of defense and resilience in times of distress, and notions of civic pride and local identity. Being a saint's life (*Vita*), the text revolves around the life and miracles of George, who was born in Kromna (modern Kurucaşile, about 40km east of Amastris) around the mid-eighth century and died in the first decade of the ninth century. Its original authorship and dating remain unclear, with most scholars agreeing that it was composed sometime in the ninth or tenth century. The *Vita* opens with the saint's upbringing and formation, as per the pattern of Byzantine hagiography. One day, while George's pregnant mother was visiting Amastris for mundane reasons, the city leaders were made aware (via a dream) of the holy nature of her baby. They sought her out and thanked her for delivering to Amastris such a "great gift" (fol. 59r.). This opening section introduces the idea that George's affiliation was to be to Amastris, which will be referred to repeatedly throughout the text as his *patris* (i.e., homeland). In fact, the word *patris* is used a total of 18 times in the *Vita* to refer to Amastris and its vicinity.

A major port-city of the Paphlagonian coast, Amastris evidently cast a wide socioeconomic net, since Kromna was within its regular area of influence. By the early ninth century, the port of Amastris had been the beneficiary of large-scale, state-funded fortifications, and begun to harbour Byzantium's Black Sea fleet. This increase in the port's importance was linked to a variety of exogenous developments, such as the loss of Byzantine Egypt and the disruption of southerly trade networks following the rise of the Caliphate, which elevated the importance of the Black Sea both economically and politically (e.g., the Khazars became a key Byzantine ally). The city was perfectly positioned to exploit the major current-systems of the Black Sea since it offered unparalleled sailing conditions to and from Crimea. It thus functioned as an access-point, or conduit, linking Byzantium to Crimea and the broader Northern Steppes—as well as to all the peoples, goods and opportunities there. But this also set it up as a prime target for the first major challenger to Byzantine naval dominance in the Black Sea: the Rus.

According to the *Vita*, upon reaching adulthood, George retreated into the Agrioserike mountains near Amastris to seek an ascetic life. News of his miracles and fame was said by the author to have brought great pride and joy to the inhabitants of Amastris since they considered him to be their home-grown hero. They lobbied for his return to their city, asserting that he "owed a debt to those who had reared him" (fol. 64v.). He was expected to be of service to the

inhabitants of Amastris and its immediate surroundings—and not to confine himself to caring for his family nor interest himself in the broader body politic of the empire, travelling to and taking up residence outside his own region. This idea of settlement-based, local affiliation is common in Byzantine hagiography. The *Vita* tells us that, despite George's initial reluctance, he was eventually appointed bishop of Amastris by Patriarch Tarasios, and that it was during his tenure that his see was elevated to autocephalous status. George was thus able to fulfill his civic duty towards his fellow citizens. Not only were the sick healed and sinners reformed, but reportedly poor people became richer, debts were dissolved, and all manner of prosperity flourished in the city. Yet his protective orbit extended beyond the city proper to include its rural hinterland. When an Arab invasion targeted the region, George reportedly dashed from village to village, warning the inhabitants of the incoming danger and leading them behind the city's robust walls. Having secured them, he headed out to confront the invaders in person—chasing away a thousand invaders despite being completely unarmed, thus saving his flock from destruction. This idea of reflexive defense, where a city was imagined as defending itself through its own saintly hero, is another common trope in hagiographies set during the Caliphate's invasions (e.g., St. Theodore in Euchaita, St. John in Polyboton).¹ The trope offered psychological reassurance to provincial populations and was part of an adaptive response to the unremitting insecurity that plagued the Byzantine east from the seventh to the ninth centuries.

George was also said to have championed Amastrians elsewhere. He sailed, for example, to go to the rescue of Amastrians travelling in the greater Black Sea region, rescuing compatriot merchants who had been falsely imprisoned in Trebizond by their commercial rivals. After his death, the saint continued to project his miracle-working powers posthumously from his shrine. For instance, his saintly presence helped contain the Amasra River—which had threatened to burst its banks—and protect the surrounding countryside from severe flooding. In another instance, when a Rus fleet sailed down the Black Sea to Amastris (an event the author sets sometime in the 820s or 830s), George posthumously so overawed the invaders that they abandoned their attempt to sack the city and his compatriots were saved from destruction. Reported in no other source, this account of a Rus' raid has occasioned much debate among historians, since, if the event occurred, it would have to predate the better documented Rus' offensive against Constantinople in 860. Recent archaeological evidence has, however, shown that Amastris' refortification and bolstering in naval importance preceded the 820s. It therefore offered a plausible target for the Rus', who would have been looking to challenge Byzantine dominance in the Black Sea. Moreover, Amastris was also notably one of the first locations a fleet that was taking advantage of the dominant currents would reach if it sailed axially across the Black Sea.

The physical text of the *Vita* occupies 19 folios in a single tenth-century manuscript known as *Grec 1452*, which is located at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. The manuscript has 227 folios in total, preserving fragments from a *Menologion* of the month of February.² Its milieu of composition was the broader Metaphrastic initiative in tenth-century Constantinople, during which texts on holy men and women were excerpted and summarised.³ As such, *Grec 1452* consists of

¹ H. Delehaye, *Les Légendes grecques des saints militaires* (Paris: A. Picard, 1909), 196-97; H. Delehaye, ed. *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae e codice Sirmondiano* (Bruxelles: 1902), 279-80.

² St. George's feast day was the 21st of February.

³ F. Halkin, *Manuscrits grecs de Paris: Inventaire hagiographique* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1968), 161-63; A. Ehrhard, *Überlieferung und Bestand der hagiographischen und homiletischen Literatur der griechischen Kirche von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1937), 467-554.

hagiographic material (e.g., *Vitae* and *Martyria*), including the *Vita* of Patriarch Tarasios (730-806 CE), who was George's contemporary and personal acquaintance. That the relationship between the two men was one of patron and client is evident from the fact that Tarasios ordained George as a priest and ensured his selection as bishop of Amastris (c. 790). Overall, St. George's *Vita* follows a structure that is standard in this collection of hagiography, beginning its account with the saint's origins, upbringing and spiritual formation, before narrating the achievements of his mature years and finally, his posthumous miracles. The text notably lacks an iconophile agenda, or more precisely any anti-iconoclastic commentary, a fact that has attracted attention given its time of composition after the so-called triumph of icons. As mentioned above, the work is also notable because of its regional concerns—as well as the details it provides regarding what may have been the earliest Rus' raid against Byzantium.

Biography

Cahit Mete Oguz is a historian specializing in the history of Medieval Paphlagonia alongside Byzantine hagiography, historiography, rural society, and the history of everyday life. He received his PhD from Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, and his MA from Boğaziçi University, Istanbul. He also has a BSc degree in Physics and is versed in digital humanities methodologies (e.g., GIS, NLP). ORCID: 0009-0008-7158-3369 / Email: cahitmeteoguz@gmail.com

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