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**MONK MEETS BLOND BOY :  
CONSTRUCTING HOMOEROTIC TEMPTATION  
IN THE *PHILOTHEOS HISTORIA*  
OF THEODORET OF CYRRHUS**

Ἦν ἐσίδω τινα̃ λευκόν, ἀπόλλυμαι ἦν δὲ μελίχρουν, καίομαι  
ἦν ξάνθον δ' εὐθὺς ὄλος λέλυμαι.  
(Straton, *AP* 12.244)<sup>1</sup>

Just imagine the surprise of James<sup>2</sup>, an ascetic living near the city of Cyrrhus in North Western Syria<sup>3</sup>, when, as we learn from his *Vita*<sup>4</sup> written by Theodoret, the bishop of nearby Cyrrhus, one hot summer

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1. « A milk-white boy undoes me at first sight ; / A honey-coloured lad sets me alight ; / A golden boy, however, melts me quite. » English translation from *Puerilities : Erotic Epigrams of The Greek Anthology*, trans. D. HINE, Princeton and London, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 113.

2. Sometimes also called Jacob (Gk. *Ἰάκοβος*), this late antique anchorite is known mainly from his *Vita* [*BHG* 771] written by Theodoret (see below, n. 4) and from a few passing mentions in this bishop's correspondence. The little available information on James is surveyed and discussed in P. CANIVET, *Le monachisme syrien selon Théodoret de Cyr* [= *MST*], Paris, Editions Beauchesne, 1977, p. 196-201.

3. Today Nebi Hourî in northern Syria, two km. from the Turkish-Syrian border. On ancient Cyrrhus and its archeological remains, see the following studies by E. PRÉZOULS : « Recherches sur la ville antique de Cyrrhus », *Annales Archéologiques de Syrie* 4-5, 1954-1955, p. 123-50 ; « L'exploration archéologique de Cyrrhus », *Apamée de Syrie : bilan des recherches archéologiques, 1965-1968 : actes du Colloque tenu à Bruxelles les 29 et 30 avril 1969* (ed. J. BALTY), Brussels, Centre Belge de Recherches Archéologiques à Apamée de Syrie, 1969, p. 81-93, and « Cyrrhus et la Cyrrestique jusqu'à la fin du Haut-Empire », *ANRW* 2.8 (éd. H. TEMPORINI and W. HAASE), Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1977, p. 164-97.

4. Theodoret's encomiastic *Vita* of James can now be read as chapter 21 of the *Philotheos Historia* [= *HPH*], a collection of hagiobiographic accounts of fourth- and fifth-

day sometime in the first decades of the fifth century<sup>5</sup>, near his cell<sup>6</sup> he came face to face with an unexpected and, as it would soon turn out, quite unwelcome visitor. This was a young boy « in full vigor, resplendent in bloom and adorned with blond hair<sup>7</sup> », who walked up straight to the old, severe looking ascetic, shamelessly « grinning and flirting<sup>8</sup> ». For a moment, as he stood there looking at the grinning face of the young man, at the silky curls of his hair, which framed a beautiful face with moist red lips heavy with unspoken promises and deep brown eyes lit every now and then by a naughty flicker, old James must have wavered for just a second before bursting out in a torrent of insults and curses. Yet, even if the virtuous ascetic was « armed with [holy] indignation and drove [the boy] off with abuse », the young man was not intimidated. « He persevered with his wanton look and with a grin and speech that reeked of pleasure<sup>9</sup> ». Although probably tempted to pick up a few stones and throw at the impudent rascal that stood before him – as he was used to do whenever a woman would approach his solitary dwelling<sup>10</sup> – James, still boiling with righteous anger, preferred instead to ask him a few questions for his own edification and that of the future readers of his *Vita* :

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century Syrian holy men and women composed by the bishop of Cyrrhus ca. 444. I quote this text according to the critical edition of P. CANIVET and A. LEROY-MOLINGHEN, Théodore de Cyr, *Histoire des moines de Syrie : Histoire Philothée*, vol. 2, Sources chrétiennes 257, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 1979, p. 70-123. For the episode discussed here (*HPb* 21.28), see p. 112-14. Translations of ancient sources are mine when not indicated otherwise. All dates are CE.

5. An exact date is impossible to establish ; on the basis of the information contained in the *Vita* by Theodoret, Canivet (*MST*, p. 199), whose chronology I follow here, argued that James started his independent ascetic career ca. 406. He was still alive ca. 444 when Theodoret wrote his *Vita* and, apparently, later still in 457 to be mentioned among the addressees of a circular letter of Emperor Leo I (see P. CANIVET, *MST*, p. 196, n. 166 for details). In Theodoret's narrative, the episode discussed in this paper comes immediately after James' miraculous escape during an Isaurian raid, a historical event datable to 406-408. It is, however, unlikely that Theodoret followed a strict chronological order in his account of James.

6. On the exact location of James' ascetic retreat (on Mt. Sheih Khoros, ca. 5 km. west of Cyrrhus), first suggested by E. HONIGMANN, see Canivet's discussion in *MST*, p. 201.

7. *HPb* 21, 28 (ed. CANIVET-MOLINGHEN, p. 112) : νέω σφριγώντι... καὶ ὄρα λάμποντι καὶ κόμη ξανθὴ κεκοσμημένω ; English translation from Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks in Syria*, trans. R. M. PRICE, Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications, 1985, p. 144.

8. *HPb* 21, 28 : μειδῶν ἅμα καὶ παίζων (trans. PRICE, *ibid.*).

9. *HPb* 28, 12 : Ὁ δὲ ἐπέμενεν ἐταιρικὸν βλέπων καὶ τῷ τε μειδιάματι τῷ τε οὐθέματι ἡδονὴν ἀναβλύζων (trans. PRICE, *ibid.*). 10. See *HPb* 21, 25 (ed. CANIVET-MOLINGHEN, p. 108-10).