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Response to David Woods

James C. Skedros

Greek Orthodox School of Theology

The origins of the cult of St. Demetrios are indeed obscure. The earliest indisputable evidence for the existence of the cult of St. Demetrios at Thessaloniki is the large five-aisle basilica built in honor of the martyr and located in the center of this important port city. Based upon archaeological and art historical evidence, the basilica can be dated to the last quarter of the fifth century.¹ However, the written tradition of the cult of St. Demetrios, as preserved in various martyrdom accounts (whose dates remain problematic), places the saint's martyrdom at Thessaloniki during the persecution of Diocletian, that is, during the first decade of the fourth century, some one-hundred and seventy five years before the erection of the saint's basilica.² To complicate matters even more, in the earliest surviving martyrologies dating from the fourth and fifth centuries, there is no mention of a martyr Demetrios who was martyred or venerated at Thessaloniki. Given such lack of historical evidence, most scholars, including David Woods, whose article appears in the pages of this journal, have argued that St. Demetrios of Thessaloniki is a fictitious saint and that the origin of his veneration at Thessaloniki is not to be found in a historical individual who was martyred under Diocletian at Thessaloniki, but rather must be sought elsewhere.

In his article, "Thessalonica's Patron: St. Demetrius or Emeterius?" Woods offers a fresh look into the beginnings of the cult of the martyr Demetrios at Thessaloniki. His solution to the question of the origins of the cult is quite inge-

¹James Constantine Skedros, *Saint Demetrios of Thessaloniki: Civic Patron and Divine Protector 4th–7th Centuries CE* (HTS 47; Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999) 29–39.

²An apsidal structure has been found underneath the five-aisle basilica and dated to the fourth century. It is possible that this structure represents an earlier three-aisle basilica to the memory of the martyr Demetrios; see Vladislav Popovic, "Sirmium: Ville impériale," in *Akten des VII. Internationalen Kongresses für christliche Archäologie* (2 vols.; Rome: Pontificio Istituto di archeologia cristiana, 1969) 1. 671.

nious. Woods begins by noting that in one of the martyrdom accounts of St. Demetrios, known as the *Passio altera*, two contact relics associated with the saint are identified: an *orarion*, or neckscarf, and a ring. Both of these relics, according to the *Passio altera*, were soaked in the martyr's blood and recognized as having healing powers.

Woods takes these two substitute relics as a starting point in arguing for a new solution to the origins of the cult of St. Demetrios. Acknowledging the unusual combination of these two contact relics, Woods states that, to his knowledge, there is only one other instance where these two relics, in combination, are associated with martyrs: the early fourth-century Spanish military martyrs Emeterius and Chelidonius. Given the similarity between the names Emeterius and Demetrios, the same unusual combination of contact relics associated with these Spanish martyrs and Demetrios, and the lack of evidence for a historical martyr Demetrios of Thessaloniki, Woods arrives at the following hypothesis. Sometime during 379–80, in honor of the new emperor, the Spanish general Theodosius I, who had recently made his residence at Thessaloniki, an unknown person or persons transferred the *orarion* and ring of the martyrs Emeterius and Chelidonius to Thessaloniki. Shortly thereafter, Theodosius moved his imperial throne to Constantinople, and the shrine built to house the relics of the two Spanish martyrs at Thessaloniki was soon neglected. According to the *Passio altera*, Leontios, the prefect of Illyricum (c. 412–413), visited Thessaloniki and was healed of an ailment after coming into contact with the relics of St. Demetrios. Woods identifies these relics as the *orarion* and ring of the Saints Emeterius and Chelidonius. In response to his miraculous cure, Leontios built a basilica at the spot where the relics were kept. While excavating the area around the shrine, Leontios, according to Woods, discovered an inscription to the martyr Emeterius, which he interpreted as preserving the name Demetrius. Leontios then erected a basilica in honor of a St. Demetrios, who, on account of “local folk memory” which associated the relics with a military martyr, became St. Demetrios the military saint and martyr. Thus the origins of St. Demetrios.

Woods has offered a new and creative solution to a question that still does not have a satisfactory answer. In particular, Woods should be commended for having raised the very important issue of the origin of the contact relics associated with St. Demetrios as recorded in the *Passio altera*. However, his reconstruction of the origin of the cult of St. Demetrios has several problems, three of which I shall discuss briefly.

As is known, there is no mention of a martyr Demetrios of Thessaloniki in the two earliest extant martyrologies, the *Syriac Martyrology* (dated to c. 362; Woods uses the more traditional name of *Syriac Breviary*) and the *Hieronymian Martyrology* (dated to c. 431–450). As Woods himself admits, these martyrologies do not contain an exhaustive list of historical martyrs of the early church. In my work on St. Demetrios, I attempted to demonstrate the insufficiency of these martyrologies by arguing that the calendar of martyrs depicted on the walls of the

Rotunda at Thessaloniki depict three martyrs who were commemorated at Thessaloniki but whose names do not appear in the Syriac or Hieronimian Martyrologies. Woods has challenged these three examples. Woods may be correct in pointing out that one of these martyrs, Therinos, ought to be identified with the martyr Tirinus, who is commemorated on June 7 in the *Syriac Martyrology*.³ The two other martyrs, Onesiphoros and Leo, Woods dismisses as fictitious martyrs, thus claiming that they cannot be used in support of the argument that there were historical martyrs venerated at Thessaloniki whose names did not appear in the early martyrologies. Onesiphoros, who is paired with Porphyrios in the Rotunda mosaics, is to be identified as the companion of the apostle Paul (2 Tim 1:16–18), and therefore is a fictitious martyr. Here I am in agreement with Woods. As for the martyr Leo, however, there is simply no knowledge of this martyr outside of the Rotunda mosaics. To claim, that he is a fictitious martyr seems too simplistic.⁴

Woods suggests that I have chosen the wrong examples to demonstrate that the early martyrologies do not preserve complete lists of martyrs. Rather, what needs to be shown is that these early martyrologies omit the name of a martyr who was celebrated in a metropolitan area for which the martyrologies list other martyrs. I should like to offer just such an example.

St. Basil the Great, the fourth-century bishop of Caesarea of Cappadocia, delivered five panegyric homilies dealing with martyrs that have survived. These consist of homilies on the martyrs Julitta, Barlaam, Gordios, the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, and Mamas. The martyr Julitta will serve as an illustrative response to Woods. No specific date for the homily on Julitta is given, yet it most likely dates between 370 and 379 when Basil served as bishop of Caesarea. The homily was delivered on the feast day of the martyr in the city of Caesarea. Basil tells us that the martyr's relics lie near the entrance into the city. The location of her shrine outside the city walls suggests that this shrine is most likely her burial site and not a shrine housing substitute relics, which would have been the result of a translation of relics. Basil even mentions a spring that flows out from the ground around the martyr's tomb, clearly acknowledging the sacred nature of the site.⁵ All of this suggests that Julitta's shrine was not of recent date but that it most likely dates to the first half of the fourth century.

³Therinos was commemorated at Constantinople along with St Demetrios on May 6 and with St. George on April 23. For the Greek *Passio* see *Analecta Bollandiana* 100 (1982) 63–78.

⁴Woods states that the names of fifteen martyrs have survived from the mosaics of the Rotunda. However, of these fifteen martyrs only thirteen of the accompanying inscriptions are currently identifiable, a fourteenth has been sufficiently reconstructed, while the fifteenth (the martyr paired with Ananios) cannot securely be identified; see, Denis Feissel, *Recueil des inscriptions chrétiennes de Macédoine du IIIe au VIe siècle* (Athens: École Française d'Athènes, 1983) 103–10.

⁵*Hom Jul 2.*, PG 31. 237–61.

Turning to the *Syriac Martyrology*, martyrs of Caesarea of Cappadocia are mentioned on six separate dates.⁶ However, there is no mention of the martyr Julitta. The tenth-century Menologion of Basil II gives the date of July 30 for her feast day. It would appear, therefore, that the martyr Julitta is an example of how the *Syriac Martyrology* omits the name of a historical martyr who is commemorated at a city for which the martyrology lists other martyrs. The conclusion is rather simple: the *Syriac Martyrology* does not preserve complete lists of historical martyrs for some metropolitan areas.

A second major problem with the origins of the cult of St. Demetrios, and my second criticism of Woods's thesis, is the reliance upon the various martyrdom accounts of the saint for evidence of the origin of the cult. There is very little disagreement that the literary accounts of the Passions of the saint cannot be read as strictly historical documents but rather belong to the category of epic Passions.⁷ This does not mean that these martyrdom accounts do not contain elements of historical veracity. However, even if one were to grant a very generous historical reading to the Passions, the major obstacle in using them as a source for the origins of the cult of St. Demetrios is that the Passions are hagiographical texts and are extremely difficult to date. These martyrdoms accounts still await critical editions and evaluation. The problem with Woods's hypothesis, as is the problem with any discussion of the origins of the cult of St. Demetrios, is its dependence upon the *Passio altera*, one of three versions of the martyrdom of St. Demetrios.⁸ It is in the *Passio altera* where the two substitute relics—the *orarion* and ring—are introduced. Woods argument that “the *Passio altera* proves the existence of an *orarium* and a ring at the center of the cult of a military martyr, Demetrios, at Thessalonica” relies too heavily upon the *Passio altera* as well as misunderstanding the historical development of the cult of St. Demetrios at Thessaloniki.

The *Passio altera* contains seven episodes or events not found in the *Passio prima* or “shorter version” of the martyrdom of St. Demetrios. It is my contention that these seven episodes, one of which is the introduction of the *orarion* and ring of St. Demetrios as contact relics with healing powers, are simply intended to enhance the authority and status of the cult of St. Demetrios.⁹ They have been introduced into the martyrdom story of St. Demetrios as proof of the divine authority of the saint, and, therefore, their historical value must be approached with caution.

Finally, Woods's association of Emeterius and Demetrios is based, in part, on the identity of Demetrios as a military saint. In fact, there is absolutely no evidence

⁶March 2, Gordianos; May 29, Cyril; July 12, Dios; July 13, Dios the Presbyter; November 3, Germanos, Theophilos and Cyril; and November 23, Veronikios

⁷Skedros, *Saint Demetrios of Thessaloniki*, 60 n. 66.

⁸For a detailed discussion of the Passions, see *ibid.*, 60–70

⁹*Ibid.*, 66 I have argued extensively for this in explaining the addition of the Sirmium subplot to the *Passio altera*, see esp. pp. 22–29.

to indicate that St. Demetrios was venerated as a military martyr earlier than 600 CE. Surviving iconographic evidence in the Basilica of St. Demetrios in Thessaloniki does not depict the martyr in any military garb. Rather, the saint is shown as an intercessor (standing in the *orans* position) or a protector (of children!) wearing a traditional *chlamys* or tunic with an embroidered *tablion*, indicating a high social rank or status. Woods argues that it was the “local folk memory” of Emeterius as a military martyr that, added to a misreading of a non-existent inscription, produced the military martyr Demetrios during the first quarter of the fifth century. However, the development of St. Demetrios into a military saint was gradual; the pivotal point coming during and after the Slav-Avar siege of Thessaloniki in 586 CE. It was the presence of the Slavs in the Balkans at this time and throughout the seventh century that was the real impetus for the transformation of St. Demetrios into a military martyr.¹⁰ On the contrary, the early cult of St. Demetrios at Thessaloniki did not identify the martyr as a military saint.

It is refreshing to read a well-argued discussion of the origin of the cult of St. Demetrios that does not rely upon the traditional view that the cult had its origins in the martyr Demetrios of Sirmium mentioned in the *Syriac Martyrology* for April 9. Woods has offered an attractive hypothesis based upon the contact relics—the *orarion* and ring—identified in the *Passio altera*. Unfortunately, his thesis cannot be supported by the existing evidence. It places undue emphasis on the completeness of the early martyrologies, relies upon a hagiographical text of dubious historical value, and misunderstands the trajectory of the cult of St. Demetrios at Thessaloniki. Without any firmer evidence, the origins of the martyr Demetrios should remain in the city in which he continues to be venerated to this day.

¹⁰Ibid., 105–32